

The Corsair

Katherine Chiyeko Naka  
(Katie)

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## Preface

I'd like to start (for anyone who might be reading this) by saying that this paper is written in a casual voice. Trust that the answers and the observations are all there, but this is the way I talked about the show throughout the process, so I think it is fitting that this will also be the way I write the paper. I don't feel the need to tart this up for one last hoorah in the Columbia University paper-trail machine. The Corsair, was an original piece and therefore I can only cite my production and the process I went through to create it. I don't know if this is atypical, but I thought that I would mention it right here at the top.

That being said...

## Part 1

*Why this play now? What specific questions does this play provoke?*

I chose The Corsair as my thesis for many reasons. The fact that it's not a play was one of the foremost and it cuts right to the core of some of my largest theatrical proclivities. It broke my heart to tell my well-intentioned, very handsome and rugged looking playwriting teacher from undergrad that no; I didn't think I was going to direct “plays”. There is something happening in live performance right now on a larger scale, and unfortunately I don't think it has very much to do with traditional playwrights.

I considered doing Sarah Ruhl's Eurydice for a second and when I vetted it past my brother (trusted advisor and video designer) his response was, “What do you want me

to do with this?” And I told him, “I don’t know, where do you see video in this? Is there anything exciting about this to you?” “Nothing” he said. “I mean it just seems like it’s been done already, right? There’s the idea, the story, and the way it looks- and it’s all right there. I don’t know what to do with this.”

What I like about working with other artists (mainly my brother) is that they’re not beholden to any high statutes of theater. Chris isn’t going to do a piece because it’s a good piece of theatre; he’s going to do it because it’s a good piece of art. And I think I’d rather make good art than good theatre. I think too much boring, mediocre work gets made in the name of “good theatre” and none of it ever stops to ask a question about where we are, who we are, and what we need today. I feel like good art always asks those questions.

Back to Sarah Ruhl. I realized that Eurydice could only ever wear a new idea, it could only ever be a hook to hang a concept on, and therefore it would never truly be mine. It’s not that I don’t accept that there is an art to making good theatre from pre-existing scripts- but there is a quality of repetition and replication that I have simply grown tired of. Neither of my stabs at Pinter or Tennessee Williams would ever be allowed by the estates to be produced, subsequently I wanted to let go of the notion of laying my vision over someone else’s with my thesis.

What I needed to find was something that I could make myself from scratch. It would be new, never before seen or tested, and built from the ground up. I knew I had to have text, but I also wanted a good story. I didn’t find it a satisfactory representation of myself or my studies to work with a text so abstract that all meaning had to be applied. I wanted a writer, just not a playwright.

Individuality has also become very important to me and I didn't want to make something that looked or felt like it could have been made by anyone else. I always want to be a director with a signature. I don't see the point in making work that could just as easily belong to someone else. This is infinitely hard to do well, but I find it's a nice thing to struggle with and I always felt good when my work was identified with me in school.

So getting back to "why this play now", I picked The Corsair because it had potential. It could be, and hopefully was, something unique. It was more than a play with an idea hung on it- it was the idea itself. I chose this project because it's what I would want to see.

In terms of what specific questions it asks, that's a two-parter. There were the questions that it asked in terms of form and structure: could it be done, would it make sense? There were a lot of technical issues to mull over and conceptual notions to struggle with. I will cover these in subsequent sections of the paper.

The second question it asked is a very personal one for me. I think the story asks (and answers in one of the simplest and most beautiful ways I've ever seen): what is love, really? (Very apropos for Anne, right?) In The Corsair, love is not faithfulness, love is not eternal, love is not infallible, and love certainly does not conquer all. The Corsair shows our faults and failings in love, but it somehow still makes love beautiful. To me, the work highlights some of the few real truths I have found in life. Love is amorphous. You can love two people at once equally and fully and love can disappear or be thrown away- this precious, precious, impossible thing- you can lose it in an instant.

On an even MORE personal level- I was falling in love when I decided to do The Corsair. I was talking to the person I was falling in love with when Byron first came up. For several months, we talked of pirates incessantly. We wanted to be pirates and we did all kinds of outrageous and shocking things under the banners of freedom, extremity, and of course- love. But before The Corsair had even started rehearsals, this love had run its course and was fading away, left on the dock while the project took off. So one of the questions I was asking on a personal level as I was developing the script was, “Can you live like this? Will love conquer reason?”

My personal answer was a swift and definitive no, but working through Byron’s answer was much more complex and in some ways more rewarding. In both cases, the question was undoubtedly worth the journey. I think that this is also something that the play asks- what do you gain from living? And conversely, what is lost when you allow yourself to let go?

## Part 2

*How will the work on this play challenge your directorial skills and abilities?*

There were two major challenges I anticipated with The Corsair; one was handling the text and the second was fabricating and clearly executing the concept. I am actually fairly comfortable understanding, expanding, and presenting heightened text, so clarifying the story and communicating the language to the actors was relatively straight forward. I knew it would be a struggle for the audience to understand the text, but I felt like if I went down the rabbit hole of finding total clarity for a laymen audience, that would be all we’d end up with.

One of my weakest points as a director is clarity in the face of confused actors. I revert very quickly to investigating what they should be feeling, which is totally a dead end because if they aren't feeling it, chances are I can't explain them into it. The text challenged me in this arena many times. I specifically recall towards the end of the process, working through the second of the very large scenes between Conrad & Gulnare and I just felt like we had hit a wall with Sarah's capabilities and range as an actor. She is fabulous and can do a lot of things without asking twice, but there were degrees of subtlety and complexity to the scene that I wanted that we weren't getting. In a situation where the actor is doing all they know how to do- and it's not enough- I still struggle with how to get what I need. I've become more comfortable with saying what I want, which I recognize now as an acceptable stance to take as a director (though not one I prefer). I've also tested out methods I've learned from Anne- sort of abstracting what I want to see and giving the actor shapes or speeds to work with. I've found though that those tactics, when not employed with highly skilled physical practitioners, can fall just as flat.

In dealing with the concept, I really wanted to push the limits of what I thought was acceptable and possible. I made a conscious effort not to be concerned with making sure that "everyone got it". I wanted to take risks and be as truly experimental as I could. As mentioned in Part 1- I didn't see the value in doing anything that wasn't pushing towards something undiscovered. Looking at this now, it was wonderfully in line with the spirit of The Corsair and pirates in general.

In some ways, I knew more what I didn't want to see, then exactly what I did. I figured that I would find the things I wanted along the way if I stayed vigilant against what I didn't want to see. I didn't want to just present the story/text traditionally (pirate

hats, parrots, eye patches, proscenium arch, realistic looking ship, etc), so instantaneously it begged the question, “If we’re not actual pirates, who are we?” Answering this question was simple in theory, but very hard to show onstage. More than anything, I wanted to hit the mark of allowing the audience an inkling of what was going on, without really telling them. I’ve seen lots of pieces that suffered for this and The Corsair really tested my ability to engage an audience. I never wanted to create something that was so abstract that it was unpleasant to watch or be a part of, yet I would be mortified to present something boring and straight-forward.

Something I go back and forth on constantly was the decision to be in the piece. I can say now from the perspective of being several months away from the project that I am glad I did it and it added something to the experience (both for myself and the audience) that was unique, interesting, and that we would have been unable to achieve otherwise. A director’s thesis is a funny thing because as you are watching this piece, even before it starts- from the second you decide to attend I imagine- and the director is on your mind. I always feel like I am going to “see” them, but then you never really do. I guess you hope that you see them through the work, and maybe I’m just an old hack in this way, but I thought it would be interesting for the audience if they could actually “see” me. I envisioned the whole piece from top to bottom as a reflection of who I am, so why would I want to sit quietly in the audience or a behind a table during the shows? It didn’t make sense to me. There was something very clear to me about, “This is my thesis. I should stand in front of the audience. They should be able to see me.”

On a side note- I guess after reading that paragraph- I was also very onto the fact that The Corsair was a “director’s thesis”. As much I think I did get pulled into the

marketing machine and as much as I envisioned (and still do) the project carrying on in another iteration after February, at the very heart of it I always saw it as a Columbia University exercise, as opposed to a piece of downtown theater. It was the “final experiment” and I just happened to be lucky enough to share it with a few others.

Back to being in the show though, I do remember and know for certain that many times during the process I lamented the decision and decreed with total honesty that I never should have cast myself. On a very practical level- I just couldn't watch the parts I was in. Which is so obvious, but I think this became more of an issue due to the complexity of the text. It wasn't just that I needed to watch to make sure people were hitting their cues, it was that I needed to watch, listen, and respond moment to moment on whether or not the story was clear. The opening sequence clearly suffered from not having a dedicated directorial eye trained on it every day, every time we ran it. I remember being backstage during our first dress rehearsal struggling to get my costume on while trying to listen intently to the other actors, repeating my notes so I could remember them because I had nothing to write them on, while I should have been focusing on my lines and entrance for the scene I was about to do. I filmed and watched my own work so I could give notes on it, but I should have just been taping everything I couldn't watch and reviewing it every night like a football coach.

Looking back on it, I guess all I can say is: Lesson learned. And if I had the opportunity to go back again- weighing the pros and cons- I probably would still chose to be in it.

Finally, in terms of challenges, there were just things that I loved about the story that got lost in the shuffle of practicality. In the future, I will always stop in the

beginning and the middle of a process to ask myself if I am showing what I love about the piece. Not, “am I effectively working on the text” or “Am I clearly illustrating the concept?” but simply, “Am I showing what I love about this piece?” I think in the end, if I had worried more about that, and less about the other stuff- it would have been a truer piece of expression and art- and less of a “thesis”. Which I’m not mad about- after all- it was a thesis.

### Part 3

*Describe in depth your preparation.*

The first thing I did was read the poem several times, which was no easy task as I believe that of all the designers, advisors, and actors that I sent it to- I might have been the only one that got through it multiple times. Which makes sense- if anyone was to do it- it should have been the director, but it’s still a wicked hard piece of text to slog through.

In my second and third readings I started mapping out the actions of each Canto and also looking for sections that were “un-actable” or repetitive. I also looked for flow and rhythm, anything that I could apply to the design that would help the audience feel the structure of poem, as I found it to be structured quite elegantly and effectively. I tried to cut as little as possible as I really wanted to struggle headlong with the density of the text. My thinking was that the struggle would force us to unlock clarity. If we pared it down to something simple, my fear was that it would lose everything about it that makes it “epic” and the scale of it was one of the things that appealed most to me.

After really investigating the structure, I started to break it down into a script. I typed the whole thing out from scratch (which unfortunately resulted in many auto-

correct typos), but it seemed the only way to get it into a workable format. I also used this process to discover who the characters were and how many voices were feasible to hear. I didn't end up assigning every line, but I knew which parts should be delivered by the same actor, and where we were going to change voices. I also formulated where narration was necessary which helped me envision what the scenes would look like (how many people on stage, etc).

One of the biggest parts of my preparation for any show is auditory, and discovering the Dan Deacon album "America" in August 2012 was one of my most important pieces of prep. I really can't even describe how I came to the conclusion that this was going to be my music- I just knew- before I even heard the record. All I knew was that Dan Deacon had a new album coming out at the end of the summer and that this was going to be score for my show.

I guess I can say why I chose Dan Deacon in general- if you've never been to one of his shows- he is at the same time both deftly seriously and completely irreverent. His music is both moving and genius, and yet silly and somewhat straight forward. A Dan Deacon show is more of an immersive theatrical event than anything I have seen since that trend entered the mainstream. Under his instruction the audience will divide in half, run in circles, disperse through a park, compete in challenges, and generally- just rock the fuck out. There is anticipation and danger to his show, but also the sense that we're all in it together. Essentially if I could bottle anything and call it, The Corsair- it would be the essence of a Dan Deacon show. I thought at the very least maybe I could channel some of that by using the music, even if I couldn't directly emulate the experience.

Once I had the music, as I have with all my shows, I just listened to it all the time on the train. Hours of dedicated listening where I could just really sink into the music and the story and allow the two things to come together. Certain songs would bring certain imagery to mind and suddenly I knew, “This is the music that scores the opening” or “This is the music that scores the jail scene.” Some of it came instantaneously and some of it didn’t come till I was very, very, very, deep in the process. If there was a spot where I knew we needed a song- I would go back to the record and suddenly a possibility I never knew existed would float to the surface.

Finally though, the biggest and probably smartest thing I did to prepare for this project was casting. I met with every actor individually to show them the text, talk about what I envisioned the process would be, rattle on about my various half-cooked concepts, and get any reactions that they had. I had absolutely no desire to have auditions for The Corsair. It was a passion project and I wanted people I was passionate and confident in and this meant only casting people I knew. I knew the process was going to be hard and I knew there was no room on the project for anyone who wasn’t totally up for the challenge in a personal way. In a way I wanted people who were going to work on it as hard as I was and people who wanted to solve the problems and make it work as I much as I did. I didn’t need anyone that was only there to meet Anne or Brian, or to pad their resume, or to try and make connections.

I suppose an argument can be made that part of my job as a director is to walk into a room of strangers, people who might be there for various reasons, and sell them on the project- to MAKE them into the passionate, personally invested individuals that I want. So, maybe I padded the deck a little, but what I think I learned was; why wouldn’t

you? I wanted and needed people that were going to trust me, I had easy access to these people, and in a no-pay student production; I just knew the chances of finding people from Backstage or Playbill were slim.

Most of the work that I admire is created by like-minded individuals who know each other and are working together for the joy and challenge of creating something together. I knew that that was what I needed for The Corsair and I couldn't waste time trying to get people to work the way I like to work- I just needed people who already LIKE to work on the fly, try things out, throw things away, create from scratch, all in a relaxed "Katie Naka" way. The care that I took with the casting might not have been readily evident to the audience; all I know is that if I hadn't taken the care- the disaster that most likely would have ensued certainly would have been evident.

Once I had most of the cast on board, I scheduled three workshops before the holidays, before rehearsals officially started. I never had the full cast at the workshops, but rather different combinations each time. I chose which sections of the text we'd work on ahead of time. I looked for selections that were either incredibly active or completely passive. I wanted to see what was possible in terms of speaking and "doing" at the same time and also what we could create out of the expository text that only dealt with thoughts and feelings.

We'd start each workshop by sitting on the floor and reading the text. We'd go through once and then talk about what we thought was going on, what it meant, and we'd look up any words or phrases we didn't know. Then we'd read it again with an eye towards the things we had just learned/processed and if there were still questions or new thoughts, we'd sit and talk some more. If we thought we knew what it was, then we'd get

on our feet and I'd stage something and let the actors play around inside it with the text for several runs- finding what worked, what didn't, and constantly incorporating new ideas and things we would find.

I also played around with music and silent actions in the workshop. I am proud to report that a lot of the opening sequence of sailing was developed in the workshop and stayed with us all the way through the production. I tried to make the workshops as open as possible. I wanted to try out everyone's ideas and listen to all the questions that they could come up with.

The workshop was also crucial for me in figuring out that I should probably just be in the show. I had thought about being in the piece and I probably will think about being in every piece I ever do. I'm beginning to accept that this is just as much a part of my process as anything else. Sometimes the best way in for me is to think about how I would play Conrad, or Brick, or Maggie, etc. In the workshop there always came a point where I just had to get up and do it. I'd be circling around something- a moment, an action, choreography- and if I just got out of my chair and joined the process- I found it was so much easier to shape it into what I wanted. I think it's important to note that at this point I was still hoping to find a suitable woman for the part I ended up playing and I was only ever considering being part of the ensemble.

#### Part 4

*How will you work with the design and dramaturgy team?*

I guess I'll start out, just to get it out of the way, by saying that the choice to not use a dramaturge was a carefully considered one. I am thoroughly intrigued with what I have learned about dramaturgy while at Columbia and for other types of projects in the

future I would love nothing more than to collaborate with a really good practitioner of the art. But from day one to closing I really honestly didn't think we needed one. I thought several times about setting up meetings to talk about The Corsair with classmates, but at the end of the day I really didn't have any questions to ask or conversations to have that I wasn't already having to wonderful, fruitful ends with the designers and actors. Again, I took the directive of creating my "director's thesis" very personally, which meant that I was willing, able, and wanting to answer all the questions myself. I wanted to do the research myself, I wanted to create the structure and resonances myself, and I wanted to edit technically, verbally, and visually myself. In retrospect I believe the decision to not use a dramaturge was one of my first strong editorial choices and first important steps towards creating the piece the way I envisioned it.

Moving on to design- I didn't have any back up plan if I couldn't get Dan (set designer) and Yuki (lighting designer). The project would not have been the same, the experience would not have been the same- having Dan and Yuki was probably about 50% of what made this whole endeavor worthwhile. Just as the casting was done in a very personal way, I knew I needed these designers because of the care and personal investment with which I knew they would approach the work and the fact that they accept and appreciate the way I work.

From working with Dan and Yuki in class at NYU I knew them to be not only talented craftsmen, but also concept oriented artists who weren't afraid to tear into complex designs intellectually as well as aesthetically. None of us were out to simply paint a pretty picture; rather we worked on making choices that suited our environment, our text, our story, and our concept. Every visual choice served very clear initiatives that

we outlined through our design meetings. It's no accident that hours of work and discussion lent itself to an almost overly simplistic design. If The Corsair was fashion, I wanted it to be the impeccably tailored sheath dress or perfect pant that blows your mind with its simplicity and allows you to see it and whatever genius it might hold in its barest form. No sequins, no feathers, no ruffles, or 100 yard trains- no distractions.

In terms of sets and lights I really felt like we were working together, experimenting together, and building something together. One of the pivotal moments of the whole process was when Dan asked me, "When you walk into the room, do you want it to feel like you are somewhere else? Or do you want it to feel like you are in 3LD?" To which I answered, "I want it to feel like you are in 3LD, but then I want it to be able to go to other places and come back." This became kind of our benchmark for the experience of watching The Corsair.

At this point you might be asking yourself, what about costumes? Yes. What *about* costumes?

To be fair, I think that Glenna and I ended up in a really great place with the look of the show but there were two really big things that held us back during the process. First of all, much in the same way that I would think about a dramaturge every once and awhile and decide that in actuality I was just making those decisions myself- I found that I did the same thing with the costumes. If I wanted a costume designer at all, I wanted someone with the same skill set that I valued in Dan and Yuki- someone that could take in the heavy elements of the concept and make them appear simple and light. Someone that I could say, "pirates" to and they would immediately take in all the established tropes, throw them away, and start thinking about something more interesting.

I also just didn't SEE costumes for The Corsair. As I mentioned before- I knew what I didn't want- but I was hoping for the process to enlighten me as to what I did. On the one hand I think I got a little spoiled (truly spoiled and maybe a little lazy) with getting to pick my own costumes for all the shows I had previously done at Columbia and on the other hand, for some reason- I truly just could not figure out why it mattered. This story was about so many things and "pirates" meant so many things to me- but none of it manifested in clothing. If I had had more time and less pressure from Dan and Yuki- I might have been able to articulate this gut feeling into something meaningful that moved our concept further. But at the time- Dan and Yuki thought it was wise to bring on someone for costumes and I couldn't in good conscience take on another responsibility and this is how Glenna ended up on project.

Glenna turned out to be exactly what I feared most in bringing on a costume designer. When I said "pirates" she thought "pirates"- like *Pirates of the Caribbean*, eye patch wearing, peg-leg having, puffy shirt wearing pirates and no matter how many times I tried to coax her in another direction- she could not see anything else. I will cop to appreciating the challenge and it definitely forced us to nail down the concept in much simpler terms than we ever would have left to our own devices, but I truly was hoping to have someone who I could collaborate with, as opposed to someone I constantly had to steer away from cliffs.

I will discuss the concept further in the ensuing parts of the paper- suffice to say that after the initial round of designs featuring Tri-Corner hats and puffy shirts was shot down- I sat with her to try and articulate more what I wanted, which turned into

essentially a lecture on conceptual art and abstraction that finished with her saying, “Maybe I just don’t understand theatre.”

Glenna really needed the characters to “be” somebody. She could accept that maybe they weren’t traditional pirates, but if they weren’t that, were they bankers? Were they trendy inhabitants of Tribeca? Were they homeless people (the classic under-grad answer to everything)? I tried to explain that to me, they were closer to themselves than they were to any “thing” that we could signify with dress. I had initially thought that everyone just wears tee-shirts, jeans, and swords and we’d just be done with it.

Of course she had many reasons why my tee-shirts and jeans idea would fall flat, would confuse people, would contrast poorly with the set and lights. Her response to the idea that the characters were just themselves (the actors) coming to the space to perform the show was to make them “LARPERS” (Live Action Role Play participants) who inevitably dress like traditional pirates- but truly in an even tackier, Halloween costume way. This ended with me essentially forbidding anyone from mentioning the word “Larper” in a production meeting for The Corsair.

Outside of the frustration, it is actually really interesting to butt up against a problem like this- as I mentioned before it forced us to articulate things far more clearly than we ever would have. But also just having to work with someone who sees theater so completely differently than I do was an experience worth having. For instance, I admire The Wooster Group, and when Scott Shepard wears a strap-on and a kimono in Vieux Carre, it’s evoking a mood, making a statement on behalf of the text, but it’s certainly not because it’s in the character description. When Reggie Watts does an amazing piece of theater, transports you to another world, investigates domesticity, film, and media...who

is he? What does he wear? I don't know. He's Reggie Watts- he wears whatever Reggie Watts is wearing...that's kind of how I think about costume design. I don't know. I did not know this about myself before I started working on The Corsair, but apparently I don't get traditional costume design on non-traditional work. Who knew?

Anyway, that was Glenna. So essentially I let Dan and Yuki run wild and I had to watch Glenna like a hawk or we would have had eye patches and genie pants or something. Which brings me to my video designer- my brother- Chris Naka (most likely rocking an eye patch and Genie Pants as we speak).

Working with my brother is one of most intense, rewarding, challenging, and amazing things I have been able to do on this earth. I strive to make theatre as art and he has all the theory and aesthetic practice that I never got. A typical conversation between us will go something like, "I've probably sent you this before, and God save institutions of higher learning if you haven't run into relational aesthetics during your education at Columbia." To which I reply, "Send it. Please."

To our credit here at the old CU Theatre School- his work is cold, possesses nothing phenomenological, and requires no feedback, no pulse in the room- all things I cherish and have learned at Columbia. What he gives me on my projects however is the Artistic eye that I lack. Like being able to look at Eurydice and say, "why would you do this?" He asks good questions, he makes me prove myself, and when he finally surrenders and idea- it's never anything I could have come up with in a million years. He asks, "What does it mean?" in an honest, invested way that I feel a good portion of the theater community either can't or won't.

My work with Chris on The Corsair started like it did with everyone else- with a pitch (which he subsequently tore to shreds) and it ended (after several hours long “conversations” that bored his wife to tears) with me imploring him to just tell me if there was anything about what I was doing that was even remotely interesting to him. What came out of that conversation was a sprawling mediated work that would have been too complex to pull off unless it was our full time job. Where we went from there was to a severely pared down 5 video version that to us explored the world that I built around the play- who these people were outside the room and why they came here. I described it to the actors as, “This is what’s on your iPad.”

Anyway. I don’t need to recount the entire history of what we did. You saw it. I love most of my designers because they are smart, bold, and think outside the box. I want them to push me, challenge me, and share in a commitment to the work. This is how I encourage them to work and this is how I work with them. Boom.

#### Parts 5 & 6

*What is the audience’s relationship to the event?  
In what world is the play taking place?*

I am combining these two sections because for the purposes of The Corsair, they go hand in hand.

The play takes place between worlds and I wanted it the experience of watching it to reflect the reasons why we do/see/love theater. We love transformation and play; we love a journey and a story. Sometimes we can take the journey ourselves; sometimes we need a conduit like going to the theater to experience a journey. I wanted the world of The Corsair (for both actors and audience) to be marked by a journey.

The play takes place in our normal, everyday, world and had two levels to peel back before we even get to the story that Byron told. After this, it inevitably wanders into the world of The Corsair, and has the ability to travel back and forth into our world. The first level was “me” and the notion of “this is my thesis” and acknowledging that. So the first thing you see is Katie Naka on the set, as if to say, “I made this, let’s see what happens...” The second level was the arrival of the players and the subsequent physical and mental set up for the show. When this is complete, the “show” finally starts with the launching of the ship.

The actors, or “the crew” are playing the characters, but they never are fully saying to anyone, “I am this character”. Anne described it as, “a tribe, playing a tribe.” They always remained partially themselves. This is what irked me about the LARPING comparison- yes- larpers are a group of people who get dressed up and pretend to be another group of people in a fantasy setting. And you could very easily say that that was what was happening in The Corsair. But then you could also say that all actors are larpers and all shows are just “live action role play”. I wanted there to be something magical, ritualistic, and in some ways desperate about what they were doing. I think I liked some of the athletic clothing that Glenna eventually ended up using for costuming because it spoke to a discipline and a physical rigor that encapsulated what I wanted it to feel like to be participating in this experience. And this feeling is very different than anything you get from larping.

What ended up being so funny and interesting about this conceit though was that I realized- probably WAY too late- that within this format, we actually didn’t need an audience at all. If the idea was that a group of friends get together to tell this story

because it moves them, effects them, keeps them whole in some deep way- then they're not "performing" it for an audience- they're doing it for each other. Late in rehearsals I felt this and was actually totally pleased by it because at the end of a solid run of the play- we, as the crew- felt a sense of accomplishment. We had done the thing we set out to do. We had told the story and some of it went the way we wanted, some of it didn't, but we got through it each night, talked about it- pondered on it- learned things- slapped each other on the back and went home. It was great. BUT, when the first "audience" members started showing up during tech, I realized, "Holy Shit- we could do this show without an audience every day and we would be just as fulfilled." I hadn't built in a need for the audience; in fact I had done the opposite and made them totally obsolete.

So it was upon this realization that I decided that the audience could serve as our potential recruits. We were doing the show for them (and for ourselves) with the knowledge that if one of them came up to us afterwards and said, "Hey man, that was awesome, is there a way I can sign up", that we'd potentially enlist them in the crew. I allowed the actors to have certain areas of direct address, I told them they could single out people in the opening if they wanted to and go talk to them, and with all their speeches and narration to the audience- just to welcome them in as much as possible.

I will admit that this was kind of a last minute solution to a problem I had been slowly, unconsciously creating for 4 weeks of rehearsal. On a less intentional and more visceral level though, I think the proximity of the audience to the actors created a very basic physical relationship that I was quite happy with. It was a very "in your face" show and I liked the intimacy of it. I liked being able to watch Andrei Serban read the program during my scene, that kind of thing.

Audience relationship is a weird thing. There is a part of me that goes, “The audience’s relationship to the piece? How about this- they’re the audience?” And isn’t that enough? Maybe my short-on-time solution of casting them as future recruits didn’t work, but I would hope that at the very least- because they showed up- that they were fellow adventurers on the make for a good journey.

### Part 7

*What are the social and political relationships between the characters?*

The most important relationships in “The Corsair” are as follows:

- The love between Conrad and Medora
- The love between Conrad and Gulnare
- The love between Seyd and Gulnare
- The love between The Corsairs and Conrad

Each version of love is different, each version is flawed, and each is beautiful.

You can say a lot of things about Lord George Byron, but he knew how to get your blood flowing and he knew intimately and completely the full range of the human heart. I was initially moved by the story because it says love is complicated and erratic. One of my favorite things about all the relationships in the play is that no one is right, and no one is wrong.

The Corsairs follow Conrad and would die for him, but they also fear him and know him to be a villain. Much of the first canto is spent asking the question of why men follow other men. What is the power that one man wields over another? Must it always be that “many shall labor for the one”? Throughout the band, there are those that love

and trust Conrad completely and there are those that question him constantly, but neither side dares to oppose him.

Within the group of players, (the people that portray The Corsairs in the framework of the play), we also tried to create different levels of involvement and “love” for the game, as it were. The character that Zach played was a really interesting take on someone who LOVES being a pirate and LOVES playing the game so much that he’d see it through no matter what happened (always the first one to suggest a new course of action, and the last one to speak in any scene). But his corsair persona was the most frequent to question Conrad’s leadership. I didn’t take these kinds of contradictions too far, but was pleased when they manifested.

I saw Conrad and Medora as the quintessential long-term, suffering relationship; two people who love each other dearly, but still can’t seem to make it work. For me, there was some lie I was fed either by Disney or television or something that love is what makes things work. When you grow up and start to experience love for yourself- you see quickly that you can love the shit out of someone, but there is a whole myriad of other things you also have to do. I thought that Conrad and Medora embodied this struggle in a timeless, simple way that I have rarely encountered anywhere else. Byron knew. It’s not that you don’t love them- but sometimes love is not enough.

Conrad and Gulare enact another well worn trope- a love that develops out of a common respect, a shared stress or adventure; an unexpected love that will most likely be insanely passionate, but short lived due to its impracticality. In this whole world of bandits, robbers, murderers, and men- I was thrilled by the fact that Byron let’s Gulnare do the heavy lifting. In a time and place where everyone proclaims to be tougher and

wilder than the next- Gulnare is the only one we see commit red-handed, pre-meditated, sucker-punching, murder. And she doesn't shrug it off or revel in it like some Tarantino heroine; she is haunted and destroyed by it. It is her bravery and her subsequent suffering that finally makes Conrad love her. You see her desire to live in direct conflict with her desire to be good. I feel that as someone who had fought that battle, Conrad comes to admire her and love her; though in a completely different way than he loves Medora (whose love comes from a purer place and requires no proving).

The most surprising and wonderful relationship I found in the piece though was that of Seyd and Gulnare. The scene in which he realizes that she is trying to trick him to save Conrad is one of the meatiest, complicated, and wonderful scenes I have ever worked on. Sometimes I would stop when we were rehearsing it and just marvel at the fact that it's not really a play because I know playwrights that would give their index finger to be able to write a scene like that. The only reason that the Seyd/Gulnare relationship is interesting at all is because Byron chooses to let you see that Seyd really loves her.

Seyd's love, while very different from Conrad's love, is still a real thing. Again, Byron paints a searing, simple, and honest portrait of a man who never had to work for sex, who never talks about his feelings, never thinks about other people's feelings, and probably didn't even know he was in love until he was losing her. Seyd could have been a very simple, two-dimensional heel if it weren't for this one gut-wrenching scene. The power of this scene eventually catapulted us into one of our most striking moments of cross-over between the worlds, where Dave (playing Seyd) chooses to react to his murder

by charging across the stage out of character almost to demand that someone correct what's been done.

I wanted the power of these relationships to bleed over into “the real world” and this is how we came up with the scenario that unfolds in the framing scenes. You see that I (Medora) have a relationship with Brendan (Conrad) that exists outside of the text. By the time the play is over, my hope was that you can see that this real relationship was manipulated and damaged by actions in the play. Then you see Sarah (Gulnare) and Brendan in the video together, signifying that whatever The Corsair was for this group of people, it is now over. To me, it answered the question, “Why is this night different than any other? Why are we here tonight?” Tonight is the night that love runs wild- just like it does in the text- and destroys the world we know.

What I think the story does so well- truly and I can't say it enough- better than anything else I have ever encountered, is give you no heroes. This is why I thought it could handle such a strong concept and support contemporary characters as well as classical ones. Everyone was right, and everyone was wrong. And it's just another thing that I LOVE to pieces about the play- you expect good guys and bad guys, Byron makes you think that there will be good guys and bad guys. But once you get into it you realize, “Oh wait, this guy is kind of an ass, but he acts like he's doing the right thing...but what is the right thing here? And this woman is treated badly so of course she should leave, but oh wait- should she murder someone in their sleep? And this guy is a total creep, but oh my God, wow- she really hurt him and I guess his love was as real as anyone else's.”

The relationships had consequences, what relationships don't? And yet in our traditional love stories, it always seems like consequence is a punishment for deeds done

poorly in love. When I was first reading the poem, I had to go back and re-read the last 10 pages because I couldn't believe what had happened. The fact that I wanted Conrad to get away with it, made me question my own beliefs and to feel the weight of some of my own decisions. Who are we to think that that kind of behavior is not only acceptable, but perhaps laudable? Why didn't I think that some consequence would be waiting for him at home? Why didn't HE think that some consequence would be waiting for him at home? Maybe not for everyone, but for me- the ending was shocking and I give Byron huge amounts of credit for that.

### Part 8

*What skills do you require from the actors and how will you discern them?*

What I needed most were actors who were comfortable with heightened text and actors comfortable pushing their boundaries. I also wanted people who were comfortable physically and wanted to run, jump, and play on our awesome set. As I mentioned before, I padded the deck by not holding auditions and by knowing the capabilities of my team ahead of time.

One of the actresses (who I consistently get the most praise for) was actually NOT a big classics person and had a pretty hard time learning her lines. To her credit- she never really had issues making sense of the text or being clear (I think she is one of those people who could read the phonebook and it would be interesting), but it did take some dedicated drilling time on the behalf of our ASM to get her off book.

Again, I wish that I knew more ways to plumb the depths with an actor. I think though that I am still a pretty young director and they are without question young actors and some of this will come in time. I did go after a couple of them with more fervor than

I ever have before (with good results- Andrei Serban method). There were definitely times though when I just looked up at the ceiling and went, “this is the thing I can’t do.” When they’re really doing what they believe is right and it’s not what you want, I find that a hard place to start negotiating.

All in all though, I have very few complaints and I can’t say enough how much of a difference the casting made. If we were dealing with some of my other experiences at Columbia- this section would be filled with trials and tribulations. I set myself up for success with these actors and I was exceedingly pleased with their work and the process because of it.

#### Part 9

*How will your work on this production reflect your training at Columbia?*

My training at Columbia has made me more rigorous and oriented to detail than I ever cared to be in my adult life (this is a good thing). If I pulled this show off in any successful capacity, it is as direct result of my training at Columbia as I know for a fact that this is not a show I would have A) chosen and B) been able to pull off three years ago. Something that I learned at Columbia that I know my future children and students will HATE hearing is, “Hard work is not a euphemism.”

More than that though, I feel and hope that The Corsair has put me on a path towards work that is right for me. One of the largest struggles I had at Columbia, even if it wasn’t out in the open every day, was one of acceptance. It was not only for my work to be accepted by my peers, but also for me to accept myself as an artist and see that my ideas are valid.

Truly, I was so ignorant and so green when I started that I probably spent a year thinking that come hell or high water, what I needed to do was figure out how to direct plays well enough that I could work in regional theater. I didn't know what else there was to do. Slowly and even accidentally, as the first year is supposed to do, I saw that the choices I made for myself were the most interesting choices I was making. No matter how hard I tried to accomplish what I thought I was *supposed* to be doing, the biggest successes were the choices I made without access to any expectations. The biggest thing I accomplished at Columbia was unlocking a voice and learning to trust it. I can safely say that I took more risks with The Corsair than I have with any other piece and this is something I could not have done without my training in the last three years.

I felt extremely validated by a response from Michael Counts, who said of the videos that Chris created, "When I saw the videos I thought, 'okay, I know who this is. I know a young person who gets it made this.'" If nothing else, that was an achievement because I want my work to look like it was made today by someone who lives in the world that I live in. Something else that Michael said when we were working together was, "Make the show that you want to see." Which seems simple enough, but it is actually so hard to do with all the outside forces of the world pushing down on you. What if the show you want to see isn't marketable? What if the common theater-going audience won't "get it"? What if it's loud? Or simple? Or too complicated? But what I've realized is how, how, how, HOW am I supposed to do anything else and have it possess any kind of truth?

Moving forward into the real world I know I have a tool box- an amazing gift that (grimace) is probably worth the \$100,000. Personally though, the tool box was always a

given and what I am far more surprised, grateful, and blessed to be walking away with is a voice that was cultivated and supported for three solid years. It's not something I think all my classmates found and I am thankful to have realized early enough in the training not only that this was a possible goal for my studies, but also that it was perhaps the greatest gift the last three years could afford me.

The truest reflection of my training at Columbia, to me, would be if my thesis had a voice. Maybe it wasn't clear yet and maybe it wasn't totally understood, but I would want you to see me struggling with it and I would want you to hear it calling out. My hope is that The Corsair had such a voice.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I loved my thesis and I think the people working on it loved it too and I am proud of that. I found a way of working that is uniquely mine and I created something completely new and original that was a successful thesis project and didn't try too hard to be anything else. I experimented and took risks and created something I could get behind with body and soul. And at the end of the day of days, on Saturday night as I was sitting on the cold concrete floor at 3LD watching the final moments of the show unfurl like so many sails on the dark blue seas...I realized that I had to be at work on Monday.

I don't know why I am including this (maybe it's because I am finishing this at my desk at work), but I think there is some poetic justice to the coda of the hard working grad student walking into the hard won job. There are Columbia master's degree students who expect a high paying job in their field when they graduate and I have to stop and think what it says about too many things to list here that as MFA students, our most

common and expected path seems to be dodging the loans as long as possible while we continue to glut the market as assistants and interns. I think I am writing this simply to propose another path to anyone who might happen to read this. I never spent a moment in grad school thinking I would do anything when I came out besides work in my field. I made this as much a priority as the artistic integrity of my shows, and I was lucky enough by the time I completed my thesis to have secured a job. That is my final, FINAL reflection on my training at Columbia. I suppose this was a personal training, but maybe one that I wish more MFA students practiced.

So finally, I'll repeat here something that I said to Anne shortly after The Corsair closed, something akin to, "While sometimes I wish that I'd been allowed time to process it all, I think that the fact that the transition happened so immediately, might be life's way of telling me that I HAVE processed it...now just go do it."

Katie Naka  
MFA Directing, 2013