SPEECH AND DEBATE

By Claudia Zahn

A thesis submitted to the

Mason Gross School of the Arts

Of

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in Theater Arts

Written under the direction of

Amy Saltz

And approved by the signatures of thesis committee members

_____________________________________________
Head of Directing, Mason Gross School of the Arts

_____________________________________________
Directing Faculty, Mason Gross School of the Arts

_____________________________________________
Design Faculty, Mason Gross School of the Arts

New Brunswick, New Jersey

January, 2011
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to acknowledge my fellow classmates and friends in the Theater and Music Departments at Mason Gross from whom I have learned so much in the past two years. I would especially like to thank all those who helped to bring this production of *Speech and Debate* to wonderful life: the indefatigable production crew, the creative design team and the incredibly talented cast.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff of the Theater Department for their commitment to my training. My teachers, in particular, challenged me to work more deeply and more personally, and for that, and for their patience, I am truly grateful. And to Cindy, and especially Kimm, who always kept the faith, much love and thanks.
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INTRODUCTION

About five or six years ago, I decided to go back to graduate school. Although originally trained as an actor, I had been most recently teaching in the School of Music at the University of Washington in Seattle. I was responsible for directing operas and musicals, along with teaching acting to the opera singers in the voice department. I was also a free-lance opera and music theatre director.

I was drawn to opera because of its uber-theatricality, the way it walked a fine line between the ridiculous and the sublime. Although I admit I’m far from a fan of many operas, the music theatre combination always fascinated me. Even when so much of it could be so silly, there was always the possibility of transcendence, those moments when all the elements soared together to touch the heart.

Directing opera, especially with student singers in an academic setting, was a wonderful challenge for me. Because I had originally studied theatre, I tried to use that training and background in my work with the singers. Most of them had no theatre training or experience at all, and it was a test for me to find ways to reach them. I experimented with improvisations and exercises, mostly as a way of breaking down inhibitions and encouraging creativity. I found it helped me as much as the students. The graduate design students in the drama school with whom I worked on our productions were imaginative and excited about working on musical theatre. Even though the acting improved in the operas and we had some successful productions, I knew I needed and wanted more.

I needed to understand the director’s process, whether working with singers, actors or designers. I knew I had been working on a fairly basic level, particularly with
the singers, and I wanted to take it deeper. Graduate school gave me the chance to start to
do that, and to explore more deeply the collaborative process in bringing a production to
life. All of which brings me to *Speech and Debate*. There were first of all a few practical
considerations to keep in mind in deciding on a play to direct. Because of budget
constraints, the cast had to be small; three or four people would be best. The design had
to be feasible within the budget as well. As I read through plays to find one that really
resonated for me, I found that I was intrigued by stories of misfits and outsiders. I think I
was feeling that sense of displacement as well, having recently left my life on the west
coast to return to school; I was still feeling isolated and out of sorts. After a number of
play choices proved not to be feasible, a friend recommended *Speech and Debate*. I
remembered hearing about the play just the year before, when it was done at the
Roundabout’s new intimate basement space. Although I was initially a little turned off by
the idea of a play about high school kids, I was really intrigued by the use of music and
dance. I had hoped to be able to do some sort of music theatre piece and had so far not
been able to find anything feasible. As I re-read the piece, I realized it was really a
straight play with music and dance, but I thought the author had found a creative way to
use those elements to help tell the story and discover the characters. And the climax of
the play was a dance – a real challenge.

What finally drew me to the piece were the characters. There seems to be a glut of
interest in high school these days—or at least a prettified version of it on television and in
the movies. *Speech and Debate* never took it for granted that the kids would ultimately
succeed, that music would somehow redeem them, or that they would even ever
accomplish something as basic as finding a friend. I loved that they were ornery, contrary
types, not easily likeable. They fought to be heard, to be noticed, to be respected. I
admired them for their courage, however over-the-top they were. I think my own
situation made me empathize with them even more strongly, particularly their isolation
and sense of powerlessness.

I felt a strong connection to their struggles, and I hoped this would help animate
my work with the actors. One of the criticisms from my teachers that struck me most was
my lack of passion and personal involvement. I know I had felt very involved working in
opera—one of the reasons I was drawn to the art form was its overt emotionality. I realized
that some of my fear and confusion about the process of directing a play made me retreat
and self-protect. I still didn’t feel I knew what to say to actors. I was trying to find the
balance between allowing the actors to explore and make discoveries, yet still guiding
them and the production. I felt that I was better prepared to go into rehearsals than I had
been in the past, and I hoped this would allow me to relax a little bit more. And I was
excited to share this play with a student audience that I knew would be coming to see it. I
was sorry we couldn’t do any high school matinee performances; I had hoped our spring
schedule would allow us to do the play for local schools. In any case, I wanted the
college students who came, as well as the adults in the audience, to experience that
intense world of high school again and see it through the teenagers’ eyes. I felt that
Solomon, Diwata and Howie were characters we might easily dismiss as losers. This play
gave us the chance to look deeper, to share in their struggles to be heard and accepted.
RESEARCH

Going Back to High School

The Playwright

Stephen Karam wrote *Speech and Debate* in 2006, when he was twenty six years old. The play takes place in a high school in Salem, Oregon, a small, conservative Northwest town. The three main characters are all lonely and isolated high school students who end up forming an alliance despite themselves. Since Stephen was so close in age to the characters he was writing about, I felt he might be telling his own story in the play. Learning more about him would help me find my way into the play.

Because Karam is such a young playwright, there were no biographies of him—yet—in the library. I found much of my material online, which actually felt right in keeping with the online/media-infused world that the play’s high school students inhabit. There were online articles and interviews; Stephen and I even ended up communicating briefly by email and had a short phone conversation as well.

As I began my research, I started to uncover some of the many parallels between Stephen Karam’s life and the story and characters in *Speech and Debate*. In our phone conversation, Stephen told me about some of them. He grew up in Scranton, PA, a small, conservative town. He was a speech and debate geek in high school, where it wasn’t uncommon for a school play to be altered to conform to the very conservative values of the community. I remember particularly Stephen’s amazement and good humor as he told me this, and I realized it was a direct link to Diwata’s own condemnation of Mr. Healy’s hypocrisy in changing the story of *Once Upon a Mattress*. 
I came upon another Karam/Diwata connection during my online research. In a Seattle Repertory Theater blog, Karam talks about performing the duet “Last Night of the World” from Miss Saigon in front of the entire high school student body. “I had no idea that might not be a cool thing to do—I was obsessed with the show at the time, wanted to sing it…so I did. By the next year I was already too self-conscious to do something like that again.”¹ That huge need for self-expression, along with the hugely varying degrees of self-confidence, really resonates in Speech and Debate. Diwata, Solomon and even Howie may deny it, but it really is painfully important to them what other people think.

Although he’s still very young, Karam has been writing plays since he was a kid. According to a Los Angeles Times interview, he started writing and submitting plays to publishers and contests while still in his teens. He was a winner for three years’ running in the late 1990s of the best play at Los Angeles’ Blank Theatre Company Young Playwright’s Competition.² He attended Brown University, where he continued writing. He wrote a full-length musical adaptation of Jane Austin’s Emma, which was produced at the university. In 2005 his new play Girl on Girl debuted as part of the inaugural seasons of the Brown/Trinity Playwright’s Repertory Theatre. While that play isn’t published, the theatre web site gives a summary of it that shows it to be a comedy dealing with gay issues. I think the title might be a giveaway.³

In 2006 the Repertory Theatre mounted the first production of Speech and Debate. That same year, a play he co-wrote with the director PJ Paparelli, columbinus,

³ “Playwrights Rep: Girl on Girl.” <www.brown.edu>
was produced off-Broadway by New York Theatre Workshop.\textsuperscript{4} \textit{columbinus} is drawn from interviews, public records, discussions with parents, survivors, community leaders and even the private diaries of the Columbine shooters. It merges the facts of the Columbine massacre with a truly harrowing impression of what life is like in high school today. The play shares with \textit{Speech and Debate} a real interest in the working of the adolescent mind, but its view of the pressure and alienation of high school is much more overtly bleak.

Although both pieces illuminate realities of adolescent culture, \textit{columbinus}, according to PJ Paparelli, is not a play but a “theatrical discussion”\textsuperscript{5}, with the subject being the merger of the fictional high school created by the authors and cast, and the real world of Columbine and Littleton, CO both today and at the time of the shootings. The piece comes across as more of a (political) investigation of adolescent group dynamics and power, with less emphasis on the details of personal stories.

It does use many of the theatrical storytelling elements also found in \textit{Speech and Debate}. Scene titles are projected at the top of each scene; contemporary music is used throughout, both live and recorded; the adult characters often are represented by just a recorded voice; and scene changes are done minimally with props, costumes and projections. It’s hard to tell if the writing of one play influenced the other, since both plays were being written and produced during the same time period. I was most struck, though, by how both plays help us to see the world through teenagers’ eyes. \textit{columbinus} is more obvious, and sometimes more clumsy, in the way it accomplishes this. For example, in \textit{columbinus} almost all the characters, both adults and teens, are played by the

\textsuperscript{4} Karam, Stephen and PJ Paparelli, \textit{columbinus}. (Dramatic Publishing Company, 2007)
\textsuperscript{5} Karam and Paparelli, \textit{columbinus}, pg 5
teenage members of the cast, and the authors use sudden and abrupt changes in lights and sound in the middle of a scene to indicate that we are now entering a character’s mind. Though both plays have loners and misfits as their principal characters, *Speech and Debate* is more interested in character than in making political points.

Karam has written *Speech and Debate* from the heart; his deep personal connection informs every moment of the play. In our phone conversation, he said that he had written the play to personally represent small-town America, which he knew well. He was insistent that the characters not be clichés and that the play goes wrong when their quirks are amplified in performance. In the Note to Actor/Directors at the back of the published playscript, Karam reiterates: “…avoid… playing gay, playing nerdy, playing a deranged diva…The more honestly theses characters are portrayed-the richer (and funnier) the play becomes.”6 He told me that Diwata, Howie and Solomon were really a split of his personality. I was touched to have him share this with me, and I re-assured him that these characters were vibrant and very real for me and that the cast and I would always work to ground them in truth. I felt a responsibility to dig as deeply as we could and discover their true struggles.

**Speech and Debate**

I was intrigued by the title of the play, even after reading it many times. Technically, the play is structured as a series of scenes which are an ironic comment on the different competition events in a Speech and Debate (S&D) tournament. Since Karam was a self-professed (S&D) geek in high school, I knew it was important to immerse myself in that world. There were a few books I found helpful, but it was the National Forensics League (NFL) official web site that was the most informative. It gave me the

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6 Karam, Stephen. *Speech and Debate*. (Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2008) pg 97
best sense of the complicated and very intense world of debating. Also, watching
debaters performing on YouTube was quite a revelation. Although some of the
individuals and teams were really quite creative, the generally hammy and over-the-top
performances of the competitors were hard to take seriously. By titling his play *Speech
and Debate*, what point was Karam trying to make, and how did this jive with the
seeming seriousness of the Forensics League? I was eager to find out.

The NFL is a “…not-for-profit honorary society created to recognize high school
students in speech and debate. “… every child in the United States will be empowered
to become an effective communicator, ethical individual, critical thinker, and a leader in a
democratic society.” There is even an official Code of Honor, in which members must
pledge “…to uphold the highest standards of integrity, humility, respect, leadership and
service in the pursuit of excellence.” These are pretty serious and lofty standards for
anyone, let alone a high school teenager, to uphold. Diwata, Howie and Solomon
certainly start out the play very far from the ideal NFL competitor; they are self-involved,
defensive, and willing to use manipulation, threats and even blackmail to get what they
want. I was beginning to see that Karam might be using the super seriousness and high
moral and academic rectitude of speech and debate to comment on the real world antics
and machinations of the three students. But the NFL vision of effective leaders and
communicators is also something to aspire to, and Karam may be pointing the way to the
changes that lead them closer to that ideal. I knew I had to delve further to understand
Karam’s point of view.

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7 “About the NFL” <www.nflonline.org>
8 “The NFL Vision” <www.nflonline.org>
9 “Code of Honor” < www.nflonline.org>
I then started to research each of the NFL competition events that are used as scene titles in the play, to discover what they might tell me about the scenes. The first scene is titled “Poetry Reading”. Poetry is considered by the NFL to be a supplemental event, usually performed by contestants who have been eliminated from the main events. It is defined as writing which expresses ideas, experience or emotion through the creative arrangement of words according to their sound, their rhythm and their meaning. It is particularly important that “the interpreter must carefully paint the images in the minds of the listeners; s/he must give them time to picture and think about what the poet has written.”10 As in prose reading, the interpreter should have an introduction that provides background information and sets up expectations that are fulfilled in the presentation. The performer should also capture the mood of the piece through tone, attitude and vocal variety, and communicate in a very personal way with the listener, even making eye contact.11

I at first thought the irony of the scene title was pretty obvious, since the scene is totally silent, an IM chat that is projected on a screen or back wall. In the published script, Karam sets it to the music from Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man.” “The result is a choreographed musical number. A cyber-ballet.”12 Howie is on his computer, trying to make a sexual connection, and he and the other guy are certainly “dancing” around each other. The idea that it was “poetry” led me to see the chat lines as a lean, spare sort of poetic communication, distilling images in few, but telling words. It was therefore very important that they each choose their words carefully, to set the right

11 see footnote #10
12 Karam, Stephen. Speech and Debate. (Dramatists Play Service, Inc. 2008) pg 11
tone and suggest the image. It was indeed an intimate communication, sexy, dangerous, but with the fear of discovery. That suggested to me that some time was needed, both to choose the right words and to take in what was written. I wasn’t sure that the Copland was the best choice; Karam gave permission to use our own imaginations for the scene. The Copland was fun and exciting music, but it had a loud, marshal quality to it that I felt worked against the intimacy of the scene. There was also no time to paint those poetic images, or to find a mood conducive to the sexual flirtation. Since the scene takes place in Howie’s bedroom, I started looking for music that Howie might be listening to on his iPod while chatting, to help set the mood. And maybe to give him some courage.

Scene Two is titled “Lincoln/Douglas Debate.” The NFL defines this as a debate that centers on a proposition of value, which concerns itself with what ought to be, instead of what is. The debate focuses on reasoning to support a general principle instead of on particular plans or proposals for implementing the proposition. Historically, the Lincoln/Douglas debates were a series of seven debates that took place in various cities across Illinois in 1858 between the Democratic incumbent, Senator Stephen A Douglas and his challenger for reelection, ex-congressman Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln had been facing an uphill battle against the more established Douglas, and so decided that “the ‘offensive’ was better than the ‘defensive’”.13 He challenged Douglas to a series of debates, and Douglas acquiesced, under pressure from the press. Douglas upheld the proposition of “popular sovereignty”, which held that every new territory had the right to vote slavery up or down. Lincoln believed that slavery was morally wrong and that the inalienable rights guaranteed in the Declaration of Independence applied to every living person, regardless of color.

The debates had political as well as moral dimensions. And although Lincoln lost the election, he was still willing to fight and declared that “the cause of civil liberty must not be surrendered at the end of one, or even one hundred defeats.” The debates gave him a national political profile which would propel him to the presidency two years later.

There are some obvious parallels between the L/D debates and the action of the second scene of the play: Solomon/Lincoln can be seen as the challenger to the “incumbent” Teacher/Douglas; there is a constant jockeying for power, etc. But I realized much more strongly after researching the debates that Karam is really making a point about the seriousness of purpose here and what’s at stake. There’s a real moral dimension to Solomon’s quest to reveal the hypocrisy of elected officials. Yet ultimately this scene is about his personal struggle. It’s Solomon’s need to be respected, to be taken seriously as a journalist—as a person—that drives the scene. Of course the Teacher has as much at stake as he does in this contest. They’re both willing to put a lot on the line here; Solomon is not above using threats: “I have a program here from a fundraising dinner listing you as a sponsor for the mayor’s county initiative. (Beat.) You’re listed under “fifty dollars or less.” (Beat.) I googled you.” He even issues an ultimatum when she tries to shut him down: “I’m going to write this story.” His need to make this happen is huge and however scary and awkward his struggle, he won’t be denied.

I thought at first that considering this scene in the light of those great historical debates would trivialize the scene for me. It actually had the opposite effect, and gave me a richer and more compassionate understanding of the world through Solomon’s eyes. I

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14 Holzer, pg 28
15 Karam, Speech and Debate, pg 18
16 Karam, Speech and Debate, pg 19
discovered much more personally his need to be acknowledged. Was this the motor driving the play? Find a way to be heard!

Scene Three, entitled “Extemporaneous Commentary”, is pretty straightforward. According to the NFL, in this event a contestant draws three questions, selects one, and then has thirty minutes to prepare a speech in response. The contestant uses files of published materials (books, newspapers, online sources) compiled as a resource for answering the question. At the end of the thirty minute preparation period, the student speaks on the topic for up to seven minutes. At the 2008 National Tournament, the topics included Media and American Culture, Crime and Justice, and Education and Issues of Youth. 

This scene introduces Diwata through her first podcast. I thought at first that the irony here is that her “commentary” is not in answer to any question on a topic of national importance. This podcast offers a real outlet for her loneliness, hurt and rage. Hurt at her talent being dismissed by her teacher, rage at his hypocrisy for changing the end of the musical. But digging beneath the more obvious theatrics, the scene addresses important issues in the play about society and the individual, particularly about finding your voice in a repressive society. Diwata’s need for self-expression really drives this scene, and the podcast is her way to reach the audience that has been denied to her. If the podcast gives her the chance to audition for her student audience, the driving need is to be noticed, to be acknowledged, just like Solomon.

Scene Four is titled “Storytelling”, which is an NFL Consolation Event. This is the same as a Supplemental Event, meant for those contestants eliminated from the main events. “Storytelling rules state that a single published, printed story, anecdote, tale, 

17 “NFL Competition Events” <www.nflonline.org>
myth or legend must be retold without notes or props…The delivery must be extempore, not read. The contestant must not add original material or materially change the story.”

I realized that there are all kinds of stories being told in this scene, and they provide the means to start a connection between Howie and Solomon. The stories they tell reveal not only truths about themselves, but their need to tell those stories. That seems especially true at the end of the scene, when Howie tells Solomon about his online encounter with Mr. Healy. This story actually starts the story of the play, and is its point of attack. They also give us clues about who these two people are. And if “Storytelling” can involve myths, tales and legends, are all these stories true? If not, why not? Why would Howie or Solomon need to lie? I was beginning to see more and more how these seemingly simple and ironic scene titles revealed deeper human truths.

Scene Five is called “Dramatic/Humorous Interpretation”. These are actually separate events, but Karam has joined the dramatic and humorous together to make a point. The NFL states that Interpretation selections should be from published novels, short stories, plays or poetry. Its aim is to share the literature with the audience. In choosing to use a play, as Diwata does, the contestant may perform all the characters in the selection. What Diwata sees as important and dramatic, Solomon (and by extension, the audience) sees as humorous. It’s not just the fact that she plays all the characters. The more I watched videos of tournaments and read articles by coaches about presentation techniques, the more focus seemed to be on the externals of the performance. One article really seemed to sum it up. It was by a high school speech and debate coach, written for the Rostrum magazine site on the NFL website, and it advocated the importance of the four fundamentals: Face, Body, Voice and Purpose. While the idea of Purpose did

18 “Supplemental/Consolation Events” <www.nflonline.org>
include each character having a goal and using tactics to overcome obstacles, the coach then wrote: “When that character appears, his/her obstacle should clearly be seen in his eyes, body and voice…Your face should be different with every character…If a ruler could balance on your shoulder in the transition between characters, you are probably boring.”19

It was pretty obvious that this way of teaching and thinking was encouraging an artificial, overblown style in most of the students I had seen perform. Was Karam seeing this as humorous? Is Diwata just a fool we can dismiss? It would be interesting to see how far this would go in rehearsal. Diwata was certainly desperate to get someone-Anyone-to join the speech and debate team, and that need really drives the scene. I think setting the context/circumstances would be really important here. Diwata may be a silly drama queen, but she’s vulnerable as well. Maybe that is the real dramatic/humorous event here.

The purpose of “Cross-Examination Debate”, the title of the sixth scene, is “to clarify an obscure point in an opponent’s case, to expose factual errors or unsupported assertions, or to obtain damaging admissions…”20 The NFL makes clear that the attitude of both the questioner and the witness should be “reasonable, cooperative and eager to please.”21 Unlike its use in the law, it shouldn’t be used to attack the witness’ personal integrity.

Karam seems to be having fun with this analogy, but I think his point again is greater than that. The scene is all about personal issues, and I saw that in looking at it as a

20 “Cross-Examination or Crossfire Guidelines” <www.nflonline.org>
21 see footnote # 20
cross-examination, the roles of questioner and witness were always switching. It starts as a real adversarial relationship, with Diwata and Howie both willing to use blackmail and threats to get what they want. They each put the other on the hot seat at different points during the scene. No reasonable and cooperative debaters here, there is just too much at stake. Maybe they’ve worn each other down a little, because they end up revealing fears and secrets. And that seems to be the start of even a tentative connection between them. Maybe Karam is saying don’t go it alone. But how do you create that community? And how do you find your voice without it? Lots of questions still to answer…

“Duo Interpretation”, the title of Scene Seven, is a two-person category in which the selection can be either humorous or dramatic. All other rules are the same as Dramatic Interpretation. It’s important in this category that the duo be real partners, matched in their interest and dedication. Again, as in Dramatic or Humorous Interpretation, there seems to be an over-riding emphasis on the presentational aspect of the performance.

Watching videos of long-time coaches on NFLtv, the NFL’s official online television, was akin to getting a lesson in bad acting, totally presentational, with no eye contact between the partners. For example, students are instructed how to physicalize attitudes such as being cunning, or sexy, or frightened, and how to change the pitch, volume and quality of their voice when they switch characters. The Duos are usually highly choreographed, with lots of miming of sound effects and props.

The Duo of Diwata and Howie presenting original material adapted from her musical *Crucible* would hardly qualify as an official Duo Interpretation. It’s her show, and Howie is an unwilling participant, which he makes pretty clear. While watching Duo

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videos, I realized that the style made me think of bad musical theatre acting, which of course is perfect for Diwata, the unfulfilled musical performer. But I wasn’t sure if the scene title was just an ironic reference to the opening number. What point was Karam making? Looking at how the scene is *not* a Duo Interpretation started to give me a better idea of what it might really be about/ what might really be happening/ what the real event of the scene is. Duo has to be a well-oiled machine, and instead, Karam gives us a really fractious threesome. Instead of playing off each other, they really push, challenge and prod each other, so that their fragile coalition could burst apart at any time, which it does in the next scene. None of them can really afford to let that happen, and I realized that the strain of trying to keep the group together fuels the scene.

Scene Eight is entitled “Declamation”. I couldn’t originally find this category on the official NFL site, except as part of what is called a Recognized Service Project. The NFL motivates students to succeed in communications. When they are exposed to real-world communication experiences, their learning extends beyond the tournament. In order to honor service (one of the NFL Code of Honor values), the NFL rewards participation in forensics projects. Declamation (also known as Oratorical Declamation), is one type of speaking permitted as a Recognized Service Project. Others include Public Address speaking, Sportscasting and PTA meeting speaking. According to the Collins English dictionary, declamation is “1. a speech, verse, etc., that is or can be spoken; 2. a rhetorical or emotional speech, made especially in order to protest or condemn; tirade.”

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23 “Illinois Names State Champions” <www.nflonline.org>
24 Collins English Dictionary-Complete and Unabridged, (HarperCollins 2003) pg 347
Webster’s dictionary defines it as “the act or art of declaiming.”

I also found Declamation as a public speaking event of the National Catholic Forensic League (NCFL). It supports speech and debate for public, private and parochial high schools in the US and Canada. Declamation is only open to underclassmen, and students must use a speech-memorized and no longer than ten minutes-already given by another person.

Looking at scene eight as a declamation, I saw that there were actually all kinds of declamations there, especially if I wasn’t overly strict with the definition. There were lots of emotional outbursts, and what I had originally thought was a scene about Howie and Diwata outing Solomon, was really about all three of them being outed. The big, painful secrets are revealed, and instead of tearing apart their really fragile coalition, it starts to feel like they might make some kind of real community together based on trust and respect. Again, I was discovering how Karam personalized and deepened what at first seemed a somewhat flip and facile way to organize the play. His personal connection was moving to me, and it was helping me find my way to a deeper understanding of the play.

Scene Nine is “Group Interpretation”, which is described by Diwata in the play, reading from the rule book: “Group Interpretation is just that—the group interpretation of a narrative, also known as Reader’s Theatre. Material may be original. Costumes, props, visual aids…prohibited.” Group Interpretation is not actually an official speech event in the NFL; it doesn’t even appear on the website. I finally found it on some of the state

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26 see footnote # 25
27 “Oratorical Declamation” <www.ncfl.org>
28 Karam, Speech and Debate, pg 49
forensic association sites. It can get confusing, because state and local associations often have categories that are different from the official NFL events. I found that the Wisconsin High School Forensic Association (WHSFA) had some of the best information on Group Interpretation, although when I recently went back to look at the site, out of curiosity, the association was proposing to cancel Group as a category for competition. The WHSFA definition of the category suggests some of the reasons Karam used it as the scene title:

“…to present a literary script in such manner that the audience imagines action being described rather than witnessing it being performed. Symbolic characterization and vocal and physical action rather than a literal dramatization or pantomime is required…Movement to suggest relationships, feelings, changes, ideas, moods, locales, etc…is acceptable and subject to evaluation.”

I was very intrigued by Karam’s choice to make the climax of the play a totally nonverbal scene. Using dance in which, as Diwata says: “all three of us come together to tell a story” would be an exciting challenge. Karam suggests in his stage directions for this scene that Diwata leads the way and the boys tag along, finally getting into the spirit of the dance, which gives the title an ironic edge. I thought about what the dance might mean if I took the title seriously. Although Diwata wants the dance to showcase herself, and although they each have their own agendas to express, I think this is really where the group finally comes together. Only then could Solomon be able to come out at last. It was much more exciting to think about the dance as that story, a real breakthrough for both Solomon and the group.

“Oral Interpretation of Prose”, the title of Scene Ten, is another Supplemental Event in the NFL. In prose reading, prose is defined as “…thought through language

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29 Home page, <www.whsfa.org> April 2010
30 “Group Interpretation” <www.whsfa.org>
31 Karam, Speech and Debate, pg 59
recorded in sentences and paragraphs: fiction (short stories, novels) and non-fiction (articles, essays, journals, biographies).“32 In an article on the NFL website, Debbie Bendix, a high school speech and debate coach, talks about the difference between Oral Interpretation and Dramatic Interpretation. In Dramatic Interpretation, it’s the performance-to wholly become the characters before the eyes of the audience-that is paramount. In Prose Reading, the literature, not the performance, is most important. Prose Reading is the art of interpreting literature aloud to suggest mood and meaning to the audience, leaving most to the imagination.33

Because this scene involves the three students listening to a radio broadcast, it qualifies in some ways as Oral Interpretation. As in that event, use of the voice is important in communicating the meaning of the text. But in a comic twist, Karam makes the performer (in this case the reporter) more important than the text. Although she gets a lot right about the real problems facing the trio, she’s really doing the broadcast to plug her book. I also realized after further research that Karam might be using the reporter’s role to reference Patricia Hersch, the dramaturg for *columbinus*. Hersch is a writer and youth advocate who wrote *A Tribe Apart: Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*. In that book, she writes about adolescence as a journey, a search for self that too often happens alone. She laments the fact that no one is paying attention, that the idea of the family is constantly changing

“Today’s teens…have grown up with parents who are still seeking answers about what it means to be an adult man or woman. They have lived in families that seldom coincide with the old ideal, and in a culture where the traditional wisdom of how to raise children has been replaced by a kind of daily improvisation as

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32 “Supplemental Events: Prose Reading” <www.nflonline.org>
parents try to fit child rearing into their busy lives. At a time when adolescents need to emulate role models, the adults around them are moving targets.34

Scene Eleven is titled “Student Congress”. My research didn’t uncover an NFL event with that title, but there is one called Congressional Debate, to which I think Karam is referring. This event encompasses individual debate in a large group setting. Debaters research and write pieces of Congressional legislation that they feel will better society. They then speak on the legislation while using proper parliamentary procedure. Through Congressional Debate, the NFL promotes leadership and communication skills by debating issues confronting our democracy. I also found that some of the Core Values related to this event were particularly relevant to what was happening in Speech and Debate: “Promote empowerment gained though knowledge…Develop interaction skills and cooperative decision making skills used in an assembly or in a committee…”35

But it was a simple dictionary definition of “congress” that helped me see most clearly what Karam really meant: “1. a coming together; meeting”36. For the first time, we see a real community, and even some guarded warmth between Howie, Solomon and Diwata. They have accomplished something which they could only have done together. They are more supportive of one another, and less involved in their own self-preservation. Solomon is even brave enough to risk reaching out to Howie. And they all seem more comfortable with who they are.

Scene Twelve, the final scene, is entitled “Original Oratory”. As defined by the NFL, “Orators are expected to research and speak intelligently, with a degree of

35 “NFL Competition Events Guide” <www.nflonline.org> pg E4
36 Webster’s New World Dictionary, Second College Edition. (Simon and Schuster, 1980) pg 300
originality, in an interesting manner, about a topic of significance…An orator is given free choice of subject and judged solely on the effectiveness of development and presentation."37 Again, the dictionary definition of “original” gets to the heart of the matter: “1. …initial, first, earliest 2. …fresh; new; novel 3. …thinking or acting in an independent, individual, fresh way”38

I loved the irony of the “initial, first” oratory being the last. But it’s also “fresh, new and independent” in the sense that Howie, Solomon and Diwata have begun to really find their own voice, and accept who they are. It’s because of even that tenuous group support that Diwata can forego her destructive need for revenge and Solomon can take that first step on his own as an out gay young man.

**Back to High School**

It had been many years since I’d attended high school, or even been in a high school, so I found ways to re-connect with those experiences. I started going back to school, literally. I live in Highland Park, a small town right near Rutgers. It has its own high school, and I live only a few blocks away. I started walking or cycling over to the school grounds, watching and listening surreptitiously as students left school at the end of the day, or played sports after school, or just hung out on the bleachers and grounds around the ball fields. The (group) dynamics and interactions were fascinating: groups of girls and boys flirting gingerly, usually in the guise of calling each other out on /challenging each other about some perceived nerdy behavior or clothing; couples walking quietly hand-in-hand or kissing in the bleachers; the jocks who were loud and would show off for each other as much as for any passing girls. Of course there were also

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37 "NFL Competition Events" <www.nflonline.org>
38 Webster’s, pg 1003
the loners, the “uncool” kids who didn’t dress like the others; a couple of surly Goths and one particularly out gay boy who wore make-up, purple-spiked hair and a big scarf. To be honest, I can’t say for sure that he was gay, or that the loners I saw didn’t have friends. But it was really helpful to imagine their lives, their isolation and how they might deal with it, and I know that at least some of the character costume design choices we used for *Speech and Debate* were informed by my observations at Highland Park High School.

I also managed to get inside the school a couple of times, and just walking the halls brought me right back to my school days. I remember trying to negotiate my way through that energized, pressurized, exciting and dangerous/scary world. I realized how much my devotion to music and theater helped me cope, and I found I understood even more personally the almost obsessive needs of Solomon and Diwata.

In addition to watching movies like *Juno* by Diablo Cody\(^{39}\) and even television programs like *Glee*,\(^{40}\) I found books about the teen experience to be extremely helpful, especially *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* by Patricia Hersch, and *All Grown Up and No Place to Go* by David Elkind. Ms. Hersch was the dramaturg on Karam and PJ Paparelli’s play *columbinus*, a theatrical re-telling of the Columbine story which I talked about earlier in this section. Her insight and compassion into the isolation of the teen experience was invaluable. The book is comprised of a series of ongoing talks she did with a number of young teenagers in her home town of Reston, Virginia. Her premise is clear:

“A clear picture of adolescents, of even our own children, eludes us—not necessarily because they are rebelling, or avoiding or evading us. *It is because we aren’t there.* Not just parents, but any adults. American society has left its


\(^{40}\) *Glee*. Fox Broadcasting, 2010
children behind as the cost of progress in the workplace.\textsuperscript{41} “…Kids today often feel invisible. Often they have to act out to get any attention at all.”\textsuperscript{42}

One of the stories that really struck me was about thirteen year old Jessica Jones.

She was a precocious, sassy kid who answered her teacher’s challenge to write a political speech on an important topic the candidates in the 1992 election had not addressed. The teacher would pick the best speeches to be read at a public assembly. Jessica chose to write about teenage pregnancy, a topic close to her heart, since her teenage sister had recently had a baby. A couple of her friends also picked topics that were important to them, including drug use at the school, and abortion. The teacher vetoes all their speeches for the public assembly, telling them the subjects are inappropriate. The girls are appalled, and Jessica even marches into the assistant principal’s office. She won’t allow her to read the speech either: “Jessica…I can’t let you read it because it would stir up too much controversy.”\textsuperscript{43}

The problems faced by the adolescents in this story really paralleled so much of the plight of the teens in \textit{Speech and Debate}. They both had to contend with an adult world that was not willing to deal with issues that were very important to them. The adults were in effect telling them that they didn’t count, that they were indeed “invisible. In a dramatic challenge that could have been spoken almost word for word by Solomon, one of Jessica’s friends fires back:

“This speech was going to be on abortion but the school outlawed the topic and decided a student couldn’t talk about it. So I am going to talk instead about freedom of speech. When my class was given this assignment we were told to talk about what was on our minds. But how can we talk about what is on our minds when they limit the issues that we can talk about?...When you are a teenager, you

\textsuperscript{41} Hersch, Patricia, pg 19
\textsuperscript{42} Hersch, Patricia, pg 22
\textsuperscript{43} Hersch, Patricia, pgs 65-66
are supposed to be finding out about who you are, but if opinions are outlawed, how will you find out how you feel?"  

I was very moved by many of the stories in Patricia Hersch’s book, but this one was the most depressing and also the most heartening. Depressing because of the chasm between the adults and the kids who needed their help and guidance, but also heartening because of the courage of the kids who wouldn’t give up. Reading this book gave me more respect for kids I might have dismissed before, and a better understanding of their real needs and problems.

Researching the actual topics of high school speech and debate became a wonderful way for me to find my way into this play. What I thought would be a dry, academic study actually helped me dig deeper into what was really happening in these scenes. Karam’s personal connection to the characters and events in the play, as well as my research into other stories of teenage life, helped me to see the world through a teenager’s eyes again, and to have a richer and more immediate understanding of the huge issues they were grappling with. I was excited to take that journey with them.
CONCEPTUALIZATION

“High school is hell!” I remember this phrase coming roaring back into my brain when I first encountered *Speech and Debate*. For a small group of friends and me, this was the rallying cry, the excuse, the curse, the outlet for all our fears and frustrations during those crazy and intense high school years. The feelings of being trapped in that building and those classrooms really hit me again as I first read the play. I was amazed at how quickly the play had transported me back after so many years. What was it about this story/world that I responded to? And what was the story I wanted to tell? I knew I had to understand the world of the play before I could decide *how* to tell the story.

I started my search by going back to the author’s own life, to find out what it could tell me about the world of the play. When we spoke, Stephen Karam was very candid about his personal connection to the characters in the play. I knew from my research that Karam had based Salem, OR, where the play takes place, on Scranton, PA, where he attended high school. They are both small, conservative towns where teachers could alter a school play to adhere to strict moral codes. Stephen told me it had happened in his high school. Also, because Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible* is so important to Diwata and her creative life, Karam’s use of the name *Salem*, as in *Salem*, MA, alludes directly to the closed, repressive, judgmental society of that play. Using the character of Mary Warren from the play, Diwata challenges the adult world directly: “…But by keeping things hidden inside, who are kids really helping? Themselves? Or the adults who would rather ignore uncomfortable subjects rather than engage them?” Mr. Healy, the drama teacher, would rather change the ending of *Once Upon a Mattress* than deal.

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46 *Speech and Debate*. pg 49
with out-of-wedlock pregnancy; Solomon’s teacher tries to channel his creative energies
towards the Speech and Debate team rather than really deal with his desire to write about
a local sex scandal, and no faculty member or community leader is willing to sponsor
Howie’s Gay/Straight Alliance. The teens are living in a world in which they are not
taken seriously.

The adults in the play are barely present, but their impact is very strongly felt.
Those who actually appear in the play are not named, but given labels, the Teacher and
the Reporter, to describe their roles in relationship to the students. To Karam’s credit, he
doesn’t allow the roles to become mere ciphers, but investigates their own struggles. The
Teacher, for example, has as much to lose as Solomon does if he goes ahead and
publishes an article about the local sex scandal. To Solomon, though, she is the authority
figure and he will do whatever it takes to be taken seriously, even issuing the ultimatum:
“I’m going to write this story.”47

The parents are particularly impersonal and seem to have little impact and
involvement in their kids’ lives. They are never seen, only heard, yelling up to the
students in their bedrooms, and they come across as peremptory, self-involved and
condescending. The politicians whom Solomon denounces are hypocrites, pushing
legislation against gays while leading closeted lives. Diwata recognizes that Mr. Healy,
especially, is hypocritical and even dangerous as a sexual predator who privately preys on
teenagers while publicly pandering to the conservative community by altering the plot of
the spring musical “…to avoid the raciness of an unwed mom…”48 Even the other
students seem to be part of this very conservative, even homophobic world. The only

47 Speech and Debate, pg 19
48 Speech and Debate, pg 22
time we hear some of them, they are heard gay bashing from behind a closed classroom
door, during the first meeting of the Gay/Straight Alliance.

We actually see and hear little first-hand about this repressive world. What we
know of it comes largely through what we see and hear from Solomon, Diwata and
Howie. We are meant to see the world through their eyes. It’s a world that is threatened
by anything that upsets the status quo and the three teens certainly do that. Not only
because of their quest to deal with the local sex scandal, but really because of who they
are, what they want and the way they express those needs. One of the things that
originally drew me to the play was the wonderfully shameless, outrageous, manipulative
behavior of the three students. Like the teenaged Karam who belted out a duet from Miss
Saigon, Solomon, Diwata and Howie will not be ignored or pushed aside or controlled or
condescended to. They refuse to be silent. They need to be heard, to be acknowledged, at
any cost.

Their struggle was so compelling that thinking of the spine of the play as a fight to
be heard was a really visceral way for me to think conceptually about the play. The
conflict had a real “us” versus “them” mentality to it, with the teens seeing the world (and
particularly the world as it is controlled by adults) as cold, unresponsive and judgmental.
The classroom where so much of the play’s action occurs is representative of that world,
a place where the students are literally and figuratively boxed in. The idea of a cold,
soulless, white room-a windowless box, really- was a compelling image for me. The
metaphor of inmates in a prison may be a little extreme, but it really helps suggest how
Diwata, Howie and Solomon see their world. I wanted to evoke that sense of confinement
in a sterile, institutional world where there is no color-no humanity or creativity allowed.
The projections on the screen would be a real contrast to that world-manifestations of all the fabulous energy, creativity, warmth, color and humor inside Howie, Solomon and Diwata. The projections were the kinds of things they would come up with on their own computers, their creative efforts at self-expression. Their bedrooms had to have color as well, as expressions of their own personality and creativity. They were their private hideaways, a safe, small sanctuary where they could escape the repressive outside world. Seeing the world of the play as the teenagers see and feel it gives it a heightened reality, and a strong sense that what we’re experiencing is really an emotional or psychic landscape.

The three teens are fighting not only the small town mentality, the world of adults, but also each other. They have learned to trust no one, and have even internalized much of the controlling and judgmental aspects of the society they live in. Diwata is willing to blackmail Howie into joining her speech and debate group by threatening to expose his online sex chat with a teacher, and Howie threatens to expose Solomon’s sexual contact with a teacher if he publishes an article about Howie’s online chat.

That this fractious group comes together at all is a minor miracle. The play tells the story of how these three do finally form a kind of community. I think that Karam is saying that it is definitely better not to go it alone. He gives us three very different characters who are all loners and lonely and seen as misfits, rejected by society and even each other. Along the way they each realize that they have to join forces to get what they need, however difficult and unpleasant that might be. Solomon can get his article published and be a recognized journalist, Diwata can be noticed and admired for her artistry, and Howie can be seen as an out gay man and a respected member of society.
And together they accomplish something—bringing to light the local sex scandal—which none of them could have done alone. Whether they want to admit it or not, what other people think is very important. On their journey from mutual hostility to wary tolerance to a kind of guarded warmth, they finally find enough validation to start to accept themselves and each other. By the time of the first meeting of the Gay/Straight Alliance there are even some signs of mutual support.

This transformative, healing power of community is at the core of *Speech and Debate*. It’s the way to fight the system, to take back the power and be respected. But it’s also personally transforming, conferring a sense of self-worth and self-confidence. That Karam chooses to express this most powerfully in the climactic music and dance scene says a lot about the power of art to change our lives.

Hidden under all the secrets, outrageous behavior and blackmail is a real need to connect. In coming together, Solomon, Howie and Diwata each discover their true voice, and the strength to become who they are. I like to think that Diwata is able to get a real job in a theater once she realizes that acting isn’t so much about getting noticed, but about the need to connect with an audience and tell a story. Howie starts to feel more self-confident as an out gay man, and is able to joke about the gay bashing. And Solomon is able to begin to deal with his homosexuality when he takes his first steps out into the online gay community as a “gay/wmale/16.”

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49 *Speech and Debate*, pg 70
I always look forward to the process of designing a production. After so many hours of working mostly alone on a play or opera, it’s exciting to be able to share ideas and discoveries with a creative group. I was fortunate that the design team for *Speech and Debate* consisted of undergraduates, graduates, faculty and even former graduates. It was a terrific mix of ages and sensibilities.

Robin Vest, our set designer and a member of the design faculty at Mason Gross, had come to the project just a week or two earlier and so was still in the process of becoming familiar with the play. My costume designer, Jessa Rae Court, was a graduate student who was also working with me on an opera that I was directing for the music school at Rutgers. Matt Bathe and Marc Vogt, the lighting and sound designers, were both undergrads, and Justin Smiley, the projection designer, was a grad student. Justin later had to leave the production, and Shawn Boyle, a recent grad, took over.

The first design meeting took place over the winter break. Since it had to be a short meeting because of scheduling conflicts, I wanted to use the time to share initial thoughts and impressions of the play. We didn’t discuss design, but shared with one another what we felt the play to be about. I told them about the research discoveries I had made and about the playwright’s personal connection to the characters and the story. I shared my feelings about what had drawn me to the play: the rebellious, ornery kids who fought and blackmailed each other, and who finally came together warily, kicking and screaming. The play tells the story of how these three do finally come together to form a kind of community.
We all discussed what the adult world might be, how tough and hypocritical it was, and also about how there was an “us” versus “them” mentality to it. That played into the idea of the characters really needing to fight to be heard, which led us further into thinking about what “weapons” the teens had to win the fight, to be able to self-express: the “virtual” world of cyberspace as both weapon and creative outlet, as well as the music and dance. I was excited to hear that everyone felt emotionally close to this struggle, either being students themselves or working in an academic environment. I wanted us to find a way to have the audience experience the play through Solomon, Howie and Diwata’s eyes. I talked about my enthusiasm in getting to do this play at a school, for a young audience who could share in the experience of the characters.

I brought in a few pictures of my impressions about the classroom space where so much of the action happens. I knew this space had to somehow feel not welcoming to the students, a place where they were forced to live every day. My initial images were very white and clean, almost abstract, soulless boxes. I was also intrigued by the opposite idea of a more traditional, realistic school room, and showed some pictures of wood-lined older classrooms (see “Supporting Materials”), more of a modern riff on old Salem, MA. We started discussing whether the space was a real classroom, and what the other spaces in the play, particularly the bedrooms, might represent in the story. I encouraged everyone to bring in images of their own to inspire a continued discussion.

Set Design

The stage directions at the top of Speech and Debate call for a space that is “relatively spare, dominated by a large screen or back wall onto which various
There is never a direct reference to a classroom, only to a room. Robin and I felt that this gave an even more impersonal feel to what that room might be where so much of the action of the play occurs. It also freed us to start thinking less realistically and more emotionally about how the students see this place. If school is where adults force students to be everyday, how could we suggest that sense of imprisonment and repression? And yet what is it about this world that has the possibility of transformation lying within it?

In thinking about the idea of transformation, I had brought in some images of school lockers I had chanced upon. They brought back lots of memories for me of my own HS: long hallways, uniformity on the outside, secrets hidden within, the energy and noise of clanging lockers and all the different lives contained within them. What might be revealed when those lockers were opened? Robin took the idea further and suggested how lockers could be the means to move from scene to scene. We were both interested in keeping the student-eyed view of the world idea by having the students (and crew dressed as students) actually make each scene change happen. The changes into the bedroom scenes could be formed from pieces brought in through the lockers, in full view of the audience. That would give us the feeling that the schoolroom never really goes away, and that the bedrooms could be suggested by some selective objects within the classroom space itself. The designers and I were all in agreement about the bedrooms representing sanctuaries from the outside world, a place where the students can feel freer to be who they are, and maybe hide their secrets from the world.

Our production was to be presented in the proscenium space at New Theater, so Robin and I spent time in the theater, “listening to the space”. Because Karam focuses the

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50 Speech and Debate, pg 11
world of the play down to its effect on three characters, I wanted to find a way to make this a direct and intimate experience for the audience. Robin and I felt that the large size of the stage and the remove of the proscenium would distance the audience from involvement with the play. We talked about extending the lip of the stage into the house, making the audience more a part of the classroom. Robin suggested we also pull down the size of the proscenium, making a smaller box within the larger stage box. We explored what that new proscenium opening space might look like, and decided to have some fun by suggesting the shape of a Mac. We were still exploring our options for where to place the scene title projections, and thought we might try projecting them on the top of our “Mac” proscenium, almost like a surtitle. Howie, Diwata and Solomon all have laptops, and in the first scene Howie is on his Mac, having an IM chat. This is a tech savvy generation, and the internet is one of the weapons that the kids have in their struggle. Pulling down the proscenium also meant that the classroom could have lower walls, which would make the space feel smaller and more confining. It also gave us the option of using the new proscenium walls for projections. I knew I wanted to use low hanging fluorescent lights for the classroom, which would give the room the feeling of a low ceiling as well.

One of our biggest challenges was determining exactly what this school/classroom space was. The play is essentially realistic in its acting style, but Robin and I felt that seeing the world through the teen’s eyes gave us some liberty to be more evocative, to construct a more heightened world. Robin had originally done a white mock-up of the schoolroom, with a large white dry erase screen on the back wall for the scene titles as well as incorporating the school lockers on all the walls. It suggested a
classroom, but was not specific other than that. I was really intrigued by the look and feel of the spare, clean box. It was almost antiseptic, and felt like a monochromatic prison box, especially imagining it under the glare of the fluorescents. But the all white was almost chic, which would lead us in a very different direction. Robin suggested we also look at the room done more realistically as well, so we looked at it as a more traditional classroom, making the dry erase board a green chalkboard, and adding some color to the walls and floor tiles.

We eventually decided to come back to a more monochromatic look for the classroom. In playing with ideas for the three bedrooms, we found that we were using a lot of color for the objects that defined the bedroom spaces and the characters who lived there. I thought it was important to make the public and private worlds as different as possible, and really focus on making them emotional landscapes as seen through the character’s eyes. Draining color from the schoolroom gave it a colder, more institutional feeling, which contrasted with the warmer, more personal and eclectic feel of the bedrooms. We ended up taking our cue from some of the all-beige classrooms in the Rutgers drama department, where we lived and worked every day. This choice enabled us to use a white dry erase board instead of a chalkboard, which gave us the option to use it as a rear projection screen.

We had originally placed the schoolroom far downstage and parallel to the proscenium. Turning the room on an angle to the proscenium gave the whole stage a lot more energy and actually felt as if it was moving in closer to the audience. Making that change meant that only Diwata’s bedroom space, which was between the boys’ bedrooms, would be in the actual schoolroom space. But we still had the sense that the
schoolroom was always there, and we also discovered that the little extra prominence this gave her room was just right for Diwata as theatrical diva.

We spent a lot of time trying to find the set pieces for each bedroom. What was the right evocative gesture for each character? All of the designers were in on these discussions, and contributed valuable images and insights. I wanted to make sure that no matter what we chose, we had enough flexibility to deal with any changes that might occur as a result of the discoveries made in rehearsal. It was important that the actors feel a sense of ownership of their private rooms.

**Lighting Design**

All of the scenes of *Speech and Debate* take place within interior rooms or spaces. The play is very focused on what is happening to and between Howie, Solomon and Diwata. There is little sense of what is happening in the outside world, other than hearing about it by the teenagers themselves. Matt and I decided to amplify the feeling of the seclusion of the interiors by not using any outside or natural sources of light: no light from windows in the classroom or bedrooms, or in the restaurant scene. Even the scene transitions were lit mostly from spill light from the projections.

I knew from the start that I wanted to help define the cold, repressive school world by using fluorescent ceiling lights. With David Gordon’s help, we were able to secure three banks of these lights, which would hang over the classroom space and give a strong sense of a low, lowering ceiling. We knew that the harsh white light could be difficult to watch after a while, so Matt proposed to control it with other stage lights. That way we could also mirror the arc of the storytelling, going from harsher, cooler light in the earlier scenes to a slightly warmer feel by the end. I remember that when I first saw
the fluorescents illuminating the stage, the classroom took on the energy of a boxing ring, with the students under the glare of the lights. It was an apt metaphor for the place where three teenaged combatants had to battle both the status quo and each other.

As I mentioned earlier, the designers and I took a long time finding the right set pieces to help define each of the three bedrooms. We ended up with what I felt was one strong iconic gesture that we then built upon for each bedroom. This not only spoke to character, but also gave some freedom for the actors and myself to make discoveries and add to what the design had already established. Since there were no actual walls, the space for each bedroom would be defined by light. In order to make the greatest contrast with the classroom, Matt and I focused on making each of the bedrooms a small and safe hideaway, with a warmer and more intimate feel than the school world.

The greatest challenge for us was the climactic dance scene, in which Solomon, Diwata and Howie dance “the story of how we came together.”51 I felt the dance was about that and more: I wanted it to start out as a piece that Diwata has choreographed to showcase herself, and then, through the power of the music and dance, become a celebration of the group itself. This finally gives Solomon the freedom to transcend his fears and really “come out”.

I wanted to see how far we could go with this idea of transformation and transcendence, how the music and the physical act of dancing could transport the three teens to a “heightened” reality of a truly delirious celebration. The music that’s called for in the script is George Michael’s “Freedom”, and we wanted to play with the wonderfully dated, disco/pop feel of it. The scene started out realistically in a darkened classroom, lit only by the outside hallway light from the open door. As the dance progressed and

51 Speech and Debate, pg 59
everyone (particularly the boys) shed inhibitions, the lights opened up to the whole room. As the group really got into it, the movement of the light reflected the changing dance moves, even suggesting some disco/psychedelic type lighting. When the dance hit its climax, the lockers on either side of the classroom opened and flooded the stage with pulsing light. Matt had originally tried using only white light here, but we found that using color was much more vibrant and really transformed the space. It had tremendous, almost manic energy that spilled out to the audience and mirrored the jubilant sense of freedom onstage.

**Costume Design**

Early in the design process we decided to set the play in present day. Although it was originally written in 2006, the script doesn’t specify when the action takes place. I felt that the story needed to be happening *now*, to make it as immediate as possible. I wanted to explore choices that would be immediately recognizable to an audience, and help us identify with the characters. I knew it was important to base our choices on character, but avoid the trap of clichés about who these misfit teens might be. Jessa and I both spent time simply observing the students around us—including the cast members—and using many of those observations as the basis for the designs.

The Teacher/Reporter, who represents the adult roles in *Speech and Debate*, was meant to be played by one actress. It was originally going to be played by Rachel Rogers, an MFA II actor. She had projected a sense of strength and maturity in the auditions. As the teacher, Jessa and I wanted to emphasize her vulnerability and youth as well, by putting her in jeans, a business jacket, and flats. We should have the sense that she is the authority figure in the classroom, but she has as much to lose in her argument with
Solomon as he does. This fear makes her unable to deal honestly with his need to be taken seriously as a reporter for the school paper. When Rachel unexpectedly left school, I cast Christina Norris in the role. Because she projected much more youth and vulnerability, we put her in a conservative skirt and blouse, in mostly warm tones. We eventually added a pair of low heels to help give her more maturity and authority.

I thought it was important that the reporter be older, early thirties or so. She is meant to be seen as yet another adult who disappoints and condescends to the teenagers. Although she comes to visit them, ostensibly to write about their interest in the local sex scandal, her real objective is to plug her book about adolescents. She is an established writer with an easy sense of authority, and a charming manipulator who knows how to get what she wants from the teens. This was reflected in her chic pants ensemble, high heels and slicked back coif. We made no effort to hide the fact that this was the same actor who had also played the teacher; it was just another side of the same adult coin.

As I mentioned before, Jessa and I took many of our teenage costume cues from our observations on and around the Rutger’s campus. It was important that the three students were recognizable, and that the costumes allowed us to track the journey the characters made during the play. I had done a timeline for the play that covered a span of five weeks, starting from a few days before the auditions for the spring musical that Diwata talks about in her podcast, until the last scene on the night of the final dress rehearsal for the musical, *Once Upon a Mattress*. Since it was the spring musical, it was probably sometime around late March or early April. Having lived in the Northwest for the last ten years, I knew how dark and rainy it could be then, and that natives rarely wore rubbers or used umbrellas, as a point of honor. They did, however, wear lots of REI or
Patagonia type outerwear, and I thought Solomon was a prime candidate for that type of pricey clothing.

I had noticed during auditions and early rehearsals that Sarah Sirota, who played Diwata, was always doing little dance moves, almost unconsciously. The character has studied dance and considers herself a musical theater performer and writer. I thought we should pick up on the dancer idea to work from for Diwata, using various leggings and dance leotards as our base. Since Diwata’s bedroom was done in shades of hot pink, Jessa found different over-shirts and blouses in variations of that color to go with the black dance tights. It really became her signature look, and set her apart just enough from what we imagined were most of the other girls who wore jeans. By the end of the play, as Diwata had more confidence and less need to be the center of attention, her look softened a bit, with a simple black shirt and flowered leggings.

Her costume for the actual dance sequence evolved later in the process, while we were in rehearsals and working on the dance itself. I had imagined Diwata’s choreography for the dance to be a combination of Martha Graham-inspired serious modern dance and pop/disco moves inspired by the George Michael music. Her home-made costume reflected that mix, with faux harem pants, and a cape that were ringed with sequins. Unfortunately the sequins had a habit of coming off and landing on the tile floor, which made some of the dance moves a little difficult. They proved to be a labor intensive design choice, and needed constant re-sewing.

Solomon deliberately dresses to separate himself from the typical student jeans and tee shirt look. He sees himself as a professional, a reporter doing important work. His clothes are a way to proclaim his seriousness and hide his insecurities. Since the script
mentions that he wears white sneakers and shirts with crocodiles on them, we chose pleated khakis and a belt to finish the fitted, tucked-in ensemble. Giving him a pair of glasses helped him look a little nerdy as well as suggesting his intellectual bent. For the dance wear, Jessa and I played with the idea of using a theatrical version of his Izod shirt. For Solomon, Jessa took one of his crocodile shirts and put a huge croc logo, with sequins, in place of the regular sized logo. He wore it outside his pants, with collar up. By the time of the Gay/Straight Alliance meeting near the end of the play, Solomon had officially come out, and was wearing jeans with his buttoned shirt outside his pants, in a much more relaxed and teenage-appropriate look.

Howie was the city boy from Portland whose family had moved to small town Salem. I felt this was a move down the economic scale, so money might be tight. Being an out gay man (and the new kid on the block) in Salem is not fun; there is no support system and Howie feels ostracized at school. I thought he would have toned down his look a bit for Salem, going for more muted, Northwest colors. He dresses very much like most students, but with a bit more flair: skinny jeans, tee shirts, and hoodies. We gave him some colorful scarves to help proclaim his outsider status and artistic side: he was after all a dancer and choreographer in the Boy Scouts. For the dance scene Jessa found him a hot pink boa in place of his scarf, which he used with great fun and abandon, especially when re-enacting his original Boy Scouts choreography.

**Sound/Projection Design**

Music is a very emotional and suggestive art form for me. As a design element, it can evoke mood and help to condition our response to a play. My early talks with Marc Vogt, the sound designer, centered on ways to use sound and music to help get the
audience into the heads of Howie, Solomon and Diwata. I wanted us to hear what they heard every day, whether at school or at home. There were lots of scenes in the play, and I knew the sound and projection design would have to work together in the transitions between scenes. What was happening to the three teens, emotionally or even literally, that got them to that next scene?

The first scene of the play, an IM chat between Howie and another man, is silent, with the online conversation projected. Stephen Karam suggests using music under the scene. In the published playscript, Karam times the projections precisely to Aaron Copland’s “Fanfare for the Common Man.” This music has a strong marshal quality to it that didn’t feel right for a scene that I saw as sexy and intimate. Howie is alone in his room at night, so I thought he’d be listening to some music on his iPod to get in the mood, and maybe give him some courage. Finding the right music proved to be a huge challenge, especially in timing the IM chat projections to the music. The IM chat scene was a sexual dance, and one that had a lot of humor in it as well. All of the designers contributed suggestions, since most of them knew a lot more contemporary pop/rock music than I did. We finally found the right choice in George Michaels’ “Father Figure.” Although it wasn’t strictly contemporary, it tied in with using Michaels’ “Freedom” later on for the dance sequence, and it had a nice, lilting, sensuous feel to it. Best of all, the song gave Shawn Boyle, the projection designer, lots of possibilities to play with the timing of the chat projections to suggest the real give and take of the online flirtation.

Since the schoolroom is so central to the play, I wanted to find what I called the “school collage”, an energetic cacophony of sounds of the high school hallway that the teens would have had to deal with before coming into the classroom and then again after
leaving. Marc put together a terrific mix of conversations, lockers clanging, music, school announcements, etc. We punctuated it with a loud school bell that took us right into the school scenes. In contrast to that, we used a vamp of Diwata’s music, played on her Casio, to bring us into her bedroom scenes and her slightly drunken pop music/diva world.

Shawn Boyle, the projection designer, and I began by talking about the scene titles, which use the names of different speech and debate competition events. Karam specifies that they’re to be projected at the start of each scene. All the designers and I talked a long time about where these projections should appear. We first tried the scene titles projected up on the top of our designed “Mac” proscenium, giving them a more formal look to introduce each scene. They even reminded me of opera surtitles, and felt like a sly adult comment on the student scenes we were about to witness. I thought that trying them up there, a little removed from the action of the scenes, would be a good contrast to the other projections we would put on the dry erase board, such as those in the IM chat scene. That we ultimately chose to keep all the projections on the dry erase board came from our efforts to really focus on seeing the world through the teen’s eyes. Putting the titles up top pulled the eye away from the stage and out of the classroom world. And once we had finalized the actual projection design for the scene titles, we found that their youthful energy and creativity had to be an integral part of the scene changes, and live in the stage space itself.

More often than not, the titles actually reflect what’s happening in the scene, although usually with a little humorous twist. Scene four, for example, is titled “Storytelling”, and it is indeed about two people telling stories—and discovering a lot
about each other. The catch is that they never actually see each other, but connect over the phone. I thought that the titles should reflect the student’s world by looking as if they had been written on a school chalkboard, almost like a class assignment. Shawn took that idea and fleshed it out with humorous graffiti and doodles, the way kids would draw. So as we heard a phone ring going into the “Storytelling” scene, we saw a projection of the title, and a hand drawn line drawing of a phone. Leading into the school scenes, Shawn designed a wonderful maelstrom of numbers and letters swirling on a blackboard. For Diwata’s bedroom scenes, Shawn based his designs on her favorite hot pink color.

All the projections had great energy and creativity, and the sound design choices I’d made to accompany them just didn’t match. If anything, they dragged the energy down. The “school collage” sounds I talked about earlier didn’t have any forward momentum to propel us into the classroom scenes. Using a vamp of Diwata’s music as a transition into her bedroom scenes was a totally enervating choice; the music was slow and repetitious and sapped energy before we’d even started her scenes. Once we got into technical rehearsals, the transitions took longer than planned, and made things even worse. After Pam Berlin came to a run-through, she suggested I find a better way to energize the transitions and the production as a whole. I realized I’d been afraid to use music which I thought would somehow compete with the music meant to be in the play: Diwata’s pop score, “Freedom”, etc. I had also been much too literal in my choices, matching them to the sounds associated with the scene we were about to see. But the answer to the problem had been there the whole time: the Scissor Sisters. They are a band that plays contemporary rock music which can also include a slightly retro rock feel, along with hints of disco and blues. The fact that they’re well known for being made up
of mostly gay musicians was a nice plus, and something a young audience would be aware of. I was using their music for the bows, and had originally looked at one of their songs to use for Howie’s IM chat scene. I decided to underscore all the transitions with their songs. The music immediately energized the feel of the whole show and matched the youth and vibrancy of the projection drawings. The transitions felt shorter, which tightened the show, and the audience was sent into each scene with an energy that matched that of Solomon, Diwata and Howie.

**Dance**

I had originally asked Sherry Albom, a member of the dance faculty at Rutgers, to choreograph the climactic dance scene in *Speech and Debate*. We had worked together in the opera that I directed for the music department, and we had a great rapport. She had choreographed a square dance for the opening scene of the opera that provided a nice period feel, and played into the talents and abilities of the students involved, all of whom were non-dancers. It also had wonderful humor and kept the opera’s story moving. I knew these were important qualities I was looking for in a choreographer, and we were both looking forward to continuing our collaboration.

Unfortunately, Sherry had to drop out of the project, and she recommended Lauren Connolly, a senior dance major, to replace her. It was late in the pre-production process, and we were about to start rehearsals. I met with Lauren and we got up to speed as quickly as possible.

As I’ve mentioned before, I loved the fact that Karam made the climax of the play a dance scene. I talked with Lauren about how the possibility of transformation and transcendence were important ideas in the play for me, and how I wanted to reach for
those possibilities here. Even though the storytelling takes a different form in this scene, it was important not to forget that it was part of a play, and to find the way to integrate it into the story. My idea for the basic shape of the dance story was this: The dance has been choreographed by Diwata, using a mix of her modern dance moves and more pop/disco influenced moves suggested by Howie and the George Michael music. It starts out as a showcase for her, with the boys generally following her lead. Howie gets into it by getting to showcase some of his Boy Scout disco moves, while Solomon is still uncomfortable and self-conscious. As the dance develops, Diwata does her striptease (as in *The Crucible* forest dancing), as does Howie, starting to enjoy the silliness of it. Solomon dutifully follows along, and they launch into their group moves. As the group dance develops, the boys-particularly Solomon-start to shed their personal inhibitions in the sheer physical exhilaration of collaborative movement. This becomes a celebration in which the realistic physical classroom space gives way to an emotional landscape to mirror their elation. They each might even abandon the choreography at some point—I was thinking mostly of Solomon—to rock out on their own. They join together to end the dance as three much more equal partners.

Before beginning work on the dance, Lauren came to a few rehearsals to get to know the actors and their characters. I had been incorporating into the rehearsal schedule some time for the actors and me to play with movement. I knew it was scary for them to have to sing and dance during the play, and I thought that it would take some of the pressure off to just have fun with it before launching into actual choreography. Lauren also took the time before setting any dance moves to do some dance improvisations, and she used some of the character moves the actors came up with in the final dance.
One of our biggest challenges in bringing this scene to life was finding enough rehearsal time to really develop and play with it. For various reasons, Lauren had to severely shorten the amount of time she had to work with us. She wasn’t able to complete the choreography until we were already on stage, and then she was unfortunately unable to come back to make any changes. Lauren had done a lot of wonderful work, but I didn’t feel we were done, nor did I feel confident enough to make any actual dance adjustments myself. I was aware that my idea of personal transformation through community—as symbolized by the dance sequence—was possibly putting too much emotional and symbolic weight on this scene, but I wanted to give it a try and see how far we could take it. I thought we had a good start to the shape of the story, but we hadn’t gotten near enough to the point where the dance expressed the joy of the growing group dynamic enough to take that leap to the next emotional level of celebration. There was still not a strong or specific sense of them coming together, and what that meant. They were just doing some steps together, but not really interacting or supporting one another. Ideally, the step after the formation of the group would have been the three of them breaking apart, inspired by the group interaction to really let go. Lauren and I hadn’t been able to get to the point yet where we could find what that letting go was—that ultimate joy in discovering your true self, and how it would be expressed physically in the dance. That would have been the real climax. I think we would have had a shot at it with more rehearsal time, but as it was the dance felt truncated and confusing. And we hadn’t yet earned the right to any sort of real transformation. That became even clearer to me when we were in tech and lighting the dance. There was confusion as to how to make the transition from realistic classroom to a more emotional landscape. I wanted the lights to
change subtly at first, grounded in the reality of the classroom but moving with the changing dance moves and shifting emotional landscape. I think we were trying to clarify with lighting what wasn’t terribly clear in the dance. I don’t think we’d built up to the “climax” when Diwata jumps into the arms of both boys with either the choreography or the lighting, and that made the huge change in the lighting confusing for the audience. Nor was our “climax” strong enough to justify that leap. The story was still unclear, as were the rules of this dance world were trying to create.

Looking back on it now, I wish we would have had a real chance to try and make the dance sequence work. I keep asking myself if I should have been more involved with the dance rehearsals. I wanted to give Lauren time and space to play, especially at first, and so I deliberately kept my input to a minimum. I stressed the story we had worked out, and asked about what was happening when, dance-wise. I think now that I should have jumped in sooner and worked with Lauren on shaping the piece. Because the dance was unfinished and unclear, and I don’t think we really earned the right to a big transformation, I think now I should have tried foregoing the big light change with the lockers opening. It simply wasn’t justified. As I’ve talked about before, I thought the starting idea/language of the dance worked well, with the dark classroom and shaft of light. It would have been fun to play with that language and see how far our dance story, as it really was, would have let us go with it. I think we were lighting a dance that we had in our heads, but that wasn’t on the stage.
SELF EVALUATION

For many years I had wanted to go back to drama school to learn a process I thought I had bypassed in my work as a director. I had started out training to be an actor, and had become very intrigued with all kinds of musical theater. Once I’d moved into doing more opera, I knew I wanted to see how a production was put together from the ground up. I worked as a stage manager, assistant director and house staff director before I started directing my own productions. Although I assisted many directors, it was rare to be able to identify any sort of coherent process in putting together an opera production. Once I started directing, and then also teaching, I tried to use my theater training to inform my work. But I knew I was working at just a basic level of competency, and I wanted to explore more deeply what it meant to conceive and create a theatrical production. I thought that learning this process would help me to be a better director, whether I chose to stay in opera or not.

It was obviously a leap to jump in mid-process of the second year at school. I often felt confused and quite out of my league, but I started to discern a working process that was like a light at the end of the tunnel. Understanding the importance of circumstances in motivating action, how to develop and communicate a strong point-of-view, how to really use research to help inform decisions: there were so many aspects of the directing process that I was trying to incorporate into my work. Sometimes it was so daunting that I know I let my fear and insecurity keep me from truly engaging with the work. I just didn’t trust myself, which often led me to either not trust the actors to find something truthful, or to not guide them when they were floundering. I realize it will
always be a challenge to find the right language to guide or inspire or question an actor, and if nothing else, I’m more willing to try, and possibly fail, than I was when I started.

**Research and Conceptualization**

I had originally thought that there wasn’t a great deal of research to do on the topic of high school speech and debate, since I didn’t see any deep connection between the speech and debate topics of the scene titles and what was happening in the play. I thought at first that they might even be a sly adult (playwright) comment on the struggles of Howie, Solomon and Diwata. But as I got deeper into each topic, I began to see them more the way the students might, and they took on a weight and seriousness that I hadn’t been willing enough to acknowledge before. For example, Scene Two is titled “Lincoln/Douglas Debate”. These debates were of great historical importance, and it seems almost laughable that this scene, which is about an argument between a student and teacher, could have any such importance. But for Solomon it’s hugely important, with a great deal at stake. There is strong moral dimension to his quest to reveal the hypocrisy around him, just as the debates focused on the moral issue of slavery. The debates gave Lincoln a national profile as a serious candidate, and ultimately propelled him to the presidency only two years later. For Solomon, the scene is also about being taken seriously—as a journalist and a person. It’s his personal struggle that really drives the scene, and he’s willing to risk a lot to be acknowledged.

As I researched, I continued to discover how Karam’s use of speech and debate topics became metaphors for what was really happening in a scene. More often than not, they were metaphors that helped me find my way into the play by suggesting how the students saw what was happening, and by extension, how they saw the world.
Because the acting style of the play is so realistic, I didn’t at first trust my instincts that there was something heightened about the world of the play. I thought at times the play wasn’t rich or layered enough to support anything conceptually too strong. It was more likely that I felt that I couldn’t justify big choices, that I didn’t know how to integrate my feelings and ideas about the play into a coherent vision. I have tended to get very scattered in conceptualizing. Not trusting the play kept me from really exploring it at first. I knew I was originally drawn to it because of the restless, defiant characters, and I understood right away their struggles to be heard. I was sympathetic to their plight, even as an adult coming back to school after so many years. I admired the students’ courage in not backing down against a world where they are rarely acknowledged. I’m sure I was feeling somewhat the same thing, certainly some of that powerlessness, being again at the bottom of the totem-pole. Once I allowed myself to envisage the adult world as the students did, it freed me from being strictly realistic and I started to find that emotional landscape.

Billy Carden, one of the directing and acting teachers at Mason Gross, talks about what we as directors want the audience to experience watching a play. I had not thought about directing in those terms, and it was very helpful to keep in mind while working on Speech and Debate. One of the reasons I chose the play was because it spoke to me of the powerlessness and invisibility of being a teenager and a student. I was feeling some of that as well, and I admired the rebellious kids who wouldn’t be put down. I wanted the audience to experience the world as the teens saw it, to take that journey with them, finding their voice through the support of their community. I knew we’d be performing
for an audience made up largely of students, and I thought these characters were honest, didn’t ask for our sympathy and had real struggles we could all understand.

I think we generally succeeded in our aims. I could tell from the very first scene, Howie’s IM chat, how large the student part of the audience was, since they were very vocal in their response. It was a language they were used to, and even the speed of the conversation didn’t faze them. I think the adults got the humor as well, but it took longer for them to accustom themselves to the chat format. The student audience was almost always quite vocal throughout the play, and cheered a lot at the end, which was wonderful support for their fellow students. I really felt they understood what the teenagers had been going through, and applauded their courage in “coming out”.

I felt, as I’ve said before, that we could have gone farther in heightening the world of the play, especially the classroom. Once we got onto the stage and into performances, I realized we could have justified a stronger choice. The beige room just didn’t pop enough under the lights, and ended up looking a bit dull instead. I would have liked to try to have gone as far as an all white room—a bright white box of a prison. It might have had a truly interesting mix of childish cheeriness and dementia. While I still liked the angle of the room, I don’t think placing the classroom on an angle to the proscenium helped with the bedrooms. Seeing it onstage, we didn’t get to really see three somewhat equal hideaways, since Diwata’s room was smack in the middle of the classroom. The boys’ rooms were the only places that existed outside the classroom walls, and I would have liked to continue to explore keeping it all within that one room. I think we were pretty successful in pulling much of the action downstage, but we might have played
more with the shape of the actual classroom, to allow us to move even closer to the audience, while keeping all the other locations within the one room.

**Working with Actors**

I still had lots of challenges when it came to working with actors. Finding the right language, knowing what to say when, were and continue to be issues for me. When I first came to Mason Gross, I was still very much a teacher, a job I’d held for many years in Seattle. I had worked primarily with young singers, and because they had little acting experience, I often combined directing with teaching. Directing a play, it was hard for me to trust that actors could discover things without my help, and so I talked at them too much and too often. In my final production at school, I challenged myself again to be as concise and clear as possible, and not to be the “instructor”, but a member of the team trying to find our way through the play. I wanted to find the balance between trusting the actors and yet not abrogating my responsibilities as a director. I was still unsure about how to share my personal feelings about the play, how to guide the actors, without dictating results, in the direction I wanted them to go, while also being able to make discoveries. But I felt that I was better prepared than I had been in the past. I was getting better at personalizing my research, to help me find my way into the play and continue to dig deeper. I worked harder on script breakdown, particularly structure and spine. Not just the overall structure, but the shape of each scene as well, finding the important moments. This had always been a challenge for me. Most of all, I understood now that thorough preparation was the key to making decisions as a director. My ability to conceptualize, to have a strong and grounded point of view about all aspects of the play, to rehearse effectively-*everything* starts with that thorough preparation. It allows
you to feel more confident in your choices, and to take risks. I felt I had made some
progress in making more confident and justified decisions about the play and our
production of it. And I knew I had a great cast who could bring these characters to life. I
was eager to get started.

I realized early on that the actors playing Howie, Solomon and Diwata all had
very different ways of working. It was challenging for me to find the best/ most effective
way to communicate with each of them, especially when we were all working together.
Sarah Sirota, who played Diwata, had a very personal understanding of her character’s
need to be noticed, as well as that character’s fears and insecurities, which she covered
with a sometimes abrasive and combative personality. Sarah was deeply invested in her
work, which was wonderful. I appreciated the fact that she often challenged my
suggestions, which really kept me on my toes and tested my ability to justify my choices
on the spot. Sarah worked slowly, building her reality through interactions with objects in
the space she created. In the bedroom scenes in particular, it was important to her to have
all the objects that would define her life in that room. I thought we started to discover
some wonderful behavior as a result of that initial work. I was concerned, though, that we
were losing the through line of the action, especially in the first scene. This is Diwata’s
chance to shine, to rally support to be cast in the school musical. It’s her audition, and
she’s doing everything she can to sell herself to her unseen audience, who might tune out
at any time. I thought this would be a positive and dynamic choice for the scene, and
there were times when Sarah really committed to pursuing that action. But I couldn’t find
the way to make that happen consistently. I think I allowed the initial improvisatory work
to go on too long, without anchoring it more strongly in the action of the scene. Sarah
quickly became attached to certain objects and behaviors, and I realized too late that she was unable or unwilling to make adjustments. She took every comment very personally, and I know I reacted by treading lightly. Sometimes this was the right way to go, but I think in hindsight I could have dealt more positively with both our insecurities. I think I could have given her more positive feedback to make a safer, more open environment in which to take chances. Sarah is in many ways like Diwata. Her insecurities fuel her need to prove herself, just like Diwata, and she can get very defensive if she feels challenged. I applaud the fact that she’ll really take risks, if she feels grounded and safe. Her performance as Diwata was generally very successful, but there were parts of the play where I wasn’t able to help her to make consistent progress. Scene 3, for example, Diwata’s podcast, never really felt focused or energized. Some nights were better than others, but when I’d give notes about playing the action more strongly, she seemed genuinely surprised that she hadn’t been doing just that. I actually challenged her more in this scene than in any other, and still couldn’t find the way to move it forward. I keep thinking that I somehow didn’t make it safe enough for her to trust me, that I should have found the way to get through to her. But she was successful in most other parts of the play, and so I continue to wonder what it was about this scene in particular that was more of a problem.

Solomon was played by Craig Dolezel, a first year graduate just starting his training. I had seen his work in classes and thought he was already very grounded and intriguing in his choices. Craig did a lot of research before our rehearsals began, and was very well informed about all the issues that Solomon the reporter was dealing with. The challenge for us was to find the way to personalize what was at stake for Solomon. Craig
is very intelligent, like Solomon, and was rational in his arguments. We had to find that
scared little boy underneath, who is intellectually bright but socially inept. He provokes
and steps over boundaries all the time in his need to be taken seriously. Craig understood
that intellectually, but seemed at first not to have personalized Solomon’s struggle. In
almost every scene, the stakes weren’t high, and he was too much in control.

I challenged him to do his homework to work out his history, relationships and
struggles throughout the play. In the past, I would have left it at that, and not known how-
or been afraid- to help much further. I wasn’t sure where he was in his crafting skills at
this stage in his training. I see now that I should have talked with Deborah Hedwall about
this first. I could see that he still wasn’t making much progress, so I tried talking with
him privately. I thought that our own situation as students was so close in many ways to
what Solomon was going through that Craig could use it to delve further into the reality
of his character. I shared my own feelings of powerlessness and humiliation. It wasn’t
easy, but Craig was open and not judgmental, and I thought it would help make it safer
for Craig to dig deeper. I also did my own homework, and suggested some specific “as
if” situations to him. Craig started to really invest in Solomon, but he still seemed to be
too much in control sometimes and I couldn’t find the way to change that. Pam Berlin
recommended that I try having Craig think even younger than Solomon’s real age of
sixteen. That really helped him, and Craig began to discover Solomon’s childish core. All
in all, I felt that I made the most progress working with Craig. I’m sure that was partly
because I was less intimidated by him. I continued to guide him throughout the entire
process and didn’t drop out, as I had done in the past. I felt better about knowing where to
go with his character, and also had more specific suggestions on how to help him get there. I was also glad that I felt confident enough not to jump to results too early.

Howie was played by Rowan Meyer. The role is challenging because it seems at first that Howie’s problems are less severe than those of Solomon or Diwata. He is older, and seems to be less needy, or is just better at covering his insecurities. But he is very much the new kid in town, and arrives in his last year of school, when alliances have already been formed. It’s incredibly important to him that he is not maligned as some gay pervert because of his online chat hookup with Mr. Healy. He has not been accepted into this conservative small town, and he is alone and lonely.

I know I was guilty of not always dealing with Howie’s struggles. In the Storytelling scene, for example, I was focused too exclusively on Solomon, and how dangerous it was for him to make this phone call to a stranger. The scene is dangerous for both of them, of course. Howie doesn’t know who he’s talking to—it could be the police. Solomon could definitely follow through on his threats to out Howie, which would be disastrous. Pam Berlin pointed out this danger at one of our rehearsals, and it really informed our playing of the scene. When the stakes got higher for Howie, the scene had much more life, more a battle of equals. It also gave them both a bigger arc, since they had to overcome more in order to connect with each other. I noticed that in performance the sense of danger was not always consistently palpable. Even if I gave a note about it, it might affect only the next day’s performance. I’m still discovering how to give effective notes, especially when you’re in performance and there’s no chance to really rehearse. Even though I try to be concise and specific, I think I need to take time to really talk with the actor to see what might be going on. I know I wasn’t as candid with Rowan about
sharing my personal take on being the “new kid on the block” as I had been with Craig. I
didn’t make that effort here, and I lost out on the chance to make that connection, and
maybe to help Rowan go even deeper in his performance.

Christina Norris was a late replacement in the roles of the Teacher and Reporter.
Like Craig, she was a first year graduate, and I had seen her do very interesting work in
classes. The second scene in Speech and Debate, between the Teacher and Solomon, was
our biggest challenge. We had determined that the teacher was young, probably mid to
late twenties. She had a position of authority as both a teacher and the faculty advisor for
the student paper. She also had a lot at stake in the scene; if Solomon writes a prohibited
article for the paper, she could be held responsible and possibly even lose her job. There
are lots of things in play here. She likes Solomon, who is bright and ambitious, but who
can also be overzealous. They’ve been through similar arguments before about him
wanting to stretch the boundaries in his writing. This time, though, he is more determined
and not above threatening her, and getting personal. She has to try and maintain her
authority while not letting this escalate.

Since the Teacher is in the process of getting ready to leave the classroom at the
end of the day, I had suggested some activities that would engage her during the scene.
Christina was letting Craig/Solomon fluster her too early in the scene, and it escalated
quickly, with no place left to go. I tried to find ways to slow her down, literally, so the
activities would take more time, help channel her energy and even just get her away from
him. I suggested actions that I thought would help her assert her authority more. Nothing
was really working consistently. Pam Berlin suggested that I give her more to do. There
were too many stretches when Christina was just face to face with Craig, and it was hard
for her not to let him get to her then. She lost the Teacher and became more of a fellow student. Her voice, particularly, got high and very tight, and she was sometimes barely able to speak. We worked to find things to do that would slow her down a little, that were important to her and helped her to feel more in charge. The scene sometimes felt a little too busy in performance, but I think in general we were able to find a better balance between the Teacher’s authority and her vulnerability.

**Working with Designers**

**Sets**

I very much enjoyed working with Robin Vest on this production. Although I think the sets were more of a challenge than we had first imagined, I felt like we had a dynamic give-and-take in our process. We didn’t quite solve the problem of the classroom space. In our efforts to evoke a cold, spare, almost prison-like space, we really didn’t go far enough. I think the beige walls got a little monotonous, and even with the low ceiling, the room was a little too warm, without the menace. I had hoped that the fluorescents and white lights would have made the difference, but they didn’t cool the room enough. Looking back, I would have loved to have tried to sculpt the room and cool it down more, maybe even going as far as a bright white room. I know we wanted to make it as different as possible from the more colorful bedrooms, but we could have tried variations on the monochromatic idea- school green, for example. I think that putting the room on an angle to the proscenium gave it more energy, although it didn’t go as far as I’d have liked to bring it closer to the audience. The farther down stage we brought the classroom, the less space we had on either side of it for each of the boys’ bedrooms. We should have explored opening up our “Mac” proscenium a bit to see if that would have
given us more bedroom space. It would have been worthwhile to really have pushed that class space even more into the house. Angling the room was the right thing to do, but I still felt that divide between the stage and the house was too big.

Once we got into technical rehearsals, we realized we’d have to abandon the idea of making all the set changes come in and out through the classroom lockers. From early on in the design process, we wanted to reinforce the idea of that classroom world never really going away. Transforming the space each time through the lockers would also have been an intriguing way to set up the big transformation with lights during the dance scene. It proved to be very awkward technically. We tried it onstage before the crew came, and then again once the crew started and we were doing the scene changes. There were some structural support elements that got in the way of moving things on and off stage. It also took too much time for props to be handed from one person upstage of an open locker to another person waiting onstage to receive it. It was more important to make the scene changes easy and fast. Since we had challenges enough just managing that, we decided to cut the use of the lockers. It worked out for the best, since it needed to be fairly dark onstage to see the projections and we could barely see the opened lockers anyway.

Costumes

There were unfortunate circumstances that affected my working relationship with Jessa Court. Jessa and I had been working together on the opera Susannah at the School of Music when she left the project mid-stream. Unfortunately, she didn’t tell anyone, and we were all left in the lurch. I didn’t find out the specifics until afterwards, and it didn’t make for pleasant going having to then work together on my thesis just a few weeks later.
I told her honestly that I would have a hard time respecting or trusting her after what she’d done. I also knew that she didn’t want to work on this project, which made it doubly difficult. I decided I could deal with this situation by not letting it get emotional, but keep it as businesslike and professional as possible. I think we made generally decent, if not exciting choices for the costumes. They helped suggest character without looking overly designed. Everything was either purchased or pulled from stock, except for the dance costumes. I had a hard time convincing Jessa to try different possibilities, especially for Diwata’s dance-inspired clothing. I thought her original choices were too garish, and it was quite a challenge to get her to find other choices. I know I settled for certain looks—Diwata’s tight black and pink striped sweater, for instance—that I wasn’t really happy about. We even ended up using some of the casts’ own clothing, when other choices were not being offered.

I thought we had a fun idea for the dance costumes, basing them on theatrical takes of the characters’ real clothing. Since Diwata would have devised and sewn them herself, she obviously would have given her own costume the most attention. I don’t think Diwata’s harem outfit was successful, though. It was too far from looking like even a tenuous extension of her real clothes. I knew we had lots of technical issues to deal with, and she had to strip to reveal her body stocking. I think we could have found a more creative way to suggest her real dance-inspired clothes and still dealt with those issues. The result just wasn’t enough of a piece with the boy’s outfits, nor was it particularly funny. It looked clunky, and ended up being difficult to get on and off. I didn’t go with my gut, which told me it wasn’t right.
Lights

I talked about many of our lighting challenges in the design section. I want to talk more about the dance sequence here. I knew it would be our most challenging, and I think many of our difficulties were a result of miscommunication and my incomplete work with the choreographer. I knew I wanted to make a great leap during the dance: to transform the space into a physical embodiment of the act of celebration. Starting from a realistic place, in a darkened classroom, how do we get to a very heightened, emotional world? What, specifically, is that place? I wanted to define it through the physical act of dance itself, and the exhilaration it brings. As I talked about earlier, we didn’t get to that point in the dance, and so didn’t really earn our transformation. I hadn’t defined for myself how and where the transformation would begin, and what was the specific process by which the three separate individuals became one. I needed to have taken it that step further, as well: how the support of community allows them to find their own voice. I should have worked with the choreographer in much more detail, almost moment to moment to plot the progression. I believed I had set up the parameters, but I see now that I didn’t plot out the turning points, as every scene must have. I think Matt tried to provide those with his lighting changes, but they looked arbitrary and sometimes confusing because they weren’t always justified.

During the earlier part of the design process, Matt and I didn’t have many meetings where it was just the two of us working together. Although we did talk often about the play, many of our talks happened during or after other design meetings. It was so helpful to have him come to meetings where Robin and I were working out the set design. He had wonderful ideas to contribute to the look of the bedrooms, particularly
Howie’s room. What ended up being an open closet door in Howie’s room started life as an open window, with light for the bedroom coming in through it. While we didn’t end up using the window, the warmth and isolated feel of the bedroom hideaways started with that window. I’m wondering if we could have been more specific in lighting each of the bedrooms. I know the placement of the boy’s rooms, especially with the pulled down proscenium, made it a challenge to light them. Ideally, it would have been great to have a more specific directional feel to each room: Solomon’s lit from a desk lamp, for example, and Howie’s from overhead. Diwata’s room was the most challenging to keep isolated because it was in the middle of the classroom space, with cream colored walls that bounced the light. Although Matt focused the light as tightly as he dared, her bedroom still seemed to be in a slightly different world than the other two.

ME

These last two years have been wonderful and horrible. I knew I had so much to learn, yet I couldn’t have imagined how coming back to school would test me in every way, both personally and professionally. I still feel quite green as a director, but I think I’m starting to have some sense of what this process is about. I don’t honestly know if I have the talent or temperament to do this for a living, but I know I’m still passionate about theater, in all its forms. I have to find for myself what that passion is all about, and how I want to be involved. If I choose to continue as a director, I have to work harder than I’ve done before, to be prepared enough for rehearsals so that I can feel some confidence in my decisions, as I talked about earlier. I love being part of a team, of actors or designers, although I didn’t often let my guard down long enough at school to really join. I felt so unsure of everything, especially at first, that I couldn’t trust myself to do
much of anything right. I became afraid to take a step, and so I closed down. It took me a
while to work myself back, to re-connect with any of the excitement I used to feel. But a
few light bulbs had gone on, and I felt enough encouragement to continue.

I feel now I’m starting to understand the process of putting a play together and
bringing a story to life. I’ve always been fascinated by how that happens, even though I
didn’t have a specific or very well informed process to allow that to happen. I think the
word allow is key here. In the past I used to try and make it happen, and not have the
patience to allow the actors/singers to be a real part of the process. I think sometimes I’ve
swung too far the other way now. I may want to make a suggestion to an actor, but if I
feel I don’t have the right language in which to say it, I’ll say nothing. I forfeit my
responsibilities as a director to guide the actors and the production. I’m still very gun-shy
about jumping to results, and I know that fear keeps me from engaging when I should.

One of the many reasons theater is so exciting and challenging is that it is
constantly new. With each new project we are re-inventing ourselves. A director can
never be too prepared for that first day of rehearsal. I realize I need to be tougher on
myself, to be even more rigorous in my preparation and to never stop working, asking
questions and finding answers. I know I still have far to go, but I’m grateful to have a set
of tools that I can continue to develop the rest of my life.
Tuesday, Feb 16, 2010

Tonight was our first rehearsal. I was concerned that I was going to be a little late, since there was a previously scheduled production meeting I had to attend just before the rehearsal began. But when I arrived, the actors were relaxed, talking and drinking coffee or tea, and making themselves comfortable in the new space. We were going to rehearse in Rehearsal Room 101 for the first week or so, since it had a piano. I wanted to get a head start on teaching everyone the music they had to sing in the production. I thought it would be helpful to integrate the singing-and the dancing-as early as possible.

Since we were late in getting started on design meetings for the play, we weren’t quite ready to do a design presentation. I figured we weren’t going to be getting up on our feet for at least a week, so we had time. And delaying our presentation might actually be helpful to the design, since we could make discoveries during our first week of reading through the play that we might be able to still incorporate into the design process.

We read through the play, without stopping. I encouraged everyone to just talk and listen, to let things land and take in what someone is saying. It was wonderful to hear the play read aloud. I discovered so much in just this first time. I really heard the humor, and how it was so often rooted in the longing of these naïve young teens who wanted to be treated like adults. I felt how truly fierce these kids could be, and even now it seemed the play could be really visceral, that these teens would stop at nothing to be heard.

In our discussion after the reading, we talked about what they all thought the play was about. Already, I felt that everyone was very much on the same page about the
importance of finding community in the play, and how important that support system could be. We talked about what it felt like to be those students and how close they were to what we were going through ourselves. The feeling of powerlessness, of being invisible, was something we found we could all access. Even Christina, playing the Teacher, commented on how vulnerable her character is. It was great to hear how everyone was already so willing to dig beneath the surface, and how close to their characters they felt. In the reading, Sarah, Craig and Rowan had a good sense of the pretty outrageous tactics that their characters were willing to use. Craig seemed a little reticent to fully engage and I thought he was hiding behind Solomon’s intelligence. I knew it was just the first reading, and I didn’t want to jump to any results, as I had done in the past. Instead, we talked about what the students do when they feel powerless and how they really have to fight to be heard and be taken seriously. I encouraged them to let those needs run as deep as possible, to let the stakes be very high.

We started grappling with lots of questions: What exactly do the students do to survive? What will they risk to be heard, to be acknowledged? How did they get to this point in the play? Why was each of them alone? It was great to see how passionate we could get, even on the first day, and I hoped we could keep that passion going. One of my goals was to set up a safe and encouraging atmosphere in rehearsals, so everyone would feel free to take risks. I knew my insecurities had often gotten in the way, but I was going to try and keep that goal in mind as much as possible.

**Weds, Feb 17, 2010**

I asked Craig to come a little early, so we could start learning some of his music. I knew he was particularly unsure of his musical abilities, so I thought we’d start first, just
the two of us, to give him a chance to work slowly and easily, with less pressure. I had asked everyone to bring a recording device of some kind when we worked on music, so they could practice on their own as well. Working with Craig, I played the piano accompaniment, and also sang or played his musical line. He had mostly harmony to sing, which could be tricky. I found he was more confident if I sang along with him at first, and then slowly let him handle it on his own. He did really well, and I made it a point to always be very positive in my comments. We really only dealt with the technical aspect-getting the notes and rhythm right—but it was an excellent start.

Before we started to read/work through the play again, I asked if anyone had any questions or feedback from last night. Sarah said she had really started thinking about high school again, and we all began to share stories from our school days. It was a great way to bring the group together. I wanted to try again to find the balance, as a director, between being a guiding force while also very much a member of the group, making discoveries as we went along. It was actually very helpful, both now and during the rehearsal process, that we were all students and could share that experience. High school seemed to have been a difficult time for everyone, in one way or another. That led us into talking about the world of the play, especially small town Salem, very conservative, judgmental and even repressive.

As we worked through the first part of the play tonight, we talked more specifically about circumstances. In scene 1, the IM chat between Howie and Mr. Healy, I read Healey’s lines. It’s written as a silent scene, but we rehearsed it, at least at first, speaking the lines, so we could discover what was happening between the two characters.
I had talked with Pam Berlin about how best to work on this scene, and she thought I should read Healy. It wasn’t the ideal solution, but being older, (and a former teacher), I had a better sense of what might be at stake for Healy. Rowan was fine with the substitution, and right from the beginning we started to find the danger and the excitement of this online seduction.

We talked about how you respond when you can’t see or hear someone, and whether it was Howie’s first time looking for sex online. Rowan had already done some good homework on Howie’s need to reach out to someone, and the risks he’s willing to take to do that.

Scene 2 is the first classroom scene, with Solomon and the teacher. After we read it, our discussion centered on what’s at stake for both of them, and how they’re both vulnerable. It might seem that the teacher is in a position of power and has less to lose here, but she’s as vulnerable as Solomon. If he goes ahead and writes the article, or even if he makes a stink about it, she might be chastised by the school principal or even lose her job. Solomon’s constant pressure on her to let him write the article about the sex scandal, along with his taunts and threats, forces her to use tactics she never wanted to use. The more pressure each of them feels, the hotter the scene, and the more they’ll risk.

In scene 3, Diwata’s podcast, I encouraged Sarah to think of positive actions. Sarah brought lots of energy and fun to her reading, but I wanted to make sure we could tie all the crazy things Diwata does in the podcast to some larger purpose. It was easy for it all to become just a slightly drunken rant, and I thought that emphasizing the positive reasons she’s doing this would help to propel the scene. We played with lots of possibilities: she’s doing this to perform and showcase her skills, to rally the troops (her
unseen audience) to support her bid to be in the school musical, to sell herself and the new musical she’s written, etc. Sarah really launched into the scene with these actions, and the rants against Healy became obstacles that she had to work to overcome. I think we might be on to something…

Scene 4 is the phone call between Solomon and Howie. Before we read we talked about some of the specific and immediate circumstances. I had written up a timeline of the action of the play, and we started with this rehearsal to put each of the scenes into that timeline. During the reading I noticed that Craig/Solomon began to realize that he was talking with a gay guy, and that he was learning things, first hand, about what it was like to be gay. I told him what a great discovery that was, and encouraged him to keep building on that. It could be a terrific motivator for the scene.

**Thursday, February 18, 2010**

Tonight we continued to work slowly through the play, talking more specifically about circumstances as they came up. We started with scene 5, in the classroom with Diwata and Solomon. Diwata is trying to get people to join her speech and debate club, while Solomon is there to get information from her about Mr. Healy for his article. Sarah had fun with Diwata’s opening speech, playing each of the characters in an over-the-top style. We talked about Dramatic Interpretation as a Speech and Debate competition event, and how it was possible to play multiple characters for that category. We had all seen the YouTube videos of high school Speech and Debate competitions, including some Dramatic Interpretation entries, and we all agreed that most of them were pretty laughable and overdone. Sarah said she was trying to re-create that acting style. I thought she was on the verge of going too far, so that I saw the actor commenting on the
performance. I decided not to talk about that tonight. I wasn’t sure yet how to deal with it, or whether I might be stifling instincts too soon. I love to test the boundaries, and maybe it was important for Sarah to take it that far at first, to know how Diwata’s strong need to get Solomon to join her club might lead her into over doing it.

Craig is still dutiful in his reading, but I sensed that he was shying away from really engaging with her. Everything made sense, but there wasn’t a lot at stake for him yet. Since he was a first year student, I wasn’t quite sure where he was in his training, so I went back to talking about his need to write the article, and how that played into the deeper need to be taken seriously. We got deeper into the circumstances, especially as the scene comes a few days after the phone call with Howie, so Solomon already has the IM chat transcript. Pam Berlin was there for part of the rehearsals, and she suggested I stress the obstacles, instead of the actions, to help propel the first year actors. She stressed really taking in what’s said, letting things land, and reacting. I planned to incorporate that at the next rehearsal.

**Friday, February 19, 2010**

We spent most of this evening continuing our work through the second half of the play. I knew we were going to be starting with a pretty emotional scene, and I wanted to help us find a way in. So I thought we’d warm up with some research.

I had asked the cast to do some research before the rehearsals began. We’d included that research in our discussions each night. Since we were starting with the scene about “Declamation” tonight, Sarah and Rowan shared their research on the topic. I added one of the dictionary definitions of declamation as “to utter with feeling, pomposity, etc.”

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52 Webster’s New World Dictionary, Second College Edition. (Simon and Schuster, 1980) pg 366
There were lots of questions about why that title was chosen by the author and what it might mean. I steered the conversation toward what was really happening in the scene and how that related to declamation. We explored who was actually “declaiming” and why. We started to discover that Solomon wasn’t the only one who was declaiming in the scene, that everyone had their moments of emotional outbursts. Maybe each of them was outed in one way or another? And if that’s true, how does that affect the scene right after with the Reporter? How have their relationships changed? It was wonderful to see how our research could inform our ideas about character and relationships.

I also made a special point to challenge Craig with the obstacles that Solomon faced, rather than continue to stress the actions. It worked wonderfully well right off the bat, especially in Scene 8, “Declamation”. The more Howie and Diwata pushed Solomon to admit he’s gay, the more frustrated and cornered he became. He really lashed out at them, and they responded by not letting up on him. I felt it was the first time Craig just reacted from his gut, without filtering anything, and it was exciting.

We took our first “dance break” tonight. I wanted to get everyone used to the idea of finding ways to be expressive just with their bodies and to help them relax about the dance scene. I planned to incorporate some dance time into rehearsals; it would be really improvisatory, and not structured. The choreographer wouldn’t even be around; it would be just us, using George Michaels’ “Freedom” music to explore how each of the characters might move. At first, I suggested that everyone just release, through movement, whatever tensions they might have. Craig, Sarah and Rowan started slowly doing just that, almost privately in their own world. I then asked them to start to react to the music, and to let their bodies lead the way. It was great to watch as they all started to
let go, and it was fascinating to see how much of their characters they were channeling through their moves: Sarah was wild and abandoned, Rowan was cool and sexy and Craig was unsure and a little stiff. Best of all, by the time we finished, they all were exhilarated and seemed much less self-conscious than when we started. The movement had really helped to break the ice, and we finished up by working on some vocal music. I was so glad to see how free they all felt to really sing out, even if they made mistakes. I told them that I felt like we had started to break through to a new comfort level with each other, and I hoped it would inspire them to keep taking risks.

**Sunday, February 21, 2010**

I decided to jump start today’s rehearsal with some more dancing. We took it a step farther than last time, and I asked everyone to share some moves that their character might do. I left it up to them to decide what those moves meant. We started with some time for warm up and improvisation. Then Rowan began, with a wonderful sexy slide move that might have been something he did for the Boy Scouts, as he talks about in the script. It showed everyone his pride in who he was. Sarah loved the move and started to try it, and then Craig joined in. All three started dancing together, and the move sort of morphed into some other disco type movement. Sarah showed off her more modern dance inspired movement, which seemed to channel Martha Graham-like theatrics, and the boys joined in right away. They were having a great time, and even Craig jumped in to show his dance moves. They were in some ways the wildest moves of all, a kind of hyperkinetic, strangulated jumping up and down, as if he was trying to escape some sort of confinement. It was incredible to see how much they all already understood instinctively about their characters, and how revealing their physical gestures were.
After a break, we sat and discussed what had just happened. Everyone was excited at what they had discovered, how liberating it was to trust their bodies to tell them about their characters. They felt free to express things they couldn’t put into words. I told them how wonderful it was to see them coming together, that it gave us all a glimpse into how they might finally come together in the dance scene at the climax of the play. We certainly have so much more to be explored, but it was so helpful to let the physical impulse rule the day, and see how that could help us explore character.

Because we didn’t actually have the dance scene choreographed at this point, the improvisations gave us some sense of what it would be like to take that climactic dance journey and what the “new equilibrium” might be like afterwards. It really helped inform our table work on the later parts of the play, which we went back to after our break. Mostly there was a sense that they’d all been through something important together, and the new, more supportive relationships they had with each other felt more earned.

**Monday, February 22, 2010**

I felt that we were starting to make good progress in exploring the play at the table. Since we’d be dealing with large chunks of the play at a time, I thought we’d take the time to explore each of the scenes in more depth. I wanted to keep us focused on continuing to discover the struggles that each of the characters are dealing with, to focus on the specific, immediate circumstances of each scene and not to over-analyze, as I knew I so often did. What is going to make the scene hotter, what will make the conflict the strongest?

We started with the first scene of the play, where Howie is alone in his bedroom at night. Since we were still at the table, we tried the IM chat in different ways.
Sometimes I read Mr. Healy and we read everything out loud. We do actually say out loud what we’re typing sometimes, so it might be something Howie would do. We also experimented with Rowan just typing (he brought a laptop to rehearsals to use) and me reading Healy’s responses out loud. After that, we tried a totally silent scene, with just the sound of the keystrokes on the computers (I drummed on the table as if I were actually typing my responses.) It was really fascinating to see how each approach evoked different responses. It felt very immediate and present when we were both speaking the lines out loud, but I thought we relied on actually hearing the words for our responses, instead of imagining in our heads how the lines might sound. Still, there was good give and take between us, and we both took the time to let things land. What can’t enter into that mix, though, is how you respond when you can’t see or hear someone, and also how you get that person to understand any of the nuances or inferences that come with direct contact. You lose so much of the human element. Rowan and I both found that the scene had much more uncertainty when it was silent, and we had to work harder to choose the right words. There was excitement, too, in taking the risk with being totally silent. I hope we can keep this richness going and continue to explore even more when we get to using the actual chat projections.

Next, Sarah and I started working on Diwata’s podcast scene. We focused on why she chooses to do her first podcast now. She actually tells her listening audience the reason: “The upcoming auditions for this year’s spring musical were the inspiration for this live, streaming musical entry.”53 She knows Healy won’t cast her-again-but this time she’s determined to take action. She thinks “America should decide whether or not I get

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53 Karam, Speech and Debate, pg 21
to showcase my skills in North Salem High’s multipurpose room.\footnote{Karam, Speech and Debate, pg 21} Diwata is really being quite pro-active about all this.

The scene is a long monologue, with singing, that can seem a little daunting, and even rambling, if there’s not a strong purpose behind it. I felt that Sarah was still struggling to find what was happening in the scene and what the point of the monologue was. I was trying to find ways to help. We had talked about Diwata being pro-active, about her using this podcast as her audition, her chance to perform, to shine. She’s campaigning to be cast in the school musical. Of course she’s angry at never getting cast, and the podcast is also an outlet for her rage and her loneliness. But if you’re campaigning for something, you can’t chance alienating your audience by ranting, no matter how desperate you may be.

I thought Sarah was getting stuck “playing the problem” too much, and not getting to her point. I suggested we try the first read through really “playing the problem”, making all those negative choices and letting the rage, loneliness and impotence spill out. Sarah tried it and really let go; it was very full of hurt and anger. I encouraged her to trust that it was there, that she felt and understood Diwata’s need. I asked her to try the scene again, and this time to keep in mind the positive actions we had talked about. Diwata’s an artist, she lives to perform. This is her big chance! Sarah tried it again and just let it rip. It was terrific; it had so much energy and focus, and the different beats started to make sense as part of a larger point. There was still underlying desperation and anger, but she found ways to cover or cope with it, and really pursue her goals. When we talked about it afterwards I told her how exciting the second reading was and that I discovered how funny and smart Diwata could be. Sarah said she felt good and
more focused on what she was doing. She wanted to do more homework before we met again, so I suggested we end the rehearsal on such a positive note. I hoped she would trust that we were headed in a good direction.

**Tuesday, February 23, 2010**

We were still doing table work, but by this time we had moved to Little Theater. I wanted to make sure we were more secure in the actions of each scene before we got up on our feet. Ideally it should be a pretty smooth transition, but I had had productions take a step back when we got up on our feet, so I guess I was being a little extra cautious.

We started working scene 2, the confrontation between Solomon and the Teacher. The scene starts in the middle of a conversation, and I wasn’t feeling that we had a good sense of what might have happened just before. We tried some improvisations to help. I thought it was important that we get the sense that Solomon and the Teacher like each other and have worked well together in the past. They probably even have had similar discussions about Solomon’s desire to write articles on touchy subjects. So I set up parameters and we tried improvisations that helped establish their relationship and what was happening just before the scene started. I thought it helped start the scene more organically and keep them from letting the argument escalate too soon. Both actors still needed to take time to let things land and to make transitions. We’re still in an early stage, and I was trying to find the way to help them make discoveries, as if it’s all happening for the first time. I tried stopping the reading and pointing out the transitions and what was happening, and stopping when they didn’t take the time to let things land. I know in the past I’ve too often let these things go, so I’m trying to deal with it now. I don’t know if I catch every moment, or even most of the moments, but I’m more aware
of the problem than I was. I hope stopping is the best way to deal with this; I know that actors can get frustrated, and maybe that’s a good thing. Maybe they’ll take the time to really talk and listen.

Chris O’Connor came to part of the rehearsal and he encouraged me to continue to keep Craig off-balance and out of his comfort zone. Craig is doing much better at putting himself out there and really taking risks, but I’m not sure his heart is in it. We’ve talked a little about his need to personalize Solomon’s needs, so that there’s more at stake for him. His work still feels dutiful, and I think I need to find better ways to help. More specific and personal suggestions, maybe, to encourage him to a deeper involvement.

Sarah’s work on Diwata’s monologue continues to grow. She’s starting to really play with it and discover Diwata’s joy in performing. It feels like she’s really pursuing something, and getting to make the points that Diwata wants to make to her audience. I’m looking forward to getting this up on its fabulous feet!

**Wednesday, February 24, 2010**

We did our last table work tonight before starting to get up on our feet. I tried having us all sit in a circle, without any table between us. I thought it might be a good prelude to doing work on our feet, and there was more direct contact without the table in the way. Also, because the circle was bigger than our table, it made everyone work a little harder to reach out. I kept working to keep the actions specific and motivated, and I tried to ask questions and make suggestions that would keep the actors involved in the decision making process. It’s important that we all feel ownership of the process. I know I fall back on being the teacher sometimes, and I’m still trying to figure out what to say and when to say it. My fear of doing or saying the wrong thing can make me tentative, or
worse—I say nothing. Amy Saltz encourages me to be more clear and concise in my
suggestions to the actors. I know I talk too much when I’m unclear about what needs to
happen, and I end up wasting everyone’s time trying to talk my way into figuring it out.
I’m making a concerted effort with this production to not intellectualize and talk things to
death. I have to trust that the actors will understand what I’m saying if I’m clear about my
intentions.

The first scene we rehearsed was scene 2, between Solomon and the teacher. It
takes place in the classroom at the end of a school day, as the teacher is getting ready to
leave.

I wanted to start the play in a classroom with all the desks and chairs, and
gradually remove most of them as the play progressed. I had notebooks on all the desks,
and textbooks on the teacher’s desk. There were lockers that she could use to put the
books away, and also one that had her coat and scarf in it. She also had a handbag, water
bottle, etc.; all kinds of personal items, some of which Christina Norris added as we
worked on the scene. I wanted to give her lots of options for behavior, and to make it
harder for Solomon to pursue her.

It was actually a difficult scene to start with, especially because of all the things
the teacher does to get ready to leave. Even Solomon is dealing with lots of props: his
notes, newspapers, his backpack, etc. We took some time at first to get used to these new
things and the actors worked just technically, getting comfortable with the new items. I
knew it would be a challenge to find the right balance in the scene, letting the behavior
not overwhelm the action, but serve to keep the life going. Once we started on our feet,
things got a little too frantic too soon and they stopped listening to each other. I suggested
that Christina start at her desk, just buttoning up her sweater. The teacher and Solomon have had this type of discussion before about topics that are off limits to him as a writer for the school paper, and she’s not expecting it to escalate into an argument. Starting out more simply helped at first, and they both took the time to really talk and listen. It was just too difficult to get very far with scripts in hand, so I asked them to look at the first half of the scene so they weren’t as reliant on their scripts for the next rehearsal. I asked Christina to think about what she would do if she were leaving school for the day. I thought we’d start the next rehearsal as an improvisation, just going through what the teacher might do to get ready to leave. I suggested to Craig that he find some time to get comfortable with his backpack. We talked about it being his office, and that he’d know where everything was. I thought it would be a good idea to continue working on this scene again the next day. We all had a sense of what a challenge the scene was, and I knew I had to think more about how the behavior affected what was happening in the scene. I had outlined some basic moves for the teacher, but I wanted to see what Christina would do, and work as much as possible off of her.

**Thursday, February 25, 2010**

We continued working on scene 2 tonight. It had been a bit of a rough beginning last night, and I wanted to take the pressure off and begin again, just taking our time. Christina and I worked on some improvisations centered on what she would do to get ready to leave school for the day. Christina brought in a few more things to put in her bag, and used them in the improvs. She used a compact to check her makeup and put on some lipstick. I thought those were good choices because they helped her believe that she was older and more mature than Solomon. She also did some correcting in a grade book,
which gave her responsibilities and authority as a teacher. We set no time limits on her
leaving, and just discovered possibilities of behavior. I suggested we try out a basic
pattern of activities, based on what we’d discovered in the improvisations. Craig worked
with his backpack and tried various ways of arranging his papers, tape recorder, etc. so
they were easily available and had personal significance for him. We then all sat in the
classroom and read through the scene again. I reminded them about taking the time to let
things land, and we stopped often, if transitions or turning points weren’t happening.

Once up on their feet, Craig and Christina had a much better connection than last
night. Christina had a tendency to make choices early on and not move from them very
much, and I struggled to find ways to help her be more receptive to other possibilities. I
thought it would be a good idea to start the scene doing the improv we had tried during
the table work, which helped set up the friendly and supportive relationship between
Solomon and his teacher. I reminded them to take their time and let things happen. They
started well, and I felt the teacher was more the person in charge this time. When she
started to get flustered I suggested she try humoring him, to try and keep him in line. We
had worked on finding positive actions for her; she doesn’t want to get into an argument
with him and humor had probably worked for her in the past. If he persisted, she could
try and end the discussion by encouraging him to write about something else, then
walking away or doing something else to get ready to leave. Craig/Solomon was being
very sweet and naïve in his eagerness, and Christina/Teacher was taking that in much
more and enjoying it. I realized that I was so focused on Christina that I wasn’t dealing
with Craig. He was letting things land, but he needed to keep finding other ways to get
through to the teacher when a tactic wasn’t working. It was a lot to digest for all of us, but we felt we made some good progress in a very challenging scene.

**Friday, February 26, 2010**

We started with scene 4 tonight, which is the telephone call between Solomon and Howie when both boys were in their bedrooms. It was the first time we were using the bedrooms, so we spent some time at first setting up the spaces. The main element in Solomon’s room was his desk. Craig took time to set that up, with his laptop, phone, notepad, pencils, etc. Since it was Solomon’s birthday, I added a piece of birthday cake and a fork on a paper plate. I thought it might be helpful in upping the stakes for him even more: he’s sneaked up to his room from his birthday party and could be called back at any time. We decided he was definitely not having fun; there were no other teens there, only his parents and grandparents. We set the parameter of the bedroom space and Craig imagined how the rest of his room would work. During our table work, we had come up with the idea that Howie is on his way out for the night when he gets the phone call from Solomon. His room had a bean bag chair and a closet that we made by opening one of the classroom lockers. Inside were various pro-gay stickers and artwork. Rowan had brought some clothes, including a hoodie, a scarf and his sneakers and socks. He also played with leaving his wallet out, and I suggested having some packaged condoms as well. Rowan decided to hang his hoodie and scarf in the closet, but leave the other things strewn around the floor. This all gave him a good destination during the scene; he had lots to do, getting dressed to go out, and it was interesting to see how and when the phone call interrupted that behavior. It really added to the conflict and his frustration during the scene.
The biggest challenge for me was finding ways to get Craig out of his comfort zone. There is so much danger for Solomon in making this phone call. He’s doing something he’s never done before and he has no idea how to do this. I felt Craig wasn’t personalizing the situation strongly enough, and it didn’t feel risky enough to him. I suggested some “as if” situations to him: what would it be like to make a cold call to an important agent about a job? What if you only had $50 in the bank, and if you didn’t get this job you’d be out on the streets? I also suggested some school related scenarios, to bring it closer to home. I figured we live with so much pressure everyday that it might be easier to access. Since we were still using scripts for the lines, I encouraged him not to worry about getting the lines right, but to keep Howie on the phone, at all costs. I remembered about stressing the obstacle for Craig/Solomon, and Howie kept threatening to end the phone call. Craig really started working hard, and it was wonderful when he stammered and didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t consistent for him, but I did some side coaching to keep him on the hook. Afterwards, we talked about what discoveries he’d made and I made sure to point out when he was working really well. I know I don’t always let actors know how they’re doing, and what’s working or not, and that can be confusing for them. Sometimes I’m not sure myself if we’re moving in the right direction, so I say nothing.

**Sunday, February 28, 2010**

I knew we were still at the awkward stage of first getting up on our feet. Some people were having a harder time than others, and I kept trying to find ways to ease the transition. We’d taken time to set up each space and even to live in it before we started scene work. We began today working on Diwata’s podcast. Sarah brought in lots of
things to help set up her space. We had a wonderful pink shag rug for the room, her laptop and microphone, some wine coolers and a chair. Sarah brought some clothes, stuffed animals, food, Diwata’s writing materials, her class syllabus, etc. She really personalized the space for herself. It was important to her to have lots of destinations, and to help give herself belief in who she is. We took time to let her live in the space and did some improvisations about her writing her musical and getting ready for the podcast.

Once we started the scene, I focused on keeping Sarah active. I didn’t mean just moving or doing activities, but focused on what her actions were. I thought she was getting a little lost in all the props, and just playing drunk too much. I asked the stage managers to sit a little distance away from Sarah and be her audience. We had talked about who Diwata’s unseen audience would be-her fellow students—and I thought giving her live people right there might be a spur to action. It helped her to really talk to them, and need to get specific things from them. If she turned them off or neglected them, they’d leave. We also started to shape sections, to really focus on what points Diwata was making and where the changes were. I really kept after her about that, and I could see she was chafing a bit under the pressure. I worked to keep Sarah/Diwata thinking positively. Sarah needed lots of attention and approval and I tried to accommodate her without letting her get indulgent. She had so much going for her in this role, and part of my challenge was to keep her confident but focused on the collaborative work.

We continued work on scene 2 with Craig and Christina. I focused this time on helping the actors to be specific. If a tactic wasn’t working, what else could you try? How can the teacher guide Solomon, or re-direct his energy to change his course about writing this inflammatory article? I made specific suggestions, but also asked questions. I wasn’t
sure if I was putting the actors on the spot doing this, but they seemed to respond and took more time to be more specific in their choices. They really made some good discoveries today when they really listened. It still seemed as if it wasn’t happening as if for the first time, and I wasn’t sure how to help with that. We had talked about the moments when each of them gets really caught by the other, and doesn’t know what to say. I reminded them about letting those moments happen. Maybe we were at the point where it’s hard to do if you’re still thinking of your next line. For now, I just reminded them to take the time to let things land, so they didn’t jump to knowing what to do so quickly or easily. Keeping the stakes high also helps, but Christina would tend to get a little frantic too soon. Finding balance in this scene is a constant challenge!

We came back to scene 4, the telephone call between Howie and Solomon. I asked Rowan to make up another story, instead of the one Howie tells Solomon about Cain and Abel. The improvisation was fun, and it kept both guys on their toes. Craig/Solomon kept asking Rowan/Howie questions, trying to make sense of the story he was telling. I understood for the first time how important that was for Solomon, to have things make sense, to have some control over his world. Solomon also got really intrigued with the story, and some of the questions he asked were really to learn more about it. It was Solomon the writer who was interested in someone else’s writing. The two of them started to connect and even have some fun together. It was an incredibly helpful improv, and we made so many discoveries as a result. Craig realized that he really craved that contact, and would do anything to keep Howie talking. Rowan discovered more about how Howie covers by being slightly cool or aloof. When we went back and started working on the scene, those discoveries really came into play. There was a much
stronger sense that they didn’t always know what to do or say. I think the improvisation somehow relaxed them both, so they were more open to what was happening, really living it as if for the first time. Good work all around!

**Monday, March 1, 2010**

We started with some dance work tonight. Our choreographer, Lauren Connolly, was able to attend rehearsal for most of the first hour, so I grabbed the opportunity to start the relationship with the cast. We’d had meetings before this to talk about the play and the characters, and ideas about how the dance would be structured. I talk about this more in the design section. Before she began to work, told her we had done a little dance work and some improvisations. She started very simply and low key, just asking everyone to move to the music. She watched how their bodies moved and what they were comfortable doing at that early stage. She asked to see some of the moves that had come from the improvisations, which gave each of them a chance to show off a little. She tried some of them herself, as if she was learning from them, which was a great way to ingratiate herself. Then she asked them to try a few moves she showed them. Some were a little disco inspired, and some had a more modern dance feeling. The cast jumped in enthusiastically and had a great time. There wasn’t time for much more than that, but we talked afterwards and Lauren had a good sense of what they could do physically, and some possibilities for actual dance moves.

We then started on Scene 5, the first meeting of the Speech and Debate team, with Diwata and Solomon. Setting up the classroom took some time. I had taken away some of the chairs and desks, and moved the remaining desks and chairs around the room, as if Diwata had cleared space to do her performance for the audience of new team members.
she was expecting. Sarah again brought in lots of things to help set the scene for her. She asked for donuts and drinks to be set out for the new team members, and had lots of papers about the club set up on the teacher’s desk. She was pretty demanding about all this, but I figured it was early in the rehearsal process and we should try anything. I knew it helped give her belief, and gave her destinations that were very important to her. And she had obviously done homework, so I was happy to go along. Some of the props were things we were going to use anyway. Sometimes using the desk as a destination kept her barricaded behind it too much, but the donuts and drinks helped provide a good outlet for Diwata’s frustrations in the scene. We discovered a wonderful moment later in rehearsals, when Diwata finally gets Solomon to officially join the team. She used one of the papers on the desk as a contract he had to sign, and it really helped anchor one of the big turning points in the scene. So more power to Sarah!

As with Diwata’s podcast, I tried to keep us on track with the actions of the scene. Diwata’s first job is to use her dramatic skills to enthrall her “audience”-Solomon-and get them to want to join the club. Sarah started off pretty intensely in the opening monologue where she plays all the roles in *The Crucible*. I felt she was already commenting on it again, and I asked her to try it for real, as if it were a dramatic speech in a serious play. She could trust that the situation and the speech as written, especially playing both male *Crucible* roles, would carry the comedy. I asked her to think about drawing the audience in, getting them interested. She started to really shape the speech, starting slowly and building to *The Crucible* scene without overwhelming her audience too early. And she took it really seriously, which was even funnier. It was hard for Craig to keep a straight face for most of the rehearsal. We talked briefly about it afterwards and I sensed she felt
it was too dull somehow, that she needed to “do” more, like the crazy YouTube videos we watched of the forensics competition. I encouraged her to trust the play, to really ground the speech in Diwata’s needs and not worry about living up to some strange videos that almost no one would know anything about. She was much funnier than any of them, anyway. I told her we’d work more tomorrow and not to over think it right now. Good advice for me, too.

We spent the last part of the rehearsal setting up the restaurant scene, with Howie and Diwata. We used one of the classroom desks for the restaurant table, and used two classroom chairs as the chairs at the table. We set up the table with all the accoutrements, and gave Diwata all her waitress gear. We took a good amount of time to imagine the set up of the entire restaurant. This was the only scene in a public place, and that lack of privacy is an important element. We had a little time left to do some beginning improvisations with Sarah, going through her activities at the start of a lunch shift. She started to find her life in the restaurant, and I knew it would help ground her when we continued work tomorrow. Onward and upward…

**Tuesday, March 2, 2010**

Chris O’Connor came for the first part of the rehearsal tonight. We continued to work on scene 5, between Diwata and Solomon. The big challenge still for me is to help Craig personalize his role; he gets glib and it all gets too easy for him. Chris told me I have to stop them more, to identify the events, and remind them to let things land. That’s very true right now; I’m struggling with so many things in this scene that I’m not sure where to start. Chris suggested I continue to find ways to energize Craig, to encourage him to really listen and be specific in his actions. I think none of that will really happen
for Craig until he digs deeper and finds a strong personal connection to Solomon’s needs. He and I have talked about it, about what writing this article really means to him and how invested he is with it, how he’s willing to risk so much, to step over the line, how everything is riding on this. I think Craig understands all this intellectually, but maybe he hasn’t allowed himself to relate it specifically to his life. I honestly didn’t know, but I thought maybe I was being too general with him, and at this point I needed to make some specific suggestions. We needed to go deeper to what Billy Carden calls the great motivator: humiliation.

Craig and I talked privately during a break, and I talked about how tough school can be at Mason Gross. I knew there were some teachers whom he was close to, and I asked how he would feel if one of those teachers put him down during class, or really humiliated him in front of his peers, disparaged his work, said he had no talent or even that he wasn’t good enough to continue in the program. What’s it like to feel as if you’re nothing? To be condescended to, not even acknowledged? I didn’t know whether anything like this had actually happened, but I had to find something, an area of his life that was very important to Craig, with a lot on the line. I used some of my own experiences at school as well. Something in his demeanor told me that he knew, emotionally, what I was talking about. We talked about a couple of other possible scenarios, and then I asked him to think, in light of what we had talked about, why this article is so important to Solomon, what it really means to him. We left it at that for the night, and would come back to the scene tomorrow.
Wednesday, March 3, 2010

Before we started working on scene 5 tonight, I told Craig/Solomon that if he didn’t get Diwata to talk to him about Mr. Healy, his article was dead in the water. This was his only shot at getting the information from her-and he has no idea how he’s going to do it. I told Sarah/Diwata that this was the only guy who would come to her meeting, and she had one shot to get him to join. I hoped this would raise the stakes for both of them.

Both Sarah and Craig made some good progress tonight, and so did I. I sensed that Craig was really trying to connect more personally with what was at stake for Solomon. I stopped the scene more often. I tried to be concise and specific with actions. I asked Craig to get Diwata excited to talk to you. Inspire her to want to talk to you! Impress her with your credentials, entice her with your inside information, etc. I tried to find more positive actions for Diwata. She got very defensive whenever she felt Solomon was attacking her. I tried to keep her on track, reminding her that she had to keep him interested in joining the club. Inspire him to join! We discovered that the scene has a wonderful reversal: Diwata starts off trying to inspire S to join her club. It doesn’t work at first, and the tables turn to where S now has to inspire D to want to talk to him about Healy. The more their needs mean to them, the harder they’ll work for them, and the more hurt and frustrated they’ll get when they don’t get what they want. They both almost sabotage everything because of their insecurities, but they find a way to get back on track.
Craig was letting everything get to him much more, and was more vulnerable. I encouraged him to really strike back at Diwata when she refuses to help him. She’s just dismissed you—what are you going to do about that?

I realized I was neglecting Sarah because I was dealing so much with Craig. I encouraged her to really drive the scene—she’ll do anything to get Solomon in her club. Even when she gets derailed, she finds a way to get back to her goal—that’s how desperate she is! I think for tomorrow I need to keep emphasizing how deep this runs and how scary it is for both of them, and continue to help with specific actions. I feel a little bit like I’m on a treadmill and saying the same things every day. How can I get the actors to go deeper here?

**Thursday, March 4, 2010**

Pam Berlin came to rehearsal this evening, and we started with scene 5. After working through much of the scene, Pam and I talked. She suggested I ask Craig to think of Solomon as even younger than he is in the play, which is sixteen years old. Think eleven or twelve, to get the sense of social immaturity and even ineptness. We talked about how dangerous the scene is for both of them and how they don’t know how to cope or what to say. But Solomon still chooses to stay, to engage with her. It’s scary and uncomfortable, but he needs her as much as she needs him. She encouraged me to use more “actable” language (*not* “This doesn’t come from a position of strength”, *but* “They’re insecure, scared, etc.”)

I talked with Craig about thinking of himself as even younger than he is, and how he would be even more socially inept, and how much more scary the scene would be for him. We started working on the scene again. Pam had suggested using index cards for
Diwata in her opening speech, so it wouldn’t be so well prepared and she would need to refer to her notes. They really helped her seem more vulnerable and needy right from the start. Craig began to try and incorporate the sense of being even younger, a real kid almost. Right from the start, he couldn’t sit still in his chair and he fidgeted nervously like a kid. His comments seemed more like unplanned outbursts. Both characters were more obviously struggling, and the scene felt more uncomfortable right away.

We started working on scene 7 for the first time. It’s the scene about the rehearsal for the presentation to the school board. Sarah wanted to do her own “set design” for her musical number, which we tried, setting out three chairs as “rocks” in the wilderness for Diwata/Mary Warren to move around. It ended up being a wonderful idea and we had fun playing with them during the choreography for the number. In our earlier table work, we had established that this was probably the third rehearsal the three of them were having, and so there was already tension between them. The boys were not happy, feeling trapped in what was becoming a truly awful presentation. We had to take time to deal with some tricky musical timing issues for Diwata’s entrance. It was truly her chance to shine, and we played with ways to give her the dramatic entrance she would have choreographed for herself. I reminded Sarah that Diwata had a lot to prove, and she took this very seriously. I had some specific choreographed moves in mind, but we spent some time improvising the song and dance. It was important that Diwata use this as her showcase to finally have the chance to be the star and I wanted to base the choreography as much as possible off what Sarah was doing. Howie was her partner, but he was there to serve her, and make her look good. As we played with the number, Rowan became resigned to his position too quickly, and we worked to find what he would do to really deal with this humiliation.
I asked Sarah to try playing the number as if she had a huge audience, which excited her and also raised the stakes. This all took a little longer than I had thought, but we had a good start to the scene and could build on that tomorrow night.

**Friday, March 5, 2010**

The plan for tonight had been to start with a dance rehearsal, but Lauren had an emergency and wasn’t available. We went over a few of the moves she had done with the cast last time, as a reminder and a physical warm up for tonight’s rehearsal. Everyone was a little tired and grouchy at the end of the week, so the physical work helped to energize them.

We worked slowly through scene 7. The opening number was developing into something that was pretty funny, and it was at first hard for Craig not to laugh watching it. We talked about a few “as ifs” to help strengthen his belief. Both boys feel very stuck in this horrible situation. Howie can’t afford to go after Solomon for wanting to include his IM chat in the presentation, so how does his frustration play out? Solomon feels stuck, embarrassed by the awful material, and he feels he’s being co-opted by Diwata, who’s taken over. How does he deal with that frustration? I continued to try to find the “actable” language. When the boys threaten to mutiny and quit the team, Diwata could lose everything she’s worked for. The stakes couldn’t be higher, and she works very hard to get them back together. Sarah was not trying new tactics when one way didn’t work. I made some specific suggestions for new tactics and she tried everything. We discovered that it was even scarier when nothing worked, and the boys started going at each other. Diwata then says almost nothing for a while, and Sarah found that she didn’t know what to say, that she was too scared. It was great to see her make that journey, and I made a
point of telling her how wonderful it was. I have to remind myself to give specific feedback, or the actors don’t know where they stand.

Rowan started to explore how Howie deals with the danger and frustration in the scene. He’s trapped there, and desperately wants out, but he needs both Solomon and Diwata, and can’t afford to go after them. As we worked on the scene, Rowan started to use the physical space to vent his frustrations. He would pace like a caged animal, hide in a corner, or bang the walls. It was so palpable that he didn’t know how to get out of this situation, or this room. It was terrific to watch him keep making discoveries, and I encouraged him to keep going further.

I wanted to get a start on scene 8 tonight as well, because it comes directly out of the unresolved situation in scene 7. It’s a few days later, and the fragile group coalition is very close to coming apart. Solomon wants to read Howie’s IM chat as part of the presentation, and Howie needs to stop him. He’s furious with Solomon because he knows he’s gay as well, but hasn’t come out. Diwata is scared and unsure how to get the group back together. I thought it would be a good idea to read through the scene first, since we hadn’t gotten back to it for a while. By this point everyone was really tired. We talked about the important circumstances and then read through. The fatigue was actually a good thing, since everyone took their time, and was open to letting things land. It got a little general, and I made some specific suggestions to Craig to try different actions, when he was trying to convince Howie and Diwata that he wasn’t gay. We talked a bit afterwards about the big turning point in the scene, and the beginning of the new group dynamic once the Reporter comes in. There was lots of good work tonight, and we all needed a break to process it all.
Sunday, March 7, 2010

Pam Berlin came to rehearsal today. I wanted to get her feedback on scenes she hadn’t seen before. We started with scene 3, Diwata’s podcast. I felt that it was still unclear what the scene was about. We were working with the idea that she does the podcast to rally support for her to get cast in the school musical. It’s her chance to audition and really shine. Maybe we were losing the need Diwata has to do this? Or her need to get back at Healy? How did this inform what she does in the podcast? Pam suggested that Diwata talk to whomever she’d like to be saying all this to, to help make it more specific. We had definitely lost the connection to her audience. We worked on it some more, with Diwata really talking to her audience. It definitely helped focus and energize the scene. That unseen presence became much more present, and motivated all her actions. I reminded Sarah that the audience could lose interest at any time, which made the stakes higher for her. I think she sometimes took them for granted, and we lost the energy of her need to connect with them.

We then came back to scene 2 with Solomon and the teacher. We hadn’t gotten back to it for a while and it showed. We lost some of the specificity we were working towards, and the whole scene felt general and too easy. Pam urged me to identify the important moments, to keep reminding them about the big revelations. She also said there was more at stake in the scene. I know I was definitely intimidated today, and clammed up for fear of doing the wrong thing. I gave some notes, and talked about taking the time to let the changes happen. I identified some of the changes we had worked before. Pam had suggested the actors needed to be more aware of how those important moments change the relationship, which I hadn’t really dealt with. I needed to think more in those
terms to help the actors and plot through the arc of the scene. When we worked through the scene again, I did stop more, especially if those important moments weren’t happening. I tried to identify what was being revealed and how it affected what comes after. I know I still missed a lot, but I felt a little more confident that I could and should stop. I somehow felt it would be too controlling if I did that too much. Sometimes actors would tell me that I didn’t give them enough chance to discover things, if I stopped, so I know I was really gun-shy about it.

We finished the day working on scene 4, the telephone call between Solomon and Howie. Pam’s big note was that the scene wasn’t dangerous enough, for both of them. I realized I’d been concentrating on Solomon so much, I hadn’t fully dealt with what’s at stake for Howie. I suggested to Rowan that he doesn’t really know who the guy is who’s calling him. He could be a policeman. How does this guy know about his online chat, and what major trouble could this be for him? Always make the choice that’s going to make the scene harder, and hotter, for both of them. There’s more of an obstacle, and they have to work harder to make the connection at the end of the call.

**Monday, March 8, 2010**

I decided to start the rehearsal tonight with scene 7, instead of scene 8. I knew we had to go through the experience of that first fight in scene 7 between Howie and Solomon. It’s left unresolved, and the simmering tensions are still there are few days later when they all meet again in the same classroom. Once scene 7 was over, we moved as quickly as possible into scene 8. It very much helped get everyone going, and the tension was palpable. I asked Solomon to start the scene standing with his back against the wall, between Howie and Diwata. They were all pretty close together, which made it harder to
stay calm and collected. Howie tried to convince Solomon not to use his IM chat, but Solomon was having none of it. I told Craig to start to leave, and Rowan/Howie, desperate to stop him, threatened to out him. I stopped the rehearsal a few times after that, when Craig wasn’t letting it all really sink in. As Howie pressed him, Solomon started packing his backpack to leave, and moved away to barricade himself behind the desk. I stopped again to suggest stronger actions for him-Solomon didn’t run out of the room, which would be admitting his quilt, but tried desperately to threaten, joke, challenge his way out of this. I coached him to go much more on the attack, to put the blame on Howie and Diwata even, anything to stop this! It was really fascinating to see how Sarah/Diwata reacted to all this; she didn’t know really what to do, she tried to sympathize with Solomon, to soften the blow, so he’d be able to admit being gay without him being totally humiliated. When Solomon finally couldn’t bear anymore and threw up, Howie and Diwata came and sat on the floor near him. It was a touching act of understanding, which they didn’t get to easily. Diwata had to pretty much threaten Howie to get him there. I stopped them again to remind them to take the time to let it all land, to start to discover this new relationship. They end up outing each other, calling each other out on their deepest secrets. These revelations are a huge turning point, and I stopped again when they rushed through it. It’s the first time Diwata can admit she doesn’t know what to do. It’s the first time they’re all vulnerable in front of each other, and it’s the beginning of a big change in their relationship, where they can be themselves, and maybe even support and trust each other.

When the reporter comes in, it throws a wrench into this delicate moment. I stopped and asked Christina/Jan to sense what she was walking into. I realized the teens
seemed like they were shell-shocked, and she needed to find a way to get through to
them. How could she make them feel comfortable enough to want to talk to her?  
Christina started to take the time to charm the teens, to convince them that she was
fascinated by their project. As she talked, she slowly sat down, took out her pad and pen
and took off her jacket. It was a great way to ingratiate herself and allay their fears.
Diwata ate it up, and it was fun to watch how the boys tried to stop her. I realized it was
the first time they ever did anything even remotely together. The teens started to discover
the sense of relief after letting those secrets go, and knowing they weren’t being judged
or dismissed. They even started to enjoy one another’s company, and had fun teasing
each other. There was something about the reporter’s interest in them that worked like a
balm to their old hurts and wounds. Even in that early work through, there was almost a
giddiness, maybe a celebration in some way, of their coming through the fire into the
possibility of something better. It wasn’t at all perfect or sweet or sentimental, but it was
a good beginning. Lots of good discoveries this evening, and room to build from here.

**Tuesday, March 9, 2010**

We worked on the last two scenes of the play tonight. We have a run through for
the designers tomorrow, so I guess we had to get through the rest of the play before then.
The run always seems to come before we’re ready, but at least we’ll have something to
show them.

Pam Berlin came for most of the rehearsal tonight. We arranged the classroom
with the chairs in a circle for scene 11, the first meeting of the Gay/Straight Alliance. I
thought Howie might want the circle to promote friendship and communication. Before
we began, I took some time to remind everyone of the circumstances, and to deepen the
stakes. It’s still a precarious situation; only the three of them are at the meeting, and the school, and community, is definitely not gay-friendly. It’s the first meeting, and no one is sure how to do this…

Everyone took their time to explore the awkwardness of the situation, and to find the way to ease the tension. It was nice to see them making tentative steps to be supportive, which is also something new. I wanted to make sure the kids banging on the hallway door and cursing them out were a real threat, so it was scarier for the teens to be in that room.

The end of the scene is the most challenging part, when Solomon tires to ask Howie for a date. Pam pointed out that both actors were playing the same thing. It’s Solomon who is unsure and shy, trying to cover by being cool. Howie is not unsure or sentimental; he tries to help Solomon. He turns him down but not out, and doesn’t dismiss him. When he sees that Solomon is defeated after he’s turned him down, he admits to Solomon that he actually went and met Healy in the park on the night of the IM chat. Howie does a very generous thing by letting Solomon know that he was desperate, too—and that it’s okay.

We made some adjustments and Rowan/Howie trusted that he could help Solomon by not being sentimental. It actually made the scene more touching.

We came back to the three bedrooms for the last scene. It’s very short, and feels like a coda, rounding out the story. I continued to stress what was at stake for them all, even here. But they’re finding better ways to cope, and the new sense of community and self-confidence among them is evident even in the separate rooms. We tried having Diwata use the boys as her audience this time, and it gave her podcast a more positive
spin. It even seemed a little intimate. She still won’t get cast in the high school musical, but she has a real job in the theater now and people who will come to see her perform. Solomon takes a huge, scary step into the world at the end. He really took the time to make that happen.

Are we ready for a run through? Not really, but we have some sense of the arc of the play, and the strong needs of the characters. I told the actors not to worry about the designer run, but to treat it as another rehearsal. We can stop if we need to. Take the time to really listen and let things land, and keep making discoveries. We’ll actually learn a lot from our run tomorrow night.

**Wednesday, March 10, 2010**

We did our first run through for the designers. It went pretty well, considering it was our first time through, and we’re still very much in process. As expected, there’s not much sense of pacing or shape to many of the scenes.

The actors and I talked after the run, and then I gave some notes. The actors were all pretty breathless, but actually thought it was helpful to do the run, even at this point. We didn’t get to do scene 8, which is the climactic dance scene, so it was challenging jumping into the last part of the play without really experiencing that scene. My biggest general note was again about making everything more dangerous, finding the strongest obstacle, and keeping the stakes high. I thought they were working towards that, but it was still inconsistent. I encouraged them to keep personalizing. We talked about them continuing to make discoveries, and the need to really take things in order to do that. Everyone had moments of playing, making discoveries tonight, and that was exciting.
I didn’t give this note to Sarah, but I thought scene 3, Diwata’s podcast, really needed more work. It lost focus again, and she was not really pursuing the actions we had worked on. I would go over the important moments, the points that Diwata needs to make to her audience, and focus our efforts on shaping the monologue around those points. After all, a performer like Diwata would make a point to shape her material to best advantage, right?

We lost some of the sense, in scene 6 at the restaurant, that Diwata and Howie were meeting for the first time. The scene got too easy sometimes; it’s still never comfortable, but wary and combative.

Christina made a big improvement in scene 8 as the reporter, especially her voice. It had tended to get high and tight, as in scene 2. She found a way to relax her voice, and discovered a lower range. Sitting down really helped, it made her the Queen bee, and they buzzed around her. Nice work.

Our choreographer Lauren was at the run, which was great. Her schedule was getting tighter by the day, and I was concerned about having enough time for the dance. She stayed afterwards and worked with the cast for about an hour. Most of the time was spent learning short sequences of dance moves, and a few solo moves for Howie, Diwata and Solomon. Lauren wanted to work from the middle of the whole dance sequence, outwards to the beginning and then the end. The solo stuff would happen at the beginning, as each person was introduced. It was wonderful, dramatic modern dance inspired moves for Diwata, very much based on what Sarah had come up with, but even better, referencing some pop styles as well. The same with Howie, starting with that terrific slide move into the classroom. We didn’t have a chance to talk much afterwards,
so I’m not sure yet what she’s working on for the center sections of the dance. But so far the character based movements look terrific.

Thursday, March 11, 2010

We went back to scenes 7 and 8 tonight, which are the crux of the play, leading up to the climactic scene. Chris O’Connor came to the rehearsal. I worked to try and clean up some staging issues, especially in the fight between Howie and Solomon. Chris thought the argument was too mushy and diffuse, that we needed to define who was the aggressor and when, and who pulls back when. We went back and worked through more slowly, beat by beat, to plot the changes. Solomon goes on the offensive when he’s attacked, and he really stood his ground and wouldn’t give in when Howie started to attack him. Howie can’t afford to say what he really wants to say to Solomon, and he was letting that frustration out by pacing back and forth, coming in for a “jab” and then backing off. The argument needed to start more slowly with Howie really looking for the words to say. The first beat ends when Howie has the last word, and everyone is silent, unsure what to do next. This is equally scary for Diwata, who can’t afford to let the group break up. She tries to figure out what to do or say, since she can’t afford to take sides. She tries to ease the tension by getting them to talk, which doesn’t work. Then she tries to get them off the subject by talking about the reporter coming to visit them. That totally backfires, and actually drives Howie to threaten Solomon. The argument escalates and Howie becomes the aggressor. Plotting through the scene slowly, identifying the turning points, helped shape the changes in their relationships and shape the arc of the scene. It builds to Howie almost getting to the point of outing Solomon. It’s too close for Solomon to deal with, and he backs off, leaving the situation unresolved.
In scene 8 Chris felt that too much of the audience lost what was happening with Solomon during the “outing” section, since he was downstage, facing up to both Howie and Diwata. I rather liked him being in the weak position onstage; it felt in the audience like we were all under the gun, being pressured by Howie and Diwata. I liked Craig’s choice to barricade himself behind the desk as he’s being hounded, but I moved him to the upstage side of it, to give him the strong position. Everyone ended up too much on the same plane and I thought it flattened out a little this way. Rowan was flexible about moving downstage and playing more of the angle, but Sarah felt threatened about upstaging herself. I started to get into a long discussion with her, which was not helpful, so I said we’d made some good discoveries tonight, and we’d play with this some more in the coming days. I knew I had to balance the needs of the scene with the wishes of the actor, but she was adamant, and I thought diffusing her anger was more important at that point.

**Friday, March 12, 2010**

We started rehearsal tonight with scene 2 between Solomon and the teacher. I wanted to slow it down, because in the run through we lost the feeling of the scene happening for the first time. I encouraged Christina to work moment to moment and not know where the scene is going. I suggested we go back to trying a short improv to start the scene, and I asked her to find something humorous about getting another article from Solomon. Anything to lighten up the start of the scene, so we had someplace to go with it. I asked her to find any tactic that would keep her out of any sort of confrontation with Solomon. She didn’t want to go there, especially at the end of the day—she had a hot date that night to get ready for! The improv helped, and the scene started off on a much
easier note. It made it actually harder for Solomon to get through to her, because she wouldn’t engage right away. He got frustrated and didn’t always know what to say or do, which was great.

Again, I stopped often when they rushed through important moments. When he forces her to have to tell him that his father was the one who complained, Solomon needed to take that in more—it’s an important revelation. As we worked through, I struggled to find the ways to help Christina make new discoveries, and not always revert back to the same intentions, and even line readings. She made some good progress at the top of the scene, and I made sure to repeat that so she would be able to build upon it. I also tried repeating each section we had worked on. I gave her a few other things to do in the scene, so she wouldn’t get caught behind the desk too much, which led her to just stand there and argue with him. I really worked to build the scene beat by beat, charting the changes in their relationship, until the climax when he lays down the ultimatum: “I’m going to write this story.” Solomon really has to drive to scene to that point; he’ll do anything to get what he wants.

In scene 5, between Diwata and Solomon, we worked to sharpen the conflict and the adversarial relationship between the two. They both have strong needs in the scene which conflict, and yet they both need each other. The first part of the scene was challenging for Craig, dealing with how hard it is for Solomon to get her to talk to him about Healy. We made some blocking adjustments to try and make it more awkward for him. At one point he jumped up and tried to stop Diwata from leaving the room by stepping in her way, which took her by surprise. He realized he’d overdone it, and had to
find the way to make up for that. It really helped keep him off balance and out of his comfort zone.

It was a really tricky balance for both characters: the stakes had to be high and very personal, and we’re always trying to sharpen the conflict and make the scenes hotter. At the same time, we as people try to avoid conflict, even though that can be incredibly hard to do. And as a director, I have to make sure the scene doesn’t peak too soon, with nowhere to go. Building the scene beat by beat helps us discover what is really happening at any moment, and we have to really earn the right to move to the next moment.

Sarah can be really demanding sometimes, but she forces me to be specific with choices, which is great. We were working the moment when she realizes that Solomon is the same guy she saw in the men’s room with Healy. She didn’t know why she would move away from him at that point, and what her specific destination would be. I suggested that she go back to the safety of her papers at the desk, or even take a swig of a drink there. She’s really shocked, and doesn’t quite know what to do for a moment. She needs a little time and distance from him to try and figure out what to do next. She might even be nervous that she’s alone with a pervert, which makes her then go to the door and open it. I had to come up with a full scenario, which kept me on my toes. Sarah tried this and worked it through in rehearsals to make it personal for her.

**Sunday, March 14, 2010**

We hadn’t rehearsed scene 3, Diwata’s podcast, since the first run through last week. I still felt that the scene was unfocused, and Sarah wasn’t pursuing her actions. I thought too many props were getting in the way, and the scene became too much about playing with them for their own sake. We pared away some things, the mic stand, some
of the extra papers on the floor, and some costume pieces that Sarah used for her songs. I knew they motivated her, but I felt at this point they were keeping her too self-involved. I really pushed Sarah to get to each point/transition that Diwata was making. The first moment was “Let the e-campaign begin”; everything before that led up to this point—she had to rally the troops, inspire her audience to support her, impress them with her skills to get them to email Healy in support of her bid to be in the high school musical. This was paramount, and it was hard to do, but she was excited about this podcast, and drinking a little first didn’t slow her down, it gave her courage to really go for it. I reminded her how smart Diwata could be, and how the ideas came fast and furious once she was “onstage”, in her element. I pushed her a lot in this rehearsal, and we plotted out again how she got to each point. I wasn’t sure why she was slowing everything down so much, but I realized she was getting the impulse and then acting on it. I urged her to act on the impulse, and tried everything I could to focus and move the scene. When she really dealt with the need to get onstage, to get back at Healy, etc., then she got active and focused and the scene really popped. Everything was in service to those needs. I made a point to tell her how wonderful the scene was, and talked about all the things that worked, and why. I hoped she would believe it and trust herself and the play enough to continue to work this way on the scene.

We also hadn’t looked at scene 6, the restaurant, in a while. I stressed how important it was that Diwata really needed to tell Howie the story about discovering Solomon and Healy in the men’s room at school. It may not be easy to say, but she’s got to make it dramatic, even enthralling for Howie, so he’ll keep his end of the agreement. We also worked on the discoveries Howie makes during all this. It’s a pretty amazing
story to hear from a stranger, and it sets up the rest of the scene. Once they took the time at the beginning to let all this land, the scene started to play well. They provoked and tested one another, and really took a big journey to get to that tentative connection at the end. They both found the vulnerability, and how they each dealt with it was much more specific.

Pam Berlin came to the run through we did in the afternoon, and we talked afterwards. She thought that scene 2 needed the most work. There was not enough arc to it, especially from the teacher. It needed to start easier and not so adversarial. Again, we needed to chart the important points. I told Pam that I’d been working on many of these things, but I couldn’t find a way to get Christina out of her rut. Pam suggested to keep using the humor, and to make her older. Even give her a higher heel. Also, try giving her more to do to keep her busy and not confrontational with Solomon so soon. Pam also felt that Craig should think even younger—maybe ten years old. He was still coming across as too old, and glib. Especially in scene 4, on the phone with Howie. He needs to feel more out of his depth, yet desperate to keep Howie on the line.

I gave the cast some notes. They were all tired after a long day, but feeling better about the run. I thought this run was a big improvement over our first try, and lots of the scenes were starting to work really well. I didn’t do many detailed notes, since we still had a dance rehearsal after the run and time was running short. I knew we’d have a chance to catch up when we got to the theatre.

Lauren had a long dance rehearsal and continued to develop the story line we had worked out. Because she worked out of sequence, it was hard for me to tell what the shape of the piece might be, and how the story was developing. I asked some questions as
she worked, but I should have been much more involved. I don’t know why I was so hands-off at this point, but I felt she needed the space to develop the work she was doing, and I needed to see more before interrupting her process. We talked more about where we needed to get to with the dance, and the key moments we had plotted out on the way to the climax. She felt confident they were working well on this, and I looked forward to seeing it start to come together on stage the next day.

**Monday, March 15, 2010**

Our first time onstage! We had scheduled a dance rehearsal in the morning. For various reasons, Lauren wasn’t going to be available after today, so she tried to finish everything in this last rehearsal. I was taken by surprise and wasn’t sure what to do. I watched the dance take shape onstage, and once it was finished there was little time to make adjustments. I wanted to fill out certain moments leading up to the climax, and even make the climax even hotter. I thought the introductory sequences were terrific, but lasted too long, at the expense of telling the story of the threesome. I really appreciated Lauren’s work with us, and I felt I couldn’t, and wouldn’t be able to make any changes without her. I wondered how this dance would work in the play. I’d get a chance to see that tomorrow…

We spent the day working through the play, scene by scene, mostly for spacing and technical issues. I did take the time to work more on scene 2. The classroom space looked great, and the desks and chairs really worked. I moved Christina away from the desk sooner and kept her a little bit busier getting ready to leave. I suggested she think older, even early thirties. We got her some low heels to work in. I asked her, as the adult, to think about covering better as she gets more harried. She made some good adjustments
and started the scene on a lighter note, even using some humor. She had a bigger arc and her voice stayed more free and open.

I took some extra time with scene 4 as well. I encouraged Craig to think even younger, and be specific about what he does to keep Howie on the phone. I urged him to really step over the line—really threaten to expose Howie if he doesn’t give you what you want. I told him to try blurting out those questions—you’re desperate to keep him talking, and you don’t know what else to do. We tracked through when Solomon becomes interested in what he’s hearing from Howie about being a gay man. As we ran the scene, I pushed Craig to walk that dangerous tightrope. I went back to more “as ifs” to make it scarier for him. I feel like I’m still throwing so much at him in every rehearsal, it might be overwhelming. I stuck more this time with encouraging him to think even younger, like a ten year old kid. I did some side coaching as we worked, which Craig had asked me to do. It helped, and I didn’t let him off the hook. Solomon had moments when he really floundered, and didn’t know what to do. His desperation was more obvious and he was more specific in his efforts to keep Howie on the phone. For the first time, he let himself be intrigued by actually talking to a gay man, and that started him on the path to the connection he and Howie make at the end of the scene. Craig let down some defenses today and allowed himself to really engage.

**Tuesday, March 16, 2010**

We spent the first part of the rehearsal time continuing to work through scenes, and did a run through in the evening.

Sarah has gotten even more insecure and needs a lot of reassurance. Scene 3, Diwata’s podcast, worked so well today—it was focused and energized, and Sarah was
clear in her actions. I really praised her work, but somehow this made her need even more reassurance about every moment of the scene. I’m not sure whether Sarah’s for real, or this is just a ploy to grab more attention. It reminds me of working with some opera divas who monopolize your time. I know how talented Sarah is, and I’m willing to put up with her neediness, but not feed it too much. She’s exhausted the stage managers already. I have to figure out the best way to help her, to keep her positive and working at her best, without taking too much time away from the rest of the cast.

The run throughs continue to get better. My big note to everyone was to involve the circumstances more. I know it’s difficult when scene changes take a long time, but they need to remember what’s happened between scenes, and then find what propels them into the next scene. I know I’ve often slighted Rowan in my efforts to work with Sarah and Craig, but he continues to be flexible and make new discoveries. I encouraged him to make it even harder to connect with Diwata and Solomon. We had talked about making some adjustments, about how Howie’s cover is sometimes to be more cool, even a bit cutting, as in the end of scene 6 at the restaurant with Diwata. He doesn’t let her in easily, and he uses some really dry humor in his attempts to connect with her. Tonight he raised the stakes for himself and was therefore more withholding. He didn’t jump to sympathize with Diwata so readily and his wariness made them both have to work harder to earn that tentative connection they finally make. It made the scene more touching as well.

**Wednesday, March 17, 2010**

We worked the second half of the play during the day. Craig was working well with imagining himself as a young kid, and I encouraged him to keep exploring that. I
made sure to give specific, concise notes that pointed out when he was successful and when not, and what needed to happen. Christina was doing good work as the reporter. Her voice was relaxed and open, and she continued to find more range to it. I suggested she try putting a limit on the amount of time the reporter had to convince the teens to share their presentation with her, to give the scene more energy and focus. I also worked on upping the stakes for that scene for the three teens. I thought they lost the sense of urgency once the reporter came in. I asked the boys to work harder to stop Diwata from giving in to the reporter’s wishes. You still don’t want to do this dance and be totally co-opted by Diwata’s agenda—how embarrassing! I think that helped to sharpen the conflict and gave that part of the scene a stronger arc.

Chris O’Connor came to the run through we did at night. He thought Craig was really finding that young boy in Solomon, and he liked his petulance in scene 2 with the teacher. His big note was about tightening the show. There was not enough sense of urgency to propel them. They were taking too much for granted. He thought that scene 3, Diwata’s podcast, particularly needed more focus and shape.

I agreed that the run felt lax. I knew we were all tired after long days, and the run took much longer without a crew to do the scene changes. But we needed to find that spark again, that sense of walking the tightrope, where life is dangerous and so much is always at stake. I asked Chris to say a few words to the cast. He had lots of good things to say, and talked about the urgency of the piece. I knew it would be a positive experience to hear from him, and that the cast would take what he said to heart. I asked them to act on the impulse more, and trust that they could feel confident enough not to “play meaning”, as Billy Carden would put it. Make the obstacles as difficult as possible and
overcome them. Trust in the moment to moment visceral reality and let the meaning take care of itself.

**Thursday, March 18, 2010**

We started later in the day today and I asked the cast to come in to do a line speed through. I realized it was a somewhat technical exercise, but I thought it would help tighten up the show for this evening’s run. Some of the cast started just reciting lines very fast, with no connection to what they were doing. We had to work to keep the life going and still be as specific as possible, just doing everything a lot faster. It was challenging and took lots of concentration. Everyone found a way to make it work for them, and they started to enjoy it. I hope that focus and energy will stay with them for the run tonight.

Before doing that Sarah and I worked on scene 3, Diwata’s podcast. Sarah continued to go back and forth, especially in scene 3. It was sometimes really energized and focused, and other times slow and self-indulgent. I continued to give her positive, specific feedback when the scene went well, but she still wasn’t consistent. I tried giving her technical notes on ways to tighten up the scene, hoping that would help. We did an “as if” and worked with a time limit of five minutes, which is when we decided her mother would return home. The scene really moved and I did some side coaching, urging her to get to her point. I could sense that Sarah was chafing a little under the pressure, but I tried to keep it positive and moving forward. I complimented her on using her props in service of her actions, instead of as an end in themselves. I hope she believes in the good work she did today, as I assured her again that I did. And I hope she’s able to repeat it.

Pam Berlin came to the run tonight. Her biggest note was about scene 2, between Solomon and the teacher. Christina went overboard again, and the argument got hot way
too soon. Pam suggested I keep trying to find behavior so she can throw things off more, and keep her away from her tendency to confront Solomon too early. I knew we’d have a few days before we got back to runs again, which might be a good thing, since we could start fresh.

In general I thought the show was tighter and more alive tonight and I complimented the cast about that. I gave some notes about spots where I thought the energy or intentions weren’t strong or specific enough. We talked about going into tech and dress rehearsals, and how that might take us away from our other rehearsal work on the show for a while. I was confident we’d be able to put all the elements together and I was looking forward to seeing how it all would help feed into our work. The cast felt much better about the run, and I was glad to leave them in such positive spirits.

**Friday, March 19, 2010**

We had our dry tech today, which generally went pretty smoothly. The scene transitions are the real tricky part, and putting those together was a challenge. The stage managers spent a lot of time working with the stage crew on the scene changes. It was obvious pretty soon into the rehearsal that the lockers couldn’t be used to bring props in and out. They were just too cumbersome and took too much time to pass props through them. Since we don’t have the actors today, it makes it extra challenging to figure out exactly how the scene changes will work, since the cast will be doing the changes along with the crew. We spent most of the rehearsal working on putting together the sound/music, projections, lights and movement of the crew and actors for the many transitions. We’re aiming to make them as quick and smooth as possible, of course, and
to find the best way to propel us into the next scene. We’ll have to wait for real timings when we get the actors added to the crew.

**Saturday, March 20, 2010**

Today was the first Q2Q, with crew and cast. Amie and Sarah, our stage managers, worked to integrate the cast into the scene changes. That took a long time, making adjustments, and trying new ways if things weren’t working. They were really creative in their solutions.

In the first IM chat scene, we needed to find a way for Rowan to see the chat projections, which were on the screen upstage of him. We tried putting a small mirror on his laptop, and he took time to work with it. Shawn Boyle, the projection designer, was still playing with timing the chat to the new music we were using, so Rowan just watched and listened this time. We cut even more props from Diwata’s podcast scene, to help shorten the change time. We found that the light from the onstage projections was enough in which to do the scene changes. I had been concerned that the projections would be covered by the cast and crew doing the change, but it wasn’t a problem. It was actually fun to see the silhouettes of the “students” against the light from the projections.

**Sunday, March 21, 2010**

We started our costume tech with Act 2, since it had most of the difficult changes. The biggest hurdle was getting into and out of the dance scene. The boys had under dressed their dance underwear, which was a big help. Diwata wore her bodystocking underneath her clothes as well, since she had a bigger change to do, and was the first one onstage for the dance. We ended up extending the dance intro music, to give her more time to get ready. Getting into costume for the next scene was even more challenging.
She was sweaty with that bodystocking still on, and the clothes just stuck to her. We put them just in bathrobes for the next bedroom scene, so they didn’t have to get out of their dance underwear. That helped shorten the transition, but Craig had to run around to the other side of the stage first, and he was always winded by the time he got back on for the bedroom scene. I’m sure we’ll routine all this more and get the changes even tighter.

We spent some time on the dance sequence, moving cue to cue. I loved starting in the dark classroom, with just the shaft of light from the open door. As we moved through, I saw that Matt Bathe, our lighting designer, was making very large changes from cue to cue, adding disco lights, geometrics, pinwheels, etc. I talked with him about making the transitions more gradual and basing them more on the language of that wonderful shaft of light on the floor. There were a lot of designers and faculty at the theater that day, and it seemed that everyone was weighing in on this, with lots of very different opinions. I wanted a chance to talk with Matt alone, since there had obviously been some miscommunication between us, or I had not been clear in our previous meetings. I think we both felt under pressure to make decisions, and Matt suggested we take a look at the lights during the actual dance, later that evening. We ended up only having time to run Act 1, so we left the dance sequence unresolved. After the rehearsal, though, Matt and I looked at a tape he’d made of the dance, and plotted specific change points. I thought we were working on telling the story of the scene, and I was confused about the language he was using. We had started with a great look, based on the reality of the room. Could we find a way to use that language, that sense of geometry, of dark and light, to move through the story of the dance? How could we evoke the changing moods/emotions that accompanied that story? Matt felt that the different sections of the dance needed to be
highlighted more specifically, to reflect the type of dance that was happening as well as how the story was evolving. I kept coming back to the idea of what language we were using, and if there was a way to use it more gradually to reflect the changes. We knew we were making a big leap here, and I admitted that I didn’t think the dance had fully justified that leap. It didn’t really fly enough, and get to that point of celebration/euphoria that we had talked about. I was worried that the lights would be confusing and overwhelm what was a more real and earthbound dance. We agreed to look at it again tomorrow and see how it worked in the run through.

**Monday, March 22, 2010**

Before the run through tonight, I took a half hour to work with Christina and Craig on scene 2. I’m still trying to find the key to helping Christina. I’m using Pam Berlin’s suggestion to get her away from the desk even sooner, so she doesn’t have a chance to become confrontational. I asked Christina to move away as she finishes putting on her sweater, and we worked out some destinations. I had her start to collect the notebooks off the desks, which occupied her more. I added having her go to the blackboard to do some erasing. I may be giving her too much to do, but I think it’s better to keep her mind off the argument. It also makes Craig have to literally stop her sometimes, to work harder to engage her. Her primary focus should be to get ready to leave at the end of the day, and she then more gradually gets drawn into this argument. It seems to be helping, though she sometimes rushes through the activities and that makes her frantic as well. We’ll find that balance.

The run tonight was a little rough, the first time we put all the design and technical elements together. The transitions are still taking too long, and it’s hard for the
actors to pick up the energy to start the next scene. I could see that the actors weren’t always as focused as they have been, and it was a little sluggish. But it was great to see that everyone is still exploring, and there are new things happening every night. Sarah really drove scene 5 tonight; she made Diwata’s need to get Solomon on her team almost overwhelming. And there was a wonderful moment when he finally signed the contract; she could barely contain her joy and did a funny little celebratory move.

**Tuesday, March 23, 2010**

We started our run quite late tonight because of some publicity we did beforehand. Pam Berlin came to watch. She thought the transitions were too long and lacked energy, and didn’t do anything to propel us into the next scene. The actors were doing a lot of good work, but it was really impossible to recover from the draining effect of all those transitions, and the whole show lacked focus and energy. I really felt that way as well. I think I kept hoping that the transitions would get a lot faster, but I wasn’t helping them at all. In fact, I was making it worse. The sound design choices were just too enervating, and sapped all the youthful energy in the play. We were using some fabulous Scissor Sister music for the bows, and I decided that night to use their music for all the transitions. It was youthful, energetic and the music had lots of different rock, blues and disco influences to keep it interesting. I don’t know why I didn’t deal with this earlier. It was so obvious that the transitions needed help, and I somehow refused to see the real problem. And the solution was right in front of me!

**Wednesday, March 24, 2010**

Matt Bathe and I had talked after the run last night. We continued to make adjustments to the dance lighting, toning down the big klieg lights from the lockers,
keeping the more realistic look of the dark room longer, and making the transitions more subtle. I don’t feel we’ve really addressed the basic challenge of finding the language to use here, and I think we’re still somewhat all over the map with that. I know it doesn’t make it any easier that the dance hasn’t told the story clearly enough, and I don’t know if the lighting can help clarify that.

This was our last run through before the invited dress tomorrow night. I can feel that the actors are ready to have an audience; they’re itching for it. I told them about using the Scissor Sisters for all the transitions and they loved that. The energy tonight was much improved, and the cast was still taking chances. Craig did some outrageously childish things during the phone call tonight, and it was wonderful; Sarah really nailed the podcast and it was exciting; Rowan was deliciously sexy in the IM chat scene, and Christina allowed Craig/Solomon to really make her laugh in the classroom scene. I shared these terrific moments with everyone and told them how great it was that they kept on making discoveries. We’re all feeling very excited about tomorrow night!

**Thursday, March 25, 2010**

The preview went really well. The audience was very vocal, right from the start, even shouting out to the cast onstage. It was a mostly student audience who were very engaged with the lives of these three teens. The cast was energized and stayed very focused. We put in the new music for the transitions for the first time tonight, and it made a huge difference. The transitions felt faster and more alive, even if they took the same amount of time. The music matched the youthful exuberance of the projections and really helped propel us into the scenes. During the first transition, a student friend turned to me and said: “Wow, the Scissor Sisters—cool!”
I know once we get into the run we’ll have all kinds of different audiences. I’m looking forward to that, and to how the cast deals with the different energies each night. I hope they’ll revel in the chance to keep exploring these wonderful roles.
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