This All Seems Quite Personal:
Bringing *Over There Over Here*

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Prologue
My Journey To Theatre

“We travel, some of us forever, to seek other states, other lives, other souls.”

- Anaïs Nin

I grew up in a small town of two thousand that covered just over two-square miles of land with the majority of that being used for farms and groves. I belonged to a long line of Florida Crackers¹ and, though our history was rich and full of culture, that culture was not necessarily steeped in theatre or the arts. Ours was a culture of swearing, spitting (my great-grandmother Bonnie kept a spittoon next to her chair at all times and it was often the job of the grandchildren to empty said spittoon), and drinking. I effectively mastered two out of the three by adulthood; I could never bring myself to spit. But nestled among this slightly backwoods culture there was one person in each generation of my family whose mind was touched by a creative muse.

The first of these creative souls that I knew was my great-grandfather on my maternal grandmother’s side. George Burchard moved from the bustling city of New Orleans when he was in his twenties to be with his brother who had carved out a business building homes in the small town of LaBelle, which was nestled along

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¹ In Florida, the term cracker is used to refer to a born and raised Floridian, not as a racial slur. It is derived from the sound the cowboys’ whips made as they incessantly whipped them about to scare off alligators and herd cattle. I am proud to say I come from a long line of these cowboys.
the Caloosahatchee River. George left behind a job as a window dresser in New Orleans and would, for the rest of his life, look back in anger at the road not taken. However, from this choice to move to Florida there came my grandmother, Geraldine Burchard, a pioneer woman in her own right who over the course of her life held the honor of being a writer, a painter, a grandmother and later in life a student of psychology. It was she that first introduced me to the world of theatre.

Geraldine, Noni as I will always know her, would load me up in her Lincoln Town Car on Saturday mornings and together we would drive the hour-long drive alongside canals and orange groves to the neighboring town of Ft. Myers where we would catch the matinee of touring shows that came through. Our drives there were filled with talks of the week that had just passed and she would listen as I would complain about the kids who picked on me because I spoke differently than they did. I had not quite adopted the twang of the cracker or redneck and was often accused of “talking British."

We would eventually pull up to the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall, a monolithic building to my young eyes, that on the outside was austere and pristine and constant. On the inside, I grew to know over time, I would be amazed and surprised by what was in store for us on these trips. Inside the hall it was possible I could see gangsters roll craps and dance, cats sing of being excluded from their pride and families become torn asunder because of war and Broadway dreams. I watched the shows there with great intensity and focus, perched on the edge of my seat.
Our drives home were filled with my incessant chatter about what we had just seen. If it was a musical, I immediately put in the tape we had purchased and fast-forwarded to the moment in the show that had captivated me most. If it was a play I would thumb through the souvenir copy of the script, finding the funny lines that had made my grandmother laugh or the word that had been said that I did not know the meaning for.²

The infinite possibilities that awaited me inside that theatre on these Saturday afternoons awakened in me a sense of recognition and reflection. I felt as though my own body was like the building of this theatre; to the layperson I appeared constant, entering and exiting with the same clothes and the same haircut and perhaps even the same smile, though I knew the difference between a grin of anticipation and a beaming smile of satisfaction. But, like the building, I was not the same, not constant. In those intervening hours between my entrance and my exit I had been changed forever. In these trips to the theatre a seed was planted, watered and eventually grew into the tree of passion and commitment to theatre I have today.

² Like Auntie Mame, the title character in a movie that Noni introduced me to and which I watched weekly, my grandmother was encouraging of my desire to extend my vocabulary but not without her own limits. After Sweet Charity, the story of a hooker with a heart of gold, I was met with, “I’ll tell you when you’re older.”
“To remain capable of making the best decisions, then, we must remain more committed to having the best answers found than to being the ones who find them.”

- Alex Lickerman, MD

My decision to direct *Over There* as my final thesis production at Columbia University came as an unexpected result of life events that occurred while I was completing my final semester of coursework. It was not on my initial short list, nor any other kind of list for that matter, but rather came out of a sense of tumult and abandon that accompanied the events of the spring of 2014. I had worked quite diligently to craft for myself a trajectory towards my thesis that would situate me in a place where the next step after graduate school would steer me towards freelance directing in regional theatres and universities. I had always thought my thesis project would serve as a calling card and a bit of a coming out to the professional theatre world; I thought it would be focused on the business and social aspects of my career. What it actually did was acutely focus my own attention on the real question of how and why I make theatre.

It was the spring of 2014, the conclusion of my second year of training, and I was committed to a production at HERE in New York City the coming fall. I had initially thought that *Bent*, Martin Sherman’s gripping drama on the lives of homosexuals during the Holocaust, might be a fitting piece for my final thesis. In my
thirties I had come to embrace an identity more firmly rooted in my own sexuality and also found a commitment to fighting against the injustices perpetrated against others for theirs.

We had been on hiatus from school for a week. The preceding two months to this vacation had involved not only my work in classes but also simultaneously directing two productions, one at Columbia and one at NYU, as well as working towards a production of a new play, Sounds of My People by Tabia Lau, at Columbia that was set to begin rehearsals the day after our break ended. The day preceding that launch, my partner of five years and I decided it was time to end our relationship. This was not the beginning of a discussion, but rather the culmination of years of working very hard to hold together what we had to finally admit was not right for the time. I won’t indulge the story here more than to say we were both heartbroken and were also both fortunate to have work to keep us on task and out of the throws of full-blown depression.

The deadline for choosing a play for the fall loomed close as I closed Sounds of My People. Natalie Gershtein, the producing partner who had offered unending support to me throughout my time at Columbia and had agreed to work with me producing the thesis, set up meetings with HERE to discuss the play we would co-produce with them in the fall, hopefully Bent if they agreed it fit into their season of curated work.

The story of Bent is at its heart a love story and the terrible choices one man must make in the face of terrifying opposition from the Third Reich and those who saw homosexuality as an abomination amongst the superior race. As I sat in my
apartment hosting a reading of the play one night in late April it became apparent
my eyes and mind were not in a place to tell this particular story at this particular
time. I was filled with a certain cynicism and anger that blocked me from accessing
this play. It wasn’t that I didn’t believe in or understand the story I was hearing, I
actually couldn’t hear it at all. I became panicked, worried that I would lose the
support of Natalie and perhaps even HERE; there had been great support
surrounding my choice of play and I feared abandonment in my artistic endeavors.

Uncertain where to turn my attentions, I continued researching Bent and its
history to see if there was point of view, an angle, that would spark a desire in me to
move forward with it. I had the support of a number of actors who wanted to be a
part of the project and I felt slightly beholden to them, even in this infant stage of
collaboration, to see this through.

While I bemoan many of the technological short cuts we now have in the field
of research, I do acquiesce there is a certain value to them. One of these is what I
lovingly call the Google Hole. My particular search stemmed from looking into
treatment of homosexuals in Germany both around the time of World War II as well
as currently. In some way I found my self looking at a review by Michael Billington
in The Guardian of Mark Ravenhill’s play, Over There:

Ravenhill explores postwar Germany’s division and unification through the
power battles between twin brothers. The result is fantastically clever and
ingenious, even if, finally, fraternal behaviour seems to be dictated by the
demands of political allegory. Ravenhill’s premise is both witty and
plausible.

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3 Becoming lost in research, such that you lose a sense of where you began.

Accompanying the review was an image, of one brother wearing a suit made from shiny grey material standing over the other who was wearing a pig mask. My curiosity was peaked and I immediately ordered the play. Thanks to e-books it was only minutes before I was hunched over my i-Pad reading Ravenhill’s work. What I discovered was a mature and rich metaphor of life in Germany from 1986 to 1990. Through the story of two twins who were separated during their childhood by their parents the complex and at times confusing politics of the re-unification of Germany are played out.

In the play Franz and his mother have fled to the West while Karl and his father have stayed in the East. We meet them as grown men living different lives on either side of the Wall. They reconnect without the knowledge of their parents, both of whom have committed fully to the ideologies of their respective sides, and begin to forge a strained brotherhood in the face of glaring differences. As the old ways die away, along with their parents, and the Wall that divides them comes down the attempt to forge a new way of life for themselves only to discover that one must eventually succumb to the other. The story was simultaneously political and familial.

Family dramas have never much interested me where making theatre has been concerned. My own family relationships are filled with such tension and complicated nuance that exploring them directly through a play concerning itself with the quotidian or even extraordinary events of another family over dinner or a holiday seems to fall short of the potential in my own story. When the time comes to
do this sort of drama it will be writing of my own based very lovingly on the family with which I was saddled at birth.

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Royal Court Theatre in London produced a series of plays and readings under the heading “Germany.” A longstanding tradition of exploring German drama that dates back to 1956 and the Royal Court’s production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Good Woman of Setzuan*, this continuation of that relationship to German writers and theatres included Ravenhill’s *Over There*, a co-production with Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz. When asked why this play focuses as it does on Germany, namely Berlin, Ravenhill responded:

"They thought I would write something about the fall of Thatcherism, the fall of Blairism, blah blah blah. But then I thought, if you talk about collapsing ideologies, the German situation is so much starker. The changes in German history over the last 100 years are so massive; English history doesn’t really have anything to compare."

Ravenhill set off to Germany to research his new play, thinking he had a fairly good understanding of the story of re-unification. What he found in his travels, perhaps only because of his focus on writing this story, was a starkly different picture. Some in East Berlin held the opinion that perhaps times were better before the privatization of their businesses and the introduction of western products and values. Many businesses were sold to investors as part of the privatizing of companies in the east after the wall fell. Many times these acquisitions did not ensure the workers at these companies the same rights as they would have in the west. Rather than finding that Germany had become one through a sharing of ideas

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and resources, he came to believe that it was more akin to the country becoming one big Western Germany.⁶

Also found in Germany, even twenty years after re-unification, was an underlying sense of prejudice and ignorance. "I was shocked by the way in which even liberal Germans - people who work in the theatre, say - make jokes about the 'Ossis' at dinner parties, “ says Ravenhill, “It's almost racist. People used to talk about the Irish that way here in the 70s and 80s; now we just wouldn't do that.”⁷

By crafting a play in which his characters not only live in these disparate worlds but actually embody the ideologies of those worlds, Ravenhill has freed the play from being a verbatim or dramatized re-telling of political and global conversations leading up to the demolition of the wall in 1989.⁸ He has also freed himself from storylines and psychological expectations of a strictly naturalistic play wherein one might feel the need to replicate or at least approach common or everyday human behavior or psychology. Instead, the two characters in Over There are driven by the sentiments present in the populace of Germany; they reflect the behaviors and psychology of a government and citizenry more than individuals.⁹

Discovering Over There when I did gave me hope that the fall would not hold a nightmare of lost possibility. I had become sullen as the semester wound down,

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

⁸ Copenhagen is a play of this type, dramatizing the meeting of Neils Bohr and Werner Heisenberg.

⁹ Mark Ravenhill is known to have admired the work of Caryl Churchill who employed a similar anthropomorphizing of ideology in her own Drunk Enough to Say I Love You.
thinking that my moment of producing this final project would be marred by the sadness I had surrounding my personal life and the indecisiveness it was creating in me as I stressed over the task of staging a larger play. *Over There* could relieve some of the administrative pressures associated with *Bent* and allow me to focus on the rehearsal and collaboration with designers and actors without the undue budgetary and schedule strains a larger production might produce.

I approached Natalie Gershtein once more saying, “I have a new play in mind. I think it’s fantastic, different and I think it’s the one we have to do.”

I explained to her the casting, two twins, and the political and social aspects of the play that I thought would be new and exciting for me. *Over There* could serve as a new start, the opening of a new door instead of the closing of an old one. I also pointed out the beauty that we would be producing the New York premiere of this play in the year of the 25th Anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. “How much fun will it be,” I said, “to tell people to come see *Over There* at HERE?” My “producer assisting” brain was in full gear. I was very fortunate she agreed whole-heartedly to *Over There*, even if not with my attempt at a marketing slogan, and we set out to produce *Over There*.

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10 Dialogue or quotes within this paper not attributed to a source should be understood to be based on my memory and recollection, often aided by notes taken during the process. They are not intended as verbatim accounts.
“The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don’t play together, the club won’t be worth a dime.”

-Babe Ruth

The casting of *Over There* posed the biggest potential for pre-production stress and tension. Though the play required a cast of only two, those two actors needed to be similar enough in look that they could play twins. The original production in London was performed by Luke and Harry Treadaway, twin actors whom Mark Ravenhill had met while the two were studying at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art. The history the two actors shared combined with Ravenhill’s direction, along with that of his co-director Ramin Gray, had created a sense of a psychological boxing match with “my boy in the left-hand corner, yours on the right.”

A 2012 American production in Chicago cast one black actor and one white actor as the brothers. This approach, one can only imagine as there is little documented on this production, highlighted America’s own divide in the present day. Class and race are, in America, still viciously divided by architecture even if the walls that divide us are not as overt or monolithic as the one in Berlin.

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11 Oltermann, “Divided We Stand.”

12 Idem.
For Natalie and I it seemed that with the anniversary of the Wall falling as an anchor of our reason for producing the play, to throw focus on significantly American divides would be inappropriate. We did bandy about the notion of casting two women or a woman and a man as the brothers, but again we worried that casting any combination of actors that was not clearly brothers would be wrong for us.

Utilizing friends in the casting industry as resources we brought together four sets of twins who were interested in the project. I was set to leave for Maine in mid-July to teach for four weeks and the hope was that we could cast the production before I left.

My hope in auditions is to create a microcosmic sense of rehearsal, that is to say I long for a feeling of collaboration and play between the actor and myself. Director Joe Mantello equates the role of the director in auditions to “being a host” where the actor “comes into your house [to] have a good time and...show the best part of [themselves].”13 I follow his lead and make it a point to be present with the auditionee in the room.

Questions that arise for me in castings include “Can we play together?” “Might we be interested in exploring the same things in this play?” “Might we be interested in different things in this play and how would those support and encourage each other?” “When this person inhales, do I lean forward to hear what they are about to say?” “Can I interrupt this person without stopping their breath?” “Does this person have the faculty of language or movement that I THINK is

necessary for this play?” “Does this person have a faculty of language or movement I
had NOT considered for this play but might lead to new discoveries for me?”

For Over There, as the casting we would do would be for pairs of actors, I
asked each set of brothers to read the play before coming in and to decide between
them two to three scenes they would like to read together with myself and Natalie. Of the four pairs two came in with a palpable hunger to learn more about the play in
our time together. They had more questions than the other two sets of brothers;
they had a sense of awe and wonder about what kind of play this might be.

Chief among the questions was how the play’s structure might manifest in
production. The play begins with a Prologue, set in the present day, which is
followed by six scenes, further divided into beats, and ends with an Epilogue.

Prologue- California, Present day
One- East Berlin, 1986
a. b. c. d. e.
Two- West Berlin, 1988
a. b. c.
Three- West Berlin, 1989
a. b. c. d. e. f.
Four- West Berlin, 1990
a. b. c. d. e.
Five- East Berlin, 1991
a. b. c. d. e. f.
Six- East Germany, A few days later
Epilogue

14 These questions are not scientific. They are also not set in stone and vary from
person to person. But, on the off chance an actor is to read this, please know I am
not there to see if you are talented or good. I am not there to judge whether or not
you should be in this business. I am there to see if I can begin to understand what
might arise from collaboration with you. I hope that is why you are there as well.

15 I feel so fortunate to have worked with a creative producer who became a
confidant both administratively as well as artistically. Natalie Gershtein has shaped
how I approach my collaborations with producers to this day.
Each numbered scene is given a location and year but from that point forward, within the scene, there is no reference to time passing between each lettered beat. Actors asked, “Do these scenes run together?” “Are there transitions?” “Are we in the same place?” Often these abrupt moves from one letter to another seemed to require an immediate shift of reality or emotional life within the characters, from the joy of a reunion to the sadness of a funeral, for example. “How large are we to play their realities if we have to switch so quickly?”

Another quirk of the script, as noted by the actors in these early casting sessions, was the dialogue. Aside from being written in a British vernacular with phrases such as, “Let’s go back to mine,” there are many moments where the two actors speak in unison.16 Ravenhill denotes this in his script “when the text is in bold type like this.”17

KARL
Or you’d be an actor in a soap opera only of course it wasn’t ever you. And then Papa would come back and he would be: What the fuck do you think you’re doing turning the aerial West. We don’t turn the aerial West in this house. Turn it right back again ... How did you do that?

FRANZ
Do what?

KARL
Do that. Yes. That. That’s it. That.

FRANZ Oh my ... That’s weird, that’s strange. I didn’t plan it. It just ...

KARL Happened? Like that?

FRANZ

16 Mark Ravenhill, Over There, (London: Methuen Drama, 2009), 11.

17 Idem., 2.
Happened. **Like that.** Yes. There have been times ... all these years when you weren’t there when I saw things, felt things that I thought were your stuff but I didn’t think hah! **We’d say the same things at the same time.** Hah! I liked it. I know so much about you.\(^\text{18}\)

A freeing aspect of Ravenhill’s script, unlike those we have grown accustomed to in our high school drama productions with scripts furnished by Samuel French, is that there is no extraneous information. No stage directions telling you what was accomplished in an original production or what side of the stage one character is to stand. Rather there is enough information within the script to raise questions of the most basic sort, the simplest sort, and to explore the myriad of possible answers. While rehearsals would lead us into deeper and much more profound areas of exploration, these basic questions served as the perfect litmus test in casting for assessing actors’ presence and engagement.

The decision was made to cast Rick and Jeff Kuperman, two brothers originally from Canada who, though not twins, showed within our casting sessions the dynamic relationship I thought necessary for the rehearsals of this play. In the few hours in which we met I witnessed these two brothers complete each others sentences time and again, at times never allowing the other to complete a thought. Ironically they were the pair that had many questions about simultaneous speaking, fearful it would appear fake or robotic. They also showed they were not fearful of confrontation or disagreement. At many points when we were together around the table the tension in the room mounted so that both of them stood from their chairs and crossed to opposite corners of the room. They were eager. If there was any

\(^\text{18}\) Idem., 4.
reticence on my part about working while I was undergoing the rebuilding of my heart and home, these two actors showed they had enough energy to share.

Concurrently with these casting sessions, the design and creative teams for *Over There* were being assembled. We pulled together a group of creatives that were all connected through me in some way, though we had not all been in the same place for a project at the same time. For stage management Garrett Rollins joined us with whom I had previously worked on two projects at Columbia University and whose artistic input his equally skilled eye for detail and organization matches. Jocelyn Shratter, another colleague from Columbia, joined us as dramaturg. Jocelyn had helped me navigate the bi-lingual production of *The Sounds of My People*, working diligently with me to understand how we might translate Mandarin dialogue, which relies heavily on intonation that might seem antithetical to the actions of the character, into an understandable moment on stage. For *Over There* she would be integral in helping us sort through the many social, political and linguistic confusions that lay ahead.

The designers we were fortunate enough to bring together on this production all came from my pre-Columbia days. Schuyler Burks, scenic designer, Jennifer Schriever, lighting designer, and Christopher Metzger, clothing designer had all come to me through various projects and friends over the years. Each of these people had, even in my early days of making theatre, pushed back on me when I was getting lazy or sloppy. They each had strong points of view and aesthetic visions. In the past their own prowess in their fields at at occasionally led to a sense of
acquiescence on my part. I was eager to bring them together now that I felt more assured and confident as a director.

One of my initial draws to this play was its ability to exist in a neutral space. The original production had taken place on a set that had been designed to house another play that was running in rep at the time. The focus in that production had been on object as place. “The son is portrayed using a washing up sponge, the ashes of the father is a packet of flour from the British supermarket Tesco and the wall is formed from supermarket boxes.”19 I was drawn to the author’s own openness to object/prop replacement or, as I arrogantly call it without a great deal of research to back it up, object re-modification20

We had not quite finished casting the show yet or perhaps I would have asked our cast to be there for the very first design meeting. One of the downfalls of the common structure of producing theatre in this country can be that all design decisions are made before the cast even enters the rehearsal room. As an actor in


20 A great deal of my own work, stemming back to a production of The Crucible in 2012, has done away with props entirely, save for a few well chosen ones. For The Crucible we limited our objects to twelve hymnals and a poppet, the latter of which served as sleeping children, a bleeding courtroom hysterical and a hanging soul. A later production of Into the Woods would take this conceit a step further into what I arrogantly called object re-modification. The idea, put simply, is that by naming an object or lack of object that which it is not, it becomes the named object simultaneously with its existence as that which it already is. In Woods this notion of re-modification could be seen in a white dump truck toy, inspired by photographs of a child among the rubble of Hurricane Katrina, that became Jack’s cow, Milky White. The intention behind object re-modification is to further engage the suspicion and therefore the engagement of the audience, making them further culpable in the act of making theatre.
my twenties I was often told to stand “on six” because “there’s a light thing here” or “the set will be this way.” There is no room for expansion or contraction of ideas based on rehearsal with the actors in these types of processes. One of my challenges for these designers was that whatever design we landed on, no matter how full and rich and specific it was, we had to allow room for the actors to play in rehearsal and know how to allow for that play to affect the final design.

When we convened for the first design meeting in late-May we began by reading the play aloud together, alternating lines around the circle. Many of the same questions the actors had came up again with this group. In this first meeting we did not discuss where the design might go but instead focused on themes and topics that were of interest to the group. A partial list of words that came up that day:


From these topics and themes each of us left that day with the assignment of coming back to our second meeting with a sense of direction we might take a play like this were we to have no limits. Focus could be on a section of the play or the play as a whole and when we reconvened we would all present a series of images or ideas to the group.
Our second meeting came on the heels of my being fairly certain Rick and Jeff, the amazing Kuperman brothers who were creators of film and dance theatre in their own right, were my top choice to play Karl and Franz. I was eager to share this news with the team as it had colored my own initial pass at an idea for the play as we might present it. Based on the hours I spent with Rick and Jeff I began to see the play as taking place in a bedroom shared by two young boys, the age the twins were when they were torn apart by their mother’s decision to flee West. The room might reflect each brother’s own life after being separated. Perhaps a line would run down the center of the room or simply a change in color and décor as well as visible living conditions would show us the two as separate but still connected through brotherly bond. I could see the entire play through this lens. My only reticence was its similarity to other work I had done around themes of childhood and my actual work with children in the summers. I was eager to shirk off the mantle of “youth” and move towards a more mature way of creating work. But it was how I saw it and so I brought it to the table.

Christopher Metzger came with an array of fashions from the many time periods present in the play, either explicit or implied. To him, it was important that we anchored our two actors in the moment of reconnection, just before 1989, with their outerwear, jackets in particular. Their connection to the past, he said, he wanted visible in their undergarments, “their first skin.” He posited that our hint towards the present might be visible in the almost “futuristic” appearance of the wig worn by Carly, a waitress in the prologue played by the actor playing Karl.
Schuyler Burke’s inspiration came in the form of imagery of warehouses and storage units. He wanted to explore the world of seeming excess that existed in the West, where unused and unwanted commodities were left to spoil or be forgotten while to the east there was a need for those very supplies.

Jennifer Schriever’s contribution to this second meeting was perhaps one of the most inspiring to me personally. She brought in a photo taken by Canadian Astronaut Chris Hadfield. The image was of Berlin in 2013 and what it shows is “bright white light around the government quarter in the heart of the city and the shopping districts of west Berlin, contrasting with a softer yellow glow in the east.”

The glow in the west showed that commercial activity still focused its attention on the western side of where the wall once stood, even decades later. Hadfield’s caption for the photo read, “’Berlin at night. Amazingly, I think the light bulbs still show the East/West division from orbit.”

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22 Idem.
Figure 1. Aerial photograph of Berlin, Chris Hadfield, 2013.23

The image stopped us all in our tracks. Concepts and ideas aside, Jennifer had brought us to what would become a governing focus of our design and collaboration. She had concretely brought into the present moment the existence of the Wall and its affects on the surrounding city. More importantly she had shown how in today’s communication age, where information is with you one second and around the globe in another, that affect can resonate worldwide via an image. How could we encapsulate the feeling that image evoked in the rest of our work? How would our visual gesture encompass the one captured by Hadfield?

We all left that second meeting encouraged by the research that had been brought into the room. We would come together once more, it was decided, before parting ways for most of the summer. At this next meeting we would invite Rick and Jeff to join us and share with the team what their thoughts on the play were. The

designers were so excited to be collaborating with the actors, an activity that seemed scary and thrilling. It is so often that the actors are the last to know what designs will be but this time that would be different. Our actors, and I am loath to use that phrase for the sense of ownership involved even for a group, would be an integral and initial voice in the process.

At this next meeting, though it had already begun to go this direction, each designer was to bring in rough ideas of where the elements of design might lead us based on everything said in the second gathering. I want to point out that at no time in this second meeting did we begin to move towards solidifying ideas. We encouraged each other to continue exploring new roads along with deepening familiar paths for as long as we could.

Between these two meetings I met again with Rick and Jeff. I gave them a little glimpse of what was being discussed on the “other side of the table.” They were thrilled to hear about the direction things were going, even in these preliminary discussions. They immediately voiced concern that they were not part of them, though. Being creators and directors themselves, they said, had given them too much insight into the necessity of those meetings and they wanted to be full collaborators.

Immediately my arrogance and ego kicked in. I was the director in this project. While I had worked very diligently over the course of my time at Columbia to relinquish any notions of directing through dictatorship, I did still hold on to the idea that I was the top dog, the big cheese, the... It didn’t matter. I was it. I wanted to tell the boys, “Well, look. I have already decided you should come to the next
meeting. So fear not! I am your director and I will take care of you! Look how I am already doing it! Love me!” Instead, and hoping that a different tactic might in the end lead to a less stressed director, I voiced to them what a wonderful idea I thought they had; of course they should be a part of any and all discussions they wanted to be.

The day approached when, still in the middle of brainstorming and throwing around ideas, the entire collaborative team would assemble for the first time. It was the moment of “Bagels and Paperwork” normally reserved for the first day of rehearsal only we were putting it three months before that rehearsal. I found myself nervous that with this many voices in the room my voice would perhaps be drowned out. I resolved to listen. That was what I did in rehearsals after all, listened intently with a sense of curiosity. I would listen and if an answer or question came I would speak.

As we all assembled for this final meeting before we all broke away for a couple of months the team was quiet. I asked everyone what was on their minds and Jennifer immediately spoke up and said she wanted to make sure that what every we did we did not over design the play. She pointed to the simplicity of structure in the script: no specific locations set forth in stage directions that allowed discovery on the part of the audience and fluidity between time and space. If we overdesigned locations or spaces, she said, we would run the risk of bogging down a piece that was meant to be light in presentation.

“Perhaps,” I offered, speaking much sooner in this gathering than I had hoped or anticipated, “I can offer a thought. I agree with you, the writing of this piece
seems to succeed when done fluidly.” Rick and Jeff nodded in agreement as I spoke. The last time they had read the script aloud with me they had both been on high demonstration mode with their acting. At the end it was Jeff who said that it all felt quite overdone when acted that way. “I would like to offer the analogy of skipping a rock on a pond,” I continued, “If you chuck the rock into the pond it will make a lot of ripples and splash a few people near by. Certainly it will have an effect, powerful even, but a limited one. If we can skip this rock across the pond with great ease, however, it will not only ripple in more places but also catch the eyes of more people the farther it goes. Let’s imagine physics doesn’t limit us here and see how far we can skip this rock rather than seeing how big a splash we can make.”

The boys chimed in with their own thoughts on design. Their backgrounds were in dance, not acting. Each had gone to an Ivy League school and studied business and international relations. Upon graduating they had invested their time into building up their own production company, The Kuperman Brothers, and spent their time choreographing dance pieces as well as music videos. They were eager to be able to explore the play without being held to strict realism, they said. The opportunity for them to incorporate text into their work was exciting but they also wanted to leave their bodies free to be part of the story telling.

Scenically, Schuyler explained that he had gone away and developed a series of ideas based on the notion of the warehouse. He had been inspired by the image Jennifer had brought in and wanted to play with moving from light to dark within the set. He proffered the notion that perhaps the progression of the set was to continually move deeper and deeper into the space of the theatre, beginning shallow
and simple, but unpacking, as one does a shipped box, the entire set until we reached the back wall.

The team immediately glommed on to this journey within the space of the theatre at HERE. The stage we would be using was a wide one with an audience arrangement that was just as wide as the stage. To play everything in center, proscenium style would mean a large portion of the audience feeling disconnected from the twins. We would want to make sure we used the width of the space as much as possible. However, that might begin to limit the relationships between the two actors to only horizontal orientations. The gradual deepening of the space would, I hoped, show that even as these two sides reunited they actually began to move farther apart and into territory not previously understood or able to be explored.

Schuyler’s design made entirely of cardboard boxes was lovely with surprises hidden within each one and with the ability to make a home or hospital by simply shifting their arrangements. Natalie voiced a concern that a set of brown boxes might not spark the immediate imagination of the audience and with a piece as dense as this one, with language that was difficult to wade through at times, we might want to consider a more dynamic design. I understood where both were coming from and agreed that there were elements of the cardboard box idea that seemed quite right (consumerism, mass production, shipping products, import/export of ideas) but I encouraged everyone to keep open minds as we moved into the summer. I promised thoughts and research via email even while I was away.
Three

Summer Swimming

“All knowledge is connected to all other knowledge. The fun is in making the connections.”

-Arthur Aufderheide

My summers are traditionally spent in Maine, working at a small summer camp where I teach around 100 teenagers over the course of six weeks. One of the principals I come back to each year as I teach is a notion I call Swimming.24

The principal of Swimming is that as artists our task is to jump into the vast ocean of knowledge and experience known as life and swim around freely. Occasionally we may see something interesting and make a small note on its location and then swim on, seeing more and more. As we grow within our own creative development we may begin to swim directly in the direction of ideas or images we have seen before, something that has caught our interest. As we grow or develop more we begin to collect these items that we have again and again returned to, knowing that our continued interest in them gives them value for us and that possessing them outright will be of use in our own lives. I think this is how we should choose careers and lovers and family as well as being how I approach a project. Too often we are given items from someone else’s Swims and told that they

24 The notion of Swimming was initially a metaphor I developed counseling teenagers on moving from high school to college. The analogy began as an attempt to alleviate the stress of choosing a major which can feel like “sealing one’s fate.”
are now ours to care for with the results being disastrous. It is our task as art
makers to find our own and to do so slowly and gently.

The summer of 2014, I focused on moving away from particulars of design
and casting and production and turned my focus to my own Swimming through the
sea of Over There. I read the script multiple times over, highlighting, writing
questions in the margins and in notebooks. “How much attention should be paid to
the Mother and Father?” “What is it to cut off someone’s hand?” “What is
cannibalism in politics?” “When have we seen a country devour its neighbor or its
own people?”

The Kupermans were now always in my mind as I read the script, which to a
degree I found useful as an anchoring point for my own imagination. But
sporadically I would enlist those who were with me in Maine to read the script
aloud in the evenings and bring up their own questions about what they had
experienced with virgin ears and eyes. I kept returning to the text as though I knew
nothing and enlisting those who did know nothing to join me. This method, of
curiosity and awe and wonderment, is something I make a point to employ in
rehearsal as I begin to see what is in front of my face and not what is already in my
mind’s eye.

I also turned my attention to a couple of historical resources. Frederick
Taylor’s The Berlin Wall: 13 August 1961 – 9 November 1989 became my early
morning and afternoon reading material. I approached it without looking for
answers or solves for the play but instead as I would read a novel that had nothing
to do with my own agenda. I attempted to avoid immediately drawing parallels to *Over There* and instead treated the book as a kind of side read.

That worked until I read the following passage:

“The wounds of the Wall have not yet closed...But Berlin has seen worse, a lot worse. It likes to party, and partying is what it does well, even when the city coffers are close to empty...For anyone who knew the city when the Wall cast its pall across Berlin, nothing can beat the pleasure of being able to stroll through the Brandenburg Gate and across the Pariser Platz...And nothing is sweeter than the awareness that, compared with twenty years ago, the greatest danger you run when taking these few unhurried paces is of being knocked into by an over-enthusiastic bicycle courier, not cut in half by a burst of automatic fire.”

I went immediately to my notebook and wrote the following in response: “The wounds that cut deep never quite heal. We can stitch them together like a torn piece of fabric but it will never be the same. It will be tight and uncomfortable and the best we can maybe hope for is to live with it.”

Up to this point this had been a project that I had kept at an arms length, intellectual and academic. The Berlin Wall, the 25th Anniversary of its fall, Western consumerism and politics I really knew very little about and had very little to tie me too had consumed my focus and much of my talk about *Over There*. Why had I chosen to do this play, really? Had it looked convenient and simple on the surface? Had it seemed an opportunity to let two actors work on good writing with me there to offer some resistance with little at stake to me personally? I will not lie here. I

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26 This reflection would come to form the basis of my director’s note for the production although I wrote the note without referencing this scribble.
think perhaps that was a part of my reason for selecting the play. It seemed possible to direct the play without exposing any truths about myself.

Reading these final paragraphs of Taylor’s I realized that I couldn’t possibly get away with continuing in this distanced and disconnected fashion. I needed to learn about Germany and its citizens, relate empathically to the stories I encountered of men leaping to their deaths and of families separated. I cringed upon reading about Peter Fechter who, “as he tried to follow his friend over the final barrier...was hit in the leg and slid back into no man’s land,” died “moaning and crying for help, at first loudly, then in an increasingly weak and desperate voice.”  

These haunting stories chilled me as I read them, cradled as I was in the hills of Maine. I spoke with friends there of the atrocities I was reading about and even mused about how I thought these bits of information might be useful for the actors to read. But the personal parallels I felt to this notion that wounds do not heal completely, that scars are left on bodies and land alike, on psyches as well as societies, ignited in me a sense of personal purpose in directing this play as well as a realization that I am a director driven not by intellect but by the empathy and spirituality, a belief in a connection between actors and audience that is a reflection of the connection I felt with human kind. For me, I discovered, it must be personal, not only of personal interest, but deeply personal.

Another source of inspiration for me that summer was the PBS documentary *After the Wall: A World United.* The special was available to be streamed online and I spent a couple of evenings watching it. As *Over There* concerns itself primarily with

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27 Taylor, 319.
the topic of re-unification I thought this particular documentary, telling the story of Berliners whose lives changed after the wall fell, would be of special interest.

In the documentary I encountered the story of Dieter Rosengarten, an East German factory worker. “When the wall came down, initially, we were very happy,” he says in the film, speaking German which is translated into English over top of the footage of him, “and everyone was very excited when they came to work. Don’t start the machines. The borders are open...and then we went shopping.”

Narrator (Joe Morton): The visiting East Germans thronged west Berlin’s department stores, bars, and even the sex shops that were forbidden in their homeland. In the beginning, they were greeted with a welcome package, including 100 deutsche marks to spend however they liked.

Woman: When the wall came down and the shoppers first got to go to West Berlin, the items that sold out the quickest were fruits, candy, and porn.

The experience of this sudden influx of Easterners into the marketplace of the West was mirrored throughout Over There. Even before the wall comes down Karl and Franz watch porn together in the West and eventually Karl goes on his own shopping spree.

The video that accompanied this portion of the documentary showed boxes of bananas and teenagers looking at stereo systems displayed along department store shelves. “The onslaught flooded stores in West Berlin and West German border towns, with East Germans dazzled by displays of goods only imagined back in the east,” wrote Terrence Roth in the Wall Street Journal, “Shelves were emptied

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28 After the Wall: A World Reunited, directed by Eric Stange, (2011; PBS), DVD.

29 Idem.
of prized blue jeans and beauty products. Bananas disappeared from fruit stands and McDonald’s restaurants were overwhelmed by orders for burgers.”

I was incredibly taken with this visual of commercialism like I grew up with being met with fresh eyes. I was a child who grew up watching The Price Is Right, a game show based on the notion that you can win prizes by being the smartest and craftiest consumer. I had seen contestants on this show win redundant items for their homes such as hair dryers and new cars and here was an entire generation of people who had not known McDonald’s or Levis.

My own privilege and ignorance hit me and hit me hard. Again I was finding personal resonance to be the catalyst for inspiration. I had been eight years old when the Wall fell; I remembered images on the news but I lived in a family that didn’t concern itself with talking about global matters. Here I was, twenty-five years later, and my ignorance was being reflected back to me in the awe and curiosity I felt watching this documentary.

I was reminded of a conversation in an earlier design meeting, brought about by Christopher Metzger, regarding the placing of this play in both two pasts and the present. I began to wonder if the play also reflected a future as well. The Prologue in Over There is situated in “California. The Present.” The Epilogue is not specifically set in any time or place by Ravenhill. The characters in the epilogue appear to be Carly, the waitress from the Prologue, and Franz, but there is also a moment in the Epilogue where Carly is again Karl, the brother. It isn’t clear where and when this final moment of the play takes place.

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30 Terrence Roth, ”After Fall of Berlin Wall, German Reunification Came With a Big Price Tag,” The Wall Street Journal, (New York, NY), Nov. 7, 2014.
Questions about past, present and future as well as my privileged and sheltered upbringing swirled around in my mind as I continued my time in Maine. I didn’t know how they would manifest in the production or how to even bring them up but I knew a few things would need to be discussed with the team. This play needed to personally reflect my American childhood and the ignorance I grew up with, it needed to be adventurous enough to guess at the prospect of what would come twenty-five years from the production at HERE, and it needed to be dangerous in risking the exposure of wounds that we all wished had healed and were too afraid to admit were still lingering.
By mid-August the entire team had returned to New York City from their various summer jobs around the country. Jeff and Rick, “the boys” as they would be called for the next couple of months with an endearing tone, would not return until right before rehearsals began on September 8th.

The first meeting back was with Schuyler Burks and myself. I spoke with him about the reading and viewing I had done over the summer, focusing a lot of attention on the notion of bringing an American version of a British play on a German event to HERE. The main phrase I kept coming back to was “A Curiosity from Here,” where Here was both 2014 as well as our American point of view. I also brought to the table heaps of visual imagery comparing the shopping in the neighboring factions of Germany both before and after the Wall’s fall.
The displays and presentations of Western consumerism in these images were rife with salesmanship, pomp and arrogance. “This is the best product for all your needs!” seemed to call out from the supermarket and department store offerings. Compared to the stark, utilitarian images from the 1980’s on the Eastern side of the Wall they began to look grotesque to us, like a theme park version of necessity. Schuyler brought up the idea of The Price is Right and I immediately jumped at the synchronicity in our thinking; this was an American visual world we could both relate to. What if it formed our visual world of the West in Over There?

On the game show it seemed odd that a woman or man should be offered a new ironing board, a new car, a new set of cookware when what they had back home was in fine condition. When I was younger my parents certainly cycled through cars every few years, updating to the latest model before the old car had
“too many miles” on it, devaluing its trade-in price. This “new-before-necessary” consumerism stood out in stark contrast to Eastern Germany where “the best known symbol of [their] economy was the Trabant, the ubiquitous affordable car made out of plastic resin” which East Germans waited up to 15 years to buy.31

Scene One in Over There takes place in East Germany before the fall of the Wall and we do not return there until after the glory of re-unification has given way to the harsh realities that faced those in the East, when Franz forces Karl to leave his apartment and return to his own life, effectively abandoning him to unemployment and identity loss as an East German. What if we were to situate the first two-thirds of the play in a visual world of The Price is Right? As a team we had identified Scene Five, Karl’s return to East Germany, as moment of interest from the very beginning. It felt like the play had built to a terrible frenzy and then all of a sudden thrown us into a dark moment of sobriety. The play, like Germany, was comprised of a swift revolution followed by “the biggest, wildest street party…and perhaps inevitably by one of the biggest hangovers.”

Combined with my earlier inspiration of a child’s bedroom, The Price is Right would form a cornerstone of the visual world for the first half of the play. The audience would enter into the theatre, a simple building on the outside with its black box spaces on the interior, and be greeted to a child’s birthday party: bright yellow wall panels with stenciled wallpaper, displays of toys and balloons and sodas and snacks would rest on either side of the stage beckoning and tempting Karl and remaining common and everyday to Franz. As the boys reunited and lived out their

31 Stange, After the Wall.
missed childhoods, sleeping next to one another and telling stories as shadows danced on the starlit walls, they would indulge in these treasures without consequence, not even bothering to clean them up, instead scattering them about with no regard for their value.

Figure 3. Karl. Photo Credit: Matthew Dunnivan, 2014
As the play progressed and the hangover of the merger with the East settled in for Franz, the time for Karl to return to his own identity and his own home becoming inevitable, we would push away the bright wall to reveal the reality behind all glamorous and perfect imagery, that of the mundane and dull reality it takes to keep the glowing lights of capitalism glowing.\textsuperscript{32} If in front we had toys and disposable food items then behind the wall we would find rags and vacuums and cleaning supplies stacked on the cardboard boxes that had brought the beautiful products here to be displayed in the first place. Karl's return to East Germany would be the reminder that keeping us afloat, even today, is a system of quiet workers who come in when we aren't looking to make sure we are greeted with only the fantasy of life as a consumer.

This direction in design and focus felt exciting and right. Somehow it managed to capture a purpose for the production that was going to happen here in New York and was being produced by this team. When we met with the entire design team and shared the ideas we were met with resounding support. Echoing my own feelings everyone agreed that this gave us an anchor in who we were collectively as American theatre makers telling this story. If we were to travel this production to Europe perhaps we would feel differently, but this direction was where we wanted to go in 2014.

At this point, in August 2014, I met with Shayna Strype, a colleague of mine from Maine and an extraordinary puppeteer. I had seen her final show at Sarah Lawrence the previous spring and was inspired by her relationship to objects. She

\textsuperscript{32} The image I had for this transition was inspired by The Wizard of Oz, in which the Wizard is revealed to be a humbug as the curtain is pulled aside by Toto.
had an uncanny knack for allowing an audience to first see the object on its own and to notice that the object had life and breath. I found she was then able to use the breath of that object to create a new story based on her interactions with the object. She honored props in the way we so often speak of honoring text. I asked if she would come on board as a properties consultant and designer and she agreed, in no small part because of the team that was already assembled.

If one were to look at a props list for *Over There* as culled from the script it would include beer, meat, wine, more meat, a son, more meat, porn. In our play, using the world of marketed products as a metaphor, what would those objects be? What was on display as the audience walked in? Shayna was thorough and thoughtful as we talked through the various things we would need. With the filter of walking into a child’s birthday party all of our props should reflect a certain indulgence of childhood.

Cans of Coca-Cola would stand in for any and all beverages. A tower of pudding cups and bananas would be on hand for food. Franz’s son would be played by a large teddy bear, inspired by my own childhood love for Teddy Ruxpin. For the scene where the brothers watched porn together, Viewfinders and a found audiotape of porn sounds would be used. Massive amounts of sugary breakfast cereal would be the items purchased in the shopping spree that Karl enjoyed with his own 100 Deutsch marks. All of these items, once used, could be left wherever they came to lie on the stage, effectively creating a mess out of what was once pristine.

33 The question, "What ever happened to all those Teddy Ruxpins,” would lead us to the visual imagery used at the end of the play.
For the first transition, the return East, Shayna worked with Schuyler to build a small mound of boxes and cleaning supplies. It would pale in comparison to the grandiose carnage on the Western side of our wall. Simple, effective and of utility, the cleaning liquids would serve as gasoline in Karl’s attempt kill himself and a broom would allow Franz the opportunity to try to reconcile with his brother by attempting to literally clean up the mess they had made in the first part of the play.

The next deepening of the space would occur in scene Six in which Karl attempts to salvage the Socialist principals he is being asked to abandon and kidnaps Franz’s son. They steal into a forest on the outskirts of Berlin where he had gone camping with the Young Pioneers as a boy. In this space between East and West, a no man’s land where Nature still governs, Karl attempts to re-make the boy in his own image teaching him the manifesto of the Young Pioneers. “For peace and for socialism be ready, be always ready.” With the image of Teddy Ruxpin in mind Shayna proposed recording onto a tape and using the tape player from the porn scene to create our own version of the toy. Karl could rip open the back of the Teddy Bear and replace its stuffing with the tape player allowing Franz to later discover what has been going on by playing the tape from within the bear.

This scene also signaled a further deepening of the space as we moved from the city to the woods. Through the use of simple Christmas lights, Jennifer would create a star wall behind the upstage stud wall creating a starry night sky that would stand in stark contrast to the bright lights of the city, whiter in the West and more tungsten in the East. This lighting gesture would begin to allow the audience to see there was more to come beyond this back wall, a hint at the Epilogue that was
looming. The lighting in this scene would create the darkest stage picture we had seen thus far with the boys having their final showdown in shadows and small shafts of light, their silhouettes being backlit through the use of the Christmas lights.

The Epilogue, unlike the Prologue, lacks any mark or direction regarding time or space. The only clue that we have jumped forward in time, perhaps to the present, is the use of the name Carly in the script’s dialogue. It can be gathered from the dialogue that we have also skipped forward in time from the Prologue’s meeting of the waitress and the brother.

A.
FRANZ I don’t have German now. I look about me and everything I see is American. Juicer. Ioniser. Sun lamp. I don’t know the German for these. In my head—all American.

CARLY There’s not much room in here. I used to have a great big condo. My husband sold cars. He made a good living. But then after a while no one bought cars any more. My husband went out in the sun all day. His skin turned to cancer so now it’s just me. There’s no much money so ...

FRANZ It’s okay.

CARLY Honey I’m going to take off my clothes. My body isn’t what it was. Everything hangs down and I ...

FRANZ It’s not a problem.
CARLY Sometimes the guys find my body a bit too ...

FRANZ That’s okay.

CARLY But I want to share myself with you so if you don’t mind ...

FRANZ I got a boy in college.

CARLY That’s great.

FRANZ Totally Californian. And he tells me the end’s coming soon. The planet, atmosphere and the ... he tells me we haven’t got much time.34

34 Ravenhill, 47.
From Carly's reticence and shyness surrounding her body it seems this is the first
time the two have been intimate, maybe on the same night as they met. The second
section of this Epilogue though seems to jump forward to a time when the two have
been intimate for a while.

B.
CARLY What's the matter honey?
FRANZ Couldn't sleep.
CARLY You had that nightmare again?
FRANZ Uh-huh.
CARLY I'll hold you till you go off.
FRANZ I love you Carly.
CARLY I love you Franzl. Try to sleep, okay?35

How much time has passed between A. and B.? Years? Are the two lovers near
death? The question of what the prologue meant for our team was the next big one
to attack.

The group discussed, along with the boys who joined us via Skype, how much
time passes between these two sections. It became clear that in the interest of
bringing an awareness to the continued mass consumption we as a culture indulge
in we wanted the feeling to be that we had thrown our characters our actors into the
future from their scene in the woods (1991) but also from the Prologue (2014). How
far, though? Twenty-five years, a time period equivalent to the distance from 1989

to 2014, seemed an interesting and somewhat grounding amount of time. But what did that mean?

Inspiration came in an unexpected way. Over the summer, Jennifer had heard a story on KPCC, a public radio station in Southern California, about an island of garbage discovered in the Pacific Ocean about 1000 miles off the coast of California. The island was about “80 feet long and...30 feet across in some places.” This island, though it was made of detritus from the 2011 Tsunami in Japan, sparked an idea for us. What if all the trash we leave in landfills or ship out to sea came back to haunt us? What if our Western expansion in this country that pushed us to the edge of a continent and beyond was actually fought back against by Nature?

The image of our two lovers, Carly and Franz, lying on the shore by the ocean surrounded by heaps of detritus became the central image of the final scene. The final expansion of space in our theatre would go beyond the stars of the forest to reveal a sculpture hidden behind the stud wall of the East. The sculpture would attempt to answer the question, “What ever happened to all those Teddy Ruxpins?” Imagery of islands of unsold cars was quickly brought out in our meeting, an example of the unseen effects of mass consumption gone awry. Oceans filled with condensed plastic and landfills taken up with kitty carriages and old mannequins came into focus. Where we would be twenty-five years from now is surrounded by the detritus of our own fascination with consumption, possibly literally and certainly figuratively. We reap what we sow and we can never truly heal the wounds we inflict.

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The journey of the show, from a design standpoint, felt solid. From the flashy show room of a warped child’s birthday party to the behind the scenes look at the structure holding it up to the landfill of boxes and leftovers. We had reached the end of the play and the end of August, with rehearsals beginning in one week, and our meeting with the production team at Columbia was upon us. Schuyler joined forces
with the team there to source, budget and build the elements that would meet us in the theatre in October.

Christopher Metzger’s designs echoed a similar journey. From bright pinks and reds in the California diner of the Prologue to browns and yellows of a Germany kept apart in the 1980s to the bright red decadence of a partying country in the 1990s and then to a final stripping away of all clothing and the laid bare reality of the actors in 2014, his design had a fluidity and presence that excited us all. There would be no offstage changes; anything that was taken off would be discarded on the stage, available to be reused as necessary or pushed into heaps with the rest of the mess created by the props and food.

The lighting would move from white/fluorescent in the West to a tungsten hue in the East. When we shifted to the forest in scene 6 we would see the aforementioned starry sky and then shift to the Epilogue where, aside from the detritus wall in the back, we would have a light from offstage shining into the playing space. By bringing attention to the far recesses of the theatre we would be reinforcing the move towards the future, the time and space unseen.

We were fortunate to have Jennifer with us during rehearsals where many of her ideas would come into more concrete realizations. Also with us in rehearsals would be our newly hired sound designer Jack Cummins, a hire of Natalie Gershtein’s who insisted I not take on the sound design myself. I was relieved but also nervous; I had not worked with sound designers much in the past and often designed my own once rehearsals were well underway. I will admit I did not know
where sound played in to this play. It would be an oversight that haunted me through opening.
Five
Into the Fire

“Nothing splendid was ever created in cold blood. Heat is required to forge anything. Every great accomplishment is the story of a flaming heart.”

-Arnold H. Glasgow

Moving into proper rehearsals for Over There was unlike any other experience I had been a part of. To have had such a thorough pre-production period with designers and actors in the room together discussing the play and its manifestation in design made for a very easy transition into the rehearsal room. Helped by the fact that we were joined in rehearsals by stage managers who had artistic and dramaturgical prowess, a dramaturg who in her own right is a theatre maker I greatly admire, designers who knew the script and play in and out and had an eye for detail that let no question go unasked, we launched in with great fervor.

Our days were four hours long. We focused on small sections of the play each day allowing for concentrated and intense work to happen between the two actors. I make it a point to never use the words “block” or “stage” when I refer to rehearsals. It seems unnatural to me and I mean this with no judgment on those who find it beneficial to do such things. This play offered me the chance to explore the degrees to which I could truly observe and remain curious.

The boys were eager to act. Immediately they attacked the prologue with questions. “Do I use a voice for her”, Jeff asked immediately referring to Carly the
waitress. “Try it”, I offered. “Does she have to be believable as a woman”, he continued. “Lets start with making her very believable and see how that works”, I responded. “Am I attracted to her”, Rick wondered aloud. “What would it serve if you weren’t”, I responded, “try it and see.”

We spent two days on the prologue allowing Jeff to explore what it might be to become a woman, albeit one who in the end of the play may or may not morph back into a man in Franz’s mind. It also took some time and quite a few laughs for Rick to acclimate himself to the reality of flirting with his brother. The scene felt weighted towards Carly and on the third day Rick came in and asked if we could move forward. It had been my plan to encourage that very thing, and Garrett reminded me we had planned to move forward on the second day and were now technically behind.37

We began moving forward and into the world of Germany in the 1980s. Jocelyn, our fearless and insightful dramaturg brought in questions and resources surrounding the period. It would have taken hours for Franz to clear the border when he visits his brother in the East and cost him 25 Deutsche marks. For Karl to travel to the West would mean petitioning for clearance and would require extreme circumstances, like the failing health of an immediate family member, in order to be approved.

Franz’s trip to see his brother, charged with both curiosity as well as the impending death of their mother from cancer, highlights the undercurrents of

37 No matter how artistically inclined a good stage manager is, schedule will always prevail.
unrest in Germany in 1986. This marked the 25th Anniversary of the Wall’s construction, saw the first visit of USSR leader Mikhail Gorbachev to East Germany, and was marked with increasing strength on the part of East German border guards directed mainly towards West German diplomats. 38 “I’m sorry,” says Franz, “There was a woman in front of me. There was something wrong. They held her for hours. She got so upset and she was crying and screaming and swearing and I had to wait and it was ... I’m sorry.” 39

Once reunited, the twins unearth an eerie connection between the two of them that transcends the distance created by the Wall. They have a shared knowledge of both of their histories, even moments they experienced after separating. Paired with their ability to finish each others sentences this bond shows that even divided they have always had the synchronicity and understanding of being one.

D.
KARL And you would say to Mama: Everything is wrong with our world. This decadent this bloated this smug and yes I would kidnap a child I would blow up a banker I would tear the façade of this sham world away.

FRANZ Hah! I did. I was a fucking pain.

KARL And Mama would cry and: So what you rather? Would you rather be over there? And you’d say: Well maybe I would.

FRANZ I was a little shit. You know too much about me. 40

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39 Ravenhill, 3.

40 Idem., 6.
This tension between the us and them in the question, “Would you rather be over there,” comes to a head later in the scene when Karl asks Franz to switch passports for a day so he can experience life on the other side. Franz replies, “I’m sorry maybe it’s me I’m a coward what if you went over there and didn’t come back? If I was stuck over here. I couldn’t stand that.” And with this line of dialogue we gained an insight into the potential in the room. The boys stopped, Jeff saying first what a shitty thing that was to say to your brother. Rick immediately retorted that it was just because Franz had grown up in a certain way and wouldn’t want to give up his life, his girlfriend and his baby that was on the way. He then likened it to switching places with Jeff who had an injury that was keeping him from dancing. Rick wouldn’t want to take that on for a day, even if it meant his brother could dance again. Jeff turned red. His injury was something none of us knew about and you could tell a nerve had been struck. The energy in the room changed significantly. Rick apologized. Jeff stayed silent.

Rick went to place a hand on Jeff and was struck away. Jeff said he just needed a second. We stayed in session, allowing the moment to breathe and live itself out. Jeff looked away and Rick eventually said, “I guess that’s this moment, huh?” Seconds passed and then Jeff encouraged Rick to take the scene back a few lines and continue. The moment was full and rich when it happened that next time. Eventually it would tighten, become a passing comment that led to the next moment

Idem.

Idem., 8.
perhaps imperceptibly fraught with history, but the residue of that moment would stay with us. This was the first of these moments that an acting teacher or director can encourage through beautiful questioning, but could truly only have come about by brothers who had spent twenty plus years living together. It was sensitive and exciting and I was thrilled.

Ravenhill kills off both the boys’ parents during the course of the play. First the Western mother passes, and later the Eastern father, effectively orphaning the twins. The metaphors for Motherland and Fatherland that they are, the parents are the last vestiges of connection to a way of life for both Franz and Karl. From the beginning of the play we know the mother has cancer and is on the verge of death. When it happens it serves as the catalyst for a deepening of the brotherhood the boys share. They return to Franz’s apartment and together watch a porno, attempting unsuccessfully to masturbate together.

The attempt at intimacy in this moment, different than that between lovers but sexual and charged with libido and youthful drive, fails because it is too soon. The Wall is still erect, even if the brothers are not, and the divide mixed with Karl’s unrequited longing for his mother keeps it from coming to fruition. But this moment is the foreplay to the event to come, the fall of the Wall and the impending release of tensions that have been building up behind it.

As the wall falls the boys share the event from their respective sides. Karl reports to Franz what he is seeing as he moves through the Brandenburg Gate where “between one and two a.m., human swarms from East and West [pushed]
their way through...some still in their sleepwear, ignoring the November Cold."^{43}

Franz remains slightly removed from the event, watching from home.

KARL The wall’s down the wall’s down the wall’s down just cracked open the possibilities the centuries of weight of the everything still slow static no nothing and you don’t think it’s ever and suddenly splits and fast the people claiming this is ours burn out the old cut it and we are the free now the oh the possibilities we can be anything I can be anything I. Who am I now? Who am I? I. Can be anything. Free choose I liberate I ...

FRANZ We watched it on the television. I felt so proud.

KARL You’re my brother. I was over there. You were over here. No more. Here. There. We’re ... everywhere. No. We’re both here. I love you.

FRANZ And I do love you—yes—I love you too.\textsuperscript{44}

With the lifting of travel restrictions on East Berliners, Karl is now free to visit Franz whenever he wishes. The boys spend the night together, recreating their childhood way of sleeping “head to toe, Karli and Franzl in the bed head to toe.”\textsuperscript{45}

Karl stays in the West for the time and quickly gloms onto the life Franz has been living, meeting the child he had previously been kept from and shopping in the stores he had never been able to afford or even dream of.

KARL I’ve been to the shops. And I bought a lot of shit. You have such a lot of shit in the shops. I love that. Totally unnecessary shit. So I went a bit—I went shopping crazy. You live in colour over here. We always lived in black and white. Look at this. You have to take a look at my shit.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Taylor, 428.

\textsuperscript{44} Ravenhill, 15.

\textsuperscript{45} Idem., 16.

\textsuperscript{46} Idem., 17.
But as Karl indulges, childlike, in his newfound world of consumption, Franz continues with the life he has always had. He dresses in a suit, preparing to go to work for a corporation that will eventually begin to buy up Eastern business and train their workers in capitalist ideology. Adrift in the confusing marketplace, Karl takes one of Franz’s suits and begins to mimic his behavior, even going so far as to learn portions of the corporate jargon employed by Franz at his job.

The initial emulation of the West by the East is met with humorous elation by both sides. The twins quickly realize their power in being mirror images of one another and set out into the night for a “beer, a steak and a shag.” They speak in tandem as they confuse a woman at a bar, trying to convince her she’s only seeing double and not actually twins. They want her and everyone to believe that they are one in the same, not mirror images, but actually a united whole. The failed orgasm from the previous masturbation scene is given its long due release here as they scream in unison, “Open wide the twins are coming inside.”

Working through this portion of the play was the first long stretch of time where we went back each day and then pieced more on the end. It felt necessary to continue returning to scene Two in order to trace the story from the mother’s death to the ultimate release of the party. Jennifer Schriever became a great resource in the room as our first audience, reflecting back when twists and turns in the script felt rushed or too long or confusing. The boys were very interested in how the grief and sorrow and pain from the hospital, where they are dealing not only with their

47 Idem., 19.

48 Idem., 20.
mother’s illness and death but also with a broken relationship between the two of them, could so quickly take a turn into the raucous party after the wall falls. It took incredible stamina and many days for us to work through these twelve pages of text, but the feeling before we moved on was akin to the release the twins have at the end of this sequence.49

Following the night of revelry, Karl returns to the east and the brothers’ father dies. “He just gave up,” Karl tells Franz, “He didn’t want to live any longer. He believed in that farmers and workers, a democracy of—totally and utterly. Impossible to imagine. But there we go. That was actually his reason for living...”50 “We’re Orphans,”51 they say in unison. With no ties to their parentage, to the old ways of life, the attention turns towards their future. Karl takes a vested interest in Franz’s son, reading him bedtime stories from his own childhood. Franz’s discomfort with his and Karl’s resemblance and the confusion it might bring his son unearths an elitism and sense of privilege in Franz. In what is one of the play’s most delightful revelations, Franz speaks to his son so Karl can't understand.

FRANZ (Is oncle hastory bid washes the bact tread, bit, as for it learning une of me complarts, which does nit concert my rally retarding he ist happy. Whim the gity dolume in sour the comfort it neads, being?) He says yes it's fine read him the story in the suit.

KARL Were you talking to him in English?

FRANZ Yes that's right. In English.

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49 Inspired by the boys’ love of dance it was decided the revelry in this scene should be a raucous dance party set to German electronica music. The culmination of the scene was the explosion of two handheld confetti cannons.

50 Ravenhill, 22.

51 Idem., 22.
KARL Why did you do that?

FRANZ It’s just something we do from time to time.\textsuperscript{52}

On a purely theatrical level this moment, both in rehearsal and onstage, was incredibly satisfying to discover. Having watched half of the play with two actors speaking English only to have a moment where we are reminded that the brothers are actually speaking German by hearing English as a form of gibberish was valuable on two fronts. Firstly, no actor speaking gibberish can take himself too seriously. As we were now about two weeks into a four-week rehearsal period the pressure had inevitably built. Of the two brothers, Rick had shown himself to be the more seriously minded, always prepared and off book and wanting to set or repeat staging. The rehearsal before we came to this scene involving the boy, Rick had asked just how he should tackle the “English.” “Should it sound more German in dialect? What did it mean exactly?”

Ironically, his brother would be the one to later tackle large sections of phonetically written Russian, a task I found much more difficult in my reading of the play. But as we came to rehearse the English scene Rick was focused and determined. It made sense, ridiculous as the English sounded, that Rick should feel this way. His moment with his son comes out of a moment of tension between Karl and Franz. In isolating his brother linguistically he is laying claim to a deeper more connected relationship with his son, one that he will not let be undone by his brother. In rehearsal, Rick spoke the gibberish and immediately the room burst into

\textsuperscript{52} Idem., 23.
laughter. He was incensed and turned on Jeff. “What’s so funny?” Jeff demurred but remained amused and Rick pushed the point. He felt foolish, for it was foolish; the harder he committed to the moment and the more he belabored the English the funnier it was.

To put oneself on the line, to risk embarrassment or ridiculousness, is perhaps the greatest challenge to an actor. In my relatively few years of directing I have heard and read many beautiful adages on the topic and how to create a rehearsal room where the freedom to be embarrassed is present. Earlier, in rehearsing the porn scene, for instance, I had joined in the “first de-pantsing”, dropping my pants down to my underwear along with the boys. Natalie, our producer, had even recorded the sounds of the video onto a tape, embarrassing herself along with the rest of us.\(^{53}\) I thought we were covered.

But here was where I had misread the actor. Rick’s embarrassment was not going to be around his own body, stripping to his underwear. He was a dancer first, after all, and was also an athlete. Nudity, body, legs, physique, these were not his source of shame or fear. No. That was reserved for the area of the play we were moving into now. This latter portion of the play was going to bring up the realities of jealousy, intimacy and love between he and his brother. It was also moving us closer to the end of rehearsals and the reality that there would soon be an audience. Rick wanted to be good.

How does a director help in a situation like this? We continued to work through the scene that day and it was fairly successful in terms of exploration. We

\(^{53}\) Her recording had been intended only for rehearsals but would later be replicated at higher quality for the performances.
got our laughs out and moved through Karl’s speaking Russian and pretending to be Franz in order to take the boy out of school. This latter event leads to Franz’s realization of his loss of control over his brother who now can imitate him so well he has actually gone into work for Franz unbeknownst to him. An argument ensues and the identical suit Franz has gifted to Karl is taken back and he is sent back East.

It was a quick rehearsal. I stopped very little in the day hoping that getting to play out the full fight might offer some relief and release for Rick and Jeff alike. We were lucky enough to be visited that day by Natalie who pulled me aside and suggested we all go out for dinner. She was picking up on the mounting tension with Rick. It was the best idea so far. We ate good food and drank beer and I regaled them with epic failures both from days of acting and of sports and life. I talked about how this project had at one point held for me so much significance I thought if it wasn’t my greatest project ever I would be finished as a director. But then I told them how watching them in rehearsal the past two weeks had truly given me a breath of fresh air. I knew that no matter what was coming down my path I would always be happy in a room with actors like them who were fearless and dedicated and creative. “In my book,” I said, “we can’t lose. We are already so far ahead in the game, we simply can’t.”

Something that night shifted for all of us. The pressure released to be good and the focus returned to being present with each other and everyone else in the room with us, using each other as audience instead of creating one in our heads.54

54 The audience we create in our heads can at times be very judgmental and harsh. It’s the job of the director to be the first audience and engage those in the room to also be an audience that is curious but kind.
We came in the next day and Jennifer showed us some ideas for lighting the first half of the play, all of which would be set against a bright yellow wall. She was particularly excited by how the print on the wall would take on blue light and create a synthetic starry pattern in the scene where the boys sped the night together sharing memories of their childhood. Rick and Jeff seemed so happy to be there next day. I think, looking back, they had begun to feel alone or adrift in the play and this moment of breath and reconnection allowed them to look back to the shore and remember we were all still there, watching and cheering them on as they navigated the waters of the play.

Figure 4. The brothers share a night. Photo Credit: Matthew Dunnivan
Karl’s return East marked a moment in the play that even in the early reads we recognized as significant. The motion of the play up to this moment maintained a consistent structure and pace. On each reading of the play we would reach this point and everyone felt like something went awry. It was impossible to pinpoint exactly what it was until we began rehearsing it. The scene, Five, begins with Franz recounting the sensation of tasting and smelling gasoline and exhaust fumes everywhere he went. At first he believed something was wrong with him and set out for the doctor, he tells us, but then he realized he was having a shared experience with his brother, just as they did when they were younger. Karl, back East and left despondent from losing his job and his way of life, has attempted suicide.

Now in the East, Franz works diligently to take care of his brother, attempting to feed him and wash him. Karl resists at every step, taking the food and assistance and throwing it, in the case of our production quite literally, in Franz’s face. The hiccup that we had all felt in the read-throughs became clear. Up to this point Karl has been a driving force in the play, seeking to assimilate in the West, to take on his brother’s life and succeed in the new Germany. Now, though, he retreats and becomes an almost passive character who responds in childish outbursts, not sustaining but sporadic. He speaks in Russian, or the Ravenhill version there-of, holding on to the language of his father and his upbringing and making it difficult for his brother to understand his needs and wants.

When Karl finally does break his linguistic blockade on his brother he says, “I want to go back…I want everything back…I want my world that I knew with my
place in it and I want it now...I want a wall.” In our production he took up the tape-recorder that has been left on the stage from his English lessons and porn and begins recording reports, Stasi-like, on his brother’s actions and his own eventual exasperation and relinquishing.

KARL
He has offered a newspaper to his brother. He is suggesting employment with one of the many companies owned by shareholders largely resident in America. They seek to destabilize our way of life by employing low-paid and temporary workers while delivering maximum profits to the American shareholder. I am identifying his brother as an enemy of our country. Action should be taken.

... His propaganda has been relentless. His brother is a weak man. He has suffered from depression and lacks a strong sense of purpose or of self. He has also now been persuaded by the propaganda. He is succumbing to the influence of America and international capitalism.

As Karl loses his own steam, giving over to Western influence, Franz succeeds in getting him to memorize the Total Quality Management jargon of a Western corporation so that Karl can gain employment. Karl attempts it at first but again loses patience, berating Franz for being one of those who “took our buildings, our land, our tools—you took them all and you sacked every single one of us.”

“There's no Germany,” he tells Franz, “They're telling our kids ‘we're all one now’ – well, we’ll never been one and every child should know that.” With this final

55 Ravenhill, 36.

56 The Stasi, or Ministry of State Security of the GDR (East Germany), spied on the population of East Germany between the years of 1950 and 1980, effectively stamping out dissidents and defectors. Here Karl is mirroring their reports, which were discovered after the fall of the Wall, as an attempt to return to the East Germany he grew up in.

57 Ravenhill, 37.

58 Ravenhill, 39.
statement to Franz, Karl’s own agency returns and launches us into the final moment of the play prior to the Epilogue. Karl kidnaps Franz’s boy, taking him to the woods and the site of the camp he himself attended as a child. There he attempts to teach him the tenets of Socialism on which he was raised. Franz discovers them and the culminating fight, murder of Karl and ingestion of him by his brother sends us into the Epilogue.

Rehearsing these final scenes in the third week of rehearsal was a thrilling adventure in the room. By now, and in large part thanks to Jocelyn Shratter, the boys were filled with an understanding of the politics and events surrounding the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The work towards understanding how this play reflected that was full and, because of the hard work in the prior two weeks, the boys faculties as actors were firing on all cylinders. They were fearless performers, entering into territory that was uncomfortable for two brothers.

After killing Karl, Franz asks, “Are you dead?” “Yes,” comes the reply. But Karl is still speaking, still there, even in death, haunting his brother. The East, disappeared in name and structure is still present, never really gone.

FRANZ If you’re dead, I think you should be totally and utterly—

KARL I’ll do whatever you want.
FRANZ I can’t bear to see you. I can’t bear to look at you. I don’t want you there. I want. We’re going to be one. I want you inside me. Swallow you down.

KARL That’s your choice.

FRANZ Lie back and be quiet now. Dead man.

KARL Yes.

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59 Ravenhill, 46.
KARL lies down. FRANZ chops off his hand. He lays the table. Starts to eat the hand. Retches. Carries on eating.

The moment was reached where we would have to discover how a man could eat another man on stage. We had thrown around many ideas about it, props of hands and tongues, food like cake or Vienna sausages. In the end we discovered that what came closest to capturing the grotesque feeling of cannibalism, both for the boys and for the audience in rehearsals, was to see a gentle “kiss” between the two that turned into convulsive heaving. Placing his mouth entirely inside his brothers, Rick placed himself and Jeff into a place of vulnerability that, to my mind, could not be duplicated through anything clever. It was simple, quiet and the sheer act of resistance on the part of the actors was satisfying.

Figure 5. “Are you dead?” Photo Credit: Matthew Dunnivan
In the fourth week of rehearsal before moving into the theatre at HERE we came together each day and ran the show from beginning to end and then I allowed the team, actors and designers in the room, to voice thoughts and reflections and choose areas on which to work. On occasion I would feel strongly that something in particular needed to be worked on but I put into practice a notion I had not, up to this point at Columbia, had the luxury to explore: letting go.

Letting go, which is a simple way of speaking about a complicated array of events that take place in the mind and body, is essential for my own sanity in tech and opening, where my attentions will turn to things other than the actors and create a split focus in myself. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, essential for the actors. If the work of rehearsal is, as I believe it to be, an opportunity for actors to create elbow room for themselves within the play, then to have a director come in and squeeze tightly on their creativity, dictating rather than continuing in the spirit of exploration, a company of actors will experience seizure. The blood and breath will begin to flow sporadically and shallowly and eventually suffocate the spirit of the company.

For this reason, in week four, I certainly began focusing moments within the play, looking for the cleanest and most direct path towards what we had found and agreed upon as a company. But I also made sure my reflections were only a portion of a larger collection of reflections from both design and management teams as well as from the actors themselves. I was very happy to feel so confident in this as we wrapped up our time in the rehearsal hall and moved into the theatre.
Six

How Do You Solve A Problem?

“Mistakes are always forgivable, if one has the courage to admit them.”

-Bruce Lee

A luxury of Columbia’s schedule for the director’s thesis production is that we moved into the theatre five days before tech rehearsals. We were able to adjust certain moments in response to the architecture of both our set, being built alongside our rehearsals, and the space of the theatre itself. It was now I began to imagine the journey of the audience as they entered the space. How would they be greeted? What would be the first thing they saw?

A particular curiosity of the space we were in is that the stage, which is about 50 feet in width, is divided on stage right by two large pillars, effectively creating a 10 feet wide liminal space. We had decided early on to avoid using this as a playable area for the show, but upon entering it is the first thing the audience would see. I voiced my observation to Schuyler and Jennifer who both took it into consideration. A few days later Schuyler arrived at the theatre with a neon sign that said, “Open.” He posited that as we were heavy into the imagery of consumerist America and the play begins in a California diner we could place it between these two pillars facing stage right, a beckoning to all who entered as well as the actors. Jennifer said she was excited by the quality of light it would create on our waitress Carly in the first moment of the play. I remain skeptical of its success.
The boys and stage management and I worked diligently during the day, balancing our time between short runs of sections, full runs of the entire play and beginning to work through some of the technical and messy aspects of the show. The first half of the play would create quite a mess of spilled sodas (a cut hand), confetti canons (orgasms), children’s cereal (children’s cereal). The second half wasn’t any cleaner with its pudding (meat), water (gasoline), and cake batter (rabbit stew). For me the joy of watching these dirty rehearsals was the care the actors took to engage the designers in conversation, without needing a go between of stage management or me. They found solutions for keeping the handmade suits clean to avoid dry cleaning during the run and wiping up the floor of heavily staining liquids, for both the floors sake as well as their own safety.

Their ingenuity and self-driven possession of the play as their own was evident in both these messy rehearsals as well as in their acting. They began using one another as resource and support more than as opposition. The further apart their characters became in the play the more I saw them connecting with one another, breathing together and giving patience to moments that required adjustment and time. They worked as though we had all the time in the world and through them we all felt like we did.

For this reason, I can be brief about our tech rehearsals. When you have had designers in the room for rehearsal and fostered, as I hope I always do, the company atmosphere that we had on Over There, the potential for tech to be smooth and enjoyable is greatly heightened. We teched the show in only two nights, both of which were runs for the actors. Rick’s and Jeff’s own smarts matched with the
incomparable professionalism of our management team made for a stop free tech rehearsal process.

October 13th, the Monday night before opening, we opened our rehearsal to friends and mentors. Both Anne Bogart and Brian Kulick, my professors from Columbia, joined me for our first dress rehearsal. It can be an unnerving thing to return to the role of “student” when you have been away from it even for a short time. Anne’s first comment to me was that I appeared so calm for having just come out of tech. “One for Team Over There,” I thought. Her comment made me reflect on what it means to truly be part of a company, supported and encouraged by everyone around you. I was calm and healthy and happy. I was proud of the past five weeks of work that had happened, not to mention the months leading up to the first rehearsal.

After the run I sat down with Anne and Brian to hear their thoughts. I won’t enumerate them here as I consider them very personal to me. I feel incredibly fortunate to count both of them among the few mentors I have had in my life. What I will write about here is the takeaway from only one of their comments, a takeaway that will seem so obvious based on this writing.

Sound. I had completely neglected to take care of the sound design. It was there, it had been discussed and designed with me in a hurried fashion in the fourth week of rehearsal, and it was wrong. The best way to describe it is to say it felt like a jukebox that had a mind of its own. The Beach Boys’ “Wish They All Could Be California Girls” gave way to the sounds of metal scraping which gave way to Electronica Dance Music and finally to low rumblings. It lacked cohesion and
exactitude. To use a phrase common in our profession, “It had not truly been considered.”

The debacle in my mind was whether at this point I should bring it up or leave it be. While I say the sound wasn’t considered I should clarify that it had been designed and built by Jack Cummins who spent time wiring the system at HERE and pulling sounds and mixing them. There had been investment on his part, just not the necessary investment on my part. Were I to call a meeting on Tuesday and change sound cues we could tech them Tuesday with an invited audience before Wednesday night’s ticketed performance. Stranger things have happened in the world of theatre and I have been a part of them, but my fear was that changes on a large scale might throw off the team’s feelings of confidence towards the piece. Mainly I wanted to make sure that going into a long weekend of performances Rick and Jeff were confident.

I decided to lean in and address the issue, assured in my own abilities to slow down the feeling of urgency that would arise with such a last minute change. I met with Jack, Garrett and Jennifer on Tuesday morning. Jennifer was essential as many light cues were designed with the sound in mind. What we decided upon was an idea that Jack had earlier in the process. All the sound would be a variation on a theme. When the Wall falls and the boys go out and celebrate we were using electronic dance music from Germany as the underscoring. Jack’s notion was that this music, associated with the feeling of freedom, along with a low rumbling sound that accompanied the Wall’s actual fall in the play, would be the only two sounds.
In the beginning of the play we would open with a low and far off rumbling and the electronic music playinglowly in the distance. Throughout the first part of the play those sounds would become closer and closer when they were needed (as muzak in the hospital, underscoring for the porno) and would come to full volume in their original locations. After that moment in the play, the moment of release in the night of partying, there would be no more sound, only the sounds that emanated from the two actors; breath and words.

In the end I believed this design to be the best solution for the moment. I stand by the decision that was made and in fact it was met with support from the entire team. Jack in particular was pleased to return to an idea he had thought superior all along. What I vowed to do from this point forward was to educate myself more fully in this area of design and to bring that person in as soon as possible with the rest of the team on future projects.
Epilogue

After Words

“The root of the word courage is cor - the Latin word for heart. In one of its earliest forms, the word courage meant "To speak one’s mind by telling all one’s heart." Speaking from our hearts is what I think of as "ordinary courage."

— Brené Brown

Over There made its New York premiere at HERE on October 14th, 2014 and played five performances. The audiences who came were in large part supporters of the work of members of our creative team. However, thanks to HERE’s marketing department we also saw a healthy audience made up of curious subscribers and ticket buyers who trust in the curatorial nature of HERE’s season. I feel very fortunate to have been included among the works they presented that season.

More importantly I feel honored to have met new theatregoers, members of the audience whose allegiance was to the act of seeing theatre and not to the artists involved. I learned so much from standing in the lobby and introducing myself to new faces, hearing what had brought them to the play and maybe what they thought of it when it was finished. The latter was rare. I found mostly that friends and strangers alike were more prone to silent contemplation with a gentle smile and nod being the common reaction.

In my time at Columbia I have learned and believe that artists should never place themselves in the position of “fund me” or “see my work because it means so
much to me.” I hope the art means a lot to the artist just as I hope the food means a lot to the chef, the subject to the teacher, the book to the writer. More importantly for me I hope that as an artist I understand that the work should be important for the audience. Our campaigns for funding should be more inline with corporate ideas of “what we have to offer is good for you and that is why you should invest in it.” My core value is that this is not my play, this is our play. That begins with the creative team and actors and must continue to extend to the audience. Directors who say, “We are not doing this for them, this one is for us,” infuriate me. It is for us, the us which includes them.

I stood in the lobby of HERE and in a small way practiced focusing on this core value of mine. I did not stand there to receive affirmation for the time and effort I had put in. I stood there to be present for those who had invested there time and energy in the evening of theatre we had offered, to extend their experience beyond the bows and into the streets, hoping that rather than reaching for their phones they would ask each other questions, ponder over the use of certain ideas or even share an utter loathing of it. Anything so long as their experience of Over There was not limited to the 75-minute runtime.

My own exit from Over There was similar to that of members of the audience. As I reflected on the play and the experience in the weeks following the run I became increasingly pleased with how it stood as a culmination of my time at Columbia. I saw in the production a growth of my work in a direction I could never have imagined when I began graduate studies. Perhaps growth isn’t the most exact word I could choose, but I will say a change had occurred at the very least.
When I entered Columbia I came from the world of Broadway musical theatre, a sleek and controlled world where in actors are too often made to feel as though they are cogs in the machine and audiences are encouraged to be passive consumers of entertainment. The clean and easy world I came from influenced my earliest work as a director. “House to half, house out, lights up,” is written in my notebook from my very first critique, next to the phrase, “Kill your show-biz Weasel. (For now. You can always get another when this is done.)"

In this small note, I was synthesizing feedback from my first presentation and was also giving myself permission to relinquish control and expectation and open up to Swimming. I will admit to keeping a separate list of names that were mentioned in passing by my classmates so I could look them up at home later. I was a seasoned professional who was a complete newbie to the adventurous theatre beyond the footlights of Times Square. But in my years at Columbia, in my mid-thirties, I learned and was exposed to more than I had been in the 15 years prior.

In Over There I feel that I truly embraced a new kind of vision for the theatre I could make. It was messy (literally and figuratively), dangerous (again literally and figuratively), and incredibly imperfect. It had breath and fluidity, or at least the beginnings of it. It taught me that to heal you must first accept there is a wound and know that you will live with it for the rest of your life. In accepting that I also accept that I will live with the successes in my life as well. I choose to own both of these realities as my truth moving forward so that the theatre I make can always be personal and courageous.
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