Approaching Fen

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Introduction

I would like to complete my time at Rutgers University with the confidence that the training at Mason Gross School of the Arts has prepared me to know how to work in any situation. I don't want to be a director who can only do one thing, so it was important for me to choose a play for my thesis production that stretched me in many challenging directions. I have given myself over to this training under the assumption that with a firm understanding of the foundations of dramatic storytelling the only limitations are the extent of one's creativity and talent. In my final year of training I wanted to test that assumption with my choice of thesis.

The struggle throughout my time at Rutgers has been to focus on what is happening between characters on the deepest and most human level possible. I have a natural inclination towards theatrical choices, and at times my work has had wonderful design elements but lacked the personal depth and specificity that is truly needed to create compelling theatre. I also have a desire to do work that is dealing with larger social or political themes, and consequently my choices can at times become intellectual and not of the gut. As I began my thesis search I wanted to find a play that dealt with an important issue that I could get behind, and had extreme stylistic challenges outside of anything I had done to date. I wanted all of this while also finding a play that allowed for a complete and thorough exploration of character, need and circumstance.

My first step was to look at playwrights who were not realistic but highly stylized: Shakespeare, Ionesco, Dario Fo, Mrozek, and Brecht to name a few. The first play I proposed was Accidental Death of an Anarchist by Dario Fo. I liked the idea of the play but I didn't like that it took place in one fairly realistic location. I wanted to work on a play that was transformative in terms of the design and demanded that I move the story from one scene to the next. I also couldn't find a good translation of the play. It was almost funny but fell short because of the language and because it was so specific to
the time that it was written in. It was about a political situation in Italy in 1970, and I couldn't imagine it working in 2010 in New Jersey without a translation that dealt with the current circumstances surrounding the production.

I was drawn to comedic absurdist pieces, but was having problems finding the right combination of ingredients that I wanted for my thesis. Ionesco's plays were mostly too short except for *Rhinoceros* which was simply too large a show for the casting pool that I had access to. I also can't help but feel that Ionesco's plays, while I find them theatrically interesting, don't deal with the issue that they are exploring in a complex or generous way. What I mean by that is Ionesco often finds an interesting metaphor and his characters exist within a two dimensional world that extends from the metaphor. Once the complicated and involved metaphor he constructed is fully unearthed the statement underneath that metaphor seems fairly simplistic. He refuses to allow the audience to go for a journey within that world, but instead demands that the audience figure out what the world is and what that may mean. While Ionesco has many positive aspects I couldn't find a piece that I felt driven to direct.

There were many plays, such as the Russian play *The Suicide*, and a version of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughter House Five*, that fit into what I was looking for in a thesis but just simply did not excite me as much as I would have liked. Aside from having the size, design requirements, thematic social relevance, and stylistic challenges that I was looking for I wanted to work on a play whose story, characters and overall world were intriguing to me. I did not want this to be an exercise in working on a play that fit a list of criteria while I lacked a passion for doing it in the first place.

I considered proposing *Macbeth*, but I was told that no MFA director has done Shakespeare for a thesis yet and it would never be approved. Instead of fighting tradition I decided to look elsewhere. It was then that Pam Berlin, one of the directing faculty teachers and advisors, suggested I look at Brecht. I ran this by Chris O'Connor, interim head of directing, and he suggested a handful of plays. I also ran
this by Amy Saltz, head of directing, who was on sabbatical. I had trouble finding a play by Brecht that had a reasonable cast size, and fit all of my other wishes. Finally I found a play that spoke to me and seemed to be doing everything I wanted in a thesis. And so I proposed *Man Equals Man*, confident that this would be my production.

As time went on I began to get the feeling that there must be a hold up with someone on the decision making end. Finally after a number of weeks I was informed that the play was not going to work. I didn't get much of a specific reason other than Brecht is hard, and that play is almost impossible. Disillusioned with the fact that I may not be able to test my hypothesis that this training would prepare me to do anything, I went back to the drawing board.

In the last half of my second semester of my second year I was able to delve into the work of Caryl Churchill for the first time. I had very limited experience with her plays in the past. I only knew that she was one of the giants and that I would love to read more of her plays at some point. In my Playwrights Voice class with Pam Berlin I had the chance to do this. I discovered that as a dramatist Churchill was doing much of what Brecht and the European absurdists were doing but with a brilliant combination of character development, poetry, style, and social relevance. She was dealing with real human beings in a very unreal, poetic and theatrical way. You could see the alienation of Brecht, the layered characters of a realist such as Chekhov, and the overwhelming visceral poetry of Artaud.

When I first read *Fen*, like many of her other plays, I was immediately drawn into a fascinating theatrical world. I also didn't completely understand it, but I knew that one reading of the play was only revealing the smallest tip of the ice-burg that was submerged below the surface. I was excited by the style and the chance to explore multiple scenes in various locations. I felt like the world of the play was extremely evocative, and the movement of the play was something I could sink my teeth into as a director. The text was so spare, yet brimming with so much subtext, that it was clear a director would
have a massive task ahead trying to figure out what story to tell, and what it all really meant. It seemed big and impossible, but intriguing. I hesitated to propose the play at first because it is a play that was devised by a company of women who interviewed the actual women of this community. It was all spurred by a book called *Fenwomen*, written by a woman. I felt like this was a story that I didn't have a right to tell; like there was something wrong with me intruding on a play specifically about woman.

Upon further reflection I realized that this was absurd. Aside from the fact that Les Waters directed the original production, as a human being I have an insight into these people. I can understand these people's struggle, and I can provide my own perspective on this story. These characters are essentially trapped in systematically unjust circumstances. The yearning for something more in their lives, and the impossibility of finding what that might be in this bleak landscape was something I felt I could understand.

In my career I often feel like I am at the mercy of completely random events of good or bad luck, and the more I try to take action in my life the more the deeply broken system of the business I work in keeps success away. Artists are an oppressed class of people with damaging stereotypes and prejudices thrown at them constantly. What makes this worse is that artists themselves sometimes take on these viewpoints and contribute to their own subjugation. The more I read *Fen* the more I began to relate to this community's struggle. Each of these women is accepting and supporting a paradigm that leads to her ultimate unhappiness. Churchill was also showing how this pattern was generational. The range in ages of her characters, and the history of the Fen itself, revealed how this cycle has been perpetuated for a long time. It is only with the the youngest in the cast, Shona, that we see a hope that there will someday be a break from the status quo.

I read the play more, and thought of these issues and how I could personally relate to them. I began to get very excited about proposing *Fen* as my thesis. Shortly after I officially proposed the play it was
accepted and *Fen* was my thesis production. At the time I was confident that it was the right choice, but I was also intimidated by the challenges that it presented. It wasn't exactly the type of show that I had in mind for my thesis, but at the same time it satisfied almost all of my goals and I felt excited about the story. I wasn't expecting the play to come from an English playwright, and I was intending to find something comedic. The fact that the play turned out to be something different than I expected is just another example of how a director works in the rehearsal room: do your work and know what you want, then be willing to let that go when you end up finding what really works.
Research

Caryl Churchill

"What kind of society I would like: decentralized, non authoritarian, communist, nonsexist. A society in which people can be in touch with their feelings and in control of their lives."¹

When I read this quote by Caryl Churchill, *Fen* began to make a lot of sense. Initially, I thought that the play was very disjointed. There are so many different characters and scenes that I didn't get an immediate sense of how it all fit together. The cause and effect from one event to the next was sometimes confusing to me. Why are we following Val mostly, but then we go off into other scenes that have little to do with her? Why are we introduced to so many characters only once? Why are there so many different story lines aside from the central Val story line? And why do none of them really come to a resolution? This quote helped me understand what was holding this play together. Churchill was writing a play in which we see the affects of the opposite of her world view. We see a village in which a centralized government and corporate system controls the resources and ultimately the lives of the people in the community. The highly marketable farmlands of the Fens, coupled with the sexist view that women have very strict and specific roles in this community, made this area perfect for her to delve into. None of these people are in control of their lives or in touch with what they really feel. In order to fully understand each of these essentials running through the play I would need to do an extensive amount of research. To begin with, I wanted to look at Churchill's life and work and how they influenced *Fen*.

Caryl Churchill was born in London in 1938. Her mother was a secretary, fashion model and sometimes minor film actress, so she was exposed to the entertainment industry from a young age.

Her father was a political cartoonist, so already we see a certain awareness of a political sensibility channelled through self expression. She said of him and his work, "Cartoons are really so much like plays. An image with somebody saying something. I grew up with his cartoons of the war--of Goebbels and Mussolini."²

She attended Oxford University where she studied English Literature and began writing her first plays. In an undergraduate essay she lamented the lack of poetry in contemporary drama. Attempting to create a poetic theatre has proven to be a characteristic of her work throughout her career. It has been said that she was influenced by Artaud, in her pursuit of surrealism and poetry that goes beyond the literal text.³ Artaud called for a poetic language of theatre⁴ that did not depend on the text, and certainly in Churchill's work one can see that simply relying on the words and only the words is a sure way to miss her plays completely. Her interest in the surreal is apparent early in her career with plays such as *Traps*, *Top Girls*, *Cloud 9* and *Fen*; and becomes more apparent later in her career with plays such as *Mouthful of Birds*, and *Far Away*.

In the 1960's she married a barrister and began to write short radio plays. In 1972 her first successful professionally produced play *Owners*, exploring the theme of an ownership based society, premiered at The Royal Court in London. She wrote the play quickly after her first miscarriage, probably as a way of dealing with this difficult time. She has said, "My attitude then was entirely to do with self expression of my own personal pain and anger."⁵

This expression of pain and anger seems to take two primary forms in her work. She is clearly angry at injustice and a corrupt societal structure, however she also has a deep understanding of human beings and the behavior that results from living in this society.

² Caryl Churchill from Dictionary of Literary Biography. Erica Beth Weintraub. 2005
In 1974 she would become the resident dramatist of The Royal Court. Her first international success was *Cloud Nine* in 1979 with the Joint Stock Company, the same theatre which would produce *Fen* in four years. The Joint Stock Company was a democratically based company that focused on the ordinary lives of people. Max Stafford Clark was the first and only Artistic Director of the company. The idea was to model an ensemble approach of creating theatre that would deal with specific communities and issues, much like the Berliner Ensemble.

In 1982 Caryl Churchill, Les Waters and a group of people from the Joint Stock Company went to the Fens and lived in a small cottage for two weeks in order to gather material for a forthcoming production about the area. They would go out everyday and individually knock on doors and talk to as many people as they could. They would come back at night and discuss what they heard. After two weeks of getting to know the community they spent a week in London workshopping, improvising and experimenting. Churchill was then free to write and develop the play on her own from late October to mid December. The original title of the play was *Strong Women Always Hoeing*, however soon became known as *Fen*. In the next year the play ran both in England and in New York.

Even though the play was an amalgamation of many people's voices it is clearly guided by Churchill's worldview. In an interview around the time of *Fen* in 1982, Churchill said that while at Oxford she "was strongly influenced by Buddhism." The Buddhist idea of rebirth, and a continuum where everything is interrelated can be found throughout *Fen*. It is especially evident in the convention of having many characters played by a few actors. The more I learned about Churchill, the more I began to understand how *Fen* sprang from who she was as a person. Her passion for equality and dignity for women, her suspicion of a minority of owners controlling a large amount of the resources and her belief that all people ultimately want control over their lives are evident in *Fen*.

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6 Randall 25
Following the success of *Fen*, Churchill went on to have a long and prolific career where she not only challenged the role of women in the theatre, but challenged assumptions about the role of theatre in society. She keeps a fairly private life aside from her work. However, because her work clearly stems from such a passionate and strong point of view, we can get a clear glimpse into who she is at her core by experiencing her plays.

**Approaching the Political**

Michael Patterson says in his book *Strategies of Political Theatre*, “It is impossible to parade characters interacting socially in front of a public assembled to witness these relationships without there being some political content. Thus the silliest farce or most innocuous musical will reflect some ideology, usually that of the Establishment.”

Caryl Churchill is viewed as a political playwright, but the above quote suggests that all playwrights are political. In my research I wanted to take some time to study the field of specifically "political" dramatists. I wanted to get a sense for what the traps are in doing political theatre, and I wanted to decide which strategies would work for this production.

Augusto Boal was in line with Patterson by saying in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*, "All theatre is necessarily political because all activities of man are political and theatre is one of them." Boal goes on to analyze "Aristotle's Co-ersive System of Tragedy." In short, he proposed that those who rely on the conventional Aristotelian approach are attempting to purge the spectator of the tragic flaw of the protagonist. The fact that it is a "flaw" is usually decided by the established powers that be.

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7 Patterson 3  
This purging occurs as a result of allowing the audience to enter into the world of the play and then causing the spectator to empathize and feel for the character. This then makes the spectator a passive, feeling subject; rather than a thinking, active participant. The tragic flaw is then the reason for the character's downfall, and not the political or economic system in which characters are living.\(^9\)

This is a subtle but very pervasive phenomenon in popular culture. While I believe it is possible to use an Aristotelian approach in a positive and complex way, the mainstream entertainment industry very often espouses ethics and values that are in line with the establishment through using an extremely simplistic version of the Aristotelian approach. Over and over we hear sitcoms, Hollywood blockbusters, and shallow commercialized theatre tell us repeatedly that love is the answer, family is important, it's not what's on the outside but what's on the inside that matters. All of this occurs using the basic methods of empathy that is central to the system Boal was criticizing. Action movies espouse the blunt, meaningless value that good wins over evil, but who is evil and who is good? Often in Hollywood a foreigner or outsider is evil. Whatever the characterization it's not important for this system to capture the truth. They say that they are just trying to entertain, but this mere entertainment reinforces the same old established propaganda by getting us to stop thinking and simply feel. One of the basic values of American action movies is that the strong, hard working, rugged individualist will stand alone and defeat the evil outside forces through no nonsense force. Through empathy and catharsis, audiences are continually put in the role of cheering for the hero, reinforcing the earlier stated virtues. This can be seen in countless summer blockbusters where explosions, guns and witty catch phrases mask real truthful exploration of issues. One could say that this is all harmless entertainment, but it is difficult to overlook the fact that politicians play into these characterizations and images to gain power. We elected a president who took on the role of a cowboy, and he was able to capture the

\(9\) Boal 1-50
imagination of enough people in this country to get elected twice by being a strong, hard working, rugged individualist who stood alone and tried to defeat the evil outside forces through no nonsense force.

Basically, Boal is saying that some playwrights argue for the establishment, perhaps without realizing it, and therefore we don't view them as political. They "parade" their characters around onstage dealing with benign issues, and in the end the commonly agreed upon social structures are reinforced. It is only when a playwright begins to be a trouble maker that they get labeled as political. Churchill seems to be very aware of this, and took great pains to make sure that her audience was not lulled into a non-thinking trance of empathy.

Perhaps the most famous political playwright and theorist, Bertold Brecht, called for an *agit prop* theatre. He believed in alienating the audience so that they would not be "hypnotized" or "lulled into a dream"10 but rather be very aware that they are at a play and must think about the issues at hand. This seemed to be somewhat in line with Churchill's work, however Brecht's approach to character and acting seems to differ significantly. Brecht wanted his actors to play their parts as if they were standing outside of the character commenting on the part. He spoke of "gests" that might represent a character or moment, rather than truthful behavior that can reveal the inner workings of the characters.

In *Fen* we can see the use of alienating affects such as episodic and surrealist conventions, however we can also see the inner workings of the characters. Though Brecht would disagree, this seems to me, to be the best of all worlds. Churchill is using the Aristotelian model of empathy in so far as it assists her in exploring the theme. Like Brecht, in Churchill's work we are reminded of the theatrical event and are therefore stimulated to think about what we are seeing, however at the same time we are truly understanding the issue at hand from a complex, layered and human way.

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It makes sense then that the famous feminist phrase which emerged around the 1970's "the political is the personal" would be a cornerstone of her work. Churchill wrote a brilliant play in *Fen* because it combines the macro with the micro. We see the minute subtextual details of the characters inner lives and their interpersonal relationships, but we also see the systemic, larger influences of government, history, economics and class at work. With this knowledge, I realized the task of preparing to direct this play was going to require a great deal of preparation in the way of additional research to understand the world of the play. Each moment of the play has so much behind it that I had to be comfortable with the ideas and the history behind them.

**Early 1980's England and Economics**

Before I deal with the specifics of the *Fen*, and the history of the people living there, I would like to lay out what I learned about the contemporary world in which the play was written. There was a huge shift in the world, and in the UK, that was happening in the 1970's and early 1980's. To understand the specifics of *Fen*, we must first understand the specifics of what was happening in the world, and in the United Kingdom, at that time.

The scene in which Mr. Tewson speaks with Miss Cade from the City about the prospect of losing his farm is the most overtly political scene in the play. It is also the most difficult scene to understand in terms of the economic terminology that is used. Knowing Churchill's work, and having lived with the play for some time up until this point in my research, I also knew these economic and political issues were important to understand in relation to the whole play and not just that scene.

*Fen* was developed and written just a few years into Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister in the UK. I had always been aware of the close ideological relationship of Thatcher and Ronald

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Reagan, but I never knew how close they were personally. She has been quoted as saying of Reagan, "He was the second most important man in my life."

The conservative belief that low taxes and relaxed government regulation stimulates business, was just beginning to have a major impact on England. The romantic notion of being an individualist who doesn't need anyone else, is a direct argument against the type of socialism Churchill believes in. In scene nine of *Fen* Mr. Tewson says, "When I say nation. You don't want to go to far in the public responsibility direction. You raise the spectre of nationalization." Up until that point in the scene he is arguing that he can't sell his farm to Miss Cade's organization because of his responsibility to his family, other land owners in the community and his country. So when he comes to this line he is retreating from his argument that he has responsibilities outside of himself, and he is literally making the decision to sell out to big business to save himself and his interests.

Tewson is not to blame however. Churchill is showing a world where the system is at fault and all the people within that system are acting exactly how they must act in order to survive. The UK saw tough economic times in the 1970's. There was high inflation and rising unemployment, as well as an oil crisis in the early part of the decade. The people shifted back and forth between electing Labour and Conservative governments. The Labour Party's Harold Wilson was the Prime Minister in the late 60's, followed by Conservative Edward Heath (whose rollover relief policy is referenced in scene nine by Miss Cade). Heath was succeeded by a second term by Wilson, who resigned and was replaced by Labour Party's James Callaghan, who then lost to Thatcher in 1979. Over the course of ten years of political and economic instability things seemed to be coming to a head with the people unsure of where to place their faith. In the "Winter of Discontent" in 1978 there were widespread strikes when the Labour government tried to control inflation by imposing government regulations. One such

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12 Harris, Paul *How the Gipper Stole into American Hearts*. June 6, 2004 The Observer guardian.co.uk

13 Churchill Scene 9 p. 26
regulation was that public sector pay raises be kept below 5%. This lead to massive public anger and wide spread strikes. Unable to do without their base of support from the workers, the Labour Party lost to the Thatcher government who began a revolution in supply side economics. As we see in *Fen*, things then became very good for big business and corporations; however, Churchill provides great detail in showing us how this good fortune does not in fact trickle down to anyone. It simply creates a privatized tyranny where people have no control over their lives because all is owned by the all consuming corporation, rather than a government run tyranny.

**History of the Fens**

I began my research of the history of the Fenlands by visiting the New York Public Library research branch in midtown Manhattan. The history of the Fens is a history of hardships both caused by nature and outside enemies. It is a history of a proud people overcoming a difficult yet rewarding environment. It is a history of a people who love their home deeply yet yearn for something more.

The reality of the Fenlands is that it is a wet, harsh environment that is prone to flooding, sewage problems, strong winds, violent storms and extreme isolation. To survive here one must work against the elements tirelessly. At the same time the precious resource of the Fenland is it's fertile land. The farmland of the Fen provides a third of the food to all of the United Kingdom, and this is because the wet environment creates a nutrient rich peat. It also, ironically, has some of the poorest people in England. Because of the combination of the valuable natural resource of the land, and the harsh conditions of the environment, the history of the Fen is a history of unrest and turmoil. It is the story of a struggle between the indigenous people of the area against outsiders seeking to take ownership of their land.

Most of the material that I came across was a history told through the eyes of the engineers and
noblemen. The story of this Fen was much different than what I found in Churchill's *Fen*. In his book, *The Draining of the Fens*, H.C. Darby includes a poem from 1685 by Samuel Fortrey, just after the first drainage of the Fenlands:

I sing no battles fought nor Armies Foiled  
Nor cities raz'd nor commonwealths embroiled  
Nor any history, which may move your tears  
or raise your spleens or multiply your fears  
But I bespeak your wonder, your delight  
And would your emulation fain invite.  
I sing floods muzled, and the Ocean tam'd  
Luxurious rivers govern'd and reclaim'd  
Waters with banks, confin'd as in a Gaol  
Till kinder sluices let them go on bail  
Streams curbed with dammes like bridles taught obey  
And run as straight as if they saw their way.\(^{14}\)

The indigenous people's response to the drainage would no doubt be very different. Samuel Fortrey, a London merchant, was looking at the massive engineering effort of draining and reclaiming the Fens as not a very big deal on the surface, but noble and heroic nonetheless. The people doing the drainage were noblemen from all over England and not the struggling fishermen and farmers of the Fens. Fortrey speaks of the sluices and dams that helped drain the Fen as giving freedom to the banks and confining the water. However, he doesn't mention the people who are the victims of this engineering marvel. Are they being freed like the land, or confined like the water? Almost immediately in my research I was reminded of Howard Zinn in *A People's History of the United States*: "The history of any country . . . conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered, masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex." Zinn goes on to speak of "the inevitable taking of sides which comes from selection and emphasis in history."\(^{15}\)

\(^{14}\) Darby, H.C. *The Draining of the Fens*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940) Preface  
In my initial research I found that the history of the Fenlands was the type of phenomenon of which Zinn was speaking. I was seeing a one sided history of the region from people like Fortrey. Despite that fact, one thing could be said for certain: the Fenlands of East Anglia were always a difficult place to live. The Roman's built sea walls to try and control flooding, but the Romans had a difficult time controlling the local inhabitants, the Celts.

The Celtic tribes were pushed aside by the Romans, and then as the Romans left, the Anglo Saxons replaced them. The Anglo Saxons were the people who developed medieval England and ultimately modern day England. When Anglo Saxons occupied England, some took up residence in the Fens. They were largely left alone to develop a way of life for some time throughout the dark ages. Their society evolved around fishing, and eating water foul. They walked on stilts, and developed ways of navigating the pervasive water. The wet and harsh environment of the Fen necessitates a struggle of man versus nature. This is flat, low lying land right at the edge of the sea is the cause of these difficulties. At the same time, this flooding and the resulting peat, also brings extremely fertile land. The high level of sea water doesn't allow the vegetation to fully decay and therefore creates a nutrient rich environment for agriculture.

With so many drainage and sewage problems, and so many possibilities for profitable, fertile land, reclamation was only a matter of time. The first significant attempt at draining the Fenland was with Sir Cornelius Vermuyden. He was a Dutch engineer who, in 1629, began work on draining 90,000 acres.

According to Trevor Allen Bevis in his book, Strangers in the Fens, the Fen people opposed the work of reclamation because they relied on the rivers and marshes for their livelihood. The opposition to Vermuyden was so strong that foreigners from Holland were brought over to do the work of building the dams. And so again and again we see one group of people struggling to survive in the

16 Bevis, Trevor, A. Strangers in the Fens. (Cambridgeshire: T.A. Bevis, 1983)
Fens, only to be pushed out by another group.

The People's History of the Fen

In William Camden's *Britannia*, 2nd edition from 1610, the inhabitants of the Fens were described as, "A kind of people according to the nature of the place where they dwell. Rude, uncivil and envious to all others whom they call Upland-Men, who stalking on high upon stilts, apply their minds to grazing, fishing and fowling."\(^{17}\)

W. Dugdale wrote in 1662, "Until of late years, a vast and deep fen, affording little benefit to the realm, other than fish or fowl, with overmuch harbour to a rude and almost barbarous sort of lazy and beggarly people."\(^{18}\)

The characterization of the Fen people was beginning to sound very similar to other chapters of history in other areas of the world where indigenous people have their resources taken from them. As I began to widen my search, I found material that told these people's story from their own points of view. In *Legends of the Fenland People*\(^{19}\) I found a number of fascinating stories that explained, through myth, folklore and legend, how the Fenland is a place of hardship and turmoil. Like most legends these were based largely on superstition, but partly on truth.

One of the myths was fascinating because it sought to explain why the Fens became flooded. The flooding myth draws some similarities to the flooding myth of the *Bible*. When the Romans occupied present day England, East Anglia (according to legend) was dry and temperate. In order to control the inhabitants, the Romans sent a tyrant, Valerian, to keep order. He kidnapped the daughter of the head of the Celtic tribe, Rowena, and made her a slave. Because Rowena's father had special favor with the

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17 Darby 23
18 Darby 23
19 Marlowe, Christopher *Legends of the Fenland People*. (London: C. Palmer, 1926)
gods of the Fenland he called for a great flood. The gods of the Fen unleashed a great flood to punish the Romans and subsequently drove them out.

Like all myths some of this may be based on fact. There actually was conflict between the Celtic tribes and the Romans, and there was a massive earthquake in the 4th century which lead to massive flooding.

A few through-lines emerged from reading the various myths in *Legends of the Fenland People*. The idea of a champion is common to nearly all the Fenland tales, and these heros were often leaders of riots and demagogues. There is a strong respect for sturdy independence and a hatred of foreigners. There is also a theme running through these stories that the people who know how to use the land and adapt, are the ones who end up being the true victors.

Edward Storey paints a very evocative picture of the modern day Fens in, *The Spirit of the Fens*. It was written in 1985, which proved to be a perfect find in that *Fen* was written in 1982. Storey's account provided a glimpse into the viewpoints of a Fen person from this time. According to Storey there is a deep love of their home and a sense of pride in where they come from. There is a beauty to the land and a rich sense of history. Ghosts are believed to be as real as the ground beneath one's feet. The isolation and hardship of the Fen gives cause for mistrust of the outsider, and the need for strong family and community ties. Generations of working the land, and the need for people to come together under sometimes grueling conditions creates an atmosphere where happiness is not necessarily the main goal. Everything is about work. One must live to work and work to live. One works for their family, for the farm, for the community, for his or her survival etc . . . One does not live for happiness, fulfillment, growth or enlightenment. "If you'd done a good days work there was nothing to grumble about," Storey said.

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From Storey's account of his home I also began to get a sense of the atmosphere that would need to be created in terms of my approach to the design. He talked about the sky being massive and the ground expansive, vast and flat. The wind was a constant in the Fen. The picture of a place that was unrelenting was emerging. "No landscape is more exposed to fierce winds, long winters, dry summers, draught, damp, flooding- a mixture of extremes."

As I read more about the modern world in the Fen, another picture began to become clear. The picture of a place that remained unchanged until very recently; a place that is beginning to change but does not want to. One quote that stuck out to me was when Storey said, "It all began with the roads."

Before the roads came to the Fen in the early twentieth century, you had to deal with isolation. You had to rely on community, and storytelling to pass the time. "In the old days there was a brotherly spirit among Fenmen . . . Now you can hardly cross the road without running the risk of being knocked down."

All of this talk of change, and the old way being better than the new way, jumped out at me as being completely present in Churchill's play. The various generations, Tewson needing to sell to the big city company, the ghost, the children, Val waking up and realizing she wanted more out of life, these were all turning around the same central point, that this was a changing place that did not like change.

The reason for this change seems to be because of a few different factors. The roads were only the beginning of a world that was opening up globally in the early 80's. Thatcherism, and the conservative revolution which soon after brought Reagan to power in the U.S., was strengthening global corporations and weakening local small business. Television and the media were exponentially growing by the early 80's, and it was only a matter of time before the modern world would penetrate even the most remote of places, such as the Fen.

Over the past thirty years, corporate globalization has proven to be a new form of colonization.
Churchill was clearly commenting on this with the introduction to the Fen by a Japanese businessman. The eye opening thing that I discovered is that the growth of corporations taking away from people's interests is not a new phenomenon. It is simply a new form of an ancient struggle for power.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of both this play and this region is that the people share a tradition of oral storytelling. This tradition is a direct link to this community's past in that storytelling was a way for people to entertain each other and pass along information before the age of television and the radio. Each major character in the play, most notably Nell, has an extended piece of text where they are telling a story.

In W.H. Barrett's *More Tales from the Fens*\(^2\), he elucidates this oral tradition by putting an anthology of oral histories and short stories together. The stories were about a people who deal with poverty and hardship in many ways, especially by having an intense belief in the supernatural. Ghosts seemed to be as real to the people of the Fen as anything else. "The best time to see a ghost", one man said, "is at the chiming hour." That would be four, eight or twelve o'clock.

Women received a large brunt of the hardship. Before the days of birth control women would go to funerals and hold the hand of the dead men to keep themselves from having a baby for a few years. More children meant more mouths to feed, more work to raise them, and more money and hardship in general. Women would also bring their children to see dead bodies and make them kiss the corpse for good luck. The idea was that the child would become so terrified they wouldn't eat so much for a while and save them money.

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Churchill's Source Material

One of the most helpful resources in researching this project was discovering that Caryl Churchill used a book as source material prior to traveling to the Fens herself. The book was called *Fenwomen* by Mary Chamberlain. It is comprised of a number of interviews of actual Fen women about a number of different subjects. There is a chapter where women discuss girlhood, another where they discuss school, marriage, work, religion, politics and so on. There was some actual text and stories taken from the book in the play. The "Girl's Song" in *Fen* was literally taken from a number of the young women's quotes in the book. The section they were taken from was "Work." It is in this section where the underlying beliefs that perpetuate a system of oppression are seen. Housework, hairdressing, teaching, getting married; these were the only possibilities for a woman according to popular belief in the 1980's. Young girls were told this early on and they buy into it so fully that more often than not they never thought to look for other possibilities.

Nell's long story about her grandfather being an accessory to murder was loosely based on an account in the book. A woman spoke of a "morphrodite" who kept to herself and caused problems. There is an old woman named Ivy who is interviewed, clearly where Churchill got the name for one of her characters.

A particularly apt section of the book is entitled "Outsiders." In it one woman discusses her viewpoint as an outsider. "What I find a bit distressing is that so little is created here. They don't seem to have a creative instinct." Another woman discussed feeling like an outsider when she left her husband, much like Val.

"I feel I present a threat to most of the women in the village and I feel they resent me. For a start, my marriage broke up, which is unheard of here. And then I've achieved an identity for myself which

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they don't have. I quite realize that to be a State Registered nurse isn't the greatest goal anyone can achieve, but to me it was. And I feel that they resent me because I have been so determined and they, because of their upbringing and because of the life they lead, haven't got this determination. They are very apathetic and uniformly dull."

For me this quote summed up much of the feeling that Val and Nell have in this play, but are unable to articulate. Ambition and the power to imagine a better life for yourself are not only foreign to many of these people but they are suspect.

As I viewed the Fen from various vantage points it became clear how important it was to not over simplify the play. This is not a story about a community of victims. It is also not a story about small minded people ignorantly holding onto the past. Both of these statements were true but so much more was presenting itself to me.

**Poverty**

There came a time in my research that I felt the need to take a step back from East Anglia and focus on some of the larger, more all-encompassing elements of the play. One of the areas that I was interested in exploring was the universal phenomenon of poverty. I was curious what similarities I might find in other parts of the world that had to deal with the same economic conditions.

I was immediately struck by one of the first things I read in the book *Poverty and Psychology*. It was about "Social Identity Theory", which proposes that members of groups have a fundamental need to engage in downward comparisons in order to maintain their self esteem.\(^\text{25}\) This seemed to be a scientific theory which spoke to the central event of the play. This group of women decide that Val has

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a weakness and so everyone jumps onboard to step on her. Val is upsetting the balance of how things are supposed to function. You don't leave work, you don't leave your family, and you don't turn your back on your responsibilities. These all present a great threat to their way of life because so much of survival is throwing yourself into your work. By having someone to look down on and scapegoat, these women who feel totally disempowered in their lives, can feel superior to someone.

As I looked from one scene to the next, I looked at which parts would be played by the same actor. This revealed more of the cycle of downward comparison in the play, because as one actor becomes various people we can see very clearly what behavior and values are passed along. For example, in scene six we see Angela torture Becky. In the very next scene we see Becky lead the charge of young girls against the outcast Nell. By the end of that scene Nell punishes the children. And the scene following that, the young girls act out against their grandmother and Val. With this in mind the power battle that happens throughout the play came into view, and then some ideas for how one scene may lead into the next began to form.

The picture that starts to form as the play unfolds is one in which no one is aware of the "whole" that they are a part of. Everyone is trying to put their foot on someone else, and this makes it impossible for anyone to have control over their lives. This is one of the most fundamental needs that humans have, but the system that they are a part of makes this impossible. "When rice farmers in Haiti work as hard as they can, abide by all the rules, and still cannot compete with American producers, there is a profound sense of powerlessness and lack of control." This is basically the same thing that is happening in the Fen. One study of a wide range of impoverished people found that the desires expressed fell into three basic categories: freedom of choice and action, health and physical well being,

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27 Chruchill Scene 7. Pages 19-22
28 Carr and Sloan 30
and a capacity for action.

In reading Poverty and Psychology I found that much of what I had been learning in my exploration of the Fen was reinforced. The process of dehumanization seemed to be consistent with both my research and the play. Nell is described as a "morphrodite," even though she is not a hermaphrodite. The extreme conditions that these woman work under strips away femininity, and it also strips away humanity. Many of the workers of the Fen that I came across in my research were described as animal like. They were dirty because of the dirt, wind and dampness all around them. They were weather beaten from working outside in horrendous conditions, and therefore the clean people, such as Mr. Tewson, see them as less than human. Once people are viewed as animals it doesn't take long before they view themselves as animals, and then the cycle continues.

One of the basic needs for a group of people is to create caring, sustainable communities and to control their own resources, economies and means of livelihood. Historically this simply has never been the case in the Fenlands. From the Romans to the Noblemen of the Middle Ages, to the emergence of big business and corporations this land has been co-opted by outsiders at the expense of the people living off of the land.
Concept

There are so many characters, locations, story lines, and references to a history and a culture foreign to Americans, that without a sense of what is really driving this story a production that didn't find a cohesive spine would be chaos. Before I found the spine I needed to figure out what the overall theme of the play was. The theme that I feel is present throughout the entire play is that true happiness and fulfillment are not possible when one accepts a system that is fundamentally unjust.

I had some difficulty defining this for myself in the early stages so I started by looking back and forth at the big picture and the small moments. I asked myself "what happens over the course of the play?" and "what is each person trying to do over the course of the play?" Looking at the play in this way, and having done the previously discussed research, made it possible to find a toe hold into this mountain. By starting with these elements it became clear to me that the only thing that I could say about everyone in this play is that they were all trying to be happy.

Val wants to leave, but she doesn't because she can't live without Frank. She also wants a life with her children so she leaves Frank. Soon she discovers she can't have one without the other, and she can't be happy without either of them.

Angela seems to want a family. She wants Becky to call her "mum", she says "if I had kiddies I wouldn't leave them" and then in the end she asks Frank to run away with her. All of this seems to revolve around her wanting a happiness of family that she can't have, and then her abusive behavior comes from both despair and the desire to be a good mother by making Becky tough enough to survive here.

Shirley buries herself in her work because "[you] can't think when your working in the field". This

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30 Churchill scene 11 page
thinking leads to realizing you're in a miserable situation. She wants to lose herself in her work.

Frank needs Val, and he needs her to be the Val from the early days of their affair, not the shell of a woman she ends up being. His happiness depends on her happiness.

Nell is trying to rally everyone to take a stand. I believe that Nell is the character who loves the Fen. She loves the land, and the stories and her heritage, but she sees the things that make it rotten. So Nell needs to make her home a better place. She wants the kids to be better, the adults to be kinder, the bosses to be more fair, the working conditions to be better etc . . .

May is trying to save her family. She gave up the chance to be a singer, possibly for her own family responsibilities. To May family is the most important thing and one can't be happy unless one's family is taken care of.

So each character has such a different need from the other, and they don't all connect to the progression of the main Val, Frank story line; however each one of these needs, and the needs of impoverished people the world over comes back to a few core human desires: the need for empowerment in a world where they have no power, the need to resist the dehumanization that happens in poverty, the need to have people beneath you, the need for a supportive community or family . . . etc. These are all interesting and true but none of them connected to one simple spine or theme that would give the play cohesion. Once I had considered all of these elements I tried to find the basic common denominator of all of them. And it was then that I thought maybe everyone is simply trying to be happy.

That seemed very general and inactive though. Really you could say that every character in every play is sort of trying to find happiness. That's the core journey of human beings in a way. So saying everyone's need is happiness seemed like a weak choice. After reading the play again and doing some more thinking I decided that it was a place to start.
If people were looking for happiness then they must not be happy. If they aren't happy, then why aren't they? Each person is not happy for different reasons, but the source of everyone's unhappiness comes from a similar source. Everyone in the play is beneath someone's foot. No one has the freedom or power to really do what they want. The land itself, from the time of the Roman occupation through to today, was controlled by outside forces who took advantage of the indigenous people. The system of injustice can be seen around the world throughout history. Native Americans, oil in the Middle East, colonization, the stripping away of resources in Africa etc . . .

So if each person is essentially unhappy because they live in injustice then that feels closer to the scope that Churchill was trying to deal with. And what was this unhappiness? Unhappiness sounded general and weak. I didn't want to settle on language that would make this intellectual or heady or emotionally tepid. I continually struggle to connect my work to a primal and visceral place. What is the type of unhappiness that fills the air of a place and infects everyone in the community with thoughts of escape, suicide, torture and murder? Everyone is clearly dealing with a soul aching misery that they don't know how to escape. This started to feel more interesting and active, and in line with the social, and human issues Churchill characteristically deals with.

So now it was becoming a play about a people under the weight of oppression who were both being victimized by outside forces, and being their own oppressors by buying in to the indoctrination passed down through the ages. “Stay with your family no matter what", "don't trust outsiders", "stay in the village for the rest of your life", "women should be school teachers, nurses or housewives." So it didn't seem that Churchill was writing a play about people trying to escape anything. Many were content to stay here and told Val she should accept things. So then I started to think of everyone as trying to break free from their misery rather than simply escaping.

Everyone trying to break free from misery started to feel like a spine that I could work with, and
that felt right for both the human and the socio-political issues that the play was dealing with.

I still felt like I needed to boil down and define a theme that held the play together even more. What was the basic issue that Churchill was dealing with and what was she trying to say?

I started to think about the broad idea of injustice. Injustice, by its definition is going to dehumanize people, and keep them from achieving true happiness. When the system has been passed down from generation to generation the role of oppressor and the oppressed becomes clouded. Certainly you could say that the corporations and businesses that own the land are one cause, but they are absentee landlords. The play is not about them. The play never reminds us that they are the ultimate antagonist except maybe in the Miss Cade scene. And so the play doesn't seem to be saying it's ultimately the rich businessman's fault. It also doesn't seem to be saying it's the people's fault for not unionizing. What is clear in the play is that we are hearing people say over and over again that the best thing to do is simply accept your lot. The power struggle between the various generations of people, between co-workers, and between the various classes of people is the struggle to get someone to accept things. This acceptance of unjust practices is what both Val and Nell are unable to give over to. Everyone else is trying to break free from misery, but they are essentially accepting injustice. Nell is not, and Val is not. Nell breaks free from the literal land by the end of the play, and Val breaks free in the only way she can, by begging to die. And so defining the theme as the acceptance of injustice never leading to happiness seemed to be a solid distillation of all the work I had done.

Once I had a sense of the theme, the spine and the overall needs of the characters, I could get a sense for how this would attach to the world of the play, and how that would present itself through the events. The movement of the play goes toward a "breaking free." This was active and could be revealed in the scene changes, through the design, and through the work with the actors. Part of what everyone is breaking free from is the land. The Fen itself is a character in this play. In the first scene it is sold to us
as something beautiful, but then in the next scene we see the affects of the land on the workers. The sky is enormous and the land is vast, flat and all consuming. There is no escape from this place. This is a place of myth; a dreamlike place where reality roles on forever, generation after generation; a cloudy murky place where memory and the present moment blur because nothing every really changes.

But in the second scene Val has the idea that she can leave. This is the spark that ignites the desire to break free. The only thing she needs to do is gather her children and Frank and leave. When she realizes this is impossible it becomes clear that something is going to have to be sacrificed. She chooses Frank over her children and we see a moment of hope that maybe she has escaped. But then the entire community surrounding Val comes into view. Becky being tortured by her stepmother Angela, Nell being tormented by Deb, Shona and Becky, and the girls singing a song about what they want to do when they grow up; all of this expands the scope of the shackles that are ultimately going to keep Val from being able to break free. These scenes uncover a much larger problem than Val simply wanting to have an affair; they reveal a community that is stuck in old destructive ways of operating.

As we are drawn into Val's struggle and the struggle of the workers we are then transported to the scene between Mr. Tewson and Miss Cade. Mr. Tewson wants to hold onto his farm, and the ways of the past, while Miss Cade needs him to realize that times have changed and he needs to sell his farm. This is the moment in the play where we really start to see a ladder. Until now Mr. Tewson was the oppressor but now we see him underneath the foot of big business, represented by Miss Cade. Mr. Tewson decides to sell out to Miss Cade even though it means being ensnared in big business, and then we see the ghost of a worker rebuke Mr. Tewson for allowing things to "go on as they always have."

The scope of what is imprisoning Val encompasses the land, weather, big business, social ties, the supernatural and family. She is still miserable and can't figure out how to escape. She decides to accept her fate and go back to her children, and go back to work. It is then that we see Val and the
others working in a "Fen blow", a horrible storm where the impossibility of comfort or happiness is clear. By the end of the scene everyone except for Shirley and Val decide to upset the balance and leave work, unheard of in this world.

Val then works harder to accept her fate and turns to religion. She is told that she must accept that she is "rubbish." By the end of this scene Val decides that she can not accept this life and goes back to Frank. Once and for all she thinks she has broken free from the old ways and can now find peace.

Then again we are reminded of the vast scope of Val's oppression in her grandmother Ivy's recounting a life of trying to stir up trouble and make change. The fog of the Fen is again made clear. Ivy's need to break free from her own fog of memory, and her need to rouse her fellow neighbors to go on strike is counteracted by her feeble old age and inability to grasp onto the memories of her life. As the audience begins to feel that there is no hope Val also has the same realization. The only way to break free is to die.

The questions of whether Val will be able to break free from her misery has come to a head. The people, the land, history, the weather, everything in her world is closing in on her and she must find a way out. She implores Frank to do it for her. When he realizes that it is the only way that she could be comforted he agrees. When he kills her the entire world changes. We see a true breaking free from the accepted reality. Val's ghost enters and she has a view of the Fen that she has never had before. She is seeing it from the outside as if it were happening all at once. Each character then finds their own moment of breaking free from the thing that has imprisoned them. Angela allows herself to feel her pain, Shirley stops working and admits she doesn't want to forget what it's like to be unhappy, Nell literally decides to "walk out on the Fen". Becky refuses to play into Angela's sick games and wakes up. Finally May, in the final moment of the play, decides to face the thing that has tortured her all of

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her life: the fact that she wanted deeply to be a singer but couldn't. Instead of allowing her pain to control her, she breaks free from this by coming onstage and singing an aria.

This is the concept that I went into my design process with. Not wanting to dictate specifics to my designers or get locked into minutia too early I relied on this sense of the overall movement from event to event and the world of the play. As I recount how I worked on the various design elements it will hopefully become clear as to how this metaphor of "breaking free from misery" as caused by the acceptance of injustice was made clear.
Set Design

When set designer Gennie Neuman and I first began to discuss *Fen*, we both had many more questions than answers. I couldn't get a sense of exactly what the style of the piece was yet. I knew there had to be a theatricality to the piece, but I couldn't see how that would be manifested. I had a lot of research under my belt and was able to discuss the thematic, character and story elements, but I didn't yet have a sense of how the play would all come together. When Gennie and I first spoke I found that she too didn't have an immediate vision for how this play would look and function. Looking back I think this allowed us to fully explore the text and the world of the play, however while we were struggling in those early weeks I became worried that maybe I chose a play that I just didn't "get."

In our early conversations we asked a lot of questions. How realistic should these scenes be? The characters were based on real people, this is a real place and they seem to be behaving realistically in the play for the most part, so how many real elements should we have surrounding them? What will the actors need in terms of the behavior for each scene? Do we need dirt on stage or would that just be copying the original production? Do we need an actual tractor? How can we make these scene changes as fast and efficient as possible while also continuing the storytelling and making them interesting? What tone should we strike? How can we capture the grueling, isolating, dwarfing nature of the landscape while still suggesting hope, beauty, and maybe even levity? How will the underlying themes of corporate globalization, suggested by the Japanese Businessman in the first scene, play out without being heavy handed or intellectual?

As the conversations developed we had many ideas and abandoned most of them. We thought maybe a round stage that rotated might be an interesting way to go from scene to scene while also providing us with the metaphor that the characters think that the ground beneath their feet is a rock
solid constant, but in fact it moves and changes and as it does so, the lives of these people go with it. The more we thought about this gesture the more problems arose. The technical requirements needed to build a rotating platform were probably beyond our budget. As the scenes change would we see the scene change happening on the other part of the platform? A slow moving platform would slow the production down since we have about 20 scene changes. The metaphor had holes in it too. It's not the land or the ground that is the variable, it's the powers who come in and co-opt the land. It's about the psychology of the community of people who develop certain traditions and customs because of this very old place that is set in it's ways.

It didn't take us long to move on from that idea, but then the problem became how to have the stage accommodate so many different locations. Some scenes were inside and some were outside; some scenes demanded a lot of physical activity and some were more static. At one point Gennie suggested maybe having a deconstructed farmhouse or barn on one part of the stage, but after considering this I realized I didn't want any man made architecture. It felt to me like it took away from the character of the Fen. That made the question of what to do with the indoor scenes difficult. The only thing I knew, was that when I thought of the essential elements for suggesting the Fen, I kept coming back to the sky and the earth.

It started to become clear that having actual dirt was necessary for the behavior of the actors and the world of the play. So we began to discuss what this would be like. Indoor scenes could simply happen on the dirt with pieces to flag where we are. Since actors are transforming from one character to another so quickly, and the play is moving from one location to another so quickly I decided that we should embrace that. Why fight against what this play is, and what theatre can do? Why try to hide the costume changes and scene changes? Why not come right out and say this is a world where one thing morphs and changes into another, like a dream.
Once we started thinking this way it freed us up to think about things less literally. The tractor didn't need to be an actual tractor, it could be an amalgamation of different pieces that suggest a tractor. Each of those pieces could be assembled or taken apart and used as all the various furniture set pieces that we needed. The pieces of the tractor could be a table if used as a table, a crate if used as a crate, a kitchen stove if used that way. This was the most interesting idea for how this show would function that we had had yet.

It was at about this point in the process that we started to have meetings with the whole design team. Gennie drew up some sketches that incorporated moveable pieces, a stage of dirt and a backdrop of sky. Even though we were slowly moving forward, the decisions that we made just presented more questions. How would people get on and off stage through "the sky"? How real or abstract are the pieces that make up the tractor? If you have a realistic chair can you then have a crate be used as a table or countertop without suggesting that the characters have a crate as a table? Where are we going to put all this stuff? Will this cumbersome furniture prevent the scene changes from being graceful and efficient?

One area that I thought we were lacking in, at this point, was creating a magical, dreamlike, foggy quality to the Fen. This is a place of ghosts, and haze; a place of memory, tradition and a long succession of one generation after another working the land. The set pieces being used to transform the space was in keeping with this idea, but the way we were going to move the play needed to be considered. I went through the play and plotted through every scene change and tried to find ways to efficiently and gracefully handle these scene changes, while continuing to take the audience by surprise.

I started to become interested in the idea of things appearing through the sky. If the sky could become a scrim and we could see behind it, and also create shadows behind it that would be interesting.
I also thought it would be helpful to have the "sky fabric" layered so that people could enter through the sky. Things could also be pulled up through the dirt and be revealed this way. I would also have liked to find a way to have things fall from the grid to utilize height, but this never ended up happening.

Basically the decision that we started to make as we moved from sketches to models was that the set would contain three basic gestures, and with these three gestures we would be able to continually transform the space, surprise the audience and keep the story moving forward. The gesture of earth was maybe the most important. I wanted this to be the first thing people noticed when entering the space. This meant that whatever we used for the tractor would have to be either covered or brought on after the first scene. When covering it became impossible I decided to make a moment of the tractor coming together after the second scene. I felt very strongly that establishing a long flat landscape immediately was very important.

The only negotiation that I made with having the stage consist of anything but earth was that we decided to put a raised platform around the circumference of the stage. This was necessary to contain the dirt and create clear fire lanes for the audience. But it also did two things for me in terms of the concept and use of the space. First it provided a level that the Japanese Businessman and Mr. Tewson could be on that was different than the workers. This platform would literally be confining the characters. It could also be used as a road or walkway, which could give us the opportunity to have people walking and talking throughout the scene.

The second gesture, other than the earth, was the sky. Gennie used a few layers of fabric and translucent screening to be an abstract, windblown type of dreamlike sky. Because of the different layers of fabric and screening we were able to do some interesting things with the lights. There were also two entrances stage left and right which allowed people to appear through the sky. The idea was that the entrances would not simply be holes in the fabric that people would walk through, but that the
fabric would be layered to create an affect that masked the entrance points. I think the result was very striking looking, but looking back on this part of the stage I think it ended up looking too much like a window and not enough like the sky. I will discuss this more later.

The third gesture was the tractor and all of the elements that would be deconstructed from it. So the elements making up the tractor, which were also all the furniture and pieces used in additional scenes, proved to be a fast and efficient way to create the various locations, both external and internal. The entire play takes place in the dirt, but it is these pieces that are used to create a room in a house, the bar, the church group etc. This seemed appropriate because this is a world where reality is skewed and things morph into one another. Folklore, gossip, storytelling and memory all merge together in the play so why not have the physical space reflect that. There is a dreamlike fog where ghosts, memories, past and present are all existing together.

So to go back to an earlier concern, we didn't end up having a problem designing a countertop that could also be a bar while also having real chairs that are only chairs. We found that if the objects contained suggestions of the things they would transform into then it would be clear. For instance we had a table that had legs wrapped in wire, so when it was turned upside down it became a crate.

Once these basic elements were settled on, the only thing that remained was to make sure that I was very clear with how each scene would be set. Gennie and I worked together to establish a layout for each scene that would provide us with what we absolutely needed. Simplicity was our main goal in each layout. We found that the less we moved things around from scene to scene the more we were able to have one thing change into another. For example the kitchen countertop unit could be used by Frank as a tractor in one scene, and then not move very much for the next scene when Angela uses it an actual kitchen counter.

The two scenes that brought us a lot of difficulty were the scene in which Val goes into Shirley's
house; and the last scene where Val has to be killed, stuffed in a trunk and then appear from a different part of the stage. In the the Shirley scene we talked about how simple we could be with the set up, but we kept coming up with many more props and pieces than any other scene because of all of Shirley's housework. This is central to the scene and neither Gennie or I felt that we could overlook the need to have Shirley diligently working on various tasks, especially since it is called for in the text. I came up with an idea that the scene change would happen as the scene started, so there would be an overlap of scenes. I wanted to try and figure out a choreography with the actors where Shirley could be doing her work as the world forms around her. I wanted her to grab a spoon as someone puts it in place just as she reaches for it, and then she goes to sit just as a seat is put in place. I choreographed it on paper and in my head as best I could at that stage, but would have to wait for rehearsals with the actors to truly find what that moment would be.

After that scene was the storm scene, so this presented a problem because we would have to figure out a way to go from inside Shirley's house with various props and pieces to outside with nothing on stage. We knew that we couldn't stop the play at that point to do a lengthy scene change so I though it might be interesting to have scenes overlap again. This is the first scene in the play where we see an upset in the balance of power. Everyone basically walks out on their work which is unheard of here among these people. To create this upset in the balance of power, and the sense of chaos that a storm brings, Shirley would knock down everything inside her house and make a mess going directly into the storm scene. This allowed us to have all of the set pieces we needed for the Shirley scene, without taking forever doing the scene change into it or out of it. Again, I would have to wait to work with the actors to find exactly how we would create the sense that Shirley was walking through a storm and knocking things down as she struggled through the violent weather.

Luckily, after the storm scene, when we still have all of the objects lying around the stage as a big
mess, we had the church scene where the women enter singing a religious song. This worked perfectly for them to be coming together, singing, and cleaning up the mess after the storm.

The scene of Val’s death was the most challenging to plan. It was basically a magic trick that we needed to build, and I had never done that before. The scene doesn’t specifically call for a bed, but it always felt like it was a bedroom scene to me. This meant the kitchen countertop and table had to be able to also function as a bed. It also meant that we would need a mattress to be brought on to put on top. The script calls for an armoire to put Val’s body in after she was killed, and then she needed to appear from a different part of the stage.

I got the idea in my head, when we decided to start pulling furniture up through the dirt, that it would be amazing to have an actual person come up through the dirt. Val’s rebirth seemed like it would be the right moment to do that, but how do we get Val off stage and into the pit to emerge from the earth? It would have been easier in a proscenium but this was a three quarter thrust. We couldn’t hide something from every vantage point in the audience. We thought maybe if we built a big armoire and put it upstage just for this scene she could just slip out the back, but that would have broken the contract with the audience. We didn’t have anything else like an armoire suddenly appearing anywhere else in the show. Also, if it were big and cumbersome, how could we get it on smoothly? We settled for a trunk large enough to fit someone, but then the person would just be stuck in there and couldn’t get out.

After months of talking this problem through we decided that the best option was to have a body double, place the bed as far upstage as possible, and work on ways to mask the movement of the body double and the actor, Val, coming on and off. Ultimately it took a huge leap of faith and some trial and error in tech, but it ended up working.

Even though I was very happy with what we were able to do with the set, there were a few areas that
I would have liked to have adjusted in retrospect. I did wish that the sky could have been more specifically sky-like. I always associated what we came up with as giant curtains blowing in the wind of an open window. I never felt completely comfortable with the look of it, but I couldn't figure out why, and I liked so much of what the set looked like that those concerns unfortunately got lost in the process of figuring everything else out. I liked the windblown look, and the surreal quality it created, but I think it maybe looked a little too beautiful and man made. I wish we could have found a way to make it look more from nature.

I also would have liked to have three streams of dirt fall from the sky in the last scene change. We experimented with this idea but it just didn't work. Val is literally being trapped by the world around her, so I thought it would be interesting to have the furniture blocking her as it was being brought in for the final scene change; and then the earth falling from the sky coming down on her would also be confining so there is literally no escape except for death. This would have been a very theatrical and interesting way to set up the end of the play which gets very abstract. It would have also been a wonderful way to misdirect the audiences attention from the body double being put in place. But unfortunately we could not work out the technology. I think if I had the idea sooner and we experimented more we could have made it work.

In the end I was happy with what the set design did for the production. I think Gennie created a strong atmosphere for the world of the play, and I also think that we established a good functionality of the set that worked very well for the production.
Lighting Design

In my visual research I started off looking at landscape painters. I found it interesting that the landscapes of France and America were warm with yellows and reds. The landscapes of England were generally cooler. A climate of fog, mist, overcast and rain is more than just weather, it creates an atmosphere that permeates the people and the culture. The colors are muted shades of green, gray, blue and brown; the intensity of light is muted and creates sometimes ominous shadows. When there is a sunny, nice day it is a noticeable contrast to the normal foggy overcast days.

I started to look for painters whose colors were muted and earthy. I wanted to find painters who created the type of lighting effects in their work that I envisioned to be the world of this play. I have always loved Caravaggio's paintings but an Italian Renaissance painter was an unlikely connection to make to a play set in 1980's England. Nonetheless I was drawn to his work because of the intense contrast between light and dark in his work. Caravaggio created absolutely detailed naturalism, while also using shadow and low level light to create a lifted quality to his work. There is something not only natural in his work, but also something supernatural. This felt right for Fen.

I spoke to Jim Sargent, our lighting designer, initially about how I wanted to capture both the abstracted style and the naturalistic elements of the play, and I suggested we start off sharing our research. I brought my research to Jim, and he provided me with a number of wonderful images that focused on the dream-like quality of the world. He had some very evocative and surreal images that incorporated elements of nature, such as the dark and foggy atmosphere of Fenland England. We seemed to be on the same page from early on in the process.

I wanted to get the atmosphere of the lighting just right because the people who inhabit the Fen are so specifically and deeply influenced by the environment. The way they interact and pass the time is a
direct result of generations of people at the mercy of a harsh environment: telling stories inside while
drinking beer or hot tea, hard weather beaten people dealing roughly with each other, people needing to
throw themselves into their work in order to survive. It is this emotional connection to the environment
that would make this production work, and the lighting could not only help the audience enter into that
world, but it would also help the actors behave truthfully within it. This is a play about people who are
not in touch with what they feel or why they feel it. The emotional lives of this community are dark
gray and covered in partial shadow.

The other major use of the lighting, which we discussed very early in the process, was to create a
sense of location and time of day to help flag all of the various locations. For the indoor scenes we
decided to have dull lights, as if the light bulbs were not very bright in these people's homes. We
would also use lower angled lights when indoors, as if most of the light were coming in through
windows from the outside. We found that this gave us a shadowed and interesting look when indoors.
We thought briefly of having some actual practicals when indoors, but with so many scene changes
simplicity was our mantra.

For the outside scenes we had a huge range of lighting demands from the text. We had scenes that
had to be at night and at all different times of the day. We also had a scene where the main conflict was
a horrible storm known as a "Fen Blow." We dealt with these demands by figuring out how they
contributed to the journey of the story as a whole. For instance, the scene in which we see Nell
working outside in her garden is a scene where we are introduced to the idea that there is a horrible
cycle of oppression and violence that refuses to be broken. Deb, Shona and Becky, the young girls,
come to Nell's garden and harass her because she is the one adult who they feel superior to because she
is the town outcast. But we thought this would be a great opportunity to play with expectations and
have Nell working outside on a warm, nice day. To go from the scene before in which we see Angela
torturing Becky, to seeing Nell gardening in nice sunny weather with the local children coming around
to see her work is an interesting juxtaposition that makes us think we are moving on to a totally
unrelated scene. By the end of the scene it devolves into violence, making this cycle of domination all
the more striking.

The third big remaining piece to begin discussing was that of the transitions, and how the lights
would be used for them. I knew that I didn't want to simply bring the lights to half, or go to a general
blue wash or any other conventional scene change light. I wanted the scene changes to be just as much
a part of the story telling as anything else, and the lights would be able to help us achieve that.

One of the ideas I had initially was to attach the scene changes to some lighting statement that
would become established with the Japanese Businessman in the first scene. It would be as if the
Japanese Businessman, and the corporation he represented, were constantly affecting the community
even though they were not physically present. We spoke about how we might specifically deal with the
Japanese Businessman and the resulting scene changes that would use the same basic lighting
vocabulary. I considered having a very corporate business type lighting that would be established with
the Japanese Businessman and then we would bring that back as a reminder of the effects of the
corporation throughout the play. I also thought that maybe there could be a logo that could be
associated with the corporation. Another option was to have the organic, earthy looks give way to the
more sleek, stylish, corporate looks throughout the play. We might go from more earthy, cooler colors
to brighter, more unnatural colors. None of this felt like it was in line with what the play was doing.
Through our discussions this idea fell away, and something more simple presented itself. We would
light the Japanese Businessman very simply, and as he introduces the Fen we will see it and the
workers from his point of view: something beautiful and idyllic, but a fantasy that is not true to reality.
We would then snap into the actual reality of the women working in the field as he leaves. This tool of
trying to see the Fenlands through different perspectives felt like it was in line with Churchill's vision, and it would help guide us toward the very difficult last scene, where Val is seeing her homeland as she never has before.

Going into tech we had done a great deal of work and were confident that we had the necessary elements to tell the story. Throughout tech we didn't have all the answers but we were able to play and discover many interesting solutions because we were so prepared. The scene changes became a series of surreal moments where the mythical, emotional and overall thematic elements of the play became exposed. The ghosts of the Fen would move us from one place to the next. This was partly accomplished through dropping the front light and using the sky as a cyc. We found that this was an interesting look that gave us wonderful shadows and silhouettes and we could find a lot of variety within that to make each one specific to it's place in the story. Some scene changes were immediate shifts from one scene to the next, but others required more time.

In the final weeks approaching tech, I ended up establishing a shorthand that became helpful in working with Jim on the lights. The scene change would either be immediate, would overlap scenes, be lyrical or be brutal. The brutal scene changes would be where we go into the storm scene. Shirley was singing while knocking down the furniture as if walking against a horrible wind. The lyrical scene changes would connect us to the sense of the cycle that is in place. People moving in unison, or various separate parts moving in perfect timing. I wanted to get a sense of a timeless community of people who are acting under greater forces than appear at first glance. By defining how the scene changes would work, Jim was then able to support that through his lighting. For instance the creation of the tractor, and Wilson's transformation into Frank, required a fairly involved costume and scene change. By having the cyc lit as a murky blue, the Fen people who bring on the tractor, and the actor transforming into Frank were lit enough to see them, but we were clearly in a different reality than
during the scenes. This became more of an interesting event because we didn't apologize for, or try to hide the scene change, but used it.

The most challenging scene in the play; conceptually, logistically and technically; is the last scene. Once Val is dead and comes up through the ground, she is seeing the Fen as she has not seen it before. She is seeing it all at once, throughout history, all at the same time. This scene is the most blatantly stylized and dream-like in the play. Therefore the surrealism of the moment had to be addressed primarily through the lights and the sound, and we had to build that into the show from the beginning with all of the elements. We used a number of elements that created a sense of rebirth, or a breaking free from a past of misery. As Val emerged through the ground there was much more movement of the lights. The space came alive with moving lights for the first time, and we saw a transformation from the drab static existence of the Fen to a beautiful and dynamic place. As Val discusses all the people she is seeing throughout history she is overwhelmed by how much there is to take in. Making the space come alive with the movement of the lights, gobos and colors that we had not seen in the play up to that point in the play, helped clarify what was happening in the final moments of the play.

In the end I feel that Jim's lights were a great compliment to Gennie's set, my vision, and the demands of the play. Everyone was involved in figuring out how to tell this story and it felt very collaborative. Jim did a great job of making sure he understood, and had a voice in, the discussions of the set and costumes on which the lighting would play. Jim and I both understood that if he was not totally in the loop with where the production was going, the lights could never satisfy everything we needed them to achieve. It was very important to me that all of the elements be in union with each other, and I feel that the lights ended up helping us achieve that.
Costumes

Costume design is generally my weakness in the design of a production. It is usually not the first element that I think of, and I don't always trust my knowledge of fashion, or what gets communicated by making certain choices for what characters will wear. For this play I did a great deal of visual research on what field workers wore, and what women wore in England in the 1980's. Luckily there were a handful of wonderful pictures that became very helpful in the book *Fenwomen*. But despite that research, I still couldn't see how the costumes would function. We go from outdoor scenes where characters are working in the fields, to indoor scenes where people are doing domestic chores very quickly. How much should they change if at all? Should they just have a base costume and change pieces, and if so, how much should they change? If some people totally transform and others don't, would that work?

Anne Liberman and I discussed these questions and more. The first priority for discovering the costumes was to figure out who the specific characters were, and what we wanted to say about them. We needed to figure out what the characters would need, practically speaking, in each scene. Then we had to know what we needed to communicate in terms of the storytelling.

The world of the play is earthy, and the characters work in the dirt, so the costumes needed to appear dirty. They needed to have muted colors, textured fabrics, and layered pieces. The characters should have various wraps, scarves, shawls, jackets, and sweaters layered over each other to keep warm in this land. The reality of working in the fields and surviving in nature almost necessitates that people becoming animal-like, losing a bit of humanity.

The scenes in which we see inside their homes, are where we see the effect the field work has taken on them. They live to work and they carry this work with them in every part of their lives constantly.
The dirt, wetness, and long hours picking should inhabit these characters on every level, especially their costumes. The fabrics, colors and textures of the Fen field workers is based on survival and comfort, not fashion. They are ripped, torn and stained people, with their eyes on rest after a long day's work.

The field workers such as Val, Shirley, Angela, Nell, Frank and Alice stand in contrast to those who are not on the bottom of the food chain. The Japanese Businessman is the first person we see in the play and he is the most "outside" the world. Mrs. Hassett is the next higher up we see. She is the overseer of the women picking potatoes in the field and even though she is not at the top, or even near the top of the pyramid, she is still of a different sort than the people on their hands and knees. The next time we see someone further up the ladder is when we see Mr. Tewson and Miss Cade. Miss Cade is a total outsider, from a London company looking to buy Mr. Tewson's farm. But Mr. Tewson is also of a different world than the workers. He tries to associate himself with his workers and befriend them, but he is not in their realm. He is an owner not a worker, and this becomes apparent in the scene where he is confronted by the ghost of one of the workers of his family from one hundred and fifty years ago. Because so much of the play is about power and status it would be important to distinguish where everyone fits into the social framework. The costumes would have to establish this very quickly and clearly since there are so many characters.

Aside from the spectrum that ranges from field worker to the owning class and everything in between, we also see a generational spectrum. We see children, parents, grandparents, great grandparents and a ghost from one hundred and fifty years in the past. Churchill was clearly trying to suggest that there is an unbroken cycle where things are getting passed down from adults to children. There was a great opportunity to deal with this in the costumes.

One particular moment that always interested me in the play is when we see Val say goodbye to
Deb, and then we see the actress transform from Deb into another woman who is now a parent, Angela, torturing her stepdaughter. Then she transforms back into Deb and we see her terrorize the town outcast Nell, and then this all ends in Nell saying that they will never learn and grow up into rotten adults. Then we see the "Girls Song" where the children sing about how they will just stay in the village and take on all the traditional roles of women. This succession of scenes is one of the clearest examples of the type of cycle that Churchill was writing about. I thought that figuring out a way to have actors get dressed onstage and be transformed by the events of the scenes, such as the Angela/Deb progression, would help communicate that theme.

Another way that Anne and I discussed dealing with the generational continuum was with color. The young girls are the future generation. They are the hope in the play. By having the youngest be the most alive and colorful and the oldest having been stripped away of this color, we would hopefully get the feeling that there is something about the Fen that strips away life and vitality. There is a dehumanizing cycle at work and the only hope for it being broken is in the youngest. This is why the scene with Val and Shona, right before the final scene, has always been so moving for me. Val is ready to die after that scene because I believe she sees something hopeful in the youth of Shona. If we could make a clear statement with color for these young characters, and then have the older characters like Ivy, and May be totally devoid of color, in grays and browns, then this would establish a spectrum that the characters who exist in the middle could be placed along.

Once we had established the basic thematic and storytelling elements that were needed, we then had to make some decisions about the overall way that the costumes would be used. At first I wanted all the women to wear skirts, even when they were in the fields. All the research that I had seen suggested that skirts for women were generally the garment of choice in the Fen in the 1980's. Using this as a base costume even when they were in the fields would allow us to move from scene to scene more
fluidly than if we did lengthy costume changes for every scene. The more we worked with this idea however, the less specific the characters began to feel. By having one homogenous group of women wearing basically the same thing, I felt that we were taking away from the rich specificity that Churchill provided. The play is about this community, and a community is not composed of types, but of individuals.

Nell, for example, is referred to as a "morphrodite." She has not only been de-feminized but dehumanized. Having her wear a skirt felt totally wrong. Val had to go back and forth between working in the fields and refusing to work, so I felt that her costume should be able to reflect where she was at, in any given moment. Shirley is the character who is of the belief that people should not question things or think too much, they should just put their heads down and work. She accepts her role as a working woman in the Fen. We see her making dinner for her husband and tending to her grandchildren, right after a hard day of working in the fields. She tells Val that she should just throw herself into her work and the time will pass. Having Shirley in a skirt seemed right because her work ethic and views on family represented a more old fashioned and traditional sensibility.

So Anne and I began to deal more specifically with what each person would wear and how these changes might work. I knew that I wanted to establish early on, and use throughout the show, the convention that we would see characters transforming from one person to another right onstage. It fit with what we were doing with the transformational nature of the set, and it seemed to be a necessity in terms of the fast moving nature of the play. This is trickier with costumes though because changes can be messy and clumsy looking. If we were going to show some changes then we would have to choose them carefully and then choreograph them so that they looked clean.

To solve the skirt versus pants issue I thought it would be interesting to have everyone in pants and
then when we wanted to have someone change into a skirt we could have long wrapped skirts, or pieces of fabric that could have multiple uses. This seemed to be in keeping with how we were using the set, and it would have satisfied my idea of having one character dress or pass something along to another, to convey the generational passing down that we see in the play. This idea proved to be extremely complicated and possibly confusing, but some of the basic elements that I liked about this idea were used. We had everyone in pants and instead of having wraps we simply put long skirts over the pants. They could either be easily taken off or hiked up to reveal the pants. When Val decides to go back to work in the field after the scene with Shirley she never leaves the stage, but she crouches down and takes her skirt up to reveal pants for field work. She stands up in the next scene and her skirt falls back into place for her scene with Frank.

Another example of how this concept was used was with the Deb/Angela progression discussed earlier. We see Angela in the field in the first scene and then she has a chance to change into Deb's costume backstage, which was a jumper. Then in the transition when she becomes Angela, she watches her mother dance with the man she abandoned her for as the youthful top half of the jumper is taken off and she untucks her drab gray sweater as Angela. Her pink headband is taken off and now she is stripped of color and youth. After this scene as Angela, the jumper is placed back on her as she youthfully tucks her sweater back in and puts her head band back on her head. She is a child again but we have seen her become affected by what is happening around her and so we understand that Deb is changing. She is moving towards the cynical and bitter adult world of the Fen.

Dealing with the male characters was fairly easy. There was only one moment that Wilson had to become Frank very quickly, and I wanted to keep this change onstage because I thought it was an important moment to see. I felt that there really weren't any other moments where we changed from one male character to another that were important in the overall arc of the play. So when dealing with
the male characters, there were very little logistics that we had to consider. The Japanese businessman was obviously the most outside of the world of the play. He is a sleek professional who lives in the cutthroat business world of modern day Tokyo. A black power suit, crisp white shirt, red power tie and handkerchief set him apart from everything else that we see, aside from Miss Cade who also wears a professional looking, long coat and red scarf to set her apart from the Fen people.

Frank is a hard worker. He wears a big beige jacket that's wrinkled and been out in the elements. He wears boots and tucks his pants into them because of the wet dirty environment he works in. But Frank has some life, some fire and passion in him, he is just afraid of upsetting the balance because he has so much to lose in having to support a wife and children who he abandoned. He has a lot of guilt but there is a strong drive inside of him to find a better life. Because of this we gave him a bit of color with his red flannel shirt coming from under the beige jacket.

Mr. Tewson is the owner of the farm so we wanted him to be set apart from the workers. He wore a casual cap, and brown jacket, with a scarf. He is not totally an outsider, but definitely a different class from the workers. He was still dressing for comfort, but he was also dressing for fashion. He worked in less grueling conditions, and had more money than the workers so he could wear nicer shoes, a nicer sweater and a tie. However, it is important for Tewson to feel that he is friends with his workers. He uses a "we're all in this together" strategy to keep people like Frank from organizing and making demands. He shares in the heritage and culture of the Fen and so the fabrics and textures and colors are in a similar vein to that of the workers, even if he dresses much nicer.

The play is Val's story, and getting her costume right was very important. Val desperately wanted to escape from this miserable life, but couldn't figure out a way to do that and have both the man she loves and her children in her life. She is almost totally devoid of color except for a green scarf that she wears early in the play but loses as events conspire against her. It would be the responsibility of the actor
playing Val and myself to find the fight, the fire, the passion that Val has which drives her. The

costume would be a total expression of the drab, bleak existence that permeates even the clothes the

people wear.

In the end I felt that Anne's costume choices struck a balance between many things. They spoke to

the overall themes of the generational and economic continuum in the play, the specific character needs

of each individual, the overall world of the play, and the stylistic transformational needs of the play.

The result of all of this was an attempt to convey the idea that these characters are trying to break free

from misery in whatever way they know how. The layers, the transitions where we see things being put

on or taken off, the stripping away or the covering up of vibrant color, were all an attempt to capture a

place where people are undergoing a process of dehumanization. Yet they still all yearn for happiness

and a decent life.
Sound

My favorite design element to work with in theatre is the often overlooked sound design. I feel that this area is regularly forgotten for some reason, yet it can do so much to convey atmosphere and flag specifics in terms of time and location. It can be used to punctuate moments or provide non literal, emotional, or atmospheric layers to the storytelling. It can often be the glue of a production, when the lights, actors and sound are happening in union to create specific storytelling moments. This requires finding an exact specificity for how cues will function, and this can be the difference between a moment really working or a moment just being a general idea trapped in the directors head.

I was very excited to work with Shane Rettig because, being a faculty member, he would really have the skills to make the most of the soundscape for the play. I knew that this show was a perfect chance for me to fully explore how sound could be used to tell a story. The sound design would be able to help convey the earlier described dream like world of the Fen, as well as creating the elements of weather.

Sound is usually what starts sparking my imagination in working on a play, so I wanted to find the right tone. I wasn't sure how musical the play should be, and if we did use music, what type it should be. If we didn't use music then we could use literal sounds and abstract them to create a soundscape. This would mean that we would take easily identified sounds, such as birds or wind, and manipulate them, such as by reverb or pitch shifting them. I wasn't sure at the outset how much of either choice would work.

We began our work together by setting up a few different classifications for the types of sound we were looking for. One category of sound was weather and general conditions of the scenes. We compiled sounds of different types of wind, rain, crickets, birds, crows, and thunder. There were a lot of varieties for each one and it became very important to find the right wind or bird. Some wind
sounds like wind on a beach, other wind sounds too intense, and some sounds like a pleasant breezy
day. We had to find the right atmospheric elements for the right moments. The storm scene needed to
be so intense that working in it would be inconceivable. But the first field working scene should be a
persistent unrelenting wind, that never quite goes away. The wind in the Nell gardening scene could be
a pleasant breeze on a nice day, and then the girls come along and ruin it by tormenting her.

The next overall category of sound that we looked for was whatever music the script called for
specifically. The music that Frank listens to as he is driving the tractor, the music that Frank and Val
dance to, the girls song, Shirley's singing, the gospel singing at the church group, and May's final opera
moment are all specified in the play. I decided that any moment where characters were singing: in the
field, at the church group, during "The Girl's Song"; would be done a cappella, with the exception of
May's final opera moment at the end of the play. My reasoning was that these are people singing in
order to get through the day. "The Girls Song" was not a production number, but rather a bunch of girls
playing, and singing about their futures. We are focusing on their relationships to each other and what
they are singing about, rather than production values and instrumentation.

When we are introduced to Frank, I had the idea to use a piece of music from early 1980's UK pop
culture. It was a song by a group called Bucks Fiz, that Shona references in her last scene. I thought it
would be funny to see a rugged working man listening to a very poppy, horrible song. We tried it out,
and I admit that I was very entertained by it. After thinking about it however, I didn't think it was the
right way to set up Frank. It was just an idea that I had in my head, but it wasn't attached to any
reasoning. We ended up going with a classic rock song from the 1970's, which worked much better.

Pictures of Matchstick Men by The Status Quo had a psychedelic and hard edged sound that worked for
both the play, and Frank.

The other music that we needed was the music Frank and Val would dance to and the final moment
with May. We listened to a lot of opera music for that final moment. I wanted it to feel deeply personal and sad, but have a sound of hope as well. After a long search I found "Ombra Mai Fu" from the opera Xerxes. There was one particular moment that felt perfect for how the song would fade in. There was a long note a minute and twenty seconds into the piece that had such a heartbreaking feeling to it, that it would be perfect for May to enter to as it faded up.

We had a lot of possibilities for the music Frank and Val would dance to together. We listened to old fashioned music hall type music, we listened to classical music such as Edvard Grieg's Solveigs Song and Chopin piano music. Nothing felt like the right combination of happiness and hope for the future, while also coming from a deep longing sadness and dissatisfaction. When I started to listen to waltzes, things started to feel right. Waltzes are easy to dance to, they are old fashioned, as it says in the script, and they often have that nostalgic, sad-happiness that is so evocative. After listening to a great deal of different waltzes I found one that felt like a perfect expression of what Val was struggling for through the play. Simple, beautiful, hopeful but it also had a sadness to it. It is called Spring Waltz and it is a simple piano waltz with a cello underneath it.

Even though it does not call for it in the script I thought it would help to clarify the Frank and Val story by using this as a theme for the two of them. I chose three places where this waltz would be heard. The first was where it is stipulated in the text, when Val first goes to Frank. The second is scene fifteen, when Val decides once and for all to go back to Frank. The third would be in the last scene when Frank is remembering how happy they were in the beginning of their relationship right before he kills her with the axe. Each waltz got more distorted and echoed as we moved further into the story, and further away from that happy, hopeful beginning of their romance.

For some time Shane and I decided to keep the sound fairly non-musical, except for these three pieces. However, when we began to run the play I felt like we needed something more to add some
weight and significance to where the play was heading. I really liked the cello in the waltz and thought the instrument had the type of foreboding, earthy, rich feel to it that I associated with the play. We found a few different varieties of cello music with varying degrees of lightness and heaviness. Ultimately, the foreboding cello was used to punctuate moments such as Val's goodbye to Shona, and then, that moved us into the last scene where she decides to die. A lighter more optimistic cello was used in moments such as Nell preparing her garden, which turned out to be a nice way to play against where this violent scene ended up going. My first impulse, to have no music, would have made the world of the play too lifeless and unpoetic. By adding these few musical touches we were able to add much richer dimensions to the play.

During tech things were almost complete but then towards the end of the play, I started to get the feeling that there wasn't enough rhythm as the scenes got shorter and momentum started to build. Once Val leaves the church group in scene fourteen, the play begins to pick up some pace and drive toward the final violent act. Shane found a piece of rhythmic drums that sounded almost like steel drums. It had the type of sound that reminded me of farm equipment, and buckets, and rusted metal which fit into this world, but it was the first time we heard something so rhythmic. I asked Shane to layer this over the cello and the natural sounds we had established, so it was as if we were saying that the world is the same but things are picking up speed and momentum.

The third category of sound that we looked for was non-realistic, non-musical buttons, atmosphere creators and emphasis chords. One of these was a short corporate jingle for the Japanese Businessman that sounded like the type of thing you hear every time you turn on your computer. We also had a series of explosive and sucking sounds that were ways of shifting us from one quick scene to the next to communicate passage of time and location. There were some scenes in which I wanted to punctuate the last moment with a sound before we moved into the next scene. After the scene where May, Val
and the children get into a horrible fight we are supposed to be left with the feeling that things are
getting very bad for Val and she is not going to be able to get away with leaving her husband for Frank.
We shift into the Mr. Tewson and Miss Cade scene very quickly from that scene, so we just needed a
fast button that would switch gears. There were a number of scenes like this, but for this one Shane
engineered a sort of electric tone that sounded like a pitchfork being struck and then the sound became
harsh and discordant. The movement of sound in the cue felt like it was moving us quickly forward,
but it also set us up for Mr. Tewson and Miss Cade because there was something about it that sounded
reminiscent of the Japanese Businessman. So even though he wasn't present, the corporation was.

Putting tones underneath the wind, gave certain scenes a dream like hazy atmosphere. Engineering
a single gust of wind to be reverbed, or an ominous echoey crow became ways of punctuating
transitions, and underscoring moments with the type of abstraction that the world of this play demands.

The scene in which Ivy discusses her past on her ninetieth birthday was a difficult scene to figure
out. I decided that we were shifting back and forth from hearing the thoughts in her head to seeing her
interact with her family at her birthday party. Our use of sound became very helpful for me in terms of
tracking when we were in her head and when we were outside her head. Shane found a very soft,
distant, set of echoey tones. It was the type of sound that I associated with an elderly woman's
memories; fragile, foggy, echoey and distant.

There were a few scenes that felt like they needed a subtle weight to them, but I didn't want to
overload them. Shane recommended that we use what we referred to as a "death boom." It was a very
low, bass-y, pulse that was very ominous but didn't get in the way. We used this for the ghost scene,
and for the transition into the last scene, where Val is being trapped in the dirt by all the furniture being
assembled in Frank's house. We also used it later in the last scene when Frank had killed Val and he
needed to clean up the body. This was a nice sudden shift from the waltz music we were hearing
seconds ago.

Once Val had died and she came up through the earth, we had cello music play while she was trying to make sense of all the ghosts and people of the Fen that she was seeing. It was beautiful and hopeful, reflecting the new view that Val had now that she had "broken free" from her life. As the other people entered into this limbo, dreamworld we began to hear the "death boom" again. Each of these characters were trying to break free in their own way, yet they hadn't found the release that Val had. Once Angela begins to "feel something", the music changes again. She is becoming aware of her pain, she is not simply covering it up with abuse and anger. The cello music changes again as each woman makes a discovery of her own way of stopping this cycle of misery. Finally this crossfades slowly with May's entering as if she were singing and giving voice to her passion.

Overall I was very proud of what we were able to do with the sound. I think it became an integral part of the play and helped define a potentially confusing story and create clear moments. I also think it helped create an atmosphere and give a weight to the play that was necessary. The land and weather itself had to be a character, and the sound was a way to give voice to that. The emotional weight of the play also had to be significant so that it didn't become a melodrama about a woman who just can't make up her mind. The circumstances and overall world of the play provide this size and scope in order to honor the enormous difficulties these women have to contend with, and the sound helped create that world.
Casting

The casting process came abruptly after the play was accepted at the end of my second year. I didn't have a lot of time to prepare for the auditions and I certainly didn't have a handle on what my approach to the production was or what my concept would be. Luckily, in working on the play during the selection process and in class, I had already been reading it and working on it for a couple of months so that gave me some sort of foundation from which to work.

I knew that capturing the grittiness and earthiness of the people would be important, and I knew that I needed to find actors who could transform into several different characters spanning many different ages. I was also fully aware of the demands of the text, and I was very hopeful that I could find actors who were not only right for the parts, but smart enough and adept enough to bring this sometimes vague, always subtextual text to life.

I looked at the list of twenty two characters and the first choice I was confronted with was whether to pair the characters to the actors in the same way that Churchill and Les Waters did in the first production. I started to look at the various characters and chart their movement through the play, but without having done the research or the conceptual work on the play I felt like I was just looking to make arbitrary choices just to be different from the original. I started to see that there was a method to the division of characters in how things played out from scene to scene. The fact that Val also plays the Ghost, and Angela also plays Deb had something to it, though I couldn't define it at the time. I decided to trust the wisdom of Churchill and Waters and divide the characters the way they were divided initially.

I did this except for my decision for who would play the Japanese Businessman. The actor playing Nell initially played the Japanese Businessman, but I wanted it to be the actor playing the male
characters. For me at that point, the play was about systems of oppression and the hierarchy of power that exists everywhere, even in this little tucked away village. I wanted to make a clear statement that sexual oppression is central in this play, and the corporate global business world is conventionally male controlled.

I wanted this statement of male oppression to be what started the play off, however looking back on this choice, I think having a woman play the man would have been a much stronger choice. Doing so would have said that this is a play told from a woman's point of view, and they are the ones defining the rules of this world, not a man. It would have set up the transformational style of the play right away, and it would have bookended the play since the same actor playing the Japanese Businessman would also be the last character we see: May. Unfortunately at that point in the process I couldn't see that far ahead. This is a useful lesson moving forward however, never take any decision lightly, especially when you are departing from the intentions of the playwright.

As we began the auditions, certain roles were very clear to me from the beginning. I knew that Andy understood this world, and the text seemed to come from a very centered and true place inside of him. I loved his openness to what I asked of him, and he showed promise in being able to transform character. When he read as Frank with Sarah as Val, there was a particularly strong connection and a very interesting chemistry.

There were a number of people who could have played Nell, the troublemaker, but Ashley had the type of fire that I saw motivating this women. I saw Nell as someone who really took pride in where she was from, and loved her home. At the same time she had a deep desire to see injustices corrected. Knowing Ashley from our acting classes, and having seen her other work at Mason Gross, I could tell she had the right mix of elements for this part.

With Nell I was also concerned about the long monologue. The monologue in which Nell tells a
story for many pages seems to have nothing to do with the rest of the play. I wanted to make sure the actor playing Nell was a storyteller. There is a sense of ebb and flow to telling a story that is very difficult to achieve if you don't have a natural sense of storytelling. It is a long piece of text and it could have been deadly if it wasn't handled properly. After a few adjustments I was confident that Ashley could handle this scene, as well as the other scenes in which the text was more spare.

This meant that if I went with Andy and Ashley the parts would have been distributed as follows:

Ashley: Nell, May, Mavis
Andy: Japanese Businessman, Wilson, Frank, Mr. Tewson, Geoffrey

This still left four more actors to cast, and fourteen more characters that would not come so easily. Of the people I had read for the grouping of Becky, Mrs. Hassett, Alice, and Ivy, I felt that Lacy and Sarah S. had the youthfulness to play Becky. (Becky being, I believe, the most important character of that grouping) I also felt that they had the ability to transform themselves in terms of the character work. I had just finished working with Sarah S. on a very challenging play that had vocal and physical demands and I thought she met them very well. I had also worked with Lacy a number of times, and I am always in awe of the depth and humanity she brings to everything.

I had Lacy read for Val, but I never initially saw her as this character. I saw Val as someone tougher, earthier and more at a breaking point in her life. Lacy is youthful and warm, and I wanted a Val who could get to a place where she was demanding to be killed, not as a victim, but as an act of defiance. In the auditions the person who surprised me as Val was Sarah. She had a very good chemistry with Andy, and she had the type of hard edged quality that Lacy lacked.

The problem then became what to do about Angela, who would also be Deb, Mrs. Finch and the boy who scares crows as the audience entered the theatre. For me the part of Angela was extremely important because it can so easily go into something one note and cliche. To really find the the depths
of where this rage and desire to abuse came from I would need an actor who could lash out and be cruel, but have it come from a vulnerable and desperate place.

I was very interested in Kristin for something because I had just been impressed with her performance in another Mason Gross play and I heard good things about her, but I didn't think she was right for Angela. I definitely wanted to use her though, because she seemed to understand how to deal with the language. There were two other actors that I was interested in that I did not have access to because they were reserved for other projects. So the choice then became, do I want to cast Sarah as Val, Lacy as Becky, and then choose between either Kristen or Sarah S. to play Angela? Or did I want to reconsider some of the other actors who I was not as yet considering?

I decided to stick with the group of actors who I felt confident really understood the text of Churchill. This meant I would have to do some rearranging. The only one of the group of actors who I had decided were the most solid for this play (Andy, Ashley, Sarah, Sarah S., Kristin and Lacy) who I thought could play Angela was Sara Sirota. Sarah S. was too young looking and always struck me as more a Becky. Kristin I thought would be best as Shirley, Miss Cade, Shona, and Margaret. By this time I was very set on Ashley playing Nell so she was going to stay where she was. This meant that it came down to either Lacy as Angela and Sara Sirota as Val, or the other way around. I had Lacy read for Angela in the audition and just didn't believe her as that character at all.

With the rest of the cast in place it came down to these two and I didn't know which way to go. I saw that Sarah was right for both parts, and Lacy was a great actress who I adore but didn't initially see in either of those parts. I had a conversation with Pam Berlin about what to do and she gave me some helpful advice. She said that clearly either of them could do either role, but the important thing for the play is to ask, who is going to break our heart more at the end? I started to look at things a little differently in terms of Val. I started to think maybe Sarah could reveal more of the vulnerability that
exists within Angela, while still being harsh. I also remembered Sarah being able to play childlike characters. If she played Angela, she would also be an excellent Deb.

Maybe Lacy's youthfulness and warmth would take us on a much more heartbreaking journey, as long as I kept her away from playing the victim, or playing her feelings instead of actions.

After a couple of weeks of sitting with this cast list in my mind, reading through the play and thinking about my choices, I decided to submit the cast list to be accepted.

The list was as follows:

Lacy: Val, Ghost
Sarah: Angela, Deb, Boy, Mrs. Finch
Sarah S.: Becky, Mrs. Hassett, Alice, Ivy
Kristin: Shirley, Shona, Miss Cade, Margaret
Ashley: Nell, May, Mavis
Andy: Wilson, Frank, Mr. Tewson, Geoffrey, Japanese Businessman

The cast list was accepted and I was very excited to start researching and working on my ideas for the play with specific faces in mind. I thought we had a cast that could handle all of the demands of the play, and would also bring ideas to the table. Now all that was left was to do an enormous amount of work.
Pre-Rehearsal Plan

After a summer of research, design meetings, conversations with various people and multiple readings of the play I felt very ready to begin rehearsals. We were going to have five weeks before we were in front of an audience, and the first week was going to be eight out of ten hour days. We were also going to be rehearsing on Labor Day, which I knew wouldn't make me very popular, but I only get one thesis production so I wanted to make it count.

A few weeks before going into rehearsals I met with Amy Saltz and we went through the entire play, discussed the design, and my overall approach. We spent hours in a cafe on the east side of Manhattan sifting through all of the choices and refining my language for how I would talk with both designers and actors. It was extremely helpful. I also spoke with Pam Berlin over the phone a couple of times over the summer and I felt that these conversations were very helpful. They were very supportive of the work I had done and provided the right pushes in the right directions to get me to the next step.

Before I began rehearsals I did one additional thing for myself that I had never done before in preparing for rehearsals, but it was extremely helpful. I invited a group of people over to my apartment, some were actors some were non actors but none of them were involved in the production. I cooked dinner, got some wine and we read the play together and talked about it. I felt like this prepared me immensely going into table work. It challenged me to ask a lot of questions and to see the play with fresh eyes. In addition to having some wonderful discussions about the story, characters, politics and themes of the play, the most helpful thing was that it allowed me to trust that Churchill wrote a masterful play. While it is challenging, there is also so much more that presents itself when heard out loud. After this reading I felt very confident to go into rehearsals.

My plan for the five weeks of rehearsals was to spend the first week immersing ourselves in
everything that surrounded *Fen*. I gave research topics to each of the actors and told them to be able to present their topic for the rest of the cast on the first day. Ashley researched folklore and the customs of the people in the Fen. Andy was to research agriculture and the draining of the Fen. Kristen was to research economics and what was happening in the early 80's in the UK with Thatcherism. Sarah was in charge of researching the phenomenon of poverty. Sarah S. was providing a biography of Caryl Churchill. Lacy was in charge of presenting research on the East Anglian dialect.

The dialect was something that was a concern because we would not have access to a dialect coach. In preparing for rehearsals Amy suggested that I try to find a student who was not in the cast, but was particularly good with accents. I approached Rowan Meyer about being our dialect coach and he agreed to help us. Luckily my girlfriend is from England and I spent a lot of time listening to English dialects between her and her friends. I have also had training with dialects as an actor, so I was confident that between all of us we could create a consistent and clear dialect that had the major sound changes and rhythmic cadence of East Anglian English.

Providing as much research as possible for the actors would be very important. We needed to create this community and that was dependent on the actors really ingesting all the various layers of the play. There is no one simple brush stroke for the actors to play, so it would require a real immersion in the world. I considered having the actors do some farm work on one of the New Jersey farms in the area, but because of schedules and summer break it didn't happen. Looking back I think it would have been worth taking one of the rehearsal days to have a field trip to a farm.

My plan for the first week was also to define what I saw as the arc of the play. I wanted to make sure everyone knew after the first week what the central conflict, or motor, of each scene was. In the past I have struggled with approaching action and objective in a heady way so I wanted to make sure everyone was playing visceral, gut needs from the start. I had a detailed list of what I thought the
conflicts, actions and objectives were, as well as having a detailed fact chart and a label of all the story beats and events in the play. I wanted to go in to rehearsal absolutely prepared, but I was also aware that this would be a collaboration and I wanted to discover things with the actors. The first week was going to be about planting lots of seeds and not pushing for anything too soon. I wanted to get through the play at least three times including a first read with no stopping.

I was also excited to utilize the Michael Chekhov work that I had been exposed to by Leonard Petit. Since my second year I had found this work enormously helpful in sparking the actors imaginations in a way that has immediate, truthful and theatrical results. Before coming to Rutgers I had some experience with Viewpoints work, and I had always been interested in using it more. It was at Mason Gross that I discovered how amazing the combination of Michael Chekhov, Viewpoints, and classic American, Stanislavsky-inspired, psychological acting are. I was planning on spending a good deal of time working physically in the first week to find the atmosphere, psychological gestures, archetypes etc. I was planning on using the Viewpoints work to give a foundation in space to the Chekhov work in relation to the other actors. I always found Viewpoints to be a system that is good at getting actors to listen with their bodies in non-literal ways. This can be very helpful in exploring pieces that have stylistic requirements, but the danger is that it becomes creativity for the sake of creativity with no basis in the substance of the characters or the story. Michael Chekhov provides a truthful basis for the theatricality.

After the first week I was planning on making our way through the play on our feet. I was planning on trying to deal with the scene changes as much as I could early on. I wasn't sure how this would play out, and I was ready to abandon this idea if it took away from the scene work. It was going to be challenging to work transitions during rehearsals though because I wanted to use crew people as characters in the play doing the changes, and we wouldn't have access to them until tech.
I was hoping that we would be able to do a run through by the third week, and start working on large sections of text. I saw the fourth week as a chance for the actors to get used to the momentum of the play, and I could step back and fine tune things without having to micromanage. This would hopefully lead us into a smooth tech.

With my game plan set, research done, concept meticulously thought through, events, actions, needs, and circumstances thought through, design choices solidifying, and actors cast, I felt completely prepared to begin rehearsals for *Fen*. 
Self Evaluation

Looking back on the work that I did on Fen I feel a great sense of pride that I led a group of artists to realize an extremely challenging play, in a production where the audience seemed to be invested in the characters and story emotionally. I was happy that it seemed to provoke people to think and converse about the larger themes of the play. I wanted my thesis to be a culmination of everything I learned at Mason Gross, and an expression of all the things I wanted to accomplish by going to graduate school in the first place. I feel happy that my thesis achieved so much of what I wanted to accomplish.

This being said there were countless missed steps, and areas that never got fully realized. Moving forward I will learn so much from the shortcomings of this production. One of the biggest weaknesses of the production was that I never felt like it amounted to the powerful effect that it should have at the end of the play. Watching the audience walk away from each show I wanted them to look deeply affected, but instead it looked as though they saw a nice play that they enjoyed and now they were going to go get some food and drinks. I think this happened for a few different reasons.

I feel compelled to say that after working on the play for over a year (at the time I am writing this) the end is flawed in the writing. Churchill keeps a satisfying ending away from us by being so vague and fractured, that it is difficult to find a way in as an audience. I have no doubt that Churchill was intending to do that very thing. Her writing is completely anti sentimental and anti simplistic, which is what draws me to her work. At the same time, this can be frustrating when audiences are so much more accustomed to stories that wrap everything up with an easily digestible bow. Regardless, in Fen, I feel that Churchill steers too far away from the question: What are we supposed to come away with at the end? I believe that my concept was solid and this was a story about women breaking free from
misery. This thread runs throughout the play and connects to Churchill's worldview. But she goes so far in not wanting to provide any easy answers or cliche endings that she really doesn't give us much of anything at the end.

This being said it is my job as the director to correct for this. I was the one responsible for making it work because I chose the play and I directed it. What I think I did not do soon enough was really make a strong choice about what affect I wanted to have on the audience at the end. If I knew sooner what I wanted the audience to come away with, I could have made any number of different choices that could have been powerful, with no help from the writing. Instead I went through the rehearsal process with the intellectual idea of what I wanted the end to be, but I never really set my imagination going as to what that last moment could be specifically. How we ended the play turned out to be very general, fairly safe, and uninspired. The inspiration would have come if I did more thinking about what it could have been.

As I said earlier, I believe another mistake that I made was in not casting Ashley as the Japanese Businessman. I think this would have helped with the end. I think a woman playing a man from a totally different culture is so much more interesting, and of the convention of the rest of the play, than what I did. I think if it got kicked off in that way we would have experienced the play slightly differently. I think it would have been especially powerful to see the actor who plays the troublemaker, also play the representative of the owner of the Fen. She also would have been the last person we focus on because she also played May. If I cast Ashley as the Japanese Businessman this would have provided the bookend that I was looking to create. Unfortunately I didn't look closely enough at the play during casting. The mantra, where do we start and where do we end must be in every stage of the process.

Another area that I feel could have been stronger is in the general grittiness of the world. I think if
we found a more organic backdrop it would have helped the atmosphere. It was too pretty, and looked too man made, rather than of the earth. I also think the actors and costumes should have been dirtier. I am not sure if we should have had actual dirt or not, but the way the actors used the dirt, and the dirtiness of the costumes and actors should have been a lot greater. I was told that real dirt was not possible and I may have acquiesced too quickly. But even if we did have to use the rubber pellets as dirt, that does not take away from the fact that there were more ways I could have made the atmosphere dirtier and grittier.

In addition to the ways I already laid out, I should have found some time to bring the actors together and live the world of the play. We should have gone to a farm, lived together for a long weekend, done day long character explorations etc. I had the idea to do this early on, but I let it get away from me because my focus went to a million other things. In the future I have to keep defining what is important for myself, and not shortchange those things by getting lost in the details. I think part of that for me is to be more organized throughout the process, which I have worked on a lot in my final year.

In my work with the actors I continue to struggle with the same issues that I have been aware of from my other work at Mason Gross. I need to continue to find effective ways of communicating simply, efficiently and viscerally with my actors. I have a tendency to speak in ways that intellectualizes things, and this leads everyone away from what is really happening in a scene.

I think I also need to continue to find ways of defining events for actors, and getting those actors to play the events. This overall, big picture storytelling gets lost a lot of the time in my work because I can fall into micromanaging. I think I fell into this sometimes with Andy and Lacy during the Frank and Val scenes. They were basically very short scenes but I think we ran them too much. I wasn't trusting that they would find all the small details if I focused on the larger beats of the overall story.

I never found a way to make the scene with the ninety year old Ivy work. We tried the scene as if
she were saying this all to Shona to try to inspire her to be a trouble maker. Imparting her last bits of wisdom to her by telling her to not just accept injustice, while Deb and Mavis ignore her. We also tried Ivy playing it to all of them. It never felt justified, or interesting to see a scene with three characters bored and not responding to great grandma who is blathering on about nonsense. We ended up exploring the scene as going back and forth between inside Ivy's head, and outside her head to her family. I think this was the right overall choice, but Sarah had difficulties playing the complexity of that choice with the character work. I could have helped her with this by letting her play more. I also didn't establish who she was talking to when she was speaking the thoughts in her head. I could have made the audience more specific people, or groups of people that she was talking to as we heard the chatter in her head. She found it difficult to justify talking to herself, making that active, and then transitioning immediately to talking to her family. I think defining who she was talking to, when and why more specifically would have helped.

The other big challenge that I faced, that I don't think I ever really solved, were the Angela and Becky scenes. Sarah expressed concern after the second rehearsal and this concern lasted throughout the process. As much as I tried to allay her fears I wasn't able to get her to explore all the complexity of Angela. I also wasn't able to ever really get Sarah S. to find what Becky's journey was. I should have been clearer about how Becky is at a stage in her life where she is not a child but not an adult. She is looking to the adults to learn how to survive in this place. As much as she hates the abuse Angela submits her to, she needs a mother. I could have found a clearer way of explaining how I saw this relationship. Having more as-if's, and being more concise and simple with how I saw each one would have worked wonders. I found myself getting into very long conversations that got the two of them in their heads and made them more fearful than if they just ran it. When things didn't work, I should have left it, focused on what was good about it, and came back to it the next day. The way I
dealt with the scenes probably created a lot of anxiety.

Aside from that I felt like my work with the actors had some wonderful successes. There was an atmosphere in rehearsals where the actors were expecting me to hold their hands and give them all the answers. After I would give them a note they would often be defensive or argumentative. I was very happy that I was able to deal with this by talking to the whole cast about positivity and collaboration. I used the old improv phrase, "yes and." They took this on and and I started to hear that phrase regularly. The positivity of the environment also changed.

I also felt that Andy's performance was among the most successful. We started in a place where he understood the text and the world of the play, but then he started finding reasons to make his character's experience too easy and inactive. I think he ended up doing some lovely work, and I really enjoyed our collaboration together.

As far as my work with the designers I felt that the collaboration with Gennie was the easiest. We worked together before and I think we have a good understanding of how the other works. I appreciate that she is not simply building a set, but she views her role as a storyteller. As I said earlier, I wish that I had said something about my concerns about the sky not looking "sky-like" enough. I think it was a vague thought that I didn't think very much about until I got into the actual space and saw it in the theatre. Moving forward I want to continue to listen to every impulse I have and really consider them all.

I think my collaboration with the other designers was very good as well. I wish that I had asked for more specifics from Jim earlier on in the process. I think there was a time in the middle of rehearsals that I didn't deal with lights very much because I assumed we were on the same page and since he is on the faculty he would do good work. I am curious what we would have come up with if we didn't let the lighting discussions die down in the middle of the rehearsal process. I was also very pleased working
with Anne and Shane, though I wish Shane could have come to the design meetings to be more a part of the team.

In the end, as I reflect on this experience I am very proud of this production. I will never be perfect so of course there are always going to be weaknesses in any project, but I can continually move forward trying to improve. I plan on having a life's work that is constantly evolving and finds fulfillment in never quite being comfortable settling for where I am at. I think this production had some massive challenges, some were met and some got the best of me, but the thing that I will take away from this the most is the experience of meeting those challenges with a sense of play, curiosity and fun. Because as difficult as this work can be, and as important as I believe being an artist is, if it isn't fun on some level then there is no point in doing it.
Today began with a feeling of excitement, fear, confidence and insecurity all at the same time. I was confident in the amount of work, research, analysis and general preparation I had done. However the size of the piece: twenty-two characters, twenty-one scenes, broad and complicated political, social, economic and cultural issues, married with a deeply layered and complex examination of a community of people that has a long and intricate history; with dialogue, a style, and a story structure that are very ambiguous on the page and seemingly purposefully open ended . . . led me to the conclusion that I am inevitably missing something.

Because this was the first day "back at school" I wanted to ease the cast back into the rehearsal room. After discussing their summers and taking care of some business we began our first read through. I told them not to push for results, but to just read it for the sense of what they were saying, and listen to what was being said to them. I told them to start right away with accents and not waste any time feeling at home with them.

The first read through made it extremely clear that we were going to have a lot of work ahead of us. The understanding of what was at stake for these characters, and the grueling environment that they exist in was clearly not present. They seemed to be struggling to find the meaning behind what they were saying much of the time, and they often seemed to be struggling to find what the conflict was. For the most part they didn't quite see how this play went from one event to the next. There was an impression of this being a series of vignettes that were not really building or related.

As we began the design presentation there started to be a shift in consciousness about the play. We
showed them the set and discussed the dream-like quality of memory, past generations, and ghosts. We talked about the timeless quality of the Fen, and how one thing would transform into another. Jim began showing them pictures of lighting that we are working with, pictures of the costumes were also shown. The grandeur and beauty of the piece started to make itself known. After the design presentation I spoke with the actors about how I see the play. I talked about the fact that these people are not in control of their own lives and therefore they can never really be happy. I began to talk about how each of the characters is trying to break free from misery.

After this we started to share our research. The actors each came into rehearsal with an assigned area of research. This led into a wonderful discussion where it became clear that they had been doing some very good work on the play already.

After lunch I wanted to get on our feet and establish a physical vocabulary for how we will deal with the way the play moves. Starting with a basic introduction to Michael Chekhov, and then moving into some basic Viewpoints work, we spent an hour exploring psychological gesture, tableau, and very basic relationships of the characters to each other and space.

After this physical exploration we returned to the table and started from the top. As we began discussing each scene I had another wave of fear sweep over me. Just in the first two scenes the amount of circumstances, relationships, subtext, meaning, possible objectives and questions that we needed to define were formidable. I began to worry that I might be bogging things down, in too much detail too soon, talking too much and not focusing on the essentials enough. However, I feel like this play is so unique in it's approach that we need to take the time to honor that approach. The approach seems to be this: Churchill seems to be putting before us, in absolutely intricate detail, a community of people who are affected by their history, government, prevailing social structure and literal physical environment. Through this detail were are seeing the human core that is universal to all people. It is
only in finding what is particular to these people that we will find what is universal to us all. It's clearly a play with a political motive, but it is not the typical political play. It does not reside in characters as types, or tools to demonstrate a world view.

We worked through to scene seven. Tomorrow we will hopefully get through the play and then start working through a second time. I will focus on the larger story beats and try to get the conflict clear and simple so that I can do less talking.

Day 2
8-25-10

Today we started at scene seven and worked almost to the end of the play at the table. We are going a little slow but I think it is important to steep everyone in the vast circumstances surrounding the play. They are beginning to understand the shape and the central conflict for each scene. The first read through was troubling in that they didn't seem to really understand what was happening, or what they were saying. Each time we work a scene there seems to be a click that happens where they silently, or sometimes out loud, say "Oh! That's what that scene is about." This is promising in that they are starting to get a little closer to the motor of each scene.

Doing physical work early in the process, when we would normally only be at the table, is very helpful. I had them explore an archetype for their character, and various images that they could use to inform their characters. I then had them find a psychological gesture that captured each character's need. Finally we moved our way through the play without breaking out of the exercise. I would call out the scene and label it with what I thought the event was. They would find their way, through gesture and the viewpoints, to a tableau that felt like that event. We were able to move through the play in this way, and I believe it gave the actors, and me, a new perspective on a lot things.
We did this physical exploration for about an hour in the middle of the day, but most of the day was spent at the table discussing the play and working through the scenes. We also listened to some more East Anglian recordings, and I have to say I am very impressed with the diligence the actors are showing in working on the accent. They are already planning study groups outside of rehearsal, and passing information back and forth on their own. I feel very lucky that we seem to have a proactive group.

I am not sure how long I want to stay at the table. I was planning on doing a solid week of table work, but it is beginning to feel a little tedious with these long days. Tomorrow I may re-evaluate.

Day 3
8-26-10

Today was tedious but productive. We finished the second work through at the table and did some more physical exploration work. I am finding it difficult to do the Michael Chekhov work with some people who have had Leonard Petit's class, and some people who have not. Since I want to be able to use this way of working professionally I think it is important that I figure out a way of making it accessible and useful for people who may not have had any experience with it.

One of the reasons today was tedious was because I focused a lot on the Angela and Becky scenes. Sarah is very concerned that the audience is going to hate the character. She wants to find a way to stand up for Angela and really understand why she is behaving in this way. I completely support that and agree. For scene six, I told her that she had a long day, and Becky is being a brat, so just lash out at her. Sarah felt that she couldn't lash out at Becky because that felt too judgmental; Angela would not think she was lashing out she would think she was doing something positive. This was a good point,
but I know that there are times in my life when I have knowingly lashed out at someone because I felt totally justified and fed up. Looking back I probably should have framed that action in more specific circumstances rather than abandoning it altogether.

I believe that Angela desperately wants a family, especially a child of her own. I believe that she can't have children, either she is unable to conceive or Becky's father refuses to have one with her. Therefore, Becky is the closest she will have to a child. Angela feels trapped and let down by where her life ended up and to top it all off she has to deal with this brat who will not accept her as her mother. Because Becky is purposefully hurting her, she is going to give it right back to her. Also, Angela had a long day, came home, did some house work, is looking forward to having to wake up first thing in the morning, make Becky her breakfast and lunch, and for that Becky gives her nothing but attitude. I am not sure I explained it clear enough, or in the right way to Sarah because this turned into a very lengthy conversation both during rehearsal and after. In the end I think that Angela is a scary character for Sarah and she is going to need a lot of support to feel safe enough to go to the places that it demands.

There was a moment during Nell's long story today where I gave a note to Sarah because she was laughing through the whole monologue and I didn't believe that the effect Nell was having on the women was funny. I presented the option that maybe Nell is telling this story because she knows just the right way to get at each of the women at work. Before even trying it Sarah looked troubled and didn't understand how Angela could be affected by the story. After a bit of discussion I just said, listen to the monologue again and listen for all the moments that deal with abuse, abandonment and a bad person getting what they deserve. Ashley did the speech again, but it was very different this time. There was a significance to it that lifted it out of simple gossip. Afterwards I think Sarah's view of Angela opened up a bit.
Day 4
8-27-10

Since yesterday felt like it dragged, I decided that today would be the last day of table work. I spoke with Meghan today about how many crew members we get and how we can use them. I think we need six crew members to move things around the stage efficiently, and then an additional two for board operators. I also want them costumed so that they are of the word of the play. Meghan said that she would put in the request, so I am hopeful. There is no way we can have clunky transitions or it will kill the momentum of the play.

I feel like everyone is ready to get on their feel on Sunday. We've been doing a lot of reading and talking and discussing of research but it's time to see how this exists in space. It was helpful to start to get on our feet a little bit today. I told them that whenever they had the impulse they should get up and put it in their bodies as much as possible. Kristin and Sarah had a lot of fun exploring the two little girls. They made some really great discoveries about the relationship and the physicality just by getting up and away from the table.

I think Val and Frank need to get away from the table now too. Andy really seems to be getting this play, the words sit on him really naturally, but I am worried that he gravitates to choices that make things easier on his character rather than harder. Instead of dropping into the last scene and exploring how his heart is breaking for Val, and wanting to do anything for her, he was going straight to anger. I am not overly concerned because he is extremely receptive to trying things and taking direction.
Day 5
8-29-10

Today was our first day away from the table. We started at the top of the show and made our way through to scene eight. Things were a little clunky as we made the transition, but it was helpful to have Pam Berlin there for some of the time. The scenes are so short and focused, and I have such a specific idea of how I see the scenes playing, that I need to keep reminding myself to not work the scenes into the ground, and to create an atmosphere of play and discovery.

I worked with Andy on the Japanese Businessman scene, and he found some pretty interesting things. He is going to really need to work on the accent, but we worked a lot on defining the space that he is in, and who he is talking to. We are working with the idea that he is presenting the land to shareholders and trying to get them to invest money. We found a loose structure for the piece in terms of the basic beats, and we found a staging that felt like it was a good start.

When we began working on the second scene, with the women picking potatoes, I got a bit more nervous. This scene had so many people, and so much physical activity that I really didn't know how it would play out in the space. As we worked I resisted the temptation to stop every few lines and steer things the way that I would do them if I were acting. I let larger stretches run, and then I tried to boil my notes down to one or two simple actable things. One issue with scene two is that we have a clear power dynamic set up right away. Mrs. Hassett is the gangmaster and the workers are underneath her. Figuring out exactly what that relationship is, and what all of the unspoken points of view are, is going to be key.

There need to be a few major events in the scene and everyone needs to understand there significance. One of the events is that Val leaves work. This never happens in this world, and something is clearly wrong. The other event in the scene is that by the end we see that Nell is a
troublemaker, and everyone else is willing to go along with the status quo to protect themselves.

The first Frank and Val scene was where I felt I began to run things a bit too much. It is a very short scene, but there is so much history between the two characters, and so much that is unspoken, that I was trying to get them to play everything on the first day. They started working on the scene and it felt very superficial and one note, which is to be expected at the beginning of the process. I told Andy to think about how he would love to leave with Val, but it is impossible and he needs to bring Val down easily. This added some interesting layers, but the scene was still too easy for Frank to say no to Val. At a certain point Pam told me that I should let the scene rest. They found some interesting things and I should just move on with the next scene. I was thankful for that insight because I felt like it kept me from going into a frustrating and counterproductive place.

The rest of rehearsal followed in a similar vein. I tried to find an overall shape for the scene, focusing on the motor and physical life, but leaving things open for discovery and spontaneity. We made it to scene eight and tomorrow we will start with the Nell gardening scene. I am looking forward to working on that scene because it is so physical and so heated. I think there is going to be room for a lot of interesting play that can happen.

Day 6
8-30-10

I am concerned with the Ivy birthday scene. The scripts gives so little to help figure out what is actually happening in that scene. It feels like it could either be a scene where everyone is ignoring Ivy or not dealing with her very much, but neither feel very engaging. Sarah was playing with the fact that she is getting more and more distant now that her mother isn't in her life as much anymore, and I think this feels right. This seemed to justify why she isn't speaking. Kristen was playing with he fact that
maybe Shona is scared of her very old great grandmother and this is why she doesn't say anything.

Why May is in the scene, and why this is a birthday party, is still beyond me. The text of the scene is about Ivy trying to make her memories clear for herself. She is trying to remember if her memories actually happened or not. She wants to validate these memories and make them clear to herself, and possibly pass them along to her great grandchildren.

She basically needs to feel that her life mattered, that if none of her memories happened it wouldn't just disappear into the fog. Every time I read the scene it feels to me as though Ivy is talking to herself, but then I don't know why there are other people in the scene. The only possibility I can think of is that there is behavior happening with Deb, Shona and Mavis that is of the birthday party, and Ivy is talking to herself without anyone really hearing her.

It may be that the reason it is a birthday party, and that the entire family is their except for Val, is to show how Val is now totally removed from her family. But then the scene never deals with that in the text. It is only an assumption that we make based on the family being there and Val not being there. We will deal with this scene again next week and I'll come in with a few different ideas for how we can attack it.

The other challenge with this scene, and with the Nell scene, is that the text work has to be very clear. It seems that every character has a chunk of text where they are telling a story. This is very in keeping with English countryside culture. Storytelling is very important to these people, and each actor has to find a way to make the story active, and clear. Ivy's scene is difficult because it is so disjointed. There are repeated phrases and jumps in logic from one beat to the next, and this suggests that she is thinking through a random and foggy thought process. Sarah isn't quite getting the peaks and valleys, or connecting all the dots in terms of the thought process. She is also not using the language to really create the imagery. I may need to schedule some time with her alone to work the text.
Day 7

8-31-10

Today was a short day because it was the first day of classes. Things were going well until we got to the second Angela and Becky scene. I was surprised at how much they both expected me to give them, and then they seemed to resent me for not giving them the exact thing that they were already thinking in their head. As much as I tried to collaborate, I felt a lot of aggression coming at me. I believe that this is coming from fear so I am doing my best to give them what they need to feel safe.

One problem is that I do not want a lot of things on stage, and I didn't want to focus on a lot of physical activity for this rehearsal. I wanted to focus on the motor of the scene for our first time working away from the table. I wasn't as concerned with activities as I was with trying to figure out what Becky and Angela's relationship is, and how we move them toward laughing together by the end of the scene. This isn't to say that I didn't want to deal with what they were doing physically, I just didn't want to make the scene about clearing dirty dishes, or sweeping the floor. Sarah expressed that she didn't want to deal with actions or obligate herself to do anything until she gave herself physical activity. She felt that she would be acting too soon. This is a fair concern, however I have gotten into trouble in the past by laying on arbitrary physical activity before discovering the real underpinnings of the scene. For this play I wanted to try and deal with the basics first: Where are they coming from? Where are they headed? What do they need from each other? At the same time I didn't want to say no, so I agreed to experiment with what they may be doing. I couldn't help but think that this was making the physical life primary, but I think it is what was needed for the actors. For the next rehearsal I should come in with some ideas that are going to ground them into the physical world of the scene while being appropriate to what is happening between them.
Day 8
9-1-10

Today we came back to scene eighteen and things went a little smoother but I feel like I lost control of the rehearsal. I came in with some ideas for what they may be doing in the space, to accommodate what we struggled with yesterday. I still had the feeling that every idea I had was met with scowling and argument, so I decided to let them do whatever they had to do to feel free. This actually helped a lot.

They seemed much happier with what we found and I felt that they had a great sense of relief once they were able to take control of their own process for a rehearsal. I was as encouraging as possible and assured them that it’s early and we should just be playing and discovering at this point. There were a few moments where they were defensive and said, “I can't just make that choice, what should I do?” And I said, "It's early in the process you can make any number of choices, let's just play and see what happens." Even though I had said this before, the thing that seemed to help today was giving them few suggestions, but asking them lots of questions.

We basically got through the rest of the play today. We still have to work on the very challenging last two pages of the last scene, but aside from that we got through the play as a first pass through on our feet. There are a lot of challenges that are presenting themselves moving forward. I am worried that Ashley is not going far enough as Nell the "morphrodite". I am also worried that maybe her long story won't work with her just sitting down. I need to think about possible options for that scene. I am also finding that Kristin is not coming from herself, and is playing an idea of a little girl as Shona.

I feel good in general though, and I feel that for the most part we are on the right track.
We began with an exploration of the last part of the last scene today: from where Val comes through the ground after she is killed. I am working with the idea that each character is breaking out of their own personal type of misery. Nell leaves the Fen, Angela becomes aware of her pain, Shirley stops working for a moment and has a disturbing memory that she puts to rest, Becky refuses to play Angela's sick games, and finally May sings. I am honestly not sure how this show should end. We explored a lot today but I never felt like anything was a big enough gesture to end this play. I felt like there needed to be a bigger event. And since it all leads to May singing, that should be the big event. In the script Churchill says, "May is there. She sings. That is we hear, as if she were singing, a fragment of opera." I don't want her to lip sync, and the script specifically says that the actor does not sing. I am not sure what this is yet, and I feel like there needs to be something else happening because this isn't strong enough. I don't know what that could be yet though.

After we explored the end we went back to the top of the play and worked the first two scenes. Andy has the tendency to play the history lesson of the opening scene a little too much. His point of view becomes general and unclear, and he becomes inactive. He is not far off, but we just need to keep working towards Andy dropping into his circumstances, and really dealing with a group of people who may invest more in this land. He needs to really welcome us to the Fen.
Day 10
9-3-10

Andy has a really tricky challenge in scene three when he has to play a conversation between Frank and Mr. Tewson by himself. As an audience we are seeing a man talking to himself preparing to confront his boss. As the actor, who ultimately plays both Frank and Mr Tewson, Andy is having a hard time finding the back and forth of the conversation without making it look like the actor is playing two different characters. We talked about how this scene is what we all do in life when we are preparing to have a difficult conversation with someone. I think he understands that, but it is either getting trapped in his head, or he plays the scene as if he is changing characters back and forth.

I told him to play with the expectation of how Mr Tewson will respond. If Frank is nervous about asking for a raise, and he knows that Mr. Tewson will inevitably meet his requests with fake appeals of brotherhood and friendship, then Frank can really be wrestling and thinking through how Mr. Tewson would respond to each tactic. Andy did have a nice moment when he made it very simple and still. He played out the chess game of this interaction for himself.

We then moved on to the second half of the scene with Val and the girls entering. I am finding it difficult to guide them toward the complexity of the scene. There are a lot of elements present but the scene keeps feeling very one note and simplistic. Lacy is having a hard time finding ways of playing the fact that her daughters are watching her talk to her lover. Andy is finding it difficult to play the roller coaster that Frank goes on during the scene. First he sees his mistress and her daughters running out onto Mr Tewson's field out of nowhere with a suitcase yelling for him. The possibilities are that something horrible happened such as a fire, or maybe Val's husband found out about them and kicked her out. Whatever it is, Val appearing with her daughters and a suitcase is really out of the ordinary. So he needs to find out what's wrong and then Val tells him that she has decided to just leave. This
may sound wonderful to Frank at first, but it is also so crazy that it isn't even close to possible. He then realizes that Val needs to be let down easily so he asks some really simple questions like where they are going to live. Clearly Val hasn't thought things through, but Frank can still be hopeful that maybe she has just the perfect answer. Finally Val decides to stay, but has no idea what she is going to do.

Lacy is doing a good job finding the arc of the scene. She begins the scene as if she found all the answers to her problems and ends the scene as if she were back in the dark. Lacy and I talked about how Val is in a kind of fog at the beginning of the play. Val had this very simple thought that for some reason she has never had before, and once she had that thought everything changes. "Oh, I can just leave." This is the type of simple thought that changes people's lives. Her whole perspective on the Fen changes. I don't think she ever thought that was really an option before. The outside world becomes real to her, rather than a vague fantasy in the back of her mind. She wakes up out of the fog and comes to Frank. Then she finds out by the end of the scene with Frank that it isn't possible to leave, but now she is forever changed by having just had the thought that she could leave.

I think they are both on the right track, we just need to keep layering in all of the elements.

Day 11

9-5-10

It seems that we are taking a turn for the better with Angela and Becky in scene six. I have found that if I guide them with a much looser grip, then we get much better results. Sarah seems to be getting more comfortable trying different things. I am hoping I can get to a place where she will trust my ideas, but I don't feel like we are quite there.

Whenever possible I try to gently suggest ways of playing more positive actions. I had them try the scene once where Angela was having fun punishing Becky, and Sarah took to that very well. It was as
if, from Angela's point of view, this was all just harmless teasing. I also had her try the scene as if this is all for Becky’s own good because this is the type of toughness you need to survive in this place.

I think ultimately we have to find this woman who is in such pain that she will never have the family or life that she imagined for herself, and everyday is a grinding chore, and therefore she takes it out on Becky. The way she sees it, Becky refuses to accept her as her mother. Angela sees Becky as the aggressor, that is why Angela wants her to call her "Mum" and that is why she tries to break her. I also think there is also something to the idea that she is doing this for Becky's own good. Angela is teaching her daughter how to survive in this world by toughening her up. So with that there is room for so many positive choices without Angela just acting out of anger and violence.

From Becky's point of view, I think she looks up to Angela and wants to prove herself as an adult. We did an improvisation where we could see a good moment between Becky and Angela. It started to feel like the type of antagonistic relationship that sisters have, but with admiration from the younger to the older. Sarah S. still hasn't been able to find this in the scene work. It's a really tricky relationship to get because it can so easily just be a torture scene. Becky complies with a lot of Angela's demands and I don't think it is only because she is terrified of her, though that is part of it. I think she also wants to show Angela that she is a grown up, she is tough, she is worthy of Angela's respect. I don't think we can overlook the huge need of teenagers, especially around sixteen, to be accepted as adults.

We also worked on scene nine today (Miss Cade, Mr. Tewson, and the ghost). For me the event of that scene is that Mr. Tewson sells out. I am still not getting the pressure that he is under in needing to sell, and the beat changes in the scene that lead him there. I think Kristen needs to push harder, and Andy needs to be entering the scene having already been discussing option after option for ways to not sell and now he is at the end of his rope. Kristen also needs to come from herself more. She is playing the character of a hard edged businesswoman from London, which is what I asked for, but she is not
really finding that within herself. It is a little bit of an idea right now. I think next time we work I am going to have her drop the character and really focus on getting Mr. Tewson to sell the farm. From her point of view it is for his own good.

We will get through the play for a second time tomorrow and work a bit on music, which I am worried we have been neglecting.

Day 12

9-6-10

We have gone through the play twice on our feet, and we are doing a stumble through tomorrow. I worked the Ivy scene again with Sarah S. and we focused on what she was really saying and why. We went through the scene with a fine tooth comb and I took her through every jump in logic and we discussed how to connect the dots.

The end of the play still feels very unsatisfying. It could be that it is Churchill's intention to leave the audience feeling unsatisfied, but I don't like that choice. Leaving an audience feeling angry would be fine, it would at least be something. But leaving an audience in confusion and dissatisfaction means they are not going to be left with an impression of the characters or the world of the play, but they are going to be left with a feeling that the artists creating the production didn't do their job. Anger at Angela, Val, Frank etc. is great; anger at me for not doing my job is not great. I am going to find the opera music for our designer run through on Sunday, and by that time I will hopefully get a sense of how this play should end.

Day 13
We stumbled through today and one thing became very clear: if the actors are not invested in life or death stakes then this is a slice of life play about a bunch of complaining farm workers. That is no doubt how many people take this play when they read it, or see bad productions of it, and then the last scene happens and you say "Oh my god where did that come from?" Right now the actors don't quite seem to really get what an impossible and soul aching situation these characters are in.

Of course this was just a first run through, and they were trying to remember lines and blocking, and it is a very difficult play so we are probably just about where I should expect us to be. But we have a lot of work ahead of us.

Day 14

Today we started off with some notes from yesterday's stumble through. Everyone felt like it was very awkward and no one felt like they could really be in the moment because they were worried about blocking and what came next. I told them to focus on how they start scenes and where they end up. We have charted through the major beat changes for each scene so I told them to rely on the structure we established and play within that. Because things move so quickly from one scene to the next I also told them to get very clear with what their circumstances are coming into each scene. I want to do some more talking about this as we move through the play this week. If they can have something physical to ground them into the reality of the moment before the scene then it may help with the speed of the transitions.

We started at the top of the play and I tried to let longer stretches of text run and do less starting and stopping. I focused on making sure they knew where they were coming from, what they were doing,
and the major beat changes in each scene. If they weren't connecting to the motor of the scene, such as with Sarah S. and Lacy not quite understanding what was really happening between Val and Mrs. Hassett in scene two, then we spoke a little about it and then got back to running things. I feel like we are at the stage where they need to deepen things and get out of their heads. The play needs a strong momentum behind it, and that can be worked on by working larger stretches and multiple scenes at once.

Day 15
9-9-10

Ashley seems to be hitting a road block with her big monologue in scene ten. I think underneath the story is Nell saying, "This guy got away with murder, and so did my grandfather, but that woman and her lover deserved what they got." I think the idea of someone getting what they deserve hits Angela. I think the idea that you can do something drastic and leave a bad situation hits Shirley. Through the story I think Nell is both putting everyone in their place, and standing up for Val.

We also worked a lot on trying to make Ashley's choices more positive as May. The trap of the scene with May, Val and the children is for it to just turn into a general yelling mess, but there is so much more there. May desperately loves her family, and she will do anything for them. She will support Val and her family and never turn her back on them, but she will do everything she can to try to get some sense into Val. We worked with finding some moments where they were trying to get away from the kids and keep things quiet and this seemed to help. May ended up wanting things to be very public and loud because she wanted Val to come to her senses. It was as if she were saying, "This is what you are doing. If you are ashamed I am not going to keep it a secret, you need to change what
you are doing."

Amy was at rehearsal today and it was very helpful to hear from her how unintelligible a lot of people are. I am really going to have to keep on top of everyone about that. It was also helpful to hear her thoughts on Nell's monologue and the movement of the play. I have always seen the transitions as fast moving and overlapping, but Amy was helpful in suggesting ways of moving it even more efficiently, such as with people starting to talk immediately after the scene before while they are setting up for the next scene. This worked wonderfully in scene ten. She was also helpful in bringing up the fact that maybe Ashley needs to go further with the physical character of the "morphodite, troublemaker" of Nell. I think she can be rougher, earthier, more of a dangerous presence. She can also demand to be heard more in her story.

Day 16
9-10-10

Scene eleven is the first time we really get to understand why Shirley is in the play and what her point of view toward Val is. Shirley believes that one must devote herself to her work and family completely, even if you are unhappy. This idea of sacrificing yourself for the good of community and family is central to the Fen and Shirley holds that belief solidly. As we worked more on the scene I wanted to go even further into Shirley's point of view and what was happening between her and Val. Kristen is playing it very generally right now, and the text is not clear enough to be making it's points by itself. I asked Kristen to make every comment about how hard she was working pointedly at Val, to guilt her. So she continued to throw things away and busy herself with all of her work but she found a
few wonderful moments where she made her point loud and clear: "Grow up, get your act together, and be there for your family."

Andy's playing of Geoffrey can be funny sometimes, and other times it can be very general. His character is unintelligible much of the time, and still an idea. Clarity and diction is a problem for everyone, and I am trying to make them very aware of using the sounds of the words.

Andy and Kristen had a wonderful discovery tonight. I told them that even though they are seemingly ignoring each other, see what happens if you take each other in as you are rambling, and pick up on the energy and passion of the other. It turned into a wonderful overlapping scene where they were both struggling to make their points over each other at some moments, agreeing with each other at others but totally focused on their own rant. I really started to get the picture of this married couple who have been together for years and know exactly how to deal with each other. Pam was at rehearsal tonight and she said that things were looking like they were on the right track, which was nice to hear.

J. Allen also came to rehearsal today to help us with the axe strike. We are going to have to wait for tech before we really know how the switching of the body double and Val is going to work. The axe strike is good though. It is a sudden violent strike, that I think Andy can play as coming from a place of rage that things have come to this, but mercy to put the love of his life out of her misery. It is as if he had to pull the plug on a loved one, because it was just the only option.

I have noticed a phenomenon spreading through the cast and I decided to deal with it directly. It all came to a head when I said to Kristin that I felt like Margaret, in scene fourteen, was deeply troubled and this was her last hope. I felt like she needed to go further with how difficult it is to talk about a past she is ashamed of in front of a group of strangers. Very exasperated with me Kristin sighed and said, "A verb, David. Give me a verb. What am I doing? What do you want me to play?" I had
clearly done something to make this cast think that I was there to give them all the answers instead of
as a collaboration. If I didn't give them just the right note that they wanted to hear they could treat me
disrespectfully. I decided I needed to deal with this directly. I assembled the cast and told them that
this is a collaboration, which means we are all bringing things to the table. I told them that I felt like
they were getting into the habit of rejecting, or disbelieving my notes instead of accepting them and
really trying to see if there was something in them. I brought up the old improv idea of "yes, and." I
said even if you don't get it right away, try it and you will find more by doing than by thinking and
talking. All the scowling faces, defensive questions, and sarcasm was getting in the way of us fully
exploring the play. I also said that I don't know what all the answers are. I assured them that I did a lot
of work preparing for the play, but that doesn't mean I have all the answers, so I need them to explore
with me. Things began to get better after that, but we will see how it plays out.

Day 17
9-12-10

Today was our second run through, and our first designer run through and I couldn't be happier. It
was wonderful to have a small "starter audience." The designers were responsive, and I found myself
laughing, and being very moved. It didn't really kick in until the May, Val, Deb and Shona scene. The
first few scenes were pretty stilted and they were in their heads. But once they fell into it things got
very exciting. The scene in which I really became aware that things were clicking was during Nell's
monologue. I have always feared this could be a big , long, boring scene, but everyone was very
engaged, and I think it was because Ashley was really taking everyone on this journey. There was a
real need to tell the story. By the end of the play I was very moved when May came out to sing, for the
last moment of the play. I had some opera music that I used for the ending, and it worked perfectly.

We still have a lot of work to do, but this was a very promising rehearsal.

Day 18
9-13-10

Shane Rettig was at rehearsal today and we were able to layer in some sound. I think it is going to be extremely helpful from this point on to work with the sounds and music of the play. I think as good as I felt about the work that they did yesterday we really need to find the atmosphere of the play, and sound will help that tremendously.

We also need to start moving things along. They are taking way too much time letting things process, and taking time finding their lines. They need to start really picking up cues and allowing themselves to be taken by surprise. They also need to drive the thought to the end of the line. It always sounds very "actor-y" and untruthful to me when every word is stressed and labored over, rather than allowing the need to communicate something drive you to the end of what you have to say.

The first Val and Frank scenes are hit or miss right now. They still don't have a solid way in for the first scene and so at times it just plays very generally and I don't get what the circumstances are surrounding this event. I found some waltz music for Val and Frank to dance to during scene five, and I think it works as a really good bridge between Val saying goodbye to Deb, and then Deb becoming Angela in scene six. Andy is becoming inactive and neutral in the later scenes, and Lacy can fall into the trap of making Val a victim, so I am trying to keep on her about being positive and active.

Day 19
9-14-10

It was helpful having Pam at rehearsal today because it occurred to me that I can be more assertive with what I am looking for with Sarah and Sarah S.. I have been working so hard to accommodate them that I haven't really gotten scenes six and nineteen on the track they need to be on. I have been asking them how it felt for them after each run of the scene, and Pam told me that I don't need to do that. I said that normally I wouldn't, but I have been having some challenges working on these scenes so I felt that I needed to give over to them and be more subtle in how I guide the process. It was nice to see Pam take the reigns at a certain moment and firmly give a direction, totally confident it was the right direction and that it is their job to do it.

They did have one very nice discovery in scene nineteen. Angela's poem about Frank trying to kill himself became very vulnerable one time through and it made me buy why Becky would be drawn to Angela. This justifies why Angela says, "Why do you like me?" We are making small strides. I know they are capable of freeing themselves up, and I am trying to give them everything I can think of to free them up: space, physical life, objectives, tactics, discussing circumstances, asking them questions, but the progress still isn't what I would like it to be.

I have to say that my "yes and" speech worked great overall though. I hear people using the phrase, and consciously working on being open and accepting to others ideas. It's overall a much better environment for rehearsals.

Day 20

9-15-10

Today was a very interesting day. Jan and Amy were at rehearsal and we did a lot of character work. The biggest breakthroughs were with Nell and Alice. Sarah S.'s Alice became a mousy little woman,
and Nell's character became a real grounded force. I really liked how we explored the characters. It was a combination of dealing with the internal work of circumstance and emotional truth, while also dealing with how that connects to external technical choices. Talking about Alice's past, and her insecurities and fears while finding gestures, and a posture that felt right for her worked wonders. The same thing happened with finding a grounded, earthy, manliness for Nell.

Nell's monologue then became very active because who she was became clearer. The event of that scene then also became clearer. She was the outcast, troublemaker talking about how being an outcast and troublemaker is sometimes necessary.

Day 21
9-16-10

Today was our last day in the Little Theatre. Tomorrow we move into Levin for a week before tech. I am really happy we have so much time to get used to the space, since our set is so unorthodox. It will take some time to get the actors used to standing on a soft surface. This may have a bad affect on their voices, since it will take a firm sense of grounding away from them. It's also going to be difficult to deal with scene changes since we can't spike anything in the space. I have been dealing with scene changes as a kind of sketch as of now. We were able to get six crew members instead of the usual four, but we don't get them until tech. It has been impossible to really get a full sense of what the transitions are going to be, but they are extremely important. The actors are aware of the concept behind each of the transitions, and we have run through them as best as possible with limited help. It has been helpful for them to stay in character and continue to play through the transitions, rather than dropping
characters and moving furniture around.

Kristen and Sarah had wonderful breakthroughs today in the church scene. Kristen really found a dropped in and truthful need for Margaret. Margaret clearly hates herself, and truly believes that God is wonderful because he can love someone as horrible as her. She truly believes that the coincidences that she talks about are miracles, and she wants everyone to accept her as being born again. If everyone here believes she is repentant then she can feel like she belongs here.

Her salvation is not a done deal. She needs their acceptance.

Sarah has been judging her Mrs. Finch for a while, and I have tried to steer her away from this. She said that she wanted to play the comedy of Mrs. Finch, and I think that's fine, but I also wanted it to come from a more truthful and passionate place. I think Mrs. Finch isn't as nice a church lady as Sarah was playing it, but today she found a very stern and strict Mrs. Finch who has a much more urgent need to save people's souls. This can still be funny, but it can also be much more affecting if it's coming from higher stakes.

Day 22
9-17-10

I wanted to do a run through for our first day in the space, but it became apparent as we started working that we needed to take things a little easier the first day in such a foreign environment. We took our time getting used to the space, and I of course needed to adjust things spatially. Having soft rubber crumb be used as the dirt not only makes it harder for the actors to ground themselves, and therefore affects them vocally, but the rubber soaks up the sound in the theatre. There is no resonance in the theatre with the stage filled with soft material. It has turned into a black hole of sound. So I am going to have to remind everyone continually to speak up.
There wasn’t a lot of major ground breaking work that happened today because it was just a matter of working through all the kinks that come from changing rehearsal locations. Sight lines are going to be more challenging to deal with than I had planned. Adjusting the layout of each scene is very challenging with no spike marks, so we are having to go off of the architecture of the space. Meghan is keeping very good notes as to what we are setting the pieces off of in regards to the voms and the audience.

Day 23
9-19-10

We are still working through this period of adjustment. The entrances upstage from the backdrop don’t work the same way I had been discussing in design meetings. There are two instead of three entrances, and they are not hidden in any way. They are just big wholes in the sky. I talked to Gennie about it and she assures me that she is continuing to work on the upstage draping. I have to say though, that seeing the set now in front of me, rather than a model, I am worried about upstage not looking like the sky, but rather like a window or something else too inorganic. I think it is too late to deal with this, and I don’t know how it will ultimately look with lights.

I am finding that the set is giving us wonderful possibilities in terms of pulling things from the ground, and using the earth as a way of providing behavior. It is nice to see them really digging for potatoes in scene two, and pull the rabbit hutch from the ground in scene seven.

In the ghost scene I am trying to find the most interesting choice for how this woman occupies space and behaves. We have tried a number of physical choices. I had Lacy move very slowly for a while, but that started to feel like the "idea" of a ghost. I had her pretend to dig through the dirt, in the Little Theatre where there was no dirt, but that seemed to disconnect her from Mr. Tewson. Ultimately the
challenge with that scene has been that Lacy falls into playing the ghost rather than the need. I can completely understand this because the fact that it is a ghost, and it is not Val has to be addressed. And I think there is room for some use of supernatural choices since she is a ghost. We tried having Lacy play that she could physically control Mr. Tewson from across the stage, but that became too much like science fiction. Today having the actual dirt onstage, I had Lacy go back to finding an activity on the ground. She began to bury her baby that died starving in her arms, and for the first time I really got what was driving this woman. There was something creepy and ghost-like about it, without being a horror movie cliche. It was appropriate in terms of the story, and it dropped Lacy into the core circumstance of the character.

Andy is still having a big problem connecting to the fear of that scene. I think part of the problem is that he is trying to find the fear in his head, or search for it internally. I told him to let himself be affected physically and in his breath. He usually seems to cut off breath in that scene, so I told him to let his internal rhythm go much faster. This is the ghost his family has talked of for generations, and she could literally kill you or your animals or destroy your crops. The first time he tried to take the note it was totally technical and lacked any justification. So then we tried it again and I went back to the central conflict of the scene. I reminded Lacy that this was her chance to maybe get things to change, and to get Mr. Tewson to see that he and his family have blood on their hands for the way they have treated their workers without sharing in the hardship. I told Andy to do everything he could to calm the ghost and make her happy, or she will continue to curse you and something horrible will happen to you or your farm. Once we discussed the central action and consequences, they tried it again still incorporating the physical and technical notes I gave them earlier. For the first time I really saw things click into place. I understood the story of what was happening, and it became more than a conceptual idea of past generations coming to confront the Tewson family. We began to find the
human story of the scene.

We also worked the Girls Song in the space for the first time. Having the girls sing and play, the way young girls would, opened up a lot of opportunities for the song. Being the middle child of two sisters I understand the almost universal phenomenon if little girls choreographing dances. So I thought that would be a very interesting way to show status in the scene. Who is leading and establishing the dance moves? Who takes over? Becky is sixteen so what type of dance moves would she create, and how would Deb want to look cool in the shadow of someone older? Shona may try to be a part of what the other two were doing, but then just go off on her own and have a good time dancing by herself. We have been exploring all of these elements, but today it started to come together when we found how they begin singing. They began singing shyly and slowly and then built up courage as they got into the song. The relationship to the audience became clearer. They were trying to impress a bunch of grown ups watching them. Becky started to show off to the audience, Deb showed off to Becky, and Shona showed off to the two girls who ignored her. So then Shona would simply start playing. I was surprised at how much could be explored in this one short song, but by focusing on the basics of character, physical life, circumstance and need it all came together.

Day 24
9-20-10

We finally have storm sounds for scene twelve, but it is not helping as much as I expected. This is a horrible storm in which the women must do their work, but there is a lot happening in the relationships of everyone that is not being addresses yet. Mr. Tewson is losing control of his farm, he has just sold it to Miss Cade’s company. The workers are never far from organizing and giving him trouble. I had told Andy that Mr. Tewson comes out into the storm to rally the troops and make sure they remain obedient,
good workers. He is basically buttering them up by saying he admires women and how hard they work. Pam brought to my attention that I wasn't focusing on the specific selfish need of Mr. Tewson. He is not just coming out to rally the troops, but he needs them to keep working because if they don't they will lose a day's productivity and therefore lose a lot of money. Or it could be that since Mr. Tewson just sold the farm he needs to keep his workers happy so that they don't organize or go off to another farm or start feeling that they can make demands.

The women need to keep working or they could get fired. It is a huge taboo in this world to leave work for any reason. But by the end of the scene there is a division in the group and Nell takes Angela and Becky out of the storm, and Shirley and Val decide to continue working.

The conditions have to be horrible, but it is dependent on the actors to play how horrible the conditions are. I started to see that just having the sound of a bad storm would not be enough. We got very specific about where the wind was coming from, how much rain there was, and what type of rain was falling. I tried to give them specific things to do in order to deal with the weather. They would play the physical reality of the scene for the first few moments and then it would fall away, so I needed to continue reminding them what they had to do to protect themselves from the storm. Sarah has tapped into the physical life really well, as well as Ashley. Sarah S. seems to continually have problems playing physical pain. Drinking the hot tea in scene six, and the horrible weather in scene fourteen aren't real for her, so anything she does to respond to those things seems mechanical. It is as though she doesn't have a compass of how to deal with those moments so she is left to just pretend. I am being specific with what she is physically doing in those moments to deal with the sensory elements, but I think she needs to do some sensory work to make the physical elements real for herself.

Day 25
Everyone has to start acting on their lines, picking up there cues, and driving the thought to the end of the line. Everyone is taking so much time to discover every word and impulse that the play is getting lost. I stop paying attention to the need, the conflict, and the behavior, and I start seeing actors working very hard to make moments work. And then they don't work.

Andy is starting to find some nice moments through the play. He has come a long with with his Frank/Mr. Tewson monologue in scene three. He is starting to understand the back and forth that Frank is going through, and how to play Mr. Tewson through Frank's eyes.

The pub scene is becoming problematic I am afraid. I think it is a deceptively simple scene. We have been struggling with the "why" for that scene for a while. Why do Nell and Angela approach Frank in the bar, and why is Frank in the bar? Andy and I discussed that Frank has had the idea to kill himself for Val's sake, but he needs to get away from Val to think. He is afraid to be alone with his thoughts so he wants to be around people. Even though he is very shut down and private in the bar, we decided he wouldn't be in a public place if there were not some sort of crying out for help happening.

So then why do Nell and Angela approach Frank. I think Nell recognizes that Frank has become an outcast as well. Frank is Mr. Tewson's top guy, and Nell knows this. I think that Nell is always trying to rally people to stand up to Mr. Tewson, with Frank being Mr. Tewson's number one guy, she may see an opportunity to get him on her side while he is vulnerable. Sarah is playing Angela as either too flirty, or just completely distant and disconnected. She is having a hard time playing the need to win Frank over and possibly have an affair with him, while also protecting herself. I asked her to be rougher with Frank, like the school kid who flirts by pulling hair and punching, and then find a couple of moments to get the courage to let down her guard and be open with him about what she is suggesting. I told her to not play any of the suggestion of trying to seduce or flirt with Frank until she
says, "You can always try again." Then after that it is a cat and mouse game with how open she will be
with him, but she does end up asking him to run away with her, and that should be the biggest risk she
takes in the scene. When she did this the scene started to happen, but then it fell away when we did it
again, and she started flirting though out the scene.

Tomorrow we are going to work through very quickly. I have a lot that I want to get to, so I am
going to start to whip up the tempo of the show. I am going to work really fast, and hit on a lot of
things briefly and keep moving. I need to be efficient with my notes, and not get into any discussions
or heady conversations. We are just going to find it by doing.

Day 26
9-21-10

Up until this point the process has felt good for the most part. There were some problems with the
openness of the actors, but that has gotten much better since I talked to them a couple of weeks ago.
There are some problem areas, but for the most part I have felt a steady progress forward. Tonight was
a big step forward.

Amy was at rehearsal and I put into effect my plan of working quickly and hitting lots of things by
moving fast. It helped immensely, and luckily Amy agreed. By working quickly and keeping the
momentum moving forward I was also able to pay attention to the big picture, story beats. I have a
tendency to get lost in the details rather than keeping an eye on what needs to happen in the story.
Tonight I was able to balance both of those things. Tonight really got me in touch with what the
essentials were for each scene, and for the play as a whole. I feel excited about our run through
tomorrow.

Day 27
I need to make sure the cause and affect for the events happens. Lacy is not getting where she needs to for the end of the play and Amy and I discussed that I have to look back to the end of scene fourteen to deal with the build to the end. If she makes her decision after scene fourteen that she can not live her life believing that she is garbage and she can not simply give over to a miserable life, then that means she needs to make things work somehow with Frank. She goes back to Frank and then she discovers that she can't be happy without her children. So in these last scenes Lacy should be playing a much more impossible problem to solve. She literally can't be happy no matter what choice she makes. Andy must be playing much stronger actions to try and help Val. Andy still has a tendency to play neutral choices, though he is improving. He seems to feel like if he does nothing it is less pushed and more truthful, but instead all we get is a neutral choice. So if they are both fighting harder to solve a much bigger problem I think the end will be earned.

Another issue we have been having is in scene eleven. One of the central points of conflict in the scene is that there is a baby in the room as Shirley is doing her work, and it breaks Val's heart. She is reminded of having abandoned her own children and shirked her responsibilities as a wife and mother. The scene is almost working, but Lacy just isn't connecting to the fact that there is a baby in the room. It is not causing a big enough problem for her. Val even has a line that references how she is crying, yet Lacy is not connecting to that emotionally, so we do not get the story of the scene. This was baffling to me because Lacy is one of the most emotionally available actors I have ever worked with. If there is anything Lacy can do, it is be emotionally open onstage. I talked to her about this and the problem seems to be coming from the as-if she is using. She is playing the scene and trying to take in the baby, but truthfully Lacy just does not have the same point of view about babies as Val does. She admitted to me that the crying baby annoyed her more than anything else. So we talked about the guilt
Val is going through because of her betrayal and abandonment. I asked her to find something that would destroy her if she abandoned it. I am sure she will be able to find something that will set her off.

Tomorrow is our last run through before tech. I know we can pull things together and get the show to where it needs to be within the next week. Everything just needs to start getting more urgent, and the events have to be clear and earned. A lot of this is going to happen if the actors start letting go of control. They have to speak faster, drive the thought to the end of the line, and pick up cues. Despite the issues with the show, I feel very good about the work we have done so far. There is always the fear that the plane may not get off the ground before the runway ends, but I have to trust that we have all been doing the work and it will come together.

Day 28
9-23-10

Tonight was our last run through before tech. This was our crew watch so we had a small audience. They seemed fairly responsive and I got some compliments afterwards. Heather Rasche was at the run through as well and she had some good ideas for how to deal with the vocal issues. I just don't feel like the show is anywhere near where I have seen it in the past, or where it could be. Amy and I spoke for about an hour and a half after rehearsal and she had some useful feedback.

She said there is still time to do everything that needs to happen, but nonetheless a lot needs to happen. I am going to stress to the actors that they must use tech time to work on things for themselves and not simply check out for three days. It seems that if the first scene gets kicked off just right then something happens to the rest of the show. If Sarah S. really plays Mrs. Hassett as needing to keep everyone in line, and if Lacy is really playing Val as needing to get Mrs. Hassett to let her leave then it sets things in motion for everyone. There's a lot of little notes here and there with everyone but the
huge overriding thing that needs to happen is that everyone needs to really play their actions and let go. It's like their feet are still on the break and they won't let it off and just go. It is all there for them in terms of understanding what they are doing and why. I have been clear in communicating what I need from each of them, and I have seen them do it. There is a rhythm to the play that only happens if they are really in the moment, and no one is allowing themselves to be there totally. Andy is continuing to make neutral choices, Sarah is continuing to hammer the language and take much too long to find an impulse to do something, Lacy is not quite playing sharp enough actions, Sarah S. is having problems making things more difficult for her characters so we get no complexity from her. Kristin has made some good strides forward as Shona and Margaret, but she is hit or miss with what she is really doing to Val in scene eleven. Ashley has found a nice balance for Nell. For some time she was playing Nell as a fairly reasonable normal woman. Then she went in an extreme opposite direction and played Nell as a twitching, beastly caricature. Now she is finding the Nell who is a troublemaker, and has been totally de-feminized from life in the fields. She is hit or miss with her long monologue though. She really needs to get consistent with making her points, demanding to be heard, and really taking us on this journey. When that happens it's lovely. I will speak to the actors about these issues and more, but it is both comforting and frustrating that none of this is particularly new. I know they can make these adjustments because I have seen them do it before. I think it will be good to have a few days during tech where they can let things settle inside themselves.

Day 29
9-24-10

There's not much to report tonight. We didn't have any actors today because it was dry tech. We started to look at lighting looks, and listen to sound cues in the space. We also gave a very basic overview of the transitions to the crew. We are going to have a lot of things to deal with over the weekend so this was a good chance to get as much prepared as possible.

Day 30

9-25-10

Meghan Fisher has been an unbelievable stage manager. This show could have been a nightmare to tech. Twenty-one scenes, an intricate clockwork of costume changes, multiple internal cues, and an extremely complicated body double switch followed by the ghost of the protagonist rising from beneath the ground etc. This could have been a disaster. I think because we all knew the challenge ahead of us we came in very prepared.

Meghan was smart enough to schedule the end of the play first, so we could figure out how we would do the body double switch, and how Lacy would rise through the trap, and out of the ground. I placed people all over the theatre, in every corner to work out the sight line issues after Val got killed with the axe and had to leave the stage. After numerous little tweaks and adjustments we figured out a way to set everything, and we found a way for Andy to place a sheet over Val's body upstage of the bed to cover the body double switch. It was a process of very fast micro problem solving. If he held the sheet one way, one part of the house could see the switch, if he held it another way it looked unnatural. Somehow we figured it all out, and we ran the reveal of Val coming through the dirt. In terms of technical theatrical moments that I have directed I would say that I am most proud of this sequence.

As we worked through the rest of the show I started to feel like I was seeing the show that I had
envisioned in my head. Hearing the sound in the space, with the lights, and the transitions with the crew made me feel relieved and excited that the elements worked well together. I think we have created the type of evocative atmosphere the play demands. I feel totally exhilarated and ready to go into day two of tech.

Day 31
9-26-10

We finished teching, and stumbled through the play with the tech elements. It was pretty messy, but that's just because there is so much going on with the transitions. When everything works it works wonderfully, and at one time or another almost everything has worked. The designer run was wonderful, and since then the actors have found some really great things. We haven't had one run through that felt really magical since then, but there are a lot of moments that are working. It's just a matter of getting consistent. Plus, we were still in tech and it was a long weekend for everyone. The actors can't be expected to be in top acting form when they are worried about costume changes, and a totally new environment of lights and sound. I have no doubt that we will make huge strides in the next few days of dress rehearsals before an audience.

Day 32
9-27-10

Tonight was our first dress rehearsal, and afterwards we were able to work some scenes. I think Sarah S. is having a lot of trouble losing herself into the mindset of Ivy. This is a woman who is struggling to remember a long and difficult life, and she is trying to come to the conclusion that she mattered and made a difference. I think a big part of that scene is being able to let one moment cause
the next, or it starts to be a monologue of a series of non sequiturs. We went through the scene again and tracked through the thought process, and Sarah really dropped into it. But this was after the run.

We need a lot of people to start being able to do things the first time.

The same thing happened with the Angela and Becky scenes. When they let go and play off of each other so much more happens than when they scream and bludgeon each other. They understand the scene because after a few directions they get it. They just need to be able to do it in the context of a run through. There is a vulnerability to Angela that Sarah started the rehearsal process wanting to find so that she wouldn't be playing a one dimensional monster. The ironic thing is that she has found the vulnerability, but she is latching onto the one dimensional, violent choice. But again, when we work the scene she is able to find more colors after I give a few adjustments.

Day 33
9-28-10

Only one more before we have an audience.

Pam was at the run through tonight and she said that we had made huge strides since last time she saw it. Despite the remaining issues I feel like we have a show, and we are just about ready for an audience.

Even though I know the show very well I am trying to see if I can really hear the show. I am worried that the accent and the projection of the actors is getting muffled. I told the actors, at Amy's suggestion, that they stand on opposite sides of the theatre and say their lines to each other, just to really get the sense of landing their voices across the space into their bodies.

Tonight people were really talking and listening, and they were really going after what they needed. It starts to get very exciting and moving when the actors are completing their actions, and earning the next moment. We have one more chance to work out the kinks before an audience.
Day 34
9-29-10

Our last rehearsal was tonight. It will be very interesting to see this through new eyes tomorrow when there is an audience. I'll really get a sense for what works and what doesn't. I am hoping that by trying to find the positive choices in each of these characters the play will have moments of lightness and even optimism. I think the scene between Val and Shona at the end of the play is beautiful. It is as if Churchill is saying that there is hope that whatever this cycle of oppression is, it can be broken by subsequent generations.

I felt very good about the run tonight and I think we are definitely ready for an audience. We have done so much work on this play, and I believe it is going to pay off. There are still issues with certain scenes but I don't think there is anything so problematic that it will derail the show. However, I have to leave that to be judged by the audience.

Day 35
9-30-10

The preview was very exciting. To see and hear the audience respond to the play was great. They were laughing, gasping, and seemed totally engaged in the world. When Val emerged from the ground you could see everyone shifting and nudging the people next to them. When Val was hit with the axe there was a gasp. People were totally into Nell's monologue and went along for the ride. Amy was there tonight as well and she saw a huge improvement.

The only problem is that the end still doesn't quite work. We spent the rest of our time after the show working out many different solutions for how to end the play. I had each character lying down
after they made their discovery that they wanted to "break out" of this horrible way of living. May entered and we hear the opera. Then I had Frank and Val begin dancing and the women start to stand from the ground as the lights fade. It just didn't have the punch that the show deserves. So we tried a lot of different options tonight. The one that seemed to work was making the last moment about Val and May's relationship. Angela, Becky and Shirley stood up and came together upstage. There was something very interesting about seeing the three of them together. For the first time they were all of their characters, both the children and the adults that they played. It struck me as capturing the universality at the core of the play. Each of these actors is playing a handful of different people because we are trying to suggest that there is a thread running through this story, and it is not just a series of isolated different people. Having the three of them together at the end really captured that for me because it wasn't clear who they were in that moment.

Having the last moment be between May and Val made a lot more sense than having Val and Frank dance. It felt as though we needed to end the play in some way focusing on Val, since it is her story, and dancing with Frank didn't really communicate anything. But there was something hopeful in Val and May looking at each other. I like that we are able to end the play with a sense of hope. We will see how this works for the opening tomorrow.

Day 36
10-1-10

The show is open! I am so proud of my actors, and everyone who worked so hard to get this show up. I think it is definitely a success. There is still room for adjustments as we continue to run for the next week, but the brunt of the work is done and I think we can all take pride in what we have done.

This is a show that is filled with traps and challenges. It could have gone very wrong at any
moment, but it didn't and I think that is a testament to the passion and drive of my actors and designers.

I wrote in my directors note that there is a responsibility of the storyteller. There is something sacred about sharing stories, especially when we are telling the stories of actual people. The people of the Fen are no different than anyone else. The issues that are central in the play are central in all of our communities. I think we were able to honor what was universal in these people, and capture the struggle that we all face in trying to gain control over our lives.
Director's Note:

What is the responsibility of a storyteller? We all seem to have a need to pass something along, ask questions, challenge assumptions, shift perspectives with our stories. Why is this such a basic need? Since encountering Caryl Churchill's *Fen*, I've been thinking a lot about stories and what they all mean. I've been thinking about what our responsibility is to these people in this very real place: the Fens, or wetlands, of East Anglia in England. A place of isolation, harsh weather, grueling work, and poverty. In the fall of 1982 Caryl Churchill, and a group of theatre artists went to the Fenlands to learn about this community for two weeks. They met the people; talked to them; lived with them; saw their work; and learned their history. And now almost thirty years later we are a new group of theatre artists taking on the task of capturing the story of this fascinating community of people. It is a story that looks all too familiar today.

In our modern world of corporate globalization, who is really in control? Who has the power? Is it the people who live and work in a particular location, or is it someone removed? What happens when the resources of an indigenous people are co-opted by outsiders? What imprisons us? Is it a larger system, or are we ourselves our own worst oppressors? Is happiness too great an ambition, or must we simply trudge through this life working for something bigger than ourselves?

The process of working on this play has been a little like walking through a door just to find another door, and after walking through that there's another, and so on. Like any great playwright Caryl Churchill is asking more questions than providing answers. She is implicating no one and everyone. She seems to be saying: These are the people here in this little place, in all their complexities, yearnings, and pain... does that look familiar? And then - Why?
And so here we are almost thirty years later telling many people's stories. Some are the field workers in the early 80's whose words are being spoken tonight, some are the ghosts of the past, some are the words of all impoverished people, and some are the words that we all find ourselves saying over and over as we ask ourselves if we should reach out in the dark for the hope that something better is maybe within reach.
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