BABY FAT: ACT I
MAKING A PUNK ROCK OPERA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Theatre Arts Program of the School of the Arts

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY
OCTOBER 1ST 2016
Introduction: Finding The Project

When I started looking for a project to direct for my thesis production, I knew what kind of a piece I was looking for: an alternative musical. It either had to be a new production, or a previously produced work that I had not seen, as I did not want to be overtly (or even subtly) influenced by a previous director’s interpretation.

I have been working on alternative musicals since 1998, when my company November Theatre (Canada), staged the world English premiere of Tom Waits, Robert Wilson and William S Burroughs’ The Black Rider, which won dozens of awards\(^1\) as it then toured across North America to sell-out houses for over a decade. The production was immensely satisfying to work on as the music was powerful, the heightened performance style was engaging, and the story was dark and important. Alternative musicals are a genre in which my passions for music, story, style and experimentation are all satisfied.

I have a large vinyl record collection and often turn to it for inspiration in my work. In fact, the idea to first produce The Black Rider came after listening to the album and reading the liner notes. My next major project with November Theatre was adapting the cult film and book Hard Core Logo for the stage with new music

\(^1\) The Black Rider is the only show in Canadian theatre history to have won “Best Production” at the Sterling Awards (Edmonton), the Betty Mitchell Awards (Calgary) and the Jessie Awards (Vancouver); while also being nominated for “Best Touring Production” at the Dora Awards (Toronto), only to lose to the National Theatre of Scotland’s Black Watch. Our production also won “Best Direction” at 1999 NY Fringe Festival.
commissioned from Joe “Shithead” Keithley of legendary punk rock band D.O.A. The show played two cities and will soon be opening in Toronto (January 2017). On HCL I served as playwright, producer, performer. I also performed in the Western Canadian premiere of another punk-infused alternative musical Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Theatre Network, 2003) which after winning several local theatre awards\(^2\) including “Best Production”, only solidified my passion for the genre.

I had directed a few midsized productions at regional theatres across Western Canada including a four person revue called I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change that got picked up by Richmond’s Gateway Theatre and Vancouver’s Arts Club Theatre (who later toured the show across BC); the absurdist classic Humanity and No for Persephone Theatre (Saskatoon); and the two-hander David Greig play with songs Midsummer for Globe Theatre (Regina). As an assistant director I had even worked on large-scale productions with the likes of visionary director Robert Lepage on his re-imagining of Quills for Ex Machina (Quebec), and theatrical maverick Robert Wilson’s abstract staging of La traviata at Landes Theatre, Linz (Austria). During my 2\(^{nd}\) year at Columbia University, I devised a cabaret based on Edward Snowden and the NSA debacle; I also directed a small Canadian cult-classic alternative musical called ILSA, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp at Medicine Show Theatre. In my directing I had been building up the creative muscle to eventually be able to do the heavy lifting of staging a full-scale alternative musical, and I knew that

\(^2\)Edmonton’s Sterling Awards.
my thesis was the perfect opportunity to do that. My trajectory has been building toward this, and this was a challenge that I was specifically seeking out. I wanted to work with a large ensemble on a new work, with many collaborators, to see if I could, in fact, pull it off. This is what I want to do with the rest of my life and it was now time to give it a try. If I am to eventually take on an opera, like Wilson or Lepage, I need to start actually using the muscles that I have been developing.

So, for the year leading up to my thesis production I was looking for the right piece that would excite me and challenge me, scare me and allow me to explore the aesthetic that intrigues me. In May 2015, I heard that one of my favorite bands, Screeching Weasel, was going to release a new album entitled *Baby Fat: Act 1* which was based on the Giuseppe Verdi opera *Rigoletto*. Before I even heard one song I knew I was interested in this project. Screeching Weasel is a band I’ve listened to for 20 years. Their lyrics are compelling, while the music is “super catchy”. Now that they were entering the world of opera and theatre, I knew I wanted to be a part of this adventure.

Verdi seemed to be all around me at that time. I had been to Michael Mayer’s *Rigoletto* at the Met, the premier of Anne Bogart’s *Macbeth* at Glimmerglass, and I was going to be working on Robert Wilson’s production of *La traviata* in Austria. I was blown away by what Michael Mayer had done with *Rigoletto*: setting it in Las Vegas during the Rat Pack’s heyday, making the translation so contemporary, and making the situation seem so tangible, dangerous and immediate. Anne Bogart’s
staging of Macbeth was revelatory. It seemed to spring from a deceptively simple concept about the chorus of “witches” being a group of gossiping women who run the house: the ‘help’ who know all. This was the leaping off point for some breathtaking visual and physical abstractions that all supported the gestus of the text. Wilson’s La traviata went even further abstracting Verdi. It was like an associative, surreal dream that derived from certain key images in Francesco Maria Piave’s libretto. A stunning example of this was a series of crystals that began to descend from the fly gallery one at time (and sometimes in clusters) to eventually fill the entire stage, as the love begins to grow in the heart of Violetta at the end of Act 1. While in Austria I was also able to see a production of Rigoletto at the Vienna State Opera House, which fed into the research process.

So, I felt like all the stars were lining up for me to take on this project; but first I needed to get the rights. To do that I did what I had done before with Tom Waits, Robert Wilson, as well as with John Cameron Mitchell (Hedwig and the Angry Inch) and Michael Turner and Bruce McDonald the novelist and filmmaker of Hard Core Logo (respectively). I contacted the artist directly. So I approached the record label, Recess Records, who were putting out the album, who then got me in touch with the band manager, who then connected me with singer/ songwriter Ben Weasel who was the composer and librettist of this punk rock opera.

Initially, I had approached Ben with the intention of attaching myself to a project that I assumed was already well underway. A great concept, and great album like
this, I assumed, must have a production already in development. Surely this project would have already been optioned by someone like Michael Mayer (who beat me to the punch with Green Day’s American Idiot and who also did Hedwig). It would have been enough just to be Meyer’s assistant and to have a hand in the development of this exciting new piece; but due in part to my timing, and my reputation for having previous successes producing alternative musicals (in particular with Ben’s contemporary Joe Keithley), Ben trusted me with his “baby” and we began a collaboration that would be fruitful and, for me, profound. I was very fortunate to be directing the world premiere of this alternative musical Off-Broadway.

When I first heard the album I was blown away by the music. It is incredibly dynamic for a pop-punk album, let alone a Screeching Weasel album, which is often reminiscent of Ramones-esque three chord ditties. Then upon reading the accompanying liner-note-libretto I was thoroughly impressed by Ben’s story telling abilities. Ben Weasel (nee Foster) had closely followed the structure of the Piave libretto (in turn based on the original Victor Hugo play, Le roi s’amuse). Ben’s characters are complex, and the verse structure of the recitative close to Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter. This is a sophisticated piece of art wrapped in a rock and roll envelope. Exactly what I was looking for. Albeit, this draft is only half of a complete opera, it still took me (and hopefully the audience) on a journey. With the album coming in at sixty minutes, it would definitely be a significant event in its own right, but now I needed to translate this CD with its liner notes into a full stage production.
Ben hadn’t written act two yet, and it seemed the libretto and songs for the second half wouldn’t be written or composed in time for the upcoming 2016 thesis slot. I had been lucky enough to secure a slot in the La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club’s Spring/Summer season after discussion with Mia Yoo their Artistic Director. This project was an ideal fit for the type of experimentation La MaMa encourages, for the theatre space itself, and for La MaMa audiences. Through some bureaucratic acrobatics within the School of the Arts Theatre Department, I was able to delay my production to later in the Columbia Stages season, in July of 2016, which gave me time to put together the large team required for this piece as well as lead some further development for the script and music. Ben licensed the script to my company, November Theatre, which has a mandate to produce alternative musicals, for this July run. The intent was to fully mount the piece, and to see how this punk rock opera could work. What does an opera look like through the lens of punk rock? What is the physical language of a sung-through rock opera? What elements from the opera world do we borrow? What elements from the punk world do we incorporate? How do we make the story clear through loud music? How does punk rock recitative even work? This is a large beast with many limbs that we needed to get on its feet, through what would essentially become a workshop production. Through this exploration we also hoped to find development partners for a later full production of both acts, but first we would need to get the piece up and running.
History and Context

To fully understand what Ben is trying to achieve in his adaptation, and then how I would interpret the piece, one must first examine the original source material and investigate the differences, even more so than the similarities. Here is an excerpt from the research blog created by our Dramaturg (Felicia King) for our production about the original Hugo play that was the *ur-text* for this show:

Victor Hugo’s controversial play *Le roi s’amuse* was written in 1832. The play is based on a real life court jester named Triboulet, who served in the court of French monarch [François] the First. [François] was famous for his debauchery and personal scandals; as a young Duke, he disguised himself as a commoner to carry on an affair with an engaged young woman...

The plot centers on Triboulet, whom Hugo decided to portray as a hunchback. Much of the play’s action carries through [Rigoletto] and [Baby Fat][...] However Hugo’s play is the most convoluted, containing a great deal more trivial side action, pithy exchanges, lengthy soliloquies, and significantly more characters in the King’s court. The play is also more of a political satire, with subtle jabs at both the institution of monarchy and the aristocracy.4

French censors banned the play for 50 years after its opening night performance.

This controversial play would serve as inspiration for Giuseppe Verdi and Francesco Maria Piave to create their operatic masterpiece *Rigoletto*.

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3 The text that appears inside brackets are edits by Michael Scholar, Jr.
The pair began work on an opera which was then titled *La Maledizione*, or *The Curse*. However, they faced numerous challenges in getting the opera past the strict Venetian censors. The opera went through numerous revisions, with Verdi and Piave repeatedly changing the setting and the names of the characters...

By January 1851, Verdi and [Piave] agreed to move the setting to Mantua, a Dukedom that no longer existed. They also removed the scene in Hugo’s play where the Duke retires to Gilda's bedroom, and made the visit of the Duke to the [taverna] (inn) the result of a trick. Both the title of [the] opera and its main character were changed to *Rigoletto*, after a popular 1835 vaudeville parody of Hugo’s play by M. Alboize - *Rigoletti ou Le dernier des fous* (Rigoletti or The last of the fools).

*Rigoletto* premiered at Teatro La Fenice on the 11th of March, 1851[…]

*Rigoletto* was an overnight success, and became one of the biggest financial and popular successes in La Fenice’s history. Even Hugo begrudgingly agreed that the opera was better than his play!5

*Rigoletto* has gone on to become one of the most produced operas in the world, having several movie adaptations and countless recordings. This is the piece that inspired Ben Weasel to write his own opera, through the lens of the musical genre that he has been steeped in for thirty years: punk rock. Ben talks about how he discovered the world of opera, in an interview with Tempi Magazine.

My wife was seven months pregnant with our son, this new baby was coming and we already had a couple of three year old twins running around as well. So we needed a bigger car, we bought it, and it came with a subscription to satellite radio.

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I never listen to music in the car, but I said: «Ok, I’ll try it out». I turned it on and I came across this opera station – a 24/7 opera station from The Met in New York. They were broadcasting Rigoletto, and I thought: «This is terrific». There was something about it that really moved me. So I [dove] into it and began to educate myself about that opera, I decided at that moment that I was going to write one and that it was probably going to be based on [Rigoletto], because in that story there were parallels to what was happening in my life.

One particular idea struck me. In the first scene [Rigoletto] is really this loathsome toad of a person, he’s a horrible character. But then the scene ends and we see him in his home life, and he’s a very different man, his whole world revolves around his daughter. He’s not a good character, but he’s very human. His love for his daughter is almost obsessive and ultimately destructive, so you can see the ending coming a mile away. And like a lot of people, especially people who aren’t religious, he’s very superstitious, so when this man puts this curse on him, he really goes into a tailspin, and the curse becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I was drawn to the theme of the public life versus the private life. I thought it was a perfect scenario to be updated with rockstars and athletes and movie stars instead of dukes and kings. Another thing I wanted to explore was the idea of success: being famous and how that can be an isolating factor, turning you into a monster. This idea that if you get wealthy and powerful enough to gain everything you want, you can really find yourself in a living hell.6

While the action of Baby Fat: Act I7 only goes as far as halfway through the second act of Rigoletto, Weasel’s plot follows the structure of the source materials quite closely. (See Appendix 1 – Plot Comparison). One of the major differences in Baby Fat revolves around the character of Poveretta - the young daughter (thought to be

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7 With the input of my Marketing Manager Erik Kaiko we slightly renamed the piece, using a roman numeral, for a (subtle) dramatic effect.
mistress) of Baby Fat (aka Robert). In Rigoletto, the Gilda character falls in love with the Duke, and by the end of the opera sacrifices herself for her love. Despite the fact that she had been seduced under false pretenses, and despite witnessing his infidelities she still holds true to her pure love of this corrupt womanizer. In Baby Fat, Poveretta has no romantic emotions for Swank, the rock star who drugs her before raping her. In fact, the “seduction” scene - which happens behind closed doors in Le roi s’amuse and Rigoletto - now provides much of the dramatic material for the third scene of Baby Fat: Act I. On one hand this version of the character (Poveretta) gives us a more progressive female role, one who doesn’t suffer from Stockholm-like syndrome falling for her captor. Poveretta has agency deciding to go with the entourage who would otherwise kidnap her, albeit under false pretenses; she isn’t a helpless item to be stolen and then given up as a sacrifice. Poveretta also makes the decision to stay with Swank and grill him for more information about the elusive father she has only recently reconnected with. The fact that the drug-induced rape is so unambiguously manifested to the reader/audience - with no room for interpretation as to the intent of Swank or the feelings of Poveretta – this relationship is finally clarified.

However, with this clarity also comes a great theatrical and political challenge. How do we handle this sensitive material on stage? Can we reveal something about misogyny without endorsing it? Before I discuss this idea further, it is important that you know a little bit more about our playwright/composer.
Screeching Weasel is a Chicago-based punk rock band. The band was formed in 1986 by frontman Ben Weasel (born Benjamin Foster)...

Throughout their career, Screeching Weasel released a total of thirteen studio albums... Their sound has been described as punk rock and pop punk, and similar to bands such as the Ramones, Black Flag, and D.O.A. Several high-profile bands have cited Screeching Weasel as a musical inspiration, including [Green Day] Blink 182 and popular ska-punk band Less Than Jake.

...Like many punk bands, Screeching Weasel has also been no stranger to controversy. The band has been the subject of numerous public fights, line-up changes and legal disputes. These include a notorious public rivalry with Fat Mike, lead singer of the band NOFX, a lengthy legal battle between Weasel and Jughead, and an infamous incident at SXSW in 2011, when Ben Weasel got involved in a physical altercation with two women. While Weasel quickly released a public apology, a video of the incident went viral, and several bands slated to [play their upcoming festival] dropped out. Ultimately, Screeching Weasel was dropped from Fat Wreck records, and four members of the band resigned [according to Weasel they were fired] over the SXSW incident.

The controversial SXSW incident is described in more detail by the LA Times:

During the band’s performance of its poppy 1996 outsider anthem "Cool Kids," Weasel was hit in or near the eye with a chunk of ice thrown by a woman, and then offered to fight the offender...

...After Weasel jumped into the crowd, several eye-witnesses reported that the woman spat beer or water in Weasel’s face, and at that point a fight broke out.

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8 Weasel, Ben. "Re: The Baby Fat Dramaturgy Blog!" Message to the author. 2 June 2016. E-mail.
...Another woman, who security staff said was one of the venue’s owners, ran on stage to break up the fight [and was caught in the brief fray]...

Although Ben publicly apologized, and no charges were ever pressed, this incident would be a factor when approaching this sexually charged material. Writing a show about a misogynistic world of excess, where a rape happens (onstage) is challenging under any circumstances; but within this context, it meant that I needed to not only present the material responsibly, but to do so with sensitivity to the audience and to the artists who would be collaborating on the piece. I needed to put together a team that would help me see beyond my own “male gaze”, and be able to ensure that we were presenting this story in a way that was contributing to the conversation around this hot button issue. I knew that the creative team needed as many strong female artists as possible to help me tell this story of toxic male behaviour, so that we could comment on it through our work.

Ben and I had been meeting over video chat for months, discussing the piece and production details. For Ben, the piece was an exploration of the Christian concept of true mercy, in the face of horrific adversity. Ben says in his Tempi interview:

I would say the character of Swank represents evil[...] And then good would be represented by the character of Poveretta, who is not all good. I made her a theologian to

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underline the idea that her faith is largely intellectual. It has never really been tested, and what happens in this story is that her faith becomes tested and she has to make a decision whether she is going to really put her money where her mouth is. And then the character of Baby Fat... He is to me just like Rigoletto, he is everybody, he is humanity, and kind of struggling. This love that he has for his daughter will end up to be her ruin, as it is in Rigoletto. Because it is a sort of love that is based on possessiveness, it doesn't enable her to have freedom.¹²

So for Ben the rape becomes a painful test of Poveretta's faith. Unlike the character of her father, Baby Fat, (and Rigoletto) who is spurred by the incident to pursue revenge, and who causes more pain to Poveretta and himself as a result of this choice, Poveretta ultimately chooses the path of enlightenment. She is not blinded by love - like Gilda for the Duke - she chooses to let go of hate: deciding not to seek blood for blood. In the current draft of Baby Fat's second act, Poveretta wants to seek justice through legal means, as Swank should pay the legal price for his crime. She does not want to plot with her father to find some kind of 'street justice'. The question the piece is then asking is: is it possible to have mercy for those who have transgressed against you so savagely? This seems a particularly relevant question to be asking in light of modern atrocities, like the Charleston church shooting where the families of the victims publicly forgave the shooter because of their beliefs¹³.


Another, albeit accidental, point of relevance came to light during the writing and recording of the piece. Ben explains in the annotated version of the script of *Baby Fat: Act 1.*

*Baby Fat is based on Verdi’s Rigoletto, which in turn is based on Victor Hugo’s Le roi s’amuse. In both the play and the opera, the character on which Poveretta is based is forcibly raped by the Swank character (a duke in Verdi, a king in Hugo). That seemed like a less likely scenario in 21st century America, so I had Swank drug his victim before raping her. But I worried it might come off a little far-fetched. Then, just as we were about to begin tracking the album, former NFL safety Darren Sharper was arrested on suspicion of rape and was investigated for three sexual assaults; all of which took place after the alleged victims claimed he drugged them. And while we were still tracking the album, the Bill Cosby story broke. I have no idea if Sharper or Cosby are guilty, but the scene suddenly became horrifyingly plausible.*

So investigating this idea of celebrities drugging their victims, and the public discussions around sexual consent in general, is another immediately resonant (if not charged) concept that is being explored through this piece.

While the themes of exposing misogyny and spiritual wrestling would be enough to fuel any production, for me there was an even more present allegory that I was wanting to explore on stage: why do the wealthy, the powerful and the famous seem to get away with rape and murder? Is there a sense of entitlement and privilege that comes with having money and fame? How and why do we endow celebrities with this power? These relevant questions would be a guiding principle for me (and my creative team) and I felt they were worth asking of our downtown NY audience.
Design and Research

It was very important to me for this project that we have as many strong female artists present in the rehearsal room and during the creative process, so that we could approach the material responsibly and sensitively. I needed other perspectives outside my “male gaze” to keep me honest. The creative team - designers, choreographer, music director, dramaturg, etc. - was made up of a majority of women (second wave feminists, integrated feminists, and transgender activists among the group) all of whom contributed greatly to how this project turned out.

One of the concepts that I had wanted to apply from our Director/Designer Collaboration classes at NYU in my second year at Columbia, was that the whole design team should be present from the first design/concept meeting onward. I extended this idea to include the choreographer and music director, even stage management and the producing team (should they so wish). I extended invitations to all for us to dream collectively in the months leading up to the production. While it was not always feasible for everyone to be present, through the use of video chatting we were able to get most folks at most meetings; and so conceptually the piece grew organically through our collective inquiries. Through these meeting we conducted group research that we shared primarily electronically.

Early on, the triggers within the text that drove our research were based on the club itself where much of the action takes place. The story is set in modern day Chicago,
in The Reptile House, Swank's club where his popular punk group Serpentello is the house band. We had to decide how big this band was and what kind of world they partied in. The script alludes to a lot of debauchery, of drugs and sex, so the fetish world and strip clubs became the inspiration for us. So did a real life legendary Chicago old punk venue The Exit Night Club on Wells Street (along with The Viper Room in Los Angeles). We researched pop punk music and bands, ultimately deciding that Serpentello was as successful as the band Green Day: big enough to have a huge following, money, and even some influence in the local community. This part of the research involved listening to a lot of pop punk music, looking at band images, and reading articles about these kinds of bands (Green Day, NOFX, Screeching Weasel, Bad Religion, Etc.).

We also investigated the aesthetic of circus, because the event that starts the piece is a funeral for Swank’s companion, Mojo, a performing “gentleman” Chimpanzee. How much of the fashion and style could we bring into the ceremony itself, and the design of the show (as the action all takes place within one evening)?

We also researched articles and reports on domestic violence and the psychology around survivors’ coping mechanisms. This allowed the team to have a common language when approaching the rape and the issues presented in the play. One key resource was a Ted Talk given by writer and advocate Leslie Morgan Steiner about why some domestic violence victims don’t leave.14 While this is more apropos to

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Gilda in *Rigoletto*, it gave me insight as well into how to approach the material. One other great resource was Michael Mayer himself (director of Green Day’s *American Idiot* on Broadway and *Rigoletto* at The Met), who answered some key questions for me as I was putting the piece together. When I asked him, “How do you see Gilda’s sacrifice at the end for a lover who has used her?” he responded with:

> That’s super complicated but in conversation with [Diana] Damrau [the actress playing Gilda] we found the part of her that were so eager to be free of her father was the same part that was touched by this man’s love, however aggressive and fraudulent it was. By virtue of her complete innocence and his ability to seduce so thoroughly and spending those 30 days back at home with her father, I think that suicide seemed like her [best] option. (C.F. Nina in *THE SEAGULL* "I still love him. I love him more than before.")

In their recent production, Michael and Diana had found a convincing personal reason to justify Gilda’s behaviour - in this century old opera - without condoning toxic male behaviour. Hearing this I knew we could forge an empowered path for Poveretta, who already has more agency than her previous incarnation. We were also fortunate enough to have the flexibility from a writer who was willing to adjust text as needed.

A key component to understanding Ben’s spiritual intentions with this piece required me to do some reading on Catholic mysticism. Having been raised Jewish, I am familiar with Kabbalah; and having been raised in a dominantly Christian society

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I am aware of some of the major tenets of the Bible, but this was my first time reading the likes of Blessed Henry Suso and Saint Thomas Aquinas.

All of these research materials and design ideas were shared through the various online platforms that have made communicating in the modern age a blessing and a curse. I’m an analog person and do much better with tangible artifacts to react to, but in the digital age we shared videos and files through Dropbox, which was (as it sounds) the “dumping grounds” for most of our research material. The Assistant Director (Ran Xia) set up a Pinterest page for sharing images and links. Our dramaturg (Felicia King) set up a closed Facebook group that allowed us to share links, and more importantly allowed us to respond to each other posts in message-dedicated threads that were linked to the picture or video we were talking about. Felicia also created a dramaturgical blog that was a key tool for our creative team and cast. This was the first time (Felicia or) I had used these online tools for this kind of project communication, and they proved themselves to be amazingly useful (and to have a lighter environmental impact).

Design wise, we looked at mannequins as a symbol of the objectification of women manifested. At first we thought of filling the whole space with mannequins, building sculptures in the lobby, or revealing a large dumpster filled with them, as part of the final gesture. This exploration ultimately ended with us using only one mannequin, a bust of a woman’s chest that had shelves carved out of it; a perfectly poignant place for Swank to store the tea and mugs with which he later drugs Poveretta. The amount of time we spent exploring the mannequin idea, and actually collecting
mannequins, seems disproportionate to the actual use of them in the final production; but that one set piece communicated so much, and was a culmination of the abstract ideas we allowed ourselves to pursue.

One major overriding concept, through which we would tell our story, was that ultimately this was an opera being told by punks. It is as though a troupe of punks had gone to see Rigoletto at the Met, and had decided that they could do it better. So this piece had to be tackled with a DIY aesthetic and philosophy that would inform every design and staging choice we would make. For this reason I decided we need supertitles, like the ones that are projected at most operas, regardless of what language is being sung (and regardless what language the audience primarily speaks). But how would these “punk tragedians” (as I ended up calling them) handle the supertitles? If video was being introduced for that purpose, what else could video do to help them tell their story? These were questions that not only the video designer and I would wrestle with, but the whole team. The operatic research involved us going to see productions at the Met (including a second viewing of Mayer’s Rigoletto) and streaming operas online through the Met’s “on demand” service.

These conceptual meetings, during pre-production, planted the seeds for how the whole production would work. It was truly collaborative. Although not everyone was present at every meeting, we always seemed to have just the right voices in the room (or via video conferencing) that allowed us to dream and problem solve together. During this process, including the rehearsals at which we didn’t have all of
our ensemble at all times, I was often reminded of the advice Anne gave me during some frustrating rehearsals during my second year, “the conditions within which you are creating your work, are the exact right conditions.” In other words, I had to learn to accept what I have, be in the present moment and stop wishing for an imagined, supposedly ideal scenario.

Through group discussions we were able to create a visual world for the piece to exist in, but there were certain impulses I had that served as a catalyst for these discussions. I knew going in that I wanted the band to be on stage; to be visible to the audience, and not hidden within an orchestra pit (which is the usual case for opera), but I did want to separate the band from the action of the play. In the script, Swank is the frontman for a band that is ominously missing from the play’s action. Serpentello’s onstage entourage is comprised of a manager (Baby Fat), a road manager (Stompanato), a guitar technician (Queeg) and their merchandise salesman (Jerry Japan), who all get intertwined in the evening’s drama - but the band members themselves are not present in the scenes. While there are many story justifications for this - as some bands don’t like to hang out with each other when they aren’t working – what this communicated to me was that the band for the show Baby Fat needed to be Serpentello, and they needed to be a non-diegetic presence that the characters couldn’t see or hear but that the audience would always see. This would maintain the punk rock concert aspect of the event, but it would also serve as a means to communicate the complicity that the band members’ silence (and perhaps society’s) through which Swank’s (and other predators’) behaviour is
allowed to continue unchecked. During intimate scenes between father and daughter, and later rapist and victim, the band would be seen, observing, and perhaps even commenting on the action onstage, but from their own reality. So we decided the punk tragedians would put the band on prominent risers behind the playing space.

Having the band present onstage has been a recurring theme in a lot of my work. I had a live onstage band for two of my pieces during my second year in the MFA directing program: *ILSA, Queen of the Nazi Love Camp* (Medicine Show Theatre, 2015) and *Mr. E’s Humongous Underground Digital Vaudeville Extravaganza!!!* (Columbia University’s Schapiro Theatre, 2014). This was already an aesthetic I was married to as early as *The Black Rider* (November Theatre, 1998-2008) and right on through *Hard Core Logo: LIVE* (Theatre Network and PuSh Festival, 2010-2011).

One of the reasons I’m so drawn to alternative musicals, is the music and the musicians. The idea of singing to “canned” music is abhorrent to me and feels inauthentic. It doesn’t allow for the breath of life to fill the songs, if an actor is having to karaoke along with a “dead” recorded track. The live music allows for flexibility in the moment, for slight variations, and for musicians and actors to communicate together. I’m also a big proponent of analog sound versus digital (and analog technology in general). This is perhaps why I’m attracted to working in the theatre, in real time, as opposed to film and television. I’m drawn to the idea of ephemeral communication that hopefully leaves a larger imprint on the soul and within the memory. When a singer vibrates their vocal chords to sing, the sound
resonates within their body, and those vibrations are sent out to the listener physically affecting them, changing them, having an impact on them. The same is true when a guitarist plucks his string. So when this communication can happen in the same room (the theatre), a real sense of shared experience or communion is possible. When the shared experience is loud and aggressive punk rock, you want that experience to be authentic and visceral. The space I was lucky enough to secure for the production was the large Ellen Stewart Theatre (formerly the Annex) at La MaMa ETC. This large cavernous space would be great for containing the loud raucous sound of a punk show.

Fig 1. Ellen Stewart Theatre “(photo: La MaMa E.T.C.)

One of the other impulses I had coming in was to further explore the Brechtian idea of having actors and characters on stage at the same time. Actors would watch from
the side of the stage (something I also explored in *ILSA*), that way an audience could
learn how to watch the show through the eyes of the performer. It would also help
illustrate how the play is being told by a troupe of punk tragedians, a meta-
theatrical story within which we could tell another story.

With such a simple ground plan for the show - risers for band, screen for projections
- one key design element evolved beautifully and against my will (to be frank). Our
set designer (You-Shin Chen) and our Lighting Designer (Oona Curley) felt strongly
that we needed a visual component to embrace the height of the space, in addition
to the projection surface. So they conceived of using long pipes as vertical poles to
go straight up into the grid. These poles would then be covered with red and white
fluorescent lights that could be used at various times as harsh blasts to the audience,
or within the context of our story, to illustrate the fabric of the world coming apart.
While I am a fan of using fluorescents as a distancing effect (something that has
been perfected by one of my heroes, Robert Wilson), the video designer (Conor
Moore) and I were concerned that the vertical lines across the projection screen
would cause too much visual disruption and wouldn’t allow the audience to fully see
Conor’s work, or the supertitles.
I wanted to cut the poles altogether, but You-Shin (SD) and Oona (LD) stood their ground about the importance of their presence in this otherwise stark set. While we did end up only using five of these poles, in the end I was hugely thankful for their insistence, as the final product looked amazing and fully integrated because of this detail. Conor (VD) and I had to adjust the placement of the supertitles to allow for all audience members to clearly see them without having to move, but this actually only added to the off-kilter punk aesthetic - that with my somewhat compulsive tendencies was at risk of flattening out. In the past I would have tried to force my directorial hand to get the designers to conform to my vision, but in the spirit of collaboration I gave over, trusting that the set and light designers knew something
aesthetically that I did not. It was also a conscious effort on my part to foster “buy-in”, allowing the members of the team to feel ownership over the production. It wasn’t going to be my show, but our show, through collaboration.

Fig 3. Baby Fat: Act I “So Long Mojo” (photo: Theo Coté and La MaMa E.T.C.)

Music

Like most of my projects, the music was the initial point of interest for me in the piece. Music is the quickest tool we have in performance to access the human spirit. I have a visceral reaction to rock music (and in particular punk rock), that is stronger than any other musical genre. So for me the music was the heart of the show, with which every aspect of the production would be in conversation. So getting the right Music Director and band was key. I needed an MD who had one
foot in the theatre world and one in the rock world. There is a new generation of rock musicals out there that are part of the popular canon, like *Hedwig and the Angry Inch, American Idiot, NOFX’s Home Street Home* (which I had the good fortune to be a part of its developmental feedback sessions), not to mention *Rent, Next to Normal, and Spring Awakening* among others. So there are now MDs out there with some of this sort of experience. I was lucky enough to find Andy Peterson (Atomic) who has worked on new musicals, is a composer himself and is a fan of pop-punk. He was the perfect fit for this show. He would be able to get out of the performers what we needed. The singing style would be a hybrid between rock and music theatre. It needed to have an edge, but be sustainable night after night. That is: it couldn’t sound too polished like “Broadway”, but it needed to be audible, and supported. The band too needed to sound like a punk band, but a tight punk band. This was the delicate balance we needed to achieve.

Ben cannot read or notate music and the show had no musical scores; only the album recording. So one of Andy's monumental jobs was to take the tracks from the CD and translate them (arrange them), notating scores for our production. The album has many more musicians, and layered tracks that we would be incapable of reproducing live. We decided to have a four-piece band: drums, bass, rhythm guitar, and a lead guitarist who could also play keyboard on some tracks. This band also needed to have a foot in each camp. Andy brought in the rhythm section, who he’d worked with on other rock theatre projects, who could read music and who understood what the gig would be like. I thought it important to bring in some rock
performers who could bring their artistic practice and authenticity to the table. Screeching Weasel’s guitarist Mike Hunchback lived in Brooklyn at the time and was willing to play with us. He knew all the songs, and the style, and could bring his great knowledge to the group, but he too couldn’t read music. So new arrangements would have to be taught to him by ear. He was a trooper, and although he wasn’t sure how it was all going to turn out, he was a really reliable member of the team who knew his stuff by heart. The other key position, lead guitarist/keyboardist, would be performed by a great musician I had worked with before on Mr. E…: Keith Patchel. Patchel used to play with punk legend Richard Lloyd. Keith does read music and although he’s newish to theatre, he served as the connective tissue between the raw punk world and the formal theatrical world. He would also serve as the bandleader (in lieu of a conductor) to keep the band members together.

Andy’s arrangements added more dynamics and harmony to Ben’s already dynamic songs. While the album is already quite varied for a pop-punk recording, for a theatre audience it required a little more shaping. Andy found tempos that could be slowed down (“Without Belief”), songs that could be unplugged (“Thine Eyes of Mercy”), chances for group harmonies (“In the Pale Light of the Midnight Sun”), underscore dropouts (“So Long, Mojo”), shortening songs (“We Never Knew”) and through discussions with our dramaturg we even found songs that could be cut (“Cursed”) or moved (“Disharmony”).

Another key member of the team that I wanted to bring on early was the sound designer. Often a sound designer on a musical ends up being little more than a
technician who mixes sound and mics the performers, but I needed a sound designer’s input early on to figure out what was the convention that would work sonically, visually and conceptually to hear the show well, and to communicate our ideas about concert, opera and story. Through La MaMa and Columbia we had seven wireless mics that the nine principle actors shared, changing headsets during the scene transitions. Andy’s theatrical arrangements called for some group harmonies that meant the entire company being on mic during certain numbers at the wake/party of scene 1. This meant we needed stations for XLR analog mics to be plugged in on stands, two on either side of the center platform, and one up center on the platform which would be used by Tommy Swank primarily as he held court from up on high. Our Sound Designer, John Sully, is a downtown theatre artist who has worked with La MaMa a fair deal, and is a musician himself. He said early on that the wireless lav mics would be overpowered during really loud raucous numbers, as they pick up sound from the room, the band, and the speakers. So for the full on punk blast outs, it would be best to be on an XLR that is really directional and local, picking up the sound of the mouth close to it (and not much else). The need for these XLR mics drove the concept, and allowed the concert aspect of the show to emerge. This helped elucidate the three different types of songs in the show:

1. **Presentational concert songs within the reality of the scene**, in which the audience play party guests. Most of Scene 1 uses this convention, and therefore many of these songs happen on the XLRs.
2. **Operatic/Dramatic songs**, which are conversations between characters. These work somewhat like recitative in that they stand in for speech, but they are less free in rhythm than true operatic recit. These songs mostly happen on the personal lav micros wired onto the side of the actors’ faces so that they can interact more. This is primarily in the second half of Scene 2 between Poveretta and Baby Fat, and between Poveretta and Swank in Scene 3.

3. **Presentational concerts songs outside of the reality of the scene**. These songs would be the most interesting to me stylistically. The music would be a catalyst to enter into the private thoughts of a character, and the staging possibilities would open up as a result. Some of these songs would be on the center XLR (“We Never Knew”) and some would be more free range (“Lonesome Wolf” and “In The Pale Light of The Midnight Sun”).

There is also a fourth kind of song that we weren’t able to fully explore in this version of the production: true recitative. The whole libretto is written in rhyming verse, the rhythm of which is consistent within each section or song, but does vary within the piece as a whole. The entire piece is meant to be a sung through opera. While most of the songs were recorded for the album, not all of the recitative or scenes were. Since we didn’t have the funds to commission Ben (or Andy) to do the
time consuming task of composing the melodies for these sections, instead we opted for underscoring the dialogue sections with songs Andy arranged. Here the text would be spoken, rhythmically, to capture the essence of what this would eventually sound like in later iterations of the piece. The rhythmic scene work with the verse was informed by the text analysis work of George T. Wright\textsuperscript{16}. (See Appendix 2 – Verse Structure).

**Script Dramaturgy**

Although the script is particularly strong for a first time playwright, I knew that it needed some sharpening beyond my skillset as a director. To help facilitate the conversations around script, story and the piece’s inherit sexual politics, I engaged Felicia King, a bright multi-talented Dramaturg who was in the first year of her MFA at Columbia University. A theatre maker with a history of working on rock theatre herself, Felicia was able to ask some hard questions of Ben and the script, to make sure that we were being clear about the story we wanted to tell. While Ben lives in Madison, Wisconsin, he and I met over video chat for months to discuss various aspects of the project. Felicia joined us to discuss lyrical choices, song placement and author intentions. For example, in scene 2, where Baby Fat comes home to Poveretta late at night, we ended up cutting the album song “Cursed” and found other places within the book scenes to insert the essential information contained

therein. It is a song that plays well when listening to the album, but seemed to be static in the playing/reading of it.

Similarly, at the end of Scene 3, as we approach the rape section, there are a series of songs on the album that seemingly prolong this agonizing moment. It starts with “Sleeping Beauty” in which Poveretta starts to feel the full effects of the drug that Swank has given her surreptitiously, as he proceeds to creepily sing over her defenseless (awake) body that “It really is kind of nice when you get down to it”.

Skipping forward two tracks to “Bound to Fall” (which closes the album), Poveretta then sings about wanting violent revenge on Swank, which, as a Christian, she wrestles with in this out-of-body experience as she is being violated. In between these powerfully disturbing songs, the album has a haunting track, a duet entitled “Disharmony” in which both characters sing the same words but come at it from their own unique perspectives as each considers the problematic state of the world. “Disharmony” - left between these two songs - seems like a thematic abstraction, a long aside that elongates one already very uncomfortable moment on stage. Rather than cut this melodically beautiful and lyrically rich track because it was slowing down the story where it is found on the album, we chose instead to move it to the end of our performance, which needed some kind of closure. The number then became a chance for the entire ensemble to come together and comment on what we have just witnessed and the broken state of the world. It became a bookend to our “half-a-piece” that starts with the ensemble preparing for the show and ends with the ensemble sending us off with food for thought. Characters become actors
again, as the actor playing Baby Fat (Kwame Michael Remy) gets up out of his wheelchair, sheds his mask, as do all the performers taking the stage for this final moment of solidarity in disharmony.

**Reading**

One way I had tried to get more time into the process was to do a script workshop even before we had cast the production. I gathered a group of actors to read the script (dialogue and lyrics) for Ben, Felicia and myself. We wanted to hear all of the words, out of the context of the recordings; to hear actors tackling the lyrics as though they were text, to make sure that the story was clear. I wanted Ben to hear it too, so that he could make sure what he was trying to communicate was coming across through the words alone. We also wanted to hear how some of the proposed edits would sound in context. So I brought in actors who were strong readers (we didn’t need singers for this) and who were not attached to the production (although they were welcome to come to the upcoming audition). Felicia led a feedback session employing the Liz Lerman Critical Response Process\textsuperscript{17} that I had found revelatory when introduced to this structure in Lisa Timmel’s class (and proved to be instrumental in the *Home Street Home* development process).

We asked the readers questions about what they grasped about plot points, the effectiveness of the recitative, and the plausibility of the events leading up to the rape. It seemed that they grasped the story, were excited by the form and were intrigued as to what was coming next. Hearing the script and the feedback allowed us to move into the rehearsal with a draft that we were confident in, and it allowed Ben to continue writing Act 2.

**Casting**

Casting this large scale rock musical production was going to be a challenge for me as I had only been in New York for my two years of school, and I had only worked with a handful of local musical theatre performers. I knew I needed to cast the net wide to find the caliber of performers required to pull this off. In order to do this, for the first time in my career, I decided to work with a Casting Director, Jamibeth Margolis. Jamibeth - who has worked in casting a wide range of productions including Broadway musicals and experimental new works - was excited enough about the potential of the project (and working with me) to come on board. The talent pool Jamibeth was able to draw from was incredible and immense. Some of the actors had Broadway credits, and rock band chops. These are the kinds of artists I needed to meet to make this project work. I had already cast my friend and *Mr. E...* performer Marlene Ginader (who would be returning from a National Tour of *Once*) in the role of Poveretta, but I needed to cast the remaining twelve roles from these auditions. This was my first experience working with a casting director and I was thrilled to give over the organization of auditions to someone else.
Jamibeth received around two hundred submissions from agent submissions alone. From these she chose just under one hundred performers for us to see over two days, with an additional day for callbacks. I would never have been able to find such a diverse and talented ensemble of performers had it not been for Jamibeth. This is the kind of experience I want to have every time I’m putting together a company.

I’m someone who likes to plan out things ahead of time. I like to be prepared. One of the most important lessons I learned from working with both Wilson and Lepage is that time can be infinitely more valuable than resources. Wilson and Lepage will work on a project in three to five phases over two to three years before the show opens. Lepage says he takes a regular rehearsal period, cuts it up and spreads it out over time, because the time in between, away from a project, is just as valuable as the time you spend working on it. It allows time and space for performances to deepen, and for reconceiving, and even for ambitious building of complex designs. For that reason I wanted to cast the project early and try to get actors to “buy-in” over a long developmental process. But Jamibeth pointed out that due to the fact that Equity Showcase agreements only paid actors a tiny stipend, it would be difficult to retain actors who would agree to perform in the show early on, but then may find better-paid work later. So we held auditions as close to the rehearsal dates as possible. That way the likelihood of actor attrition would be greatly diminished.

One way that I was able to put a little more time and breath into the process was that I got the band to meet for a couple of rehearsals before the actors began, so that they would have more time together to feel like a band (and to learn the 27 songs).
Usually in opera (or musicals) the orchestra (or band) comes in at the last minute for perhaps one rehearsal with the conductor, and then a *sitzprobe* (seated rehearsal) with the singers, before going into dress rehearsal. Ideally I would love to have the band in rehearsals from day one (as we did in *The Black Rider*), growing with us and learning how the piece works, and having a hand in the staging through their musical influence. In fact, I would love all the team present at all rehearsals including designers (which was something we did in *The Black Rider* and that I later witnessed with Lepage and Wilson), but on this shoestring budget production, that just wasn’t going to happen here. We did manage to get the band together a few times in the weeks before the usual sitzprobe, and I think this helped the band gain the confidence they needed to come together as an ensemble.

Like the band, we needed actors who had an understanding of rock and theatre, and we found a lot of them. Andy accompanied the auditions, while Ben was digitally present via video (as was our choreographer Samantha Sheppard). Although it is not a very popular term these days, “colour blind casting” was at play when putting this diverse team together. As I am an artist of colour, there were many opportunities lost when casting directors wouldn’t see me for certain roles. I was often only allowed to read for Latino roles, or characters of undetermined ethnicity - and too often small supporting roles that reinforced stereotypes. I was always hungry to play bigger, juicier roles with more meat. That’s why in my acting career I have focused primarily on theatre, where there is sometimes more inclusiveness when it comes to casting. I became a character actor, playing weirder roles in
regional theatres, but one of the reasons I started my own company was so that I could choose the work that excites me. I can play the rock star, and not just be fifth business. So inclusive casting is one of the mandates of my company, which was written into the casting call that went out:

“November Theatre encourages submissions from artists of all diverse backgrounds for all roles.”

And for the role of Baby Fat, our anti-hero in a wheelchair, I had hoped to find an actor/singer who actually uses a wheelchair in real life.

“*We strongly encourage differently-abled actors/singers who use a wheelchair to submit for this role”

While we did have a wide range of diverse performers come to the audition, we didn’t have a single submission from a performer who uses a wheelchair. It was too close to rehearsals to start an extensive search (for this production), and so I cast from the talent that came to the auditions. We were all impressed by the caliber of the talent who came out, but I needed to find a way to embrace this wheelchair situation. One of the meta-theatrical devices I knew I wanted to explore off the top of the piece, was to see the company warming up, and to hear the band tuning and getting ready to perform as the audience enters. This came from the idea of the orchestra tuning before an opera, and it would lead to the entrance of the band leader who would quiet us all down with a punk rock gesture equivalent to the opera conductor’s bow before the show: flipping off the company and the audience. In this punk-ified operatic ceremony we would be going from outside the play into the story. In that liminal space, I wanted our lead actor to become Baby Fat before
our very eyes, donning the facial scar, and a costume piece that would allow us to see the change from actor to character. Now this became the opportunity to show our able-bodied actor consciously and deliberately taking his seat in the wheelchair, and slipping into the skin of his character. I wasn’t going to hide that the actor was able-bodied, but would instead share with the audience what we were doing.

Some serendipitous political implications came as a result of the colour-blind casting. I made no effort to make family members Poveretta and Baby Fat (or Sardonicus and Cassandra) of the same ethnicity, because the overriding concept of the production is that it is being put on by the punk tragedians. Actors became characters with a simple prop or costume piece. That said, the actor playing Swank (Russell Fischer from Jersey Boys) was white, and most members of his entourage were artists of colour (including Baby Fat). The actors were cast for their singing and acting abilities, but their ethnicity unintentionally ended up reflecting the prevalent hierarchy of privilege.

**Social and Political Relationships**

Much like Rigoletto and Le roi s’amuse, Baby Fat is a piece about both hierarchies and also the pain that comes from taking the path of vengeance. While Hugo’s controversial play depicts a debauched king (based on historical accounts of François I), whose court is criticized by his jester Triboulet, the political commentary had to be several steps removed before Verdi could get Rigoletto past
the “Austrian censors who had control over northern Italian theatres at the time,\textsuperscript{19} and were frightened of even operatic depictions of regicide and rebellion. Ben’s adaptation too borrows from real life icons to tell of the dangerous corruption that comes from too much power, even when that power is achieved by celebrity and not merit.

Swank is an amalgam of celebrities from today, and even lesser known rockers from the punk circuit who seem to be above the law through their financial backing and status, evading prosecution or reprimand for juvenile and sometimes criminal behaviour. This is very relevant when looking at how corporations and the world’s top 1\% are responsible for environmental atrocities, hoarding wealth, and keeping the lower classes in line. These kinds of power relationships are explored through the characters within the play. Swank holds all the power, and his underlings Stompanato, Queeg and Jerry Japan (whom I affectionately called the Three Stooges) are all vying for more power, and try to curry favour with Swank by exposing their vulnerabilities for his amusement, by enabling his predatory behaviour and by committing their own crimes (kidnapping) with hopes of climbing further up the ladder.

Baby Fat too, is a part of this corrupt system, although he does criticize it in private (“Things Aren’t So Bad After All”), he supports the machine of oppression from within. Baby Fat gleefully plays along with the denial of Zannoni’s search for justice,

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only to later have Swank’s destructive behaviour affect him and his daughter. Baby Fat, like Rigoletto, is a pimp whose trafficking in young women ends up hoisting himself and his daughter on his own petard. Complacency, apathy and supporting the status quo end up causing Baby Fat’s downfall, much as we are reminded by Martin Niemöller’s famous quote about the Holocaust and not standing up to tyrants:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—
and there was no one left to speak for me.19

Baby Fat (and Poveretta) fall victim to the system he has privately criticized and has hoped to escape, but did nothing to stop. Baby Fat is an enabler, a hypocrite who sees fault but does nothing to change it. As punk rock icons D.O.A. (and Hard Core Logo collaborators) taught with their anarchist slogan “Talk – Action = 0”. In this case the sum is a negative one. In fact, the hypocrisy of Baby Fat is even more exemplified when we realize that he too is oppressing his daughter (who we think is his lover) by keeping her locked up in his home. There is a blindness that is keeping Baby Fat “asleep” when he, like all of us, needs to stay awake if he is to change anything (and even out of pure self interest) save himself and his family. This idea to be “woke”, seemed to take on a new urgency during the making of this piece, as it

was simultaneously being propelled by the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the wake of a surge of Police shootings across the USA.

Poveretta is the idealist, a moralist who is studies theology, and approaches her belief in God from an intellectual place. Her experience of the world is sheltered, and her perspective has only been through books and classrooms. She has visions in her room that are channeled through her drawings, but she lacks the real world knowledge that might otherwise protect her from “the devil”. Although she questions Baby Fat and his restrictions, she still goes along with the limitations (for now), and allows herself to be trapped like a bird in a cage. When “The Three Stooges” show up with a false account to trick her out of her safe prison, she leaves not only because she is curious, but also because she is fooled. However, even when she realizes she’s been brought to Swank as some kind of sick offering, she stays in Swank’s lair because she hopes to learn more about her secretive father, whose image is captured next to Swank’s (and Mojo’s) in a painting hanging on The Reptile House’s wall. While there, Poveretta lets her guard down and is tricked by the manipulative Swank, who tries to possess her body, mind and soul. Man rapes woman, the rich takes from the poor, the oppressor ravishes the land, the ruling class continues the cycle of abuse for personal gain, all maintained by a system of dysfunctional enabling.

In here, is also the moral and spiritual argument that Ben is trying to communicate: in a world without faith, humans are rudderless, immorally adrift, and the ruthless become monsters. Swank - who espouses his atheist views in a heated musical
debate against the pious Poveretta ("Without Belief") - is turned into a dangerous predator after having no shepherd to guide him ("Lonesome Wolf"). The debauched court he has built around himself is devoid of belief as well. Baby Fat is at most (on the Theist spectrum) an agnostic who doesn’t share his daughter’s belief, but still holds tightly to his superstitions. Douglas Coupland postulates that humans need something to believe in. His post-religious collection of short stories explores “Life After God” and argues that in the absence of belief in God, we look elsewhere for significant meaning.

For me there was nothing—not even the seed of a religious experience to grow from—and I found that I had to build (and continue to) try and build some sort of faith for myself using the components taken from disposable West Coast suburban culture. Malls and nature and fast-food places.

It does seem rather incongruous that in a secular society, superstitions and folklore still carry some weight: black cats, stepping on sidewalk cracks, the number 13, etc. Nonetheless, Baby Fat puts huge stock in the curse; Swank does not. Perhaps because Baby Fat worries so much about the curse (as do Rigoletto and Triboulet) it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Swank (and the Duke and the King) don’t believe in the curse at all (as they don’t believe in anything) and are therefore immune to its effects, as they continue down the same perpetual path of rapacious consumption. The believer (in superstition in this case) is the one who suffers; just as Poveretta the faithful is the only one having a crisis of conscience during the rape itself. In this regard, religion (and belief) becomes a yardstick to keep the devout lower classes in

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line. As Karl Marx famously postulated, “religion is the opiate of the masses\(^{22}\), but what is often lost in this philosopher’s uncontextualized quote is that Marx also recognizes the need for religion.

Marx is saying that religion’s purpose is to create illusory fantasies for the poor. Economic realities prevent them from finding true happiness in this life, so religion tells them that this is OK because they will find true happiness in the next life. Although this is a criticism of religion, Marx is not without sympathy: people are in distress and religion provides solace, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs.\(^{23}\)

Each of the characters has a different level of belief or disbelief, in the world of Baby Fat, and there doesn’t seem to be redemption for any of them. Swank is a ruthless monster without belief; Baby Fat is a superstitious agnostic; while the rest of the entourage - who don’t profess to believe in anything - are left in the vortex around Swank’s gravitational pull, spiraling on a ride of destructive hedonism. This is disrupted when a hard-core believer, Zannoni, interrupts the party to lay his “old school” damnation on the pair. Then there is Poveretta, who believes with all her heart in following “the path of the righteous” (“Bound to Fall”) but who suffers the most despite her faith. Even the assassin Sardonicus, has dark interpretations of Christian scripture as he sees himself as weapon through which a vengeful God speaks, to purge sinners from the world through a veil of bloodied tears (“Living Hell”). There is a wide spectrum of (predominantly Christian) beliefs represented in


this piece; and the one who is the most religious, is ravaged by a pitiless man who holds nothing sacred.

The Trio

Fig 4. The Trio (Mallory Gladman, Anne Bragg and Darian Marchetto) with Baby Fat (Kwame Michael Remy) during the overture. (Photo Carol Rosegg)

One aspect of the production that developed out of collaborative necessity was the Trio. As there are only two featured female characters in this piece set in a misogynistic world, I thought it would be important that the female chorus members do more than play mere partygoers. I wanted them to watch and comment on the action, and in doing so they became another spiritual element in the play. But how the concept of the ensemble of women evolved was a true collaboration of ideas that came out of necessity.
Andy (Music Director) decided that we needed a trio of female voices for the harmonies and arrangements that he’d created to really pop. Some of Swank’s songs like “Kewpie Doll” and “Sleeping Beauty” have a do-wop feel to them, and the kind of backing vocals that help serve that choice, are “ooooos” and “aaahhs” from a Supremes-esque trio.

Sam, our choreographer - who was my Assistant Director on Mr. E... and Uncle Vanya (Medicine Show Theatre) – wanted to work with an ensemble of three or four female dancers to create the three different physical languages that we felt this piece could speak in:

1. Physicality ripped from the mosh pits and stages at punk concerts (“God Damn You”, “So Long Mojo”)
2. Moments of Broadway schmaltz (“Baby Fat’s Got a Girlfriend”)
3. Heightened gestural work that would be thematic abstractions of the inner emotional states of the character (“Pale Light of the Midnight Sun”)

While there were ample opportunities to mix all three of the physical languages even within a single number, I was most intrigued by the theatrical potential of the abstract work. Some of this movement was going to come from the ensemble, who would be omnipresent onstage: at times supporting what was happening for the principles within the scene, and at other times commenting on it. The ensemble was
integrated into the party in scene 1, but I wanted to find ways of incorporating the ensemble into the more intimate scenes at Baby Fat’s home in scene 2, and in Swank’s loft in scene 3.

One way of doing this was by playing with time and space, by changing the reality, and allowing the deep inner world to materialize, and another was to return to the framing device of the punk tragedians. Within this troupe we needed leaders, or instigators to trigger the action, to cast a spell over the space, to create the world for us, to move in and out of the action and comment on it as well. This became our female trio, who took on an ethereal quality, acting as The Fates.

The ancient Greeks believed that many aspects of a person’s life were determined by the three mythical women known as Fates. These were three sister goddesses that appeared in Greek and Roman mythology and were believed to have “spun out” a child’s destiny at birth. They determined when life began, when it ended, and everything in between. At the birth of each man they appeared spinning, measuring, and cutting the thread of life. However not everything was inflexible or pre-determined. A man destined to become a great warrior one day could still choose what he wanted to do on any given day. The gods could simply intervene with decisions that could be helpful or harmful. In a sense, they controlled the metaphorical life of every mortal born.24

Our Fates would start the action of the play once the defiant meta-theatrical gesture of the band leader’s “finger” cleared the space. They would conjure the lead character and bring him his wheelchair. They would instigate each scene change.

They would observe the male oppression, and comment on it. They would sing

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backups, at first sweetly, then more ominously and eventually rebelliously.

Although these characters didn’t exist in the script initially, their development came out of need to address some of issues raised in the script. Their evolution came organically from a musical need, added to a choreographic impulse, and even a casting requirement. I worked very closely with Malloy, Darian and Anne who would play the roles, to fully integrate their presence into the piece. They became spiritual support for Poveretta, tragic storytellers, and fun backup singers. In some ways they worked a lot like the three mysterious women who work as a Greek chorus in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Ben would call them Angels when he came to see opening night. Whatever you called this trio, they were three more strong female characters weaving the threads of this story together.

**Commenting on Misogyny**

While speaking with Lepage about my upcoming project, he told me of a production of *Rigoletto* that he had seen in which the debauchery of the Duke’s court was so relentlessly “in your face”, that he had an instant visceral reaction to the patriarchal world that the story was set in. I heard this as a great challenge, and I knew that I couldn’t timidly explore or expose this world; that I needed to be bold if I were to portray it or comment on it. In the words of Anne Bogart “If you’re gonna do it, *do* it!” Michael Mayer too had gone full bore with the debauched world of his Vegas themed *Rigoletto*, which included trays of cocaine, showgirls and a topless pole dancer, all of which shocked some members of the Met Opera’s regular audiences.
“The new staging by Michael Mayer, a Tony Award-winner on Broadway, and his design team draws gasps as soon as the curtain rises.”  

But how to do this and not perpetuate the stereotype? Mayer’s Rigoletto showed toxic male behaviour without celebrating it. I wanted to go one step further, and actually comment on it. We needed to show a debauched world, and not just add to the amount of male dominated culture that is mindlessly presented on a regular basis. First and foremost, the room needed to feel safe for the female artists to play in and to express their concerns. The creative team and I wanted the artists to portray scenarios in which they felt comfortable physically and politically. So, to that end, we made the sex-party a sex-positive one; a place where the female partygoers (The Trio and Miserella) were in charge of how much they were participating. With input from the performers, we choreographed every movement of the debauchery once the trays of coke come out (which occurs in an instrumental section after “I’ve Got VD” and continues under the scene leading into “Kewpie Doll”). The women were the ones leading the advances, and this “sex positive” world of kink would hopefully be a stark contrast to the horrifying rape of Poveretta in scene 3. I wanted it to come across as sexy and fun, in the playful vein of hedonism, that could be looked at differently once we get the information from Zannoni that this isn’t a safe place. But after Brian came to a dress rehearsal, he gave me a hard note to hear: the party wasn’t planting enough clues about the

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horrors to come. So I had a challenging work-session with my team in tech, trying to find the different levels of enjoyment (not consent, but enjoyment) that the women were having at this party. The women were still leading the actions, but the men were operating at 110% with tongues salivating, while the women were not always at that same level of eagerness. The image we were working with was a moment from a Pina Bausch dance piece in which a man licks the side of a woman’s face incessantly while she calmly smokes, facing out to the audience, aware of the “puppy on her leg” and commenting on it to us with each puff of her cigarette. This subtle shift brought a darker tone to the world of the play, but also a lightness in that we were able to break the fourth wall in these moments of recognition, and thereby keep that direct line of communication open.

The Trio was able then to see us again as they stepped out of the debauchery - which was suspended in a “freeze” during the song “Kewpie Doll” - and to comment further about what they had just experienced, now as storytellers outside the moment. They become backup singers, who slap a huge layer of cheese with extra schmaltz as they croon behind the manipulative Swank (who is seducing Miserella while her boyfriend Jerry is out of the room). This also sets up the language for an even harsher comment during the sticky sweet tune of “Sleeping Beauty” in which Swank tries to put rose-coloured glasses on the atrocity he is about to commit. The Trio come on stage with mics in hand and repeat only one single word amidst the harsh toned ‘oohs’ and ‘aaahs’, the haunting word ‘forever’ (a keen arrangement choice by MD Andy). Sam’s campy choreography for “Kewpie Doll” was a thick layer of satire
that was an abrupt juxtaposition to the creepy make-out that preceded it. Then the lack of formal choreography in “Sleeping Beauty” served as a greater contrast to the tongue-in-cheek take on “Kewpie Doll”. No longer could those tongues be held firmly in their cheeks, as The Trio swung back and forth between casting sharp accusing stares at the predator Swank, and sympathetic gazes focused on poor Poveretta. But as it was the Fates who started weaving this tragic tale, they could no longer stop it from unfolding, nor wish it away, or even scream it away. All they could do was feel compassion for the pure lamb they had sacrificed, for our sins, for our better understanding: so that we can hopefully learn from our mistakes and not repeat them.

**Process Planning**

One way that I managed to infuse more time and space into the rehearsal process was to only work 5 hours a day, 5 days a week; no weekends. Lepage tries not to work 8 hours straight in a day - he often works a morning chunk, takes the afternoon off, then works an evening chunk – allowing more space and time for discoveries to happen even in the same work day. *Baby Fat* rehearsals were Monday to Friday from noon until 5 PM. I was then able to balance work and family, which is a priority for me in my career. My daughter had daycare during the weekdays, so I was able to spend time with her in the morning, pick her up from school at the end of the day and even spend the weekends with her. I was firm about these rehearsal hours, and when I put the casting breakdown out I made sure to clearly lay this out, asking actors to *only* submit if they were available for this kind
of schedule. What happened as a result is that rehearsals were manageable concentrated blocks of dedicated work, giving enough time for actors to prep in the mornings (and even do outside auditions) and then they went off to their evening gigs, which brought them back fresh with new ideas every day. I hear Ivo van Hove rehearses on a similar schedule with his Toneelgroep Amsterdam. The ensemble he often works with there are locals who also have families and want to have a good work/life balance. This is one of the challenges I had been trying to work out since coming to Columbia. How was I going to be a daddy and a director? In the past what happened was that I would dive down the rabbit hole of a project, and I wouldn’t eat, sleep or see anyone for the duration of the process. This was not going to work if I wanted to have a healthy family life. A balance needed to be struck, as I couldn’t maintain that pace moving forward. In the past, I often got so stressed out, my body would break down, and I would limp across the “finish line” of opening night. Would the work still be as rigorous, with this much “air” in the process? This was going to be the biggest project I had ever directed, and I was going to limit the amount of rehearsal hours (and even outside hours) that I was going to work. Was the quality of my life going to increase while the quality of my work suffered? While not meaning to “jump ahead” in this journal, I can report that I was extremely satisfied with the work, and I have never been so relaxed, open and, dare I say, even happy while working on a show. My wife was shocked to see how calm and happy I was even during tech-- which is usually the toughest time for me.
**Stage Management and Voices in the Room**

One of the key partnerships on this show was with my Production Stage Manager, Joan Wyatt (Columbia 2017). A fellow Canadian who came from my old stomping grounds in Edmonton, we were aware of each other’s work, but this would be our first time working with each other. It was a huge production for a student stage manager to take on, but Joan proved herself to be an amazing partner. She kept this large machine on track through excellent organizational skills, great communication and empathy. A solid stage manager is hard to find, and I count myself lucky that Joan was able to come on board. Not only was she good at making sense of the chaos, she was also a great artistic voice in the room. One lesson that I’ve been experimenting with, while at Columbia, is giving space for all members of the team to have a voice in the room.

While I’ve always believed that any member can run ideas past me, now I was opening up the idea to allow ideas to flow freely in the rehearsal space as well. I had been tentative about this in the past, as there are certain ideas and notes that performers can’t unhear (line readings, harsh judgments of their characters, etc.), and being an actor myself I know what kind of notes can help or hurt a performance. But instead of trying to contain the ideas, or control how they are communicated, I tried to create a room where all ideas were welcome, as long as they were respectful. And if an idea was expressed that I didn’t agree with, or if it wasn’t taking into consideration some other piece of the puzzle that the speaker couldn’t
necessarily know about, then it was up to me as a director to hear the idea, embrace the idea, and refocus it.

The tone of the room dictates the kind of ideas that come forth, and even the way those ideas are expressed. So opinions were shared and no one got hurt. No performances were ruined. In this process, I felt I had the ability to take what was offered and use it, or respectfully put it to rest. This was liberating, taking tension out of my body and mind, as I was no longer trying to control how everyone communicated. However I did lead by example, and folks contributed in that spirit. In this regard, Joan proved to be a key contributor on this project. I would pow-wow with her at the beginning of each day to talk about rehearsal goals, and de-brief with her at the end of each day about what we had accomplished. I could not have pulled this show off without her.

The Assistant Stage Manager was Abraham Marlett (Columbia 2017) who was also a great presence in the room. Abraham was very resourceful for us, allowing us to run two rehearsal rooms when necessary, and he also provided some valuable input about gender issues that were invaluable to have in the room.

I need to have strong organizational support in order for me to feel I can do my best work. When I can focus my energies on the art, I can go deeper into it, and have more flexibility in how I approach the work. When this happens, I don't get bogged down in the minutiae and can focus on the big picture. Joan and Abraham allowed me to be an artist both inside and outside the room, because I knew they were
taking care of so much: communication with the team, updating of scripts, sourcing of resources for rehearsals, etc. And they did it all with a clear and passionate understanding of what the production needed, because they were involved in it, and had a sense of ownership over what we were creating.

**First Week**

Part of how I set the tone for how the rehearsal process would proceed happened before the table reading on the first day. I told the gathered ensemble that “the piece was written by a man, and is being directed by man, and the speaking roles are mostly male. There is a lot of testosterone in the room and we need to make sure the female voices will be heard loud and clear. If I start *mansplaining* please let me know. We all need to be sensitive to the triggers in this show and how we approach them”. I was told afterwards that this speech helped members of the team buy into the project, and overcome any tentativeness they may have had.

Another reason folks were able to buy-in so deeply on day one was that we were fortunate enough to have had Ben Weasel join us for the first three days of rehearsal. For Screeching Weasel fans (like myself) it was a real treat to have him come and share his time and knowledge with us. He gave us insights into his intentions behind certain scenes and he was moved to hear his songs being arranged and sung by professional performers. In the punk scene, there isn’t always

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26 "...explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer, often done by a man to a woman" - Rothman, Lily (1 November 2012). *A Cultural History of Mansplaining*. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved 20 August 2013.
a lot of rigour around the actual rehearsing. So he was thrilled to hear harmonies being worked out, and to have a whole chorus of great singers bring his tunes to life. Ben also came to jam with the band, which was rehearsing separately in the evening. He lent his voice to the jam, and provided his insight into how it was played on the recording. In all respects, Ben was the kindest and most supportive of artists. He did not live up to his reputation of being brash, inflexible and verbose. He was the opposite. He was more open than any other playwright I have ever worked with. He understood that this wasn’t his field of expertise, and therefore was generous in giving us the freedom to interpret the material, and to make suggested edits. He was kind and supportive to every member of the team. By the end of the three days, we were all sad to see him go (although we of course stayed in touch throughout the process).

Part of what I was doing by flying Ben in for the beginning of rehearsal was providing tangible research opportunities for the company members. They were all able to ask him questions about their characters, vocal techniques, story insights or even various aspects of his life in punk. He was the living, breathing answer book to the riddle of this production that we were trying to solve. Not every member of the team had first hand experience with the punk scene, and Ben was a valuable source of information. I wanted to expose my team to as many punk scene experiences as possible during the process. I shared documentaries on the early Chicago punk
scene\textsuperscript{27}, and a documentary series about (rival Fat Mike’s) band NOFX touring\textsuperscript{28}. I scheduled group outings to concerts, and even brought in a few more special guests. Coincidentally, on Ben’s final day with us, shocker punk band The Dwarves was coming through New York to play a concert at the Bowery Electric. Their lead singer, Blag Dahlia, sung the role of Baby Fat on the album. Blag was kind enough to come in and check out what we were doing. He sang one of the songs for us (“Attention”), and gave some pointers to the actor playing Baby Fat (Kwame), saying that he could afford to speak more of the lines rhythmically. This is a common punk vocal technique (and coincidentally an avant-garde operatic technique: \textit{Sprechstimme}\textsuperscript{29}). Some of the cast and creative team attended the concert that night, and noted fashion choices, found some emblematic gestures from both performers and the crowd to bring into our production. How could we capture this idea of event in our show? What elements could we borrow and riff off of?

As we moved into the theatre I was also able to get Paul Collins of The Nerves and The Beat (“Hanging on the Telephone”), who sang the role of Sardonicus on the album, to come into rehearsal to sing with us. He came in at a critical time, when we were incorporating the elements of lights and sound, and showed all of us how to rock out in that huge space.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{NOFX: Backstage Passport}. Fuse. 2008. Television
\textsuperscript{29} See Alban Berg’s \textit{Wozzeck} and \textit{Lulu}. 
These kinds of punk experiences would add a layer of authenticity to the performance that punk fans who don’t normally come to theatre would appreciate. After all, this piece was for them too. These shows can be a gateway drug to the addictive world of theatre, for those who might otherwise think there is no place for them in the theatre. I’ve seen it happen before. In one of the final tours of The Black Rider, and on Hedwig and the Angry Inch, the theatres noticed a huge increase in single ticket buyers from customers who they had no previous relationship with. The theatre companies then did direct marketing to reach those audience members - many of whom said they hadn’t seen a play before - hoping to bring them back for a piece that also might appeal to them in the following season. Exposing more people to the power of theatre, and bringing in other ways of thinking into our sometimes-insular world, is an important artistic goal for me.

**Act II**

On the first day, after our table read, design presentations and group discussions, we did a cold read of the first draft of Act 2. Ben had been in discussion with me for months about what he had hoped to do roughly with Act 2, what songs he wanted to put in it, and what the character story arcs were going to be. He sent me an outline and even a couple demoed music tracks, from previous recording sessions. I had resisted giving him any concrete feedback until the first draft was to be completed. I wanted him to try to say what he wanted to say first, and to not interrupt his flow with my opinions until I could see the whole piece laid out. When the draft arrived it was so close to rehearsal, that I felt the dramaturgy and development for Act 2
would be better served if I just focused on staging Act 1 (which was the challenge we had all signed up for). I knew that once Act 1 were up and running we would have a better sense how the show worked, and that the realization could better inform the writing (and music composition) of Act 2. That said, what Ben wrote was sophisticated, complex, and (I think) a bold attempt to empower the female characters that come across as hapless victims in the Verdi classic. In Baby Fat, Cassandra - the daughter of the killer for hire, Sardonicus - ends up viciously striking back against her father that has used her for bait in his schemes. In this way Ben had twisted the traditional story on its head.

While we weren't going to be on working on Act 2, the character insight buried in these pages was a valuable tool for all of us. So we ended day one with a reading of this draft, but I made it clear to all in the room, that we weren't going to be providing feedback to Ben on this first draft. He just needed to hear it, and we needed to know where this train was headed.

It was clear that Ben had been motivated to get us a draft of act 2 for the first day of rehearsal, now that he knew who the cast was. It was easier for him to see some of the characters, particularly the three members of Swank's entourage – Stompanato, Jerry Japan, and Queeg - who in Act 1 are not as individualized as some of the other characters. This is also true of the lords and courtiers in Rigoletto; what each character's actual job is in the court (or rock band) is less important to the audience than it is to the actor (and director and costume designer), but the hierarchy is
important. That said, Ben’s ability to find more character specificity in Act 2, allowed us to be more specific in our character choices in Act 1.

The character of Cassandra becomes quite important in Act 2, and was initially missing in Act 1 when we started rehearsals. I have seen productions of Rigoletto in which (the corresponding character) Maddalena is silent but present, seductively haunting Act 1, Scene 2 when Rigoletto first meets the assassin Sparafucile. In light of the fact that Cassandra has such a pivotal role in the second half of the piece, I thought it would be important to plant that seed in our staging of Act 1: not to mention that this gave us another opportunity to have a strong female character on stage (much to satisfaction of one of our ensemble members, Anne Bragg, who got to play the role).

Homework

The first week (which was only Wednesday to Friday) was filled with a day of table work and readings, design presentations, learning the music around the piano, starting to build a choreographic vocabulary and starting to stage the overture. It was really a (half) week of getting to know each other, and seeing how this group was going to function together. It felt like a three-day workshop, followed by our first two-day weekend away. Ben would be leaving us until opening, and now the real work began. All the preparation was over and it was time to create this thing. I gave the cast a homework assignment over the weekend: to prep for Stanislavsky’s character “Hot Seat” exercise that we would work on the following week. In this
exercise the actors write out every single line that a) they say about other people, b) other people say about them, and c) that they say about themselves. I told them to include the text from Act 2 for this exercise. I had never asked a professional company to do this kind of group exercise before, but I was keen to apply some of the tools I had been experimenting with in class. I had used this exercise as an actor myself, but never thought of assigning it until Brian’s Chekhov class had floated the idea.

On the first day back I conducted a couple of revealing “Hot Seat” sessions with the actor playing Swank (Russell) and the actress playing Poveretta (Marlene). These sessions were playful but also quite emotional. All members of the team present were able to ask questions of our characters - including our Stage Management team and my Assistant Director, Ran Xia. (Ran Xia is an emerging experimental director who kept me mindful of aspects of the production I might have lost sight of.) After guiding the whole team as to how these “Hot Seats” would be run, I was then able to give over this duty to Ran, who would go to the second rehearsal hall with the ASM (Abraham) to further investigate the homework the actors had done, while I was working in the main hall. This was a great way of dividing our resources, making good use of actors’ time who might have otherwise sat around. This was the first time I had really worked with an Assistant in this way, and I found it immensely valuable. I didn’t need to “check” the actors’ homework, I just wanted them to have done this sort of research for themselves.
When I was the Assistant Director to Glynis Leyshon at the Vancouver Playhouse, working on *Romeo and Juliet*, she had sent me to the other rehearsal hall to work on the second pass of scenes she had just staged. I felt invigorated that she had entrusted me with this task, and I knew that if I ever had an Assistant I would want to work with them in a similar way. So, several times throughout the process, Ran was able to run a secondary rehearsal hall doing character work and even a rhythmic line run emphasizing the meter through percussion.

**Rehearsal**

The rehearsals themselves felt very collaborative. Ideas would come from all over the room in a very supportive, organic way. Everyone had a voice, and I was able to focus discussions if need be. In the past, and in much of my life, I’m known for talking a fair amount. In this process, I did a lot of listening, and the result was much more peaceful, and collaborative, but still quite rigorous. I often found myself saying “I didn’t know” the answer to many questions, but I was eager to explore the question on its feet. In the past, my rehearsals have tended to get bogged down in discussion. I wanted this process to be thoughtful, but to be more action packed. I’d only allow discussions to got on for a few minutes, before I’d say “lets try that”. Often times we wouldn’t know what we were hoping to find, but we’d try it out, listening to how the scene or section worked. The actor’s internal experience was a great tool for gauging how a scene was working, as were the reactions of the rest of the creative team who all contributed in trying to crack the nut of certain scenes. I should highlight the participation of one key collaborator at this point, Sam
Sheppard (choreographer)- a dancer, performer, choreographer and sensitivity training instructor. Since arriving in NY for school, Sam has become a true creative partner for me. She will always grab the ball and run with it, and showed me new ways of throwing it. Our discussions inside and outside of the rehearsal hall always stimulated imaginative physical work on stage. Through Sam’s insight and respectful provocations I was able to learn a new language of inclusion that now seems so essential to making work collaboratively. I didn’t have Sam, Ran and Felicia in the room all day for every rehearsal, but they always seemed to be there exactly when I needed them. Anne’s words about “ideal working conditions” kept returning to me throughout the process. Ideally I would love all artists to be in the room at all times, but until I can afford to pay people a livable wage (which seems more possible in the subsidized art world of the Canadian granting system) I can’t complain. It would be great to have everyone on the same page at all times, so that when change happens in the room we can all react to it, but in the end that’s what Joan’s thorough rehearsal reports ended up becoming: a means for each of us to catch the details of the evolving piece.

One criticism I have for working this way is that it seems to be slow. Yes, this is a new work, a musical with many moving parts, but the pace at which we moved through the piece felt luxurious. We staged one scene a week, essentially, and then started to put the big pieces together. Thank goodness we had decided to only stage Act 1, because we would have never gotten through the whole show in our five-week rehearsal period. True, we only worked 25 hours a week, but the point
remains the same. If I am going to continue working at this pace, which I enjoy, I am going to have to find a way to work longer rehearsal periods. Or perhaps I will have to find a way of working more efficiently, so that I can work within the traditional constraints of regional theatre. Or perhaps this process was a clear example of the old truism that no matter how long or short the rehearsal period is, you will always have barely enough time.

One scene that took a few days to find was the rape itself. I knew that I didn’t want to show any gratuitous violence on stage, as it would be an unnecessary trigger for some members of the audience. But I also wanted to engage the power of the audience’s imagination in helping to tell the story. An aesthetic I share with Robert Wilson is that I find props, especially realistic ones, clutter the visual field and limit an audience’s creative skills. It doesn’t allow room for us to enter into the piece beyond the surface level. So too, I also want to put acts of violence into the minds of the audience without having to re-create a naturalistic interpretation. This is the power that theatre has over any other medium. When we dissect a human action, pull it apart to see the components of it, we are able to understand it better. Like a cubist sculpture that shows us an object from several perspectives simultaneously, theatre can do the same when looking at humans and human action. So my simple concept for the rape was that it was going to be an out-of-body experience, which is a common occurrence during such trauma. Having the rapist and victim on opposite sides of the stage, proved to be even more disturbing, but at the same time gave more agency to Poveretta who screamed her threats of revenge at Swank who was
trapped in his own body some distance away. This simple sequence took the
brainpower and mindfulness of the whole creative team to realize. I’m so grateful
for all of their input, as what we ended up creating was very powerful.

Performance

Fig 5. Poveretta (Marlene Ginader) in “Bound to Fall” (Photo Carol Rosegg)

Getting all of the elements to come together for the performance was a challenge,
but with respect and patience we managed to get the piece where it needed to be.
Opening night was actually the first time we got through the piece in its entirely
without stopping. We had been rehearsing with karaoke recordings that Ben had
supplied to us, and the band had been rehearsing separately in jam spaces on and off
for months. Mostly this was due to the availability of the musicians, but it was also
due to the practicality of setting up and tearing down musical gear. Band jam spaces have drums kits all set up, and amps in a sound proof room that allows us to just show up and rehearse inexpensively. I ended up being the singer for these sessions, as we couldn’t ask the actors to give their time over and above the regular rehearsal time. I also knew what changes were happening in the rehearsal hall, and could bring that knowledge to Andy (MD) and the band. So when we moved into the theatre the week before we opened, it felt like we had ample time to tech the show, but there were so many elements to incorporate. We loaded in set and lights, and now we had to figure out sound. This would be the first time working with microphones and the band, and finding the balance would be tricky. In fact we didn’t get the right sound levels until the last two performances on closing night. The band overpowered the singers during the first two shows, and once again I was reminded why the supertitles were an essential element.

Conor (Video Designer) worked closely with Felicia (Dramaturg) to figure out at what pace the lyrics should be displayed for the audience. We didn’t want the line-by-line tradition of the opera; rather we opted for more of a CD liner notes aesthetic: a stanza of lyrics at a time so that an audience member can take it in and then focus for a while on the action.

The actors’ performances just got deeper and deeper after each performance, as they took more ownership over the material. As the musicians got more confident with the cueing the show got more and more tight. This showed to me the huge
benefit of preview performances. Had we opened with our fourth (and final) show, the run would have been incredible.

One of the elements that came together at the last minute was the costumes. Our first costume designer had dropped out of the project two weeks before we began rehearsals, so I found a last minute replacement who came highly recommended: Joseph Blaha. Joey and I had a couple of good meetings outside of rehearsal talking about the influences for the project and going through the research that the team had managed to amass. He came to a couple of rehearsals to observe, and to do some fittings. I asked if I could sit in on the fittings, but he asked that I not. He wanted to have his own experience and relationship with the performers. I had never worked like this but I wanted to be respectful of his process. The costumes did show up for the dress rehearsal, and they looked miraculously on point. There was no time for any major notes, but thank goodness they didn’t require any. Joey had managed to make magic happen in what seemed to be a parallel universe. I have to admit I was scared being so removed from this aspect of the production, but it worked out amazingly in the end.

When Ben came to see opening night (and every show thereafter) he was thrilled to see what we had done with the piece. He loved the sound, the look, the story, the performances, but he had one immediate doubt. After the show, he ran to me concerned that perhaps putting the rape on stage was in fact too hard to take as an audience member, as even he had difficulty watching it. This had been the number one challenge about the script from day one. Despite a team of thoughtful creators,
who approached the scene (and its text revisions) from various feminist perspectives, the piece had been a trigger for some audience members (including the author). Is ending (half) a piece at that moment unsatisfactory? With no chance for revenge (failed or otherwise) does showing the rape (even in a deconstructed form) actually help us deal with the issue? In a full-length piece, an audience suspends its judgment until the final curtain. Perhaps in this workshop production the curtain fell too soon. I had hoped to promote discussion through the piece, and that discussion is definitely ongoing. Some audience members were moved by the fact that we weren’t afraid to show the harshness of a very real issue, while others were upset that we would put this story out into the world at all. As I hope to stage the full production sometime in the near future, Act I will need to be looked at again with the whole team, now in the larger context.

The Event

When audiences arrived at La MaMa, they were greeted by the typical box office table set up at the entrance of the theatre, but behind them was a “merch” table selling Screeching Weasel LPs and CDs, meanwhile a record was playing on a portable turntable playing loud punk rock, while beer was being served. The atmosphere I tried to create in the lobby was that of a rock show more than a theatre piece. I believe we captured that feeling, but in future productions could probably go much further.
Once the audience entered the space they were forced to walk through the playing area where the actors and musicians were warming up and preparing for the show. The artifice of the theatre was revealed. Lighting racks and other technical gear were intentionally left out to be seen by the audience as they walked in. The actors acknowledged the audience and their friends as they walked in. The actors were not in character. Audience and actor were in the same space, in the present moment, here in the Ellen Stewart in the moments before the show. The warm up was supposed to be reminiscent of an orchestra tuning up before an opera. At the side of the playing space - where the actors would eventually sit in their “off-stage” positions during the show – were their seats made out of road-cases typically used in rock shows and some unmatched boxes, stools and chairs strewn about. This along with the completely visible “side-light trees” helped to create the open, unmasked aesthetic: no blacks, no Germans, no curtains of any kind to hide the theatre and its trappings. I wanted the audience to know they were at a rock show in a theatre. Before the four performances there always seemed to be a fair amount of authentic interaction between performers and audience. Some selfies were taken, and the laid-back atmosphere was achieved through this soft opening to the show. All of that gets interrupted with the entrance of the bandleader (conductor). A spot light catches his entrance, the mood shifts as the performers sharply turn toward him for his call to action: a middle finger. This disperses the actors to their positions at the side, and the band (with support of video and lights) begins to take us on a journey that doesn't let us go for 90 minutes. The songs move in and out of direct address, rock concert crooning, and dramatic interaction among characters.
Audiences applauded after numbers that had hard buttons, and some even hooted and hollered after more virtuosic moments. The hybrid event of theatre, opera and rock seemed to be communicated clearly.

The role of the audience was an evolving one through the evening. At first the audience is asked to be participants as they walk in, permitted to engage with performers and be in the playing space. Then a spell is cast during the overture, creating a somber mood of ceremony as the Trio invokes the space with an electrical charge, allowing the audience to sit back and watch. A small coffin lit from the inside slowly makes its way to the stage; a dark shadow is cast over the once playful space during the overture “Il Tremendo Fantasma” (Translation: “The Terrible Ghost”30). This quickly shifts to a raucous party to which the audience is invited; they are at once welcomed and admonished to behave appropriately at this “celebration of our dear departed friend’s life”. The audience become characters in the first scene, fellow party goers, who can snort a line of imagined cocaine, who are encouraged to laugh at the ribbing that comes from the “entertaining” misfortune of others and to drink from Swank’s Kool-Aid. The show within the show begins with Swank singing about the death of his monkey Mojo. This heartfelt but silly tribute hopefully charms our audience to some degree. As the party goes on, Swank’s luster begins to fade. The first crack in the veneer is when he attempts to publicly humiliate his underling, Queeg (“I’ve Got VD”). Swank’s luster is hopefully smudged again through a high-pressured seduction of Miserella, who came to the party with

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30 A reference to the song “Ohime! Sorge il tremendo fantasma” from the Gaetano Donizetti tragic opera *Lucia di Lammermoor.*
Jerry (“Kewpie Doll”). Then the scene ends with a disgraced father (Zannoni) spoiling the party atmosphere by coming in and accusing Swank of rape in front of his entourage. All of these steps are intended to be gradual clues to the villainy that lies beneath the surface of the rock star’s veneer, that I had hoped the audience would initially connect with. But as Baby Fat screams “God help me” at the end of the scene, the audience’s relationship with these characters should be a complex one, that will continue to evolve.

At the top of scene 2, audience sympathies seem to be with the acerbic Baby Fat who is critical of the whole system he is a part of (“Things Aren’t So Bad After All”), but once we find out that he is essentially keeping Poveretta prisoner in his home “for her own safety”, again the audiences sympathies shift, as does their role from participant to observer again.

In the final scene (of Act I) the audience is asked to bear witness to the most horrific act of toxic male behaviour: the rape. So the audience’s role changes yet again from observer to witness or judge (or perhaps even jury), but without the power to sentence. With the end of the now final song (“Disharmony”) the house lights are turned back on, with the white fluorescents going full blast. The fabric of the world has been ripped apart, the video has burnt out, and the characters revert to actors, singing directly out to the audience about the broken state of the world. Here the audience is asked to return to the room, think about their own lives, and the disharmony in the world around them.
Sensitivity vs. Political Correctness

Fig 6. Swank (Russell Fischer) and Miserella (Maggie Politi) in “Kewpie Doll” (Photo Carol Rosegg)

This entire process was very rewarding when it came to team building, but did it result in better art? I had a strong impulse to approach the work sensitively, but I don’t know that the approach actually helped promote a community dialogue, nor did it break new ground creatively. When I first read the script, there was one stage direction that worried me, which appeared immediately following “I’ve Got VD”.

(\textit{the crowd disperses, and seven nude women enter with platters of food and plates of cocaine. Some of the women kneel down to serve as footstools; others lie or kneel down and serve as human tables for the food and drugs})

Before coming to Columbia University, I often disregarded stage directions, as I thought they were a way for the playwright to dictate the staging. As an actor I
would often scratch out stage directions so that I could feel free to discover what is potentially happening in any given moment, and not to have those moments pre-determined physically or emotionally. Anne Bogart showed me a new way of looking at stage directions that treats them like clues, rather than answers. What is the playwright “pointing” to with these stage directions? What is the intention? If you can grasp that, then you are free to abandon it, or find another way of coaxing that idea to the surface. So when I read the above stage direction, I thought no self-respecting actress would want to play the role of “nude drug furniture”, and I thought that staging a scene like this, as written, would be contributing to the pile of misogynist culture. So I edited the stage direction with Ben’s permission.

*(the crowd disperses, and platters of food and plates of cocaine are served. There is much debauchery)*

I thought this new stage direction “pointed” to the same idea of debauchery that Ben’s first idea was alluding to. In retrospect, I’m not sure I did Ben’s piece or the cause any service by making this change. I may have watered down the message, and tried to lightly tread where I could have stomped. Perhaps with Ben’s version of this debauchery, Swank’s world of hedonism, entitlement and oppression would have been more colourfully and clearly exposed. Or would it have just been another example of exploitation? I tried to create a nuanced villain who revealed his darkness one shade at a time, which has its own merit, but now I’m curious as to what the audience impact would have been had I gone full bore into the kind of staging suggested by the original stage direction. It would have been more in line with Lepage’s advice about the unrelenting debauchery. Perhaps by creating a
world of hyper-exploitation, the audience would have had more to chew on. So in my attempt to be sensitive, did I end up making politically correct art that neither pushed the envelope nor contributed to the political conversation? Is it the artist’s responsibility to provoke or appease? Not to offend for the sake of offending, but to show something to an audience that is true, or revealing, or whatever for the sake of promoting thought, feeling and discussion? In my effort to be sensitive did I inadvertently end up offending more people? These are questions I will be asking the team and myself as we move forward with this piece.

**Conclusion**

I learned so much about collaboration during this process that I’m eager to keep working in this way. I’m learning its more rewarding to hear all voices and then make decisions based on the feedback received, not just to charge through with my pre-determined vision regardless of what’s being said. It doesn’t mean that I have to do what people tell me to do, but it does mean that I need to take all opinions and ideas into consideration before proceeding. This is true with audience feedback as well. As an actor I never read reviews, as I don’t want an outside opinion to derail the work that came out of the rehearsal process. As a director, I always read reviews, as I want to know what is coming across, so that I can clarify what’s being communicated (even after opening night). Audience feedback is essential, although it’s not my job to make every audience happy. A director needs to hear what’s being said, listen for the patterns and larger themes that keep emerging from aggregated feedback, and adjust accordingly. That said, if one person brings up an issue that
rings true for me, I take it to heart, wrestle with it and try to come to terms with it. This experience with *Baby Fat* has given me much to think about in terms of working on the larger production and working within the genre of alternative musicals in general.

When I first entered the alternative musical genre almost twenty years ago now, I felt as though I was forging new territory. In the 90s, North American theatre hadn’t fully embraced punk (or rock for that matter) in a way that celebrated the rebellious nature of the music, its composers, or the DIY aesthetic. Sure there were fluffy musicals like *Grease* that used the rock genre to tell a typical saccharine story without substance, but the real underdogs of the music theatre scene for me were adventurous pieces, that experimented with form and content. There seemed to be an entire catalogue of gritty music theatre for people who hated Musicals, that wasn’t getting produced on a large scale: pieces that owe their DNA to the early musical works of Brecht and Weill, and other post-war artists creating political allegory through song and story.

By the time I produced the World English Premiere of *The Black Rider* in Edmonton in 1998, the piece had already been in existence for eight years - with Wilson’s production having premiered at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg in 1990. Wilson’s original production toured across the world in German, with only one brief North American stop at BAM in NY in 1993. This show was a milestone success for Wilson, with 35 different productions in 7 languages across Europe, before 1998. Yet before I independently produced a chamber version at the Fringe Festival, no one in North
America would produce it. Our production went on to tour the main stage seasons of regional theatre across Canada (while also playing a stint at the Henry Street Settlement in NY in 1999). Our production inspired a generation of theatre makers in Western Canada who went on to create dark alternative musical theatre pieces: One Yellow Rabbit (Calgary) later would mount their hugely successful gothic rock opera *In Klezskavania* (2005) composed by the Plaid Tongued Devils; Catalyst Theatre (Edmonton) would begin their regular touring of new dark musicals with *The Blue Orphan* in 2002 (starring myself and other *Black Rider* alum), to name a few. Punk music theatre like *Hard Core Logo* (2010) also seemed to tap into the zeitgeist, as Green Day was just beginning their ascent to Broadway at the time. The world of opera seems to be one of the last territories left to fully embrace this musical style.

While I am passionate about this hybrid of theatre and music, I don’t know how revolutionary it is anymore. Once something has been accepted by the mainstream, it had lost its experimental edge. What was innovative to me in my twenties is now part of the norm. I am still quite interested to see what can be done with this piece, but as a director I don’t know how many more productions I can work on within this narrow field. I would like to bring this rock aesthetic and attitude to my work, but not exclusively to rock musicals. Classical dramatic works, like the Greek tragedies and Shakespeare’s canon are very intriguing to me because of the rich interpretative potential they offer, and the layers of textual discovery that is possible. While there are certainly enough alternative musicals to keep me busy for a lifetime (Three
Penny Opera, Sweeney Todd, Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson, Frank’s Wild Years, etc.) I would love to bring this “rock aesthetic” to my work in non-musical pieces, and even classic operas. Now that I know I am able to tackle the beast that is the alternative musical, I do want to keep doing it and more.

Fig 7. The Finale (Photo Carol Rosegg)
## Appendix 1 – Plot Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene</th>
<th>Baby Fat (2015)</th>
<th>Rigoletto (1851)</th>
<th>Le roi s’amuse (1832)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.1</strong></td>
<td>Baby Fat introduces Tommy Swank (<em>Attention!</em>). Swank enters in clown makeup and sings a eulogy for his dead chimpanzee, Mojo (<em>So Long Mojo!</em>). The entourage praise Swank for his talent (<em>Tower of Talent</em>). They sing a song in anticipation of summer (<em>All Winter Long</em>). At Swank’s request, Queeg sings about his VD (<em>I’ve got V.D.</em>)</td>
<td>Borsa and the Duke discuss his desire to seduce a “nameless beauty of the bourgeoisie” that he has seen at church every Sunday for three months (<em>Della mia bella incognita Borghese</em>). The Duke sings about how women are all the same to him (<em>Questa o quella per me pari sono</em>)</td>
<td>M. de TL and the King discuss his desire to seduce a commoner he sees at the church in St Germain de Près every Sunday. The King has been disguising himself as a commoner. He cannot steal the woman away as she is constantly guarded by a “pestilent old crone” and a mysteriously cloaked man.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.2</strong></td>
<td>Swank asks Baby Fat about Miserella. Baby Fat gets rid of Jerry by telling him to close out, while Swank seduces Miserella (<em>Kewpie Doll</em>). They head to his bedroom together.</td>
<td>The Duke flirts with Countess Ceprano, who says she’s shortly leaving.</td>
<td>The King flirts with Mme de Cossé, who says she’s shortly leaving. The King flirts with Mme de Coislin to make Mme de Cossé jealous.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.3</strong></td>
<td>Baby Fat insults the Entourage (<em>The Entourage</em>).</td>
<td>Rigoletto insults Count Ceprano, who storms off. (<em>Partite? Crudele</em>).</td>
<td>Triboulet insults M. de Coislin, who storms off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.4</strong></td>
<td>Stompanato tells the group he’s discovered Baby Fat’s girlfriend (<em>Baby Fat’s Got a Girlfriend</em>). They decide to grab her and bring her to Swank.</td>
<td>Marullo enters with the discovery that Rigoletto has a mistress. Rigoletto recommends that the Duke banish, exile or kill Ceprano (<em>Gran nuova! Gran nuova!</em>). Ceprano vows revenge against Rigoletto. He convinces the courtiers to join him the following night at his house (<em>Gran nuova! Gran nuova!</em>).</td>
<td>Several courtiers discuss the King. M. de Pienne arrives with the discovery that Triboulet has a mistress. Triboulet insults the courtiers. Triboulet tries to convince the King to behead M. de Cossé. M. de Cossé is enraged and tries to strike him. The King stops him. The courtiers vow revenge, agree to join at dusk that evening.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appendix 1 – Plot Comparison</td>
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<td>--------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2.1</strong></td>
<td>Baby Fat worries about the curse. [And then tries to wrestle his demons before coming home.] <em>(Things aren’t so bad after all)</em>. He runs into Sardonicus, who has just gotten out of prison and has bought the bar up the street. Sardonicus says he hates Swank and would love [“to cut that punk off at the knees”].</td>
<td>Rigoletto briefly worries about the curse. Sparafucile meets him and offers his services. Rigoletto tells him to leave <em>(Quel vecchio maledivami)</em>.</td>
<td>Triboulet briefly worries about the curse. Saltabadil meets him and offers his services. They discuss terms. Triboulet says he has no need of him for now.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.2</strong></td>
<td>Sardonicus bemoans his life [of exacting sacred vengeance] <em>(Living Hell)</em>.</td>
<td>Rigoletto worries about the curse <em>(Pari siamo! lo la lingua)</em>.</td>
<td>Triboulet worries about the curse in a lengthy soliloquy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.3</strong></td>
<td>Baby Fat sings of his love for Poveretta <em>(Thine Eyes of Mercy)</em>. It is unclear what their relationship is. [She] bemoans his secrecy. [He] consoles her that it won’t be much longer. She can see something is troubling him, he won’t tell her what it is. She promises he won’t lose her again <em>(Creeping in Silence / Here to Stay / Cursed)</em>. Baby Fat [is called away] [<strong>“Cursed” is cut from the final production</strong>]</td>
<td>Rigoletto and Gilda express their love for one another. Rigoletto speaks of Gilda’s mother – how she loved him out of pity and tragically died. Gilda bemoans her isolation. <em>(Figlia! Mio padre!)</em> Rigoletto tells her to guard her chastity. The Duke slips Giovanna a purse to ensure her silence. Rigoletto interrogates Gilda about a man following her to church. He tells Giovanna to keep the doors locked and [leaves] <em>(Ah! Veglia o donna)</em>.</td>
<td>Triboulet and Blanche express their love for one another. It is revealed that Triboulet retrieved Blanche from her adopted home [<em>…</em>] He speaks of Blanche’s mother – how she loved him out of pity and tragically died. He interrogates Blanche about a man following her to church. He tells Dame B. to keep the door locked, and tells Blanche not to go out onto the terrace. He goes to bed. The King, watching from outside, realizes [she’s Triboulet’s] daughter and laughs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 1 – Plot Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.4</th>
<th>Poveretta sings a premonitory song (<em>In the Pale Light of the Midnight Song</em>). She reads aloud from the <em>Prayer of Those Who Go Astray</em> by Bl. Henry Suso. [This prayer is ultimately cut from the final production]</th>
<th>Gilda tells Giovanna she’s ashamed for not telling her father about the young man she’s seen at church. The Duke rushes in and proclaims his love for Gilda (<em>Giovanna, ho dei rimorsi</em>). They sing a love aria. He claims his name is Gualtier Maldè (<em>Che m’ami, deh, ripetimi</em>). He flees upon hearing footsteps. Gilda says she’ll carve his name into her heart (<em>Gualtier Maldé...Caro nome</em>)</th>
<th>Blanche tells Dame B. she’s ashamed for not telling her father about the young man she’s seen at church. The King rushes in and proclaims his love for Blanche. He seduces her. He claims his name is Gaucher Mahiet, and that he is a poor student.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Stompanato, Queeg and Jerry enter and trick [Poveretta] into going with them by telling her that Baby Fat’s been in a car accident.</td>
<td>The courtiers arrive, masked and armed. Rigoletto re-enters. In the darkness, they trick him into thinking they are kidnapping the Countess. In fact, he helps them to prop up a ladder to the courtyard, allowing them to kidnap Gilda (<em>Riedo! Perché</em>) They make off with her (<em>Zitti, zitti</em>). Rigoletto recognizes her scarf on the ground and is sent into a panic. He drags out a terrified Giovanna and cries out “Ah! The Curse!”</td>
<td>The courtiers arrive, masked and armed. Triboulet re-enters[…] In the darkness, they trick him into thinking they are kidnapping Mme de Cossé from the next-door Hotel Cossé. In fact, he helps them to prop up a ladder to the courtyard, allowing them to kidnap Blanche. They make off with her. Triboulet recognizes her veil on the ground and is sent into a panic. He enters his house to find Dame B gagged and half-undressed. He falls into a swoon, crying “Malediction!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Alone in his loft, Swank sings about being a lone wolf (<em>I’m a Lonesome Wolf</em>).</td>
<td>The Duke worries about the fact that Gilda’s been stolen from him (<em>Ella mi fu rapita!</em></td>
<td>The courtiers discuss their plans to [throw] Triboulet off the scent […] including false accounts and messages.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1 – Plot Comparison

The entourage arrives with Poveretta. Swank pretends to fire them. He reveals that Baby Fat is fine. They discuss Baby Fat. Swank promises to call her a car (Just for Now). Poveretta reveals that Baby Fat’s her father. Swank drugs her tea. She discusses how she came to live with Baby Fat (We Never Knew). Swank talks about the car accident that left Baby Fat paralyzed. They [argue about their opposing religious beliefs] (Without Belief). Poveretta falls unconscious. Swank undresses her (Sleeping Beauty). The rape happens (Disharmony/ Bound to Fall). [“Disharmony” is ultimately used as a closing number in which characters are dropped, and the actors sing directly to the audience commenting on the broken state of the world]

The courtiers enter to tell him they’ve brought Rigoletto’s mistress to him (Duca Duca).] The Duke realizes it’s Gilda, is relieved, goes off to find her (Possente amor mi chiama).

The King enters, wanting to see Triboulet’s mistress. They unmask Blanche and she throws herself at his feet. He recognizes her and motions for all the courtiers to leave. Blanche is distressed to learn he is actually the King. He proposes to make her his Queen. He reveals that her father is his jester. She is more distressed. She attempts to flee into the King’s bedroom. He follows her and locks them in.


1 I have re-organized and combined much of section 3 from the website layout to underline the key difference in this final scene. All edited text appears in [brackets].
[U]nlike the rigid verse of [*Le roi s'amuse*] and *Rigoletto*'s arias, *Baby Fat* oscillates between iambic pentameter and heptameter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Lines</th>
<th>Meter</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>“Say Mr. Queeg”…&quot;Your wish is my command&quot;</td>
<td>14 syllables (iambic heptameter)</td>
<td>Couplet (AA, BB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>“Jerry's Girlfriend's”…“Move it young man”</td>
<td>14 syllables (iambic heptameter)</td>
<td>Couplet (AA, BB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>&quot;Did my heart&quot;…“next to my bed&quot;</td>
<td>14 syllables (iambic heptameter)</td>
<td>Couplet (AA, BB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>11-12</td>
<td>“He's such a creep”…“on his repulsive face”</td>
<td>1 couple: iambic pentameter (Shakespeare quote)</td>
<td>Couplet (AA, BB)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 couple: iambic heptameter</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>12-13</td>
<td>“So what’s the plan”… “eat that girl alive”</td>
<td>Alternate between 14 syllables + 10 syllables (iambic heptameter/pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB (two stanzas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>“That sick old man”…“you're just another clown.”</td>
<td>Alternate between 14 syllables + 10 syllables (iambic heptameter/pentameter)</td>
<td>First two stanzas: ABAB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>16-17</td>
<td>“Bobby Fate”…”at the knees”</td>
<td>14 syllables (iambic heptameter)</td>
<td>Couplets (AA, BB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>“I missed you”…”over soon”</td>
<td>10 syllables (iambic pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>“I don't understand”…”drop it please”</td>
<td>10 syllables (iambic pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>22-23</td>
<td>“What is it”…”I always am”</td>
<td>10 syllables (iambic pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>24-25</td>
<td>“Excuse me”…”I have to go”</td>
<td>Alternate between 14 syllables + 10 syllables (iambic heptameter/pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB (ish)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 2 - Verse Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>26-29</td>
<td>“Hey Tommy”…”make yourself at home”</td>
<td>Alternate between 14 syllables + 10 syllables (iambic heptameter/pentameter) until “in here fast”</td>
<td>ABCB</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Then iambic Pentameter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>29-31</td>
<td>“Do you have a name”…”her own third degree”</td>
<td>10 syllables (iambic pentameter)</td>
<td>First Stanza ABAB – then ABCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>32-33</td>
<td>“so who are you”... “she died”</td>
<td>10 syllables (iambic pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>34-35</td>
<td>“I’ve been living there”…”kemosabe”</td>
<td>10 syllables (iambic pentameter)</td>
<td>ABCB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>