

**LOOKING BACKWARD, MOVING FORWARD: THE  
HOW AND WHY OF A DEGREE IN THEATRE**

**Honors Thesis**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts**

In the School of Theatre and Speech Communication  
at Salem State University

By

Stephen Zubricki IV

William Cunningham  
Faculty Advisor  
Department of Theatre and Speech Communication

\*\*\*

Commonwealth Honors Program  
Salem State University  
2019

## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to process the usefulness and purpose, as it pertains to the author, of obtaining a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre with a performance concentration by examining the production process of *Poison of Choice* written and directed by Professor William Cunningham (Bill) and produced during the fall 2018 semester by the Salem State University Theatre and Speech Communications Department. It identifies concrete theatrical knowledge acquired through a detailed breakdown of the production process, and the author's personal artistic process as an actor in the production. This is followed by a reflection on the positive and negative elements of the author's experience, observing areas of growth educationally and artistically and concludes with a decision as to how the author will utilize his degree professionally following graduation.

## Table of Contents

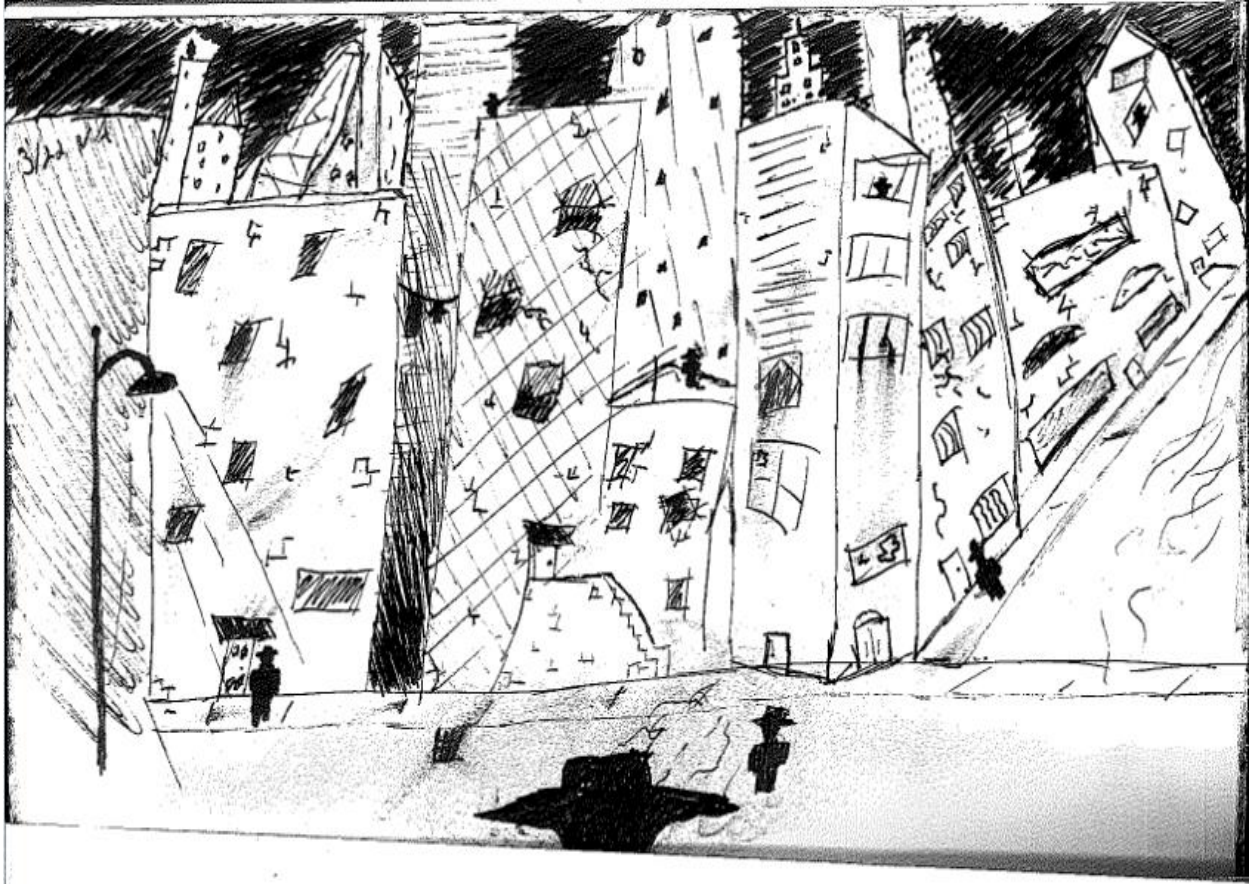
<b>This is who I am, and this is why I am writing .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Things that you should know about the play: .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>From Page to Stage .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Preparation in Process.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Looking Backward.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Moving Forward .....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Photos and more.....</b>	<b>101</b>

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to Bill, my professor, director, playwright and mentor, for giving me the opportunity to play Alan and for sticking for three semesters worth of conversations, rehearsals and meetings. His, guidance, patience and artistic contributions to the *Poison of Choice* process have been invaluable to this project. He has a gift for mentoring and inspiring his students and I am forever grateful for how he has helped me.

Thanks also to Krystal Hernandez for her generosity in spending an hour on the phone talking about something that was far more important to me than she may have known at the time. Whether she knew it or not, I needed to hear what she was saying.

Finally, thanks to all my professors who have given me four years of time teaching me about this crazy field of theatre and how to “be an artist”- whatever that means. Each in their own way, they have modeled for me what it means to be generous and professional, helped me to discover myself as an artist and prepared me for a lifetime spent making theatre.



A picture I drew inspired by the opening stage directions during the staged reading process.

# **This is who I am, and this is why I am writing**

As a senior in college no one ever asks you about right now. Everyone's questions are focused on the future. They ask what my plans are, what job I will have, where I will live and on and on. Truthfully, the answer is that I do not know, and I am terrified. I am questioning what my ability will be to support myself after school and what the point and purpose of a theatre degree costing tens of thousands of dollars is if I cannot recoup my investment with a job that will help me pay off the debt accrued while obtaining this degree.

When deciding what I wanted this paper to be about, I was unsure at first. I originally intended to document and reflect upon the process of working on a new play and originating a role. It was, in theory a potentially very interesting subject, but throughout the process I found myself noticing that it was no different than creating any other role I had played, and I would have had very little to write about.

So, I had to reevaluate. Bill, my thesis advisor, the director and playwright of the show and my professor, always says, "don't write a play unless you intend to change the world". This paper may not be a play, but it still felt important to me to keep that in mind. I needed to write about something that was both interesting to me, was relevant to right now and would matter to other people, not only to me.

In Bill's office I have voiced my fears about the future and he has consistently reminded me that I am not alone in feeling this way. Every other student that is about to graduate experiences a fear of the unknown. Every other graduating theatre student at some point along the line is also probably asking themselves what the purpose of the past four years getting a degree in this actually was.

So, I decided that I would write a paper for myself and my peers. I would objectively examine what it was that I learned the past four years and then sort through it all via a reflection to be able to declaratively state what the purpose of the past four years has been. It is my hope that struggling with this same question in the future would find some sort of comfort in reading my experiences and my conclusions from this paper.

# This is what I'm writing about

In February of 2018 I auditioned for and was cast as Alan Lubeck in a staged reading of a new play written by my professor Bill Cunningham entitled *Poison of Choice*. Following the staged reading in the Spring of 2018 there was a new round of auditions and callbacks were held for the fall 2019 shows at Salem State. I was lucky enough to be cast again

During the Summer of 2018, Bill worked to complete the unfinished script that had been used for the staged reading. As a part of my preparation for the process I spent much of the summer researching film genre studies to be able to define what film noir was for myself come the fall.

In mid-August, I received my first email from our stage manager with the updated, script. At this point I was able to read the script closely to understand the story, specifically the character of Alan. I also broke the script up into units that I would be able to use for a script analysis, analyzing the structure of the action and the arc of my character.

Professionally, it is an expectation that actors report to the first rehearsal entirely off-book, memorized. Due to the fractured nature of the dialogue, memorizing lines was a challenge without having other cast members with me to run lines. I made solid progress memorizing almost all of act-one by the time the summer came to a close.

# Things that you should know about the play:

## Who is the Playwright?

Later in this reading I will further discuss my script analysis class that I took as a part of my required theatre courses. During the class I learned about the importance of understanding the background of a playwright because plays come from a place of personal importance to the playwright. Understanding their perspective through researching their life provides me with a much deeper insight into the script because I have an understanding of the source that it came from.

William (Bill) Cunningham was born in 1960 into a devout Roman Catholic family as the youngest of three siblings in Wilmington, Massachusetts. His father had not completed high school and made money as a laborer installing sprinkler systems before a crippling injury forced him to retire from the trade. In response, his mother reinvented herself by pursuing a degree in her fifties and eventually running a local senior center. The family was never poor, but they worked incredibly hard for everything they had and were incredibly conscious about the value of money.

To illustrate this point, Bill told me a story from his youth. He once helped a local paperboy in town with his paper route. The boy had promised Bill that he would give him a quarter if he helped. When they had finished, the other boy stiffed Bill and refused to

give him the money. When Bill returned home and told his father, he looked at him and said “go get your money.” When Bill said that he wouldn’t give it to him, his father looked at him and said “make him give it to you.”

Wilmington was a small town with not much to do. Growing up in the 60s and 70s and being raised by a generation of parents affected by World War II and the Great Depression meant Bill was often expected to toughen up and fend for himself. Parents were generally less protective than modern parents are, and his were no exception. It was not uncommon then, for groups of kids to get into scraps and fight. As a thin, wiry teenager, Bill discovered early on that he was at a physical disadvantage, so in order to survive he had to be fast and funny. He developed a pointed, biting, sarcastic sense of humor that many people miss in person but that is incredibly evident in the dialogue of this play. It is both a defense mechanism and a weapon that he imbues most prominently in the character Alan.

This sense of humor traveled with Bill to high school where he developed a love of writing and making people laugh. Though he had no experience with playwriting he wrote his senior class play before leaving to attend Tufts University as an English major and a first-generation college student.

Attending Tufts, Bill was out of place among the generally affluent population of students. He was one of few students who held a job during the school year. There, he learned the lesson that the world is far from equal and he developed a hatred of injustice.

It was at Tufts, however that Bill began reading and learning how to write plays from the head of the drama department who became a close mentor. Eventually he went on to receive a master's degree in playwriting from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Upon returning to Massachusetts he shortly thereafter began teaching at Salem State University. Today, he is married with three adult children. He continues to direct and teach script analysis, theatre history, public speaking, and playwriting courses.

### **Playwrights Write What They Know**

There are many instances where the style of writing or the themes of the plot can be tied back to Bill's history. To show how a playwright's past influences the scripts that they write I have included some of the areas in which I saw the influence of Bill's life enter his writing in theme and style.

### **Religion and Guilt**

In a Catholic household and upbringing there is a heavy emphasis placed on the fact that everyone is guilty of sin. People are often made to feel an intense inner shame or guilt when they act immorally. This is reflective in the character of Lauren Kingsbury and in the recurring themes of the play.

The character of Lauren Kingsbury is a reverend and Alan and Haley seek her out towards the start of the second act. The scene takes place in a church, a very literally religious setting, as they wrestle with their consciences.

The characters that Bill writes have a strong internal conflict when it comes to moral issues such as harming someone or cheating on a partner. Not only does Alan feel his own conscience weighing on him, but he lives in a world that is filled with immorality and seeks to prove the guilt of those around him.

The following is an excerpt from the church scene in act two that exhibits these concepts. Alan is approaching Lauren about whether or not he should draw Eli's guilt to the surface by writing a condemning edition of *Terror Cell* while Haley wrestles with the fact that she thinks Alan is writing an unfaithful character based on his suspicions of her in reality:

**ALAN**

**Let me ask you something, Reverend; if you had the means to get the spin out of your head...**

**HALEY**

**Alan has written a new edition of *Terror Cell*.**

**ALAN**

**...If you could illustrate, in black and white, how loose ends could conceivably tie together...**

**HALEY**

**His characters profile...**

**ALAN**

**...would you...**

**LAUREN**

**...expose?**

**HALEY**

**...people...**

**ALAN**

**...like...**

**LAUREN**

**...my step-mother.**

**ALAN**

**A character based upon your step-mother, but...**

**LAUREN**

**...for all intents and purposes...**

**HALEY**

**...are close enough to be believed.**

**LAUREN**

**That would all depend, Mr. Lubeck.**

**ALAN**

**On?**

**LAUREN**

**On, whether or whether or not, the benefits...**

**ALAN**

**Say you could use it as leverage, to get someone else to...**

**(With a sweeping gesture)**

**...refinish the pews for you, say.**

**LAUREN**

**...outweighed the risk.**

**ALAN**

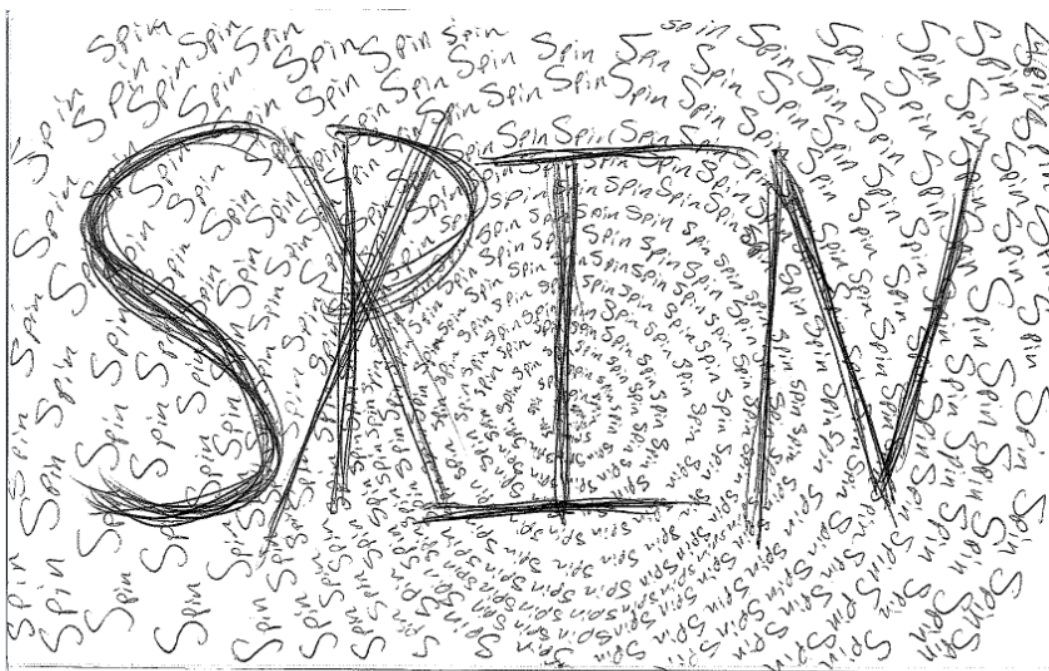
**But, if you did something like that, you would be able to recognize guilt when you saw it, wouldn't you, Reverend?**

**LAUREN**

**I think we call that flirting with disaster, Mr. Lubeck.<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup> Cunningham, William, 2018. "Poison of Choice", 114-115.



(An image I drew in response to the text during the staged reading process)

**Money**

Growing up in a family where his parents worked incredibly hard to provide stability, Bill values money. Though he is an artist as a playwright and director, he has maintained stability through his job as a professor.

Alan is an artist who has had to sacrifice the artistic integrity of what he wants to write in order to make money. There are several moments where he is tempted by the allure of more money- It is a point of conflict in his relationship with Haley. Kathryn Kingsbury and Peter Larkin expose this conflict by offering Alan more money to work for them. Alan's conflict is reflective of the competing interests that Bill experiences in his own life- his desire to create art with integrity that is meaningful competing with his desire to make money and provide for himself and his family.

I have included here the moment in act one when Alan is offered more money to work for Kathryn Kingsbury's campaign writing political propaganda. Kathryn's final line regarding creativity and madness refers to its tendency to drive creative minds insane as well as how artists must be crazy to work so hard for such little money:

**PETER**

**(Pulling a business card out of his pocket)**

**I've written on the back of my card what we're offering in the way of compensation.**

**KATHRYN**

**You should talk the offer over with...ah...**

**(Searching again)**

**PETER**

**...Haley.**

**KATHRYN**

**...and then you let us know what you both decide.**

**PETER**

**(Putting the card into ALAN's hand)**

**I know you don't believe in noble causes, Alan, but that doesn't mean that there aren't any.**

**(ALAN looks at the figure on the back of the card; as he does so the distant, pulsating rumble is heard again)**

**KATHRYN**

**Before you go, Mr. Lubeck, could I ask you something?**

**(ALAN gives his attention back to KATHRYN)**

**ALAN**

**Feel free.**

**KATHRYN**

**Why did you kill Caleb Lange?**

**(The distant, pulsating rumble continues)**

**ALAN**

**He became a liability.**

**PETER**

**A liability to..?**

**ALAN**

**Me.**

**(KATHRYN comes out from behind the counter and stands next to PETER)**

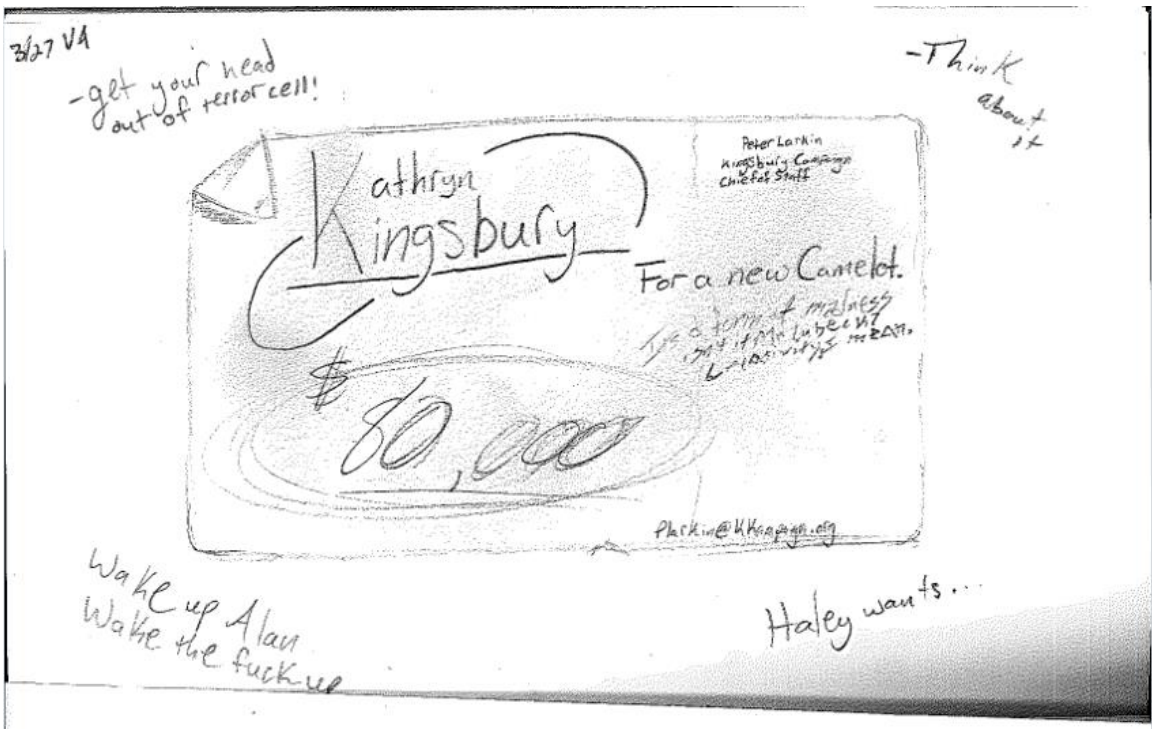
**KATHRYN**

**It is a form of madness, isn't it, Mr. Lubeck? Creativity, I mean.**

**(Without answering this question, ALAN turns and exits through the door)<sup>2</sup>**

---

<sup>2</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 43-44.



(An image I drew during the staged reading of what I imagined the business card Peter hands Alan to look like along with some quotes from the script.)

**Wilmington Wit**

The character of Alan is written with the same type of hard, thinly veiled humor that Bill developed growing up. He deflects his own discomfort with a situation by cracking a joke that is often aimed at pointing out an unsavory unspoken truth about the others in the room. The humor is smart, quick, sharp and dangerous as Alan typically has less power than those that he picks apart with his humorous quips.

This humor is accomplished by making subtle and pointed remarks that often are tinged with sarcasm. In real life it can be easily be missed, but in the script (if executed correctly) it is very apparent to the audience and creates palpable tension in the theatre.

Below is an example of a moment in act one during Alan's job interview where Alan calls out Kathryn Kingsbury for putting on airs and only acting the part of a dutiful grieving wife. The resulting moment on stage was an incredibly tense moment that audience members often laughed at because it was so uncomfortable:

**KATHRYN**

**Zoe believes in the “Evil Mother.” Acts of rebellion, Mr. Lubeck.**

**ALAN**

**Rebellion?**

**PETER**

**Zoe has been engaging in behavior that...**

**KATHRYN**

**...belongs in your graphic novel.**

**(Taking her hand back from PETER)**

**I’m fine.**

**PETER**

**So far, we’ve been able to keep it out of the public eye. But it’s becoming...**

**KATHRYN**

**...untenable.**

**PETER**

**The Senator is working tirelessly to promote national stability. Her work can be hindered by...**

**KATHRYN**

**...the perception...**

**ALAN**

**...that you can’t manage peace and domestic stability in your own home.**

**(There is an uncomfortable silence. KATHRYN moves back around the island)**

**ALAN**

**You’re not going to start baking cookies now, are you?**

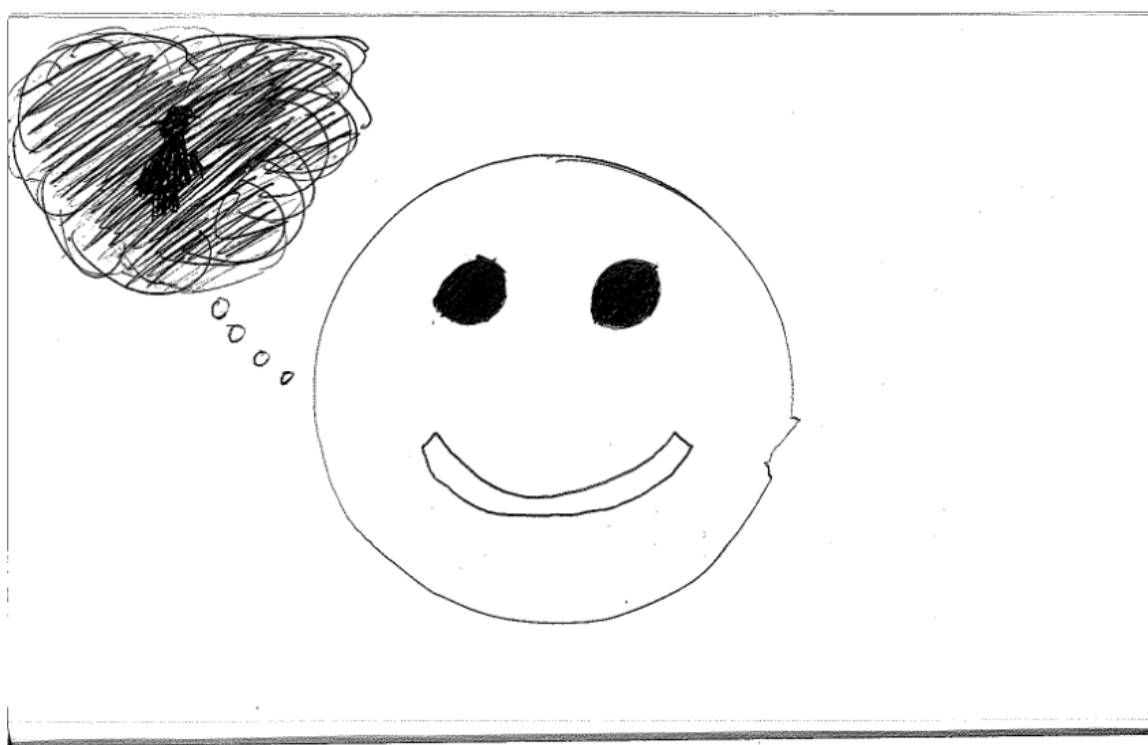
**(KATHRYN stops, turns and glares at ALAN)**

**ALAN**

**There you are.<sup>3</sup>**

---

<sup>3</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 40-41.



(An image I drew in response to the text during the staged reading process.)

### **What Inspired the Concept and the Plot?**

There were three main sources that inspired the unique concept behind this play:

1. *Hamlet*
2. Graphic Novels
3. Film Noir

It all began with *Hamlet* which is one of Bill's favorite plays. He finds it amazing that people still accept all of the fantastical elements that Shakespeare put into his plays- everything from gods and magic to ghosts. Audiences are not as receptive anymore to fantastical plots in theatre and Bill was frustrated that there was some sort of unspoken rule that he had to follow and asked himself "why couldn't I put a ghost on stage?"

Then Bill realized that we still have fantastical stories in our popular culture today- Superheroes! Inspired by the characters of graphic novels, the Hollywood is inundated right now with films featuring humans or aliens with supernatural powers- they can lift buildings, shoot lasers from their eyes or electricity out of their hands. Audiences crave these movies and are willing to accept the stories even though they are obviously outside of the realm of reality. Still, it is extremely rare to see a superhero in theatre.

Looking at his students and the current political and social climate that they are experiencing in 2018 and 2019, he is worried. He sees students that seem to have lost their ability to have faith in politics, in religion, in the criminal justice system, in love. This bleak outlook reminded him of film noir where many of the characters live in

seemingly hopeless environments. He also loves the dialogue in film noir as it is smart and loaded with dangerous subtext, similar to his own sense of humor.

Taking all three of these sources as inspiration, Bill wanted to mash them together and see what happened. He decided to write a play with the same level of fantastical plot that Shakespeare did, using the modern-day characters and aesthetic of a superhero movie combined with the tone, aesthetic and writing style of a film noir.

**What's the Play About?**

*Poison of Choice* follows Alan Lubeck, author of the popular graphic novel "Terror Cell" who suspects his long-time partner, Haley, of cheating on him with her partner on the police force, Eli. In an attempt to change careers and save his relationship, he accepts an interview with Kathryn Kingsbury, widow of a recently deceased senator, for a communications position on her political team. As he is pulled into the dark, deceitful world of corrupt politics, Alan writes his suspicions of his partner, his boss and the alleged affair into a new edition of "Terror Cell" prodded by the protagonist of his graphic novel, Caleb Lange.

The new edition emerges reflecting Alan's state of mind- he has lost the ability to discern what is real, to tell the difference between what is true and what he merely *suspects* to be true. The novel is his attempt to expose Eli for what he really is- a corrupt cop- and to coax proof of the affair into the open. In a final confrontation with Eli and Haley, Caleb pushes Alan to kill Eli forcing Haley to have to shoot Alan. The final moment of the play leaves Haley amidst a stage full of bodies saying, "This can't be real."

### **Theatrical Conventions Used in the Script**

Theatrical conventions are tools that theatre artists can use to creatively tell the story of a play outside the rules of reality. The theatrical conventions used set the “rules” for the audience. They allow a play to do things like jump locations, skip twelve years ahead and then four years back, put two different locations on stage at once etc. *Poison if Choice* uses a variety of theatrical conventions throughout the play.

### **Time**

Time does not run in a perfect line in the play. Alan’s narrative never actually goes backwards, but there are several scenes that show Alan’s imaginings of what happened in the past coming to life in front of him. These moments appear to the audience to be flashbacks- scenes that jump backward in time to give history or context to story in the present. In the actual structure of the script, these scenes are more accurately described as hallucinations. Time may appear to be going backward to the audience at first, but later they realize that Alan was merely thinking back to what *may* have happened before.

Additionally, certain moments involve scenes occurring simultaneously on stage that happened at different points on the play’s timeline. In the church scene, Reverend Lauren Kingsbury appears to be having a conversation with Haley as she also has a conversation with Alan. These two conversations took place at different moments in time but are occurring alongside each other on stage.

## **Space**

The church scene is one of several moments in the show that require the audience to follow multiple scenes happening in different locations at once. On the right side of the stage they may see Haley and Eli investigating a teenage drug addict on the streets while on the left side of the stage Kathryn Kingsbury is confronting Alan inside her home. The audience knows that although both sets of actors are on stage at once, they are not physically together. Scenic and lighting elements are important in helping to convey this information to the audience as well.

Additionally, in our production there were minimal set pieces. Location was often indicated by changing positions of various moving skyscraper flats (code for rolling walls) and then the addition of larger prop pieces such as a kitchen island, a church pew, a bar, a staircase etc. Though the audience does not see an entire kitchen on stage, they understand where the location has moved to through the suggestion of these prop pieces.

## **Double Casting- Transformation of Character**

There are actors who portray two characters in the play- the character that is real and the comparable character in Alan's graphic novel. The audience accepts the fact that although they know that the same actor is still on stage, that they are now representing a different character. This is usually signified with some sort of a costume change, or the addition/subtraction of a prop.

Sometimes double casting is a choice made by a director or a casting director based on a concept or the practical boon of paying fewer actors. In the case of our production, the choice was made by the playwright on purpose- In using the same actors for both the real life and graphic novel characters it shows how Alan is basing his characters off of real people- he is “Working reality into his fiction.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, this serves to purposely confuse the audience slightly as it makes it harder for them to understand what is real and what is only in Alan’s imagination.

Here is an example of a moment where the actor playing Eli transformed into the character of Mackler. You can see in the script that Haley initially refers to Eli/Mackler as Eli, but by the end of the passage Caleb implies that Alan is now imagining him as the evil character Mackler. Bill accomplished this on stage as the director by giving the actor a trench coat that signified the transformation for the audience:

---

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, “Poison”, 101.

**ELI/MACKLER**

**Check the label.**

**CHAVEZ/HALEY**

**We should take her into protective custody, Eli.**

**CALEB**

**You'd think that would be true.**

**ELI/MACKLER**

**But she's a Kingsbury, Haley...**

**(Bending down to look at ZOE's face)**

**...and that means she has all the protection she could ever want.**

**CHAVEZ/HALEY**

**Let's follow procedure and get her into detox.**

**CALEB**

**(Bending down too, but looking at ELI/MACKLER)**

**Sounds reasonable, but...**

**ELI/MACKLER**

**What we have here is a lost soul, Haley...**

**CALEB**

**True.**

**ELI/MACKLER**

**...and, when you find a lost soul, you should always return her to...**

**CHAVEZ/HALEY**

**...to?**

**ELI/MACKLER**

**(Standing)**

**...her family of origin.**

**CALEB**

**Too often true.**

**PETER's VOICE**

**For which...**

**ELI/MACKLER**

**...we should be...**

**PETER's VOICE**

**...handsomely rewarded.**

**CALEB**

**(Standing)**

**The plot thickens.**

**(ZOE, remaining seated on the ground, as the alley begins to become the living room of the Kingsbury home)**

**(PETER, hands a cup of coffee to CHAVEZ/HALEY...)**

**PETER**

**Regular coffee black, if I remember correctly.**

**ELI/MACKLER**

**You two know each other?**

**PETER**

**We were acquainted in college.**

**(CHAVEZ/HALEY accepts the coffee)**

**PETER**

**(Suggestively)**

**But don't tell Alan.**

**CALEB**

**(Circling behind ALLAN)**

**Something else you've always suspected, isn't it?**

**(The rumble of thunder is heard)**

**PETER**

**(Pouring himself a drink at the bar)**

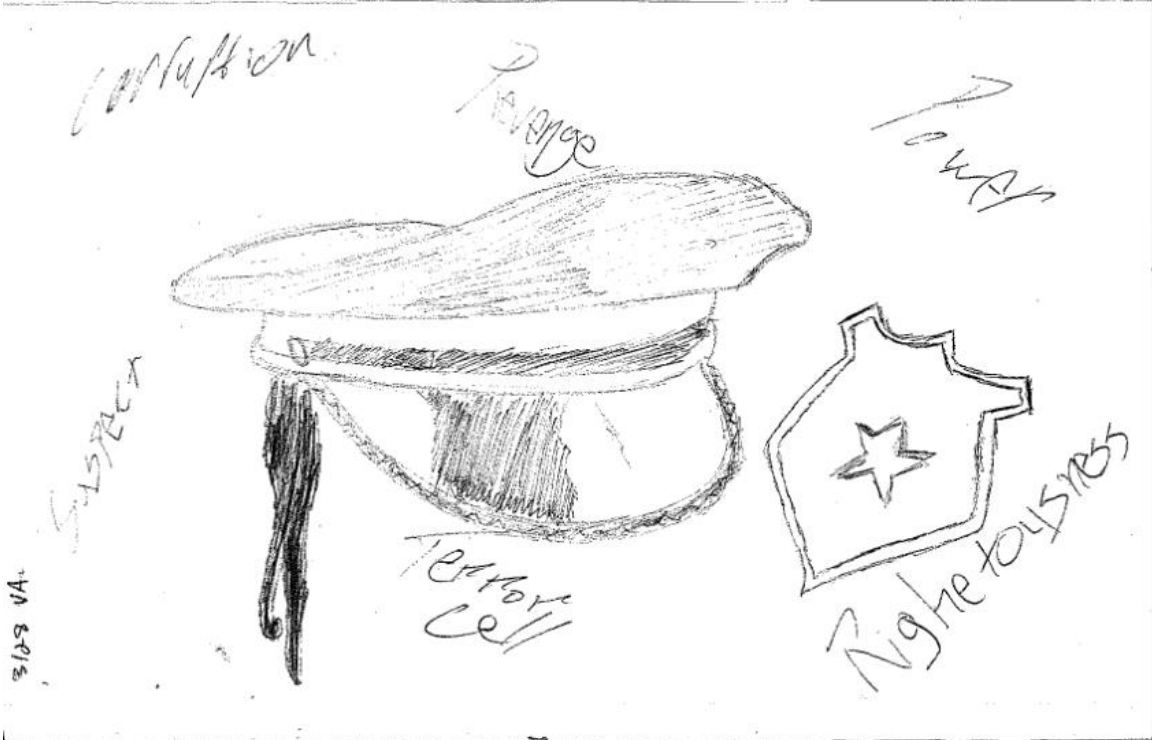
**I've turned into a scotch drinker since then. I always wanted to play the part of a scotch drinker. Can I pour you one, Detective?**

**CALEB**

**You don't mind if I promote him to detective, do you? Eli has always reminded me of Mackler.<sup>5</sup>**

---

<sup>5</sup>Cunningham, "Poison", 68-71.



(An image I drew in response to the recurring theme of police corruption during the staged reading process)

### **Puzzle Dialogue**

This is a convention that neither Bill, nor myself have ever encountered before and so we have coined the term “puzzle dialogue” to discuss it.

You may have already noticed from reading the short excerpts of scenes that the dialogue for most of the script is broken up and fragmented. There is an aspect of realism in this convention that mimics the frequency people interrupt each other in actual conversation, but the convention takes it a step further. Two character’s may be having conversations simultaneously taking place on stage in different locations and yet their lines are connected and they complete each other’s thoughts. The audience must listen to both in order to understand the play at a deeper level, like putting together a puzzle.

Though Bill was attempting to imitate the very real, fractured nature of conversation, the puzzle that the dialogue forms hinges on the verge of being absurdist. This concept may be difficult to comprehend without reading a scene.

The majority of the play is written using this convention, but the following is an excerpt from a scene where puzzle dialogue was particularly prevalent. This scene occurs just before the confrontation between Alan and Eli. In it, Kathryn and Alan are on stage located inside of Kathryn’s house while Zoe and Hayley are located somewhere outdoors. Caleb is omnipresent at this moment and he provides a connection between these two events:

**KATHRYN**

**What have you done, Mr. Lubeck?**

**HALEY**

**(Turning to see...)**

**Zoe.**

**CALEB**

**(Keeping his eye on HALEY)**

**Haley will follow her cop instincts, Alan.**

**HALEY**

**(Picking up a flower)**

**You're leaving a trail.**

**KATHRYN**

**I gave you a job. I gave you the opportunity to be influential, to help me improve the lives of people who are outside the ranks of privilege...**

**ZOE**

**(Looking up and not recognizing HALEY)**

**Who are you?**

**KATHRYN**

**I gave you a chance...**

**HALEY**

**My...**

**KATHERINE**

**...to redeem yourself in the eyes of your...**

**HALEY**

**...partner...**

**CALEB**

**She'll try...**

HALEY

...and I...

CALEB

...to convince herself that by following procedure she will...

HALEY

...we brought you home.

KATHRYN

...to...

CALEB

...hopefully find...

KATHRYN

...a way of scaring people into...

CALEB

...a peaceful...

LAUREN

...*delusion*.

(KATHRYN turns to see LAUREN, who is now standing behind the bar)

KATHRYN

Where the Christ did you come from?

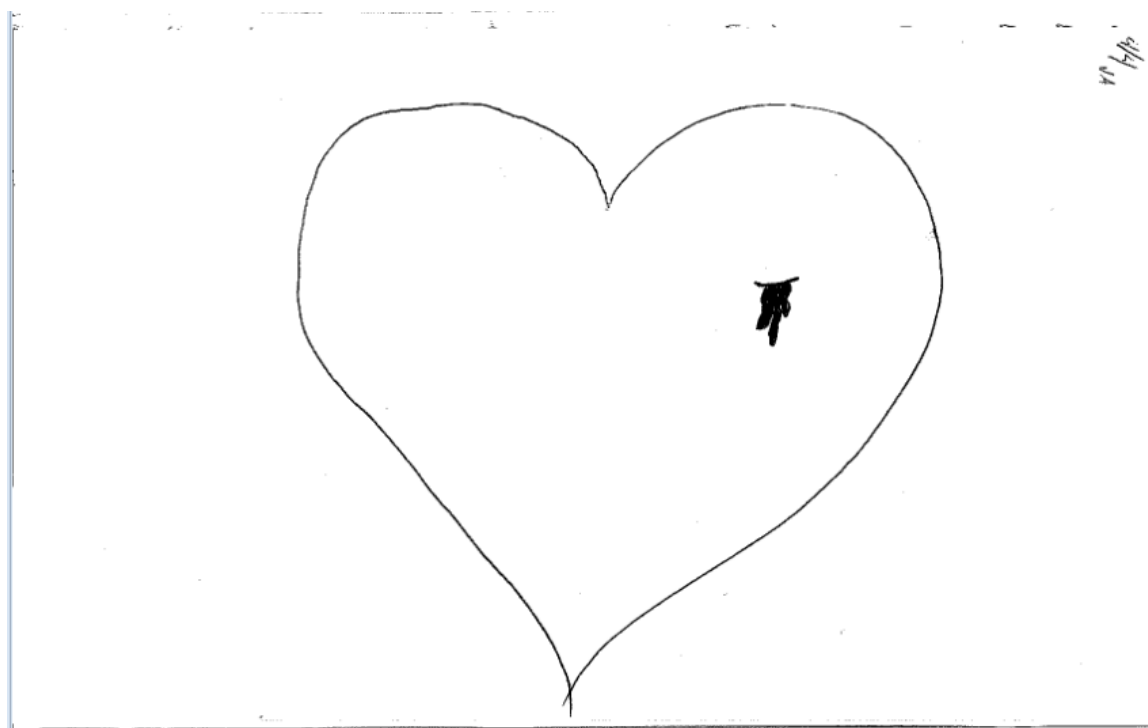
LAUREN

(Looking past KATHRYN to ALAN)

Wouldn't it be nice if we could all stay blissfully unaware, Mr. Lubeck?<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 125-127.



(An image I drew in response to Haley being corrupted during the staged reading process)

# The Staged Reading

## **What is a staged reading?**

A staged reading is a crucial part in the development of a new play that occurs after the first draft is written, but before a fully-fledged production is mounted. It involves an abbreviated rehearsal process that brings together actors to play the characters in front of the playwright and an audience. This allows them to be able to hear the dialogue out loud and gauge its effectiveness. These readings are often followed by a “talkback” where the audience responds to what they heard and offer feedback from their perspective.

Traditionally, the visualization of a play during a staged reading is left to the audience’s imagination as there is no set, lights or costumes. Actors are not “off-book”, meaning they do not memorize their parts and they remain stationary at music stands to read. A reader is often designated to read stage directions in order to help audience members visualize circumstances and what is going on physically in the script. Often, a script is given several readings before it is produced by a theatre company.

To give you an example of what I mean by an abbreviated rehearsal process, Actor’s Equity, the union representing professional stage managers and actors, designates that a member of the union may be involved in a staged reading, without an equity contract if it meets the following guidelines:

“Members may participate for a maximum of 29 hours (including both rehearsals and no more than three presentations) over the course of 14 days. No admission may be charged at the time of the readings, which may not use sets, props, wigs, make-up or costumes. The readings may not be advertised to the public or reviewed by critics.”<sup>7</sup>

### **An Educational Staged Reading is Different**

Many aspects of our process differed from what is typical of a professional staged reading because this was being undertaken in an educational setting. Unlike a professional reading, the script that we were reading was unfinished. The purpose of putting an unfinished script in front of an audience was twofold: to allow the playwright gauge if what was already written had clarity of story to the audience, and secondly: to get an idea for what the audience *expected* the ending to be. This would allow him to write an ending to the second act that was unexpected over the summer recess.

Our process involved thirteen days of rehearsals and two performances, far longer than the time allowed professionally. In order to create opportunity for design students, we also had a student sound designer who selected pre and post show music, and a student lighting designer. These elements added aural and visual atmospheres that are not normally found in a staged reading. Finally, Bill, who acted as both playwright and director chose to give the cast blocking as opposed to having us simply stand and read from music stands.

---

<sup>7</sup> “Staged Reading Code,” Actor’s Equity Association, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/contracts/Staged-Reading/>

I have included the cast list and creative team that worked on the staged reading in this section. In the following section I will expand upon what the purpose of each of the different types of rehearsal days.

### Staged Reading Cast and Creative Team

<i>Director/Playwright</i>	Bill Cunningham
<i>Assistant Director</i>	Christopher Noran
<i>Stage Manager</i>	Jenna Glass
<i>Sound Designer</i>	Devin McGovern
<i>Lighting Designer</i>	Kevin Dunn
<i>Alan Lubeck</i>	Stephen Zubricki IV
<i>Haley/Chavez</i>	Haley Thompson
<i>Eli/Mackler</i>	Patrick Klos
<i>Kathryn Kingsbury</i>	Olivia Brennock
<i>Caleb Lange</i>	Jazsmin Lynn
<i>Zoe Kingsbury</i>	Kalyn Kosh
<i>Peter Larkin</i>	Jimmy McCormack
<i>Lauren Kingsbury</i>	Paige Ruggles

### Schedule

<i>Date</i>	<i>Rehearsal Type, Location, Note</i>
3/8/18	First Read-Through (Cancelled due to snow)
3/19/18	First Read-Through
3/21/18	Table Work (Cancelled due to snow)
3/27/18	Table Work
3/28/18	Table Work
4/2/18	Staging
4/3/18	Staging
4/4/18	Staging
4/5/18	Staging
4/6/18	Staging
4/9/18	Spacing
4/10/18	Tech
4/11/18	Tech
4/12/18	Dress
4/13/18	Performance and talkback #1
4/14/18	Performance and talkback #2

# From Page to Stage

## **Rehearsals and the Production Process**

Every creative process is different, and directors will always structure a rehearsal calendar to best fit their style of directing and the needs of the show. There is a vocabulary surrounding the several types of rehearsals that theatre artists commonly use. Each type of rehearsal serves a different purpose during the process of preparing the show for performances.

### **First Read-Through**

In my experience, the first read through for any production is usually the first rehearsal. The director may speak about their vision for the production and provide the actors with any information or inspiration that may inform their performances. It is the first time that the whole cast is brought together to hear each other read their parts.

### **Table Work**

After the first read-through we had days of table work. This period of a rehearsal process occurs seated at a table reading and discussing the script. It allows the actors to get on the same page intellectually about their characters and relationships. This is also a time to make sure that the actors, quite literally, know what they are saying and why they are saying it. Professional actors do most, if not all, of this work on their own before they come into the first rehearsal. More

time is spent on this type of work in an educational setting. As a student I appreciate having a bit more time to be able to synthesize the concepts that I have learned in my performance classes and apply them to the script, especially on a script that is as dense as this one was.

### **Staging**

The staging portion of a rehearsal process is normally left out of a reading. During this period of rehearsal, the director works to choreograph where the actors move physically in the space throughout a scene. This choreography is referred to as “blocking.” Additionally, the director will help the actors shape the scene, giving notes to adjust the actors’ performances accordingly.

The director will normally break the script into smaller pieces referred to as “units” that can be worked individually and then put back together. Units are usually worked broadly first to give them shape and then get fine-tuned and detail oriented once every scene has a general shape.

### **Designer Run**

Once the play has been completely blocked, props masters, lighting, scenic, sound, and costume designers attend a rehearsal to watch a full run. The designers will watch the show for anything pertinent to their designs. Lighting designers watch where the actors are in space to make sure they light the right parts of the stage. Costume designers make sure the costumes they have designed are safe or aren't going to rip due to a cartwheel or jump that is in the blocking etc.

Often, during staging there will be choices about additions or cuts made to the script or blocking that directly affect the designers work. This is their chance to see for themselves what the show will roughly look like, take notes and ask questions before putting final touches on their prep work for tech week..

### **Tech**

“Tech week” is usually the week leading up to the show opening. In professional settings there may only be a few days to tech the show as opposed to a full week. Rehearsals move from a rehearsal space to the actual venue that the show will be performed in. The time in the space allows the stage manager and designers to integrate all technical elements into the show. This may consist of adjusting blocking to navigate the set, running scenic changes and quick changes for costumes with run crew members, adding lights and sound cues etc. During this week the stage manager and designers are the main-focus as they try to make every area of the show work together.

**Dry Tech**

Actors are not called to dry tech. it is a day for the stage manager, run crews, and designers to run transitions and technical elements of the show both so they can practice and in preparation for the addition of actors.

**Spacing**

A spacing rehearsal is the first rehearsal in the performance space and is not usually involved in a typical staged reading process. Blocking is adjusted as needed to accommodate the difference between the rehearsal room and the set. (This day is especially important if the show is a musical as dance numbers often need to be adjusted.) This was not a particularly important part of our process as our set had a relatively large amount of open space.

**Technical Rehearsals (Wet Tech/Cue to Cue)**

The technical rehearsals are also not normally a part of a staged reading process. Technical rehearsals allow the stage manager to begin integrating “calling cues” to initiate light, sound and scenic changes etc. A cue to cue rehearsal involves moving through the script and only performing moments that have technical cues involved. This allows the run crew can learn a traffic pattern backstage or so that the stage manager can place the timing as to when a cue needs to be called. Additionally, this allows the actors to interact with the technical elements of the show and understand how they will affect their performances. During these rehearsals the show is rarely run in its entirety and the work is very stop-go.

**Dress Rehearsal**

Again, not a typical part of a staged reading. The dress rehearsal is a complete run of the show in full costume with lights, sound and all other technical elements that will be used in the show such as blood or gunshots. This normally takes place the day before the first performance.

**Performances and talkbacks**

A performance is a run of the show done in front of an audience. Sometimes there will be a facilitated discussion following the performance known as a talkback. This is a time for the audience to ask any questions that they may have about the script, the process, the performance etc. of the cast and any members of the creative team that are present. They typically last ten to fifteen minutes long but there is no rule about their length.

# Preparation in Process

## Research

Research is an important part of my process as an actor. Over the summer between the staged reading and the full production I focused most of my research on film noir to better understand what Bill wanted to model our performances and his writing after. My goal in researching film noir was not for me to synthesize the information that I learned to develop my own argument or thesis about what film noir was or is. Instead, I was looking to become informed about something that I otherwise knew very little about. I would then use that knowledge to inform my dialogue with the director and my acting choices.

My film-noir research involved two elements: reading criticisms and essays on the subject and viewing old film noir movies. I have only included the most pertinent discoveries and readings that I took away from my research process. I will then explain the relevance of the research as to how I was able to actively compare film noir to the script of *Poison of Choice*.

## Historical Context/ Common Themes

Film noir came about as a reaction to WWII in the 1940s reflecting the state of the nation with a pessimistic, gritty outlook of soldiers and families following the war. The disillusionment of the country produced a dark, seedy and cynical tone.

“Society [is] something less than worth fighting for. The war continues, but now the antagonism turns with a new viciousness toward American society itself”<sup>8</sup>

I learned that the film noir is a direct descendent of the American gangster film which was full of black and white good versus evil conflicts. The genre is also marked by taint and corruption.

“[Film noir was] Less a matter of portraying specific social issues than of reflecting, generally and metaphorically, the mood of the country during an after the war”<sup>9</sup>

Some common themes found in film noir are those of hopelessness, lost time, irretrievable past etc. These themes are usually emphasized by complex chronological orders. There was “a passion for past and present, but also a fear of the future.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Relevance**

Though the historical context and themes of a category may not be something that can provide tangible acting choices, it is important to think about because it allows me to understand why the play is being done. In my training I have been challenged to ask, “why this play, why now?” by my professors. In other words, what about this play is relevant that makes it important for an audience to hear today? It pushes me to think beyond

---

<sup>8</sup> Schrader, Paul, “Notes on film noir”. *Film Comment*, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> Hirsch, Foster, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. *The Dark Side of the Screen*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Schrader, “Notes”

the purpose of producing work for sheer entertainment. While rehearsing and playing the role, knowing the message that I am helping to spread to the audience can also be something that personally drives me and informs my perspective on a character. For example: A character that behaves cruelly may be that way because society has been cruel to them and taken opportunities from them their entire life. The historical context could tell me this which would allow me to feel bad for my character instead of judging them and portraying them as solely “bad”, ignoring the duplicity of human nature.

Film noir reflected a dark and pessimistic view of the world. Bill also sees a darkness in the people around him now in 2018 and 2019. He is in a country filled with an inability to believe in things-in people, in politics, in law enforcement, in religion, in love. By using film noir as the vehicle for his thoughts, Bill actively comments on the world he sees. He invokes a dark world in a recognizable way so that the audience sees the comparison and can catch itself before we fall any farther. He reflects what he sees out of fear and to warn the audience that like in film noir, and in his play- society right now is cynical and bleak. It was important for me to remember this while I was acting- that Alan was not just a character who drove himself mad with jealousy, but that he was a man who lost his ability to believe in anything.

### **Importance of visual language**

The story told by the visual language of film noir through sound, lights, camera angles etc expresses “emotional material that cannot be expressed in the body of the film.”<sup>11</sup>

“When the environment is given an equal or greater weight than the actor, it, of course, creates a fatalistic, hopeless mood. There is nothing the protagonist can do; the city will outlast and negate even their best efforts.”<sup>12</sup>

I learned that the aesthetic elements in film noir make viewers respond on a subconscious, primal level, not an intellectual level. Every element of the production design lends itself to making the audience feel something, not just think something. The lines are jagged, the camera angles are disorienting, the lighting casts looming shadows etc.

### **Relevance**

From the first stage direction of *Poison of Choice*, there is a very clear atmospheric quality. It is dark, shadowy and sinister. This becomes a trap in the dialogue while performing it that makes all of the lines come out sounding dark, gloomy and the same. Another lesson from my professors: “Mood spelled backwards is d-o-o-m.” By this they mean that you cannot act the tone or atmosphere of a play because it will be boring, and the play will fail.

---

<sup>11</sup> De Cordova, Richard, “Genre and Performance: An Overview.” In Barry Keith Grant, 129-139. Ed., *Film Genre Reader*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

<sup>12</sup> Schrader, “Notes”

Reading about film noir taught me that the mood of the script needs to be expressed through the work of the designers, not through the acting. It was a reminder to me during the process that the visual language of the play would tell the audience the story that I my acting could not.

I have included here the very first words of the script, stage directions that exemplify what I am discussing here:

**(A deserted, darkened cityscape. The buildings connect in ways that leave shadowy corners. Steam comes from a subway grate. Occasionally the sound and lights of a passing subway car pulse and spark from beneath the street...)**

**(...We are in the reality of a graphic novel)**

**(From out of the darkness, a voice is heard...)<sup>13</sup>**

### **Film noir writing and noir heroes**

One of the most prominent film noir writers was Raymond Chandler. His dialogue has been described as smart, witty, terse, and laden with subtext.

“created the “tough”, a cynical way of acting and thinking that separated one from the world of everyday emotions- romanticism with a protective shell...the hard-boiled hero was, in reality, a soft egg...but he was a good deal tougher than anything American fiction had ever seen.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Cunningham, “Poison”, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Schrader, “Notes”.

“Noir heroes dread to look ahead, but instead try to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, they retreat to the past. Thus, film noir’s techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities and insecurity, then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Relevance**

The character of Alan was written in a similar vein to the protagonists of many film noir movies. Especially useful were the notes I took that described how noir heroes had tumultuous inner lives that they hid behind a hard exterior made of wit, and intelligence. The similarity between Bill’s writing and that of a film noir meant that I could apply these to creating the role of Alan.

### **Style of Acting**

Observations about actors in film noirs taken from my readings:<sup>16</sup>

- “Dry, tight voices”
- Emotionally stingy
- Tough but quiet
- “Bogart hardly moves facial muscles”
- Cynicism masks integrity
- “Enormous feeling kept in check”

---

<sup>15</sup> Schrader, “Notes”.

<sup>16</sup> These observations taken from: Hirsch, *The Dark Side*.

## **Relevance**

By watching the way actors approached the witty dialogue and their characters I achieved a sense of how I needed to approach Bill's text. I came to understand that the dialogue moved quickly requiring a light touch on the actor's part and intelligence on the audience's part to be able to follow the plot at a sub textual level. In other words, I had to allow myself to move the dialogue along and trust that the audience was understanding the story instead of artificially adjusting my performance to be more obvious so that people could keep up.

Something that I did have to remember while doing this research was that there is a difference between film acting and stage acting. Film acting is far subtler and if reproduced on stage will appear to be subdued and too quiet (both literally and figuratively) to fill the space of a theatre. I knew in researching film acting that I would not be able to imitate it exactly. I would have to magnify their choices for the stage if I wanted to use them. Many of these qualities that I noted in the list are not appropriate for the stage, but it was important to me to understand how actors used them. Humphrey Bogart especially was an actor that I wanted to be able to emulate because Bill wanted to achieve the same kind of effect with Alan that he was able to in his movies.

**Scratching**

This term refers to the process of finding or creating inspiration images. These images are aimed at evoking some sort of feeling about an aesthetic, a mood, trait, or idea related to my character or the play. I have dropped some of my scratching images into the body of this reading to help give texture and spark imagination.

**Script Analysis**

Script analysis is a class taught by Bill that all theatre students with performance concentrations are required to take in the theatre program at Salem State. In addition to researching the playwright which I included earlier, the class teaches you how to read a play closely to identify the dramatic action, identify and research the areas of conflict, and analyze character and dialogue. In doing the research you break down the various real-world conflicts that are present in the script. These conflicts may be political, moral, environmental or economical. By researching each of them students are able to understand the real-world stakes and repercussions of such conflicts in the context of the play.

Analyzing a script should be a part of every actor's process. It is a part of your homework as an actor so that you come to rehearsals prepared. As I progressed through my training, some of this work began to become intuitive, but remained a tool that I could go back to if I am stuck. There are some elements of the script analysis that are always important to do to make sure you understand your character and their dramatic action. These are the structural and character analysis sections

### Structural Analysis

All actors playing a character in a traditional play need to be able to identify what their character wants at any given moment. What they want is referred to as their goal or objective. The different ways a character goes about trying to get what they want is called their tactics. When someone asked me what a play was about when I first started studying performance at Salem State, I would give them a long-winded summary of the entire play down to the many conversations that occur in the dialogue. I would tell them all about the characters' tactics instead of the conflict surrounding their competing goals. This is something that I have noticed affects many young actors and is still often a challenge for me. When an actor cannot clearly articulate what the action of a play is or confuses a tactic for what a character needs or wants, it translates on stage as a muddled performance that lacks focus.

A structural analysis identifies the actions of a play. I think of the action as simply “what is really going on.” Actions consist of two parts: causes (triggers) and effects (heaps) that push the story and conflict of a play forward towards its conclusion. To find them, the script is broken down into smaller parts called “units.” The start of a new unit indicates that there is a new action occurring. By going through this process and identifying what is really going on, I can then pull out what my character wants (objective) and what is in their way, referred to as an obstacle.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ball, Peter. *Backwards and Forwards: a Technical Manual for Reading Plays*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.

The following was my structural analysis for *Poison of Choice*. I did not analyze the units that Alan was not on stage for. I have titled each unit. Sometimes these titles are silly or seemingly unrelated and this is because they are ultimately nonconsequential, personal labels that I have assigned to them.

**Unit 2: What are you doing here?**

**Trigger:** Alan and Lauren try to discover what they are doing in this house.

**Heap:** Alan reveals that he is here for a job interview, but that he doesn't know what job is. Lauren is much more cryptic and only reveals that she is the senator's daughter.

**Objective:** To Investigate this house and this job offer so that he can have success in the interview and "enter the *real* world"<sup>18</sup> as Haley wants him to.

**Obstacle:** He was told nothing about the job offer and Lauren is being incredibly cryptic.

**Unit 3: An old friend**

**Trigger:** Alan reacquaints with Peter, an old college friend and tries again to gain more information about the Senator and the mysterious job offer.

**Heap:** Peter leaves Alan feeling insecure about himself before he goes into the interview.

**Objective:** To gain information about what he is about to walk into and what kind of person the Senator is.

**Obstacle:** Peter is more interested in lording his position of power over Alan and is being cryptic.

---

<sup>18</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 9.

#### **Unit 4: The job offer**

**Trigger:** Kathryn and Peter offer Alan a job in return for him helping to get the Senator's daughter, Zoe to undergo treatment for her addiction.

**Heap:** Alan leaves seeing that this house is just a real-world version of his novel but feeling torn over the amount of money they have offered him.

**Objective:** To find out what Peter and Kathryn *really* want from him underneath all of their spin.

**Obstacle:** Kathryn and Peter are being good politicians instead of saying what they really mean and what the job offer really entails.

#### **Unit 5: "She's fucking him you know."<sup>19</sup>**

**Trigger:** Alan leaves the house to try to get away from this real-world *Terror Cell* and runs into Zoe.

**Heap:** Zoe plants the seed of suspicion in Alan's mind that Kathryn and Peter are having an affair and that Kathryn may have murdered the Senator.

**Objective:** To get away from *Terror Cell* and this job offer.

**Obstacle:** Alan's mind is susceptible to what Zoe is saying so the more she talks the more his mind works and the further he is pulled into *Terror Cell* and this world.

---

<sup>19</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 46.

**Unit 6: We can't keep living like this.**

**Trigger:** Haley confronts Alan about the new edition of *Terror Cell* that he is writing.

She urges him to take the job offer to save his relationship with her.

**Heap:** Alan's suspicions about Haley's affair with Eli grow and he can't say I love you to Haley when she leaves for work with Eli.

**Objective:** To convince Haley that Peter and Kathryn are having an affair and that is why he shouldn't take the job.

**Obstacle:** Haley is fed up with Alan writing *Terror Cell* and his crazy suspicions and doesn't want to talk about an affair because she is having one and it makes her feel guilty.

**Unit 7: "Go away"<sup>20</sup>**

**Trigger:** Alan's suspicions summon Caleb Lange and Alan tries to make him go away.

**Heap:** Caleb Lange pushes Alan down a rabbit hole and brings his suspicions to life in *Terror Cell*.

**Objective:** To make Caleb Lange go away and stay in the real world.

**Obstacle:** Alan can't tell if his suspicions are real or just in his head and Caleb will not leave until Alan plays them all out.

---

<sup>20</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 66.

**Unit 8: Following procedure?**

**Trigger:** Chavez/Haley and Mackler/Eli find Zoe on the street and debate what to do with her.

**Heap:** Mackler/Eli convinces Chavez/Haley to take her home to the Kingsbury's instead of following procedure and taking her into protective custody.

**Objective:** To believe in Haley and have faith that she is still a good, redeemable person who stands for what is right and just.

**Obstacle:** Alan's mind is assuming the worst possible scenarios.

**Unit 9: "Corruption...It's just a simple act of... Consenting."<sup>21</sup>**

**Trigger:** Mackler/Eli and Peter persuade Chavez/Haley to overlook Zoe's problem in exchange for Alan's job offer.

**Heap:** Chavez/Haley consents therefore proves herself to be corrupted even though she was reluctant.

**Objective:** Still to believe in Haley.

**Obstacle:** Haley is involved in corrupt behavior with Eli and Peter and Alan doesn't know if it is real or just imagined.

---

<sup>21</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 82.

**Unit 10: Corruption + Murder = What the heck is going on?**

**Trigger:** Caleb pushes Alan's mind even further to draw conclusions until he believes that Kathryn poisoned her husband.

**Heap:** Alan accepts that Chavez/Haley has been corrupted and that Mackler/Eli is a dirty cop.

**Objective:** To sort through his suspicions to discern what is true and what is only in his mind.

**Obstacle:** It is impossible to tell what is real or imagined because it is all plausible.

**Unit 11: The Death of Caleb Lange**

**Trigger:** Alan pushes Caleb to kill Mackler/Eli in *Terror Cell* because "Guilty people need to be...punished"<sup>22</sup>, but Mackler/Eli ends up shooting Caleb instead "killing" him.

**Heap:** Caleb tells Alan to write his suspicions into his newest edition of *Terror Cell* to avenge his death.

**Objective:** To punish Mackler for corrupting Haley and taking her away from him.

**Obstacle:** Mackler/Eli shoots Caleb before he can be punished, and Alan is not yet at the place where he will do anything to punish Eli in the real world.

---

<sup>22</sup> Cunningham, "Poison", 96.

**Unit 13: To publish, or not to publish**

**Trigger:** With the possibility of ruining lives on his mind, Alan approaches Reverend Lauren Kingsbury to make sure that if he publishes this new edition that guilt will indeed be revealed.

**Heap:** Alan commits to publishing the new edition to reveal Eli as corrupt and destroy his life.

**Objective:** To determine whether he can be forgiven if he goes down this path or not.

**Obstacle:** His conscience telling him not to do it. His desire to punish Eli and Lauren's advice contradict this.

**Unit 14: Guilt revealed**

**Trigger:** Kathryn Kingsbury has gotten ahold of the proof copy of *Terror Cell* and confronts Alan about it because it portrays her as a murderer.

**Heap:** Kathryn reveals that she did not kill her husband. She also implies that Eli has seen the publication and knows about Alan's plan to discredit him.

**Objective:** To search for where the graphic novel has proven the guilt he suspected and where his suspicions were wrong.

**Obstacle:** The novel has hurt Kathryn even though she was not guilty of the crime Alan accused her of. Alan is caught in a moral dilemma.

### **Unit 15: Toxic Masculinity**

**Trigger:** Eli invites Alan to the gun range under the pretense of teaching him how to shoot, but in reality he is trying to intimidate him into not publishing the new edition.

**Heap:** Alan is not intimidated and accuses Eli of the affair with Haley.

**Objective:** To kill Eli.

**Obstacle:** Eli is more physically powerful than Alan. If Alan Kills Eli, he cannot take it back. He will lose Haley forever and go to jail.

### **Unit 16: Caleb's Revenge**

**Trigger:** Caleb prods Alan to shoot Eli. Haley arrives on the scene and sees Alan with a gun aimed at Eli. She draws her weapon and tries to talk him down from his heightened emotional state. Alan needs to hear from Haley if she cheated on him or not and asks her.

**Heap:** Haley reveals that she did cheat. Caleb reveals that he really has wanted revenge on Alan for killing him in *Terror Cell*. Alan goes to shoot Caleb, but Haley, who cannot see Caleb, thinks he is going to shoot Eli and is forced to choose between protecting Eli or her love for Alan. She shoots Alan.

**Objective:** To hear the truth from Haley so that he can decide whether he should or shouldn't shoot Eli.

**Obstacle:** His love for Haley and the fact that he is a good person at heart.

**Unit 17: Truth Revealed**

**Trigger:** As Alan lies dying, Caleb reviews the various “poisons” that created this world of corruption and mistrust. As he reviews them, the truths behind all of the mysteries that Alan had written into his new edition are revealed.

**Heap:** Haley is left alone in the wake of her own actions struggling to believe that any of this could possibly be real. Caleb recedes into the shadows telling Alan that we can all go back to sleep- this must just be a bad dream. Or was it?

**Objective:** To understand how this all could have possibly happened.

**Obstacle:** Alan has been shot and is dying.

## Character Analysis

Interesting and well-written characters are not the same people at the end of a play that they were at the beginning of a play. As in real-life, people change. This section of a script analysis allows me to break down who a character is at the beginning and end of a play to better understand their arc (how they change). The objectives of the character are less immediately regarding the action than in the structural analysis because this is a snapshot of who this person is and what their “super-objective” is (this term refers to the overarching objective the character wishes for throughout the action of the play)The format for it is specifically given in Bill’s script analysis class.

### Alan

#### I. Beginning

- a. **Objective:** To get a new job that is not writing *Terror Cell* so that he can repair his relationship with Haley who has grown tired of living in the world of suspicion.
- b. **Obstacle:** The job offered by Kathryn and Peter is a real-life version of *Terror Cell* filled with lies and deceit. He is already suspicious of Haley and Kathryn and Peter magnify his suspicions making it harder to get away from them.
- c. **Need/Action:** Impress, escape, discover, understand, put-together
- d. **Justification:** If he lands this job with Kathryn and Peter, his relationship with Haley will be fixed and he will be in a better place mentally, able to sleep at night etc.

- e. **Decorum:** Tired, run down, trying to appear professional, light, smart-ass, witty
- f. **Inner Life:** Alan is physically tired from his lack of sleep and unable to fight his mind's impulse to be suspicious of everything around him. He loves Haley and is longing to return to their relationship as it was in their college days.

## II. End

- a. **Objective:** To bring justice in the name of righteousness to Eli for taking Haley away from him no matter who he hurts in the process.
- b. **Obstacle:** His conscience tells him that it is wrong to hurt others. Kathryn and Eli want to stop Alan from publishing *Terror Cell* because it damages their reputations.
- c. **Need/Action:** To expose, accuse, hurt, punish, kill, take revenge
- d. **Justification:** Eli has destroyed the only thing that Alan had left to believe in and that is a crime deserving of punishment. The other people that may get hurt in the wake of trying to hurt Eli are also corrupt/guilty and deserve what they get.
- e. **Decorum:** Conflicted, tortured, hurt, angry, vengeful, mad, driven, jaded, exhausted, righteous, powerful, brash, testosterone-filled
- f. **Inner Life:** Alan is conflicted about the moral repercussions regarding the publication of *Terror Cell* but the voice of Caleb in his head and his suspicions have driven him further insane and made him more prone to brash actions. The hurt of the betrayal of Haley and the corruption of the

world he resides in has stripped him of his ability to believe in anything or anyone. With nothing left to lose he seeks to take revenge and punish the guilty in the name of justice.

### III. Character Arc

Alan's arc takes a jaded and tired, but good man and drives him to do bad things. It strips away his ability to believe in love. His suspicion of an affair between Haley and Eli acts as a catalyst for his slide that is further intensified by the corrupt Kingsbury household.

Alan is a tired writer who no longer writes anything that he is passionate about because it does not allow him to be financially stable. Instead he writes *Terror Cell*- a graphic novel steeped in corruption and fear- which is popular and able to pay the bills (barely). He is bitter about the fact that the poetry and theatre that he once hoped to reach people with when he was in college is dead in the "real world". Writing *Terror Cell* has slowly eroded Alan's trust in the world around him but there is one thing left that he still has faith in: Haley and his relationship with her. He truly loves her and believes in her as a pillar of love, justice and good. As the play begins, he suspects even Haley of being corrupted but still clings to hope and faith in love as he takes steps to save his relationship.

As he is pulled into the dark political world of the Kingsbury home, it

becomes harder and harder to separate himself from *Terror Cell*. With Caleb ever present in his head he continues to grow more and more tired as he writes. Before the new job he wrote purely fiction. Now, he is weaving what he suspects to be reality into his stories. When his stories take him so far as to draw the conclusion that Eli has corrupted Haley, he decides to take action to bring Eli's guilt into the open and punish Eli himself.

At this point, Alan is desperate and exhausted. He has lost his ability to remember what it was like to be idealistic and to stand for good in the world. His entire world is dark and void of anything good. Though his conscience weighs heavily on him, it is outweighed by his desire to discover the truth. He justifies the fact that he will hurt others through the process because of his personal convictions that they are also guilty and deserve to be punished. The moment when Haley's guilt is revealed is the last straw when he decides to shoot Eli, but still Haley is able to reach him reaffirming that though this entire ordeal he still loves her and is still a good person. When Haley shoots Alan, he is not aiming at Eli, he is aiming at Caleb who Haley cannot see.

# Looking Backward

During the first two thirds of the rehearsal process for the full-scale production I kept a rehearsal journal where I recorded what had happened in rehearsal including the scenes we worked on, any discoveries I made during the night, questions that I had about my character or the play, breakthrough moments and frustrations with the process. In looking back at these journals, I noticed patterns of observations in several areas that I will discuss individually before looking at the process as a whole.

As I looked back at all of my journals from the rehearsal process, I had a lot that I was unhappy about as a result of my tendency to be hard on myself. The negative aspects of the process are much more informative to me than the things that went right so I will unpack everything that went wrong before I examine the positives and what I learned.

## **Finding Alan's physical life**

Alan was a difficult character for me to find. He was very similar to who I am in a lot of ways- he is smart, sarcastic, he uses humor to avoid tension, he is in love, and (get this) he was a theatre major in college who also struggles with balancing the need to make money with the desire to make art that he cares about.

I have heard over and over in my classes that my goal as an “actor” should be to transform so that I do not simply behave as myself on stage. In a way, Alan being so similar to me made me feel like I was not ever doing enough. I mentioned time and time

again in my journals that I wanted to work on finding a different physicality. I tried to come up with what animal his personality might physically manifest itself as, I experimented with different gaits, I observed people in public that I could emulate, but I did not find anything that felt right. At one point I scheduled time to work with a professor on finding his physical presence, but it never ended up happening. In the performances, Alan walked like I walked and carried himself the way that I carry myself. Coming off of my performance in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* by Martin McDonagh my junior year where I played a crotchety, old, Irish gossip who was different from me in every way, I felt like I had taken a step backwards. You will see that I mention the character of Johnnypat and finding a physical life in almost all of the journal entries I have included later in this section.

Related to not finding a physicality that was different from my own, I found myself feeling as though I was not filling Alan's time on stage with enough creative specificity. In other words, I did not feel like I was doing enough behaviorally to make him interesting in a way that deepened his character. It was so important for this show that I listened intently to every single line and delivered each of my own lines clearly to the correct person. If I had not done that, there was no way the audience would have followed the story. There was no such thing as a moment where I could sit back and relax into the character and have an easy conversation. Everything was pointed and purposeful in the script, there was no such thing as a "throwaway" line which was not a bad thing, but sometimes it did not feel as though there was room for me to just breathe and inhabit the character.

### **During Rehearsals**

Something else that I noted a lot in my journal entries was that the rehearsal process was very slow. I have already mentioned that lines were incredibly difficult to memorize given the nature of the puzzle dialogue. For some people it took much longer than it should have for them to know their lines which affected two things: first, it drastically slowed the speed at which we could move through and block the scenes, and second, once we had blocked everything, it took a very long time for us to actually explore the depth of a scene and “play” with it because there were people who’s attention was constantly given to their script instead of listening and responding to their scene partners.

Even after everyone knew all their lines, we would often get the note from Bill that he could not “hear” the play. Part of the reason that we struggled with it as a cast was because of the second difficulty of the script- the trap of mood- making every single line sound dark and menacing and foreboding and miserable. We had the same problem during the staged reading. Even still, I had to rediscover how to free myself from that tendency all over again. In order to make this script work we had to be hyper focused on listening and responding. The lines had to zip from actor to actor and adjustments had to be made *on* the lines, never in between. That was the only way that the audience could follow the plot. Bill’s writing had a musical and rhythmic quality that was inherent in the script- but only if it was performed correctly.

A habit that I have become aware of through my classes is that any time I feel like a scene is lacking in energy I go into over-drive and try to act enough for everyone. I speed

up the tempo, I speak louder, I move more and I open my eyes wide and stare intently at my scene partner(s) as though I am trying to shoot beams of energy into them or make my eyeballs grow out of my head and touch the other person (To an audience it looks as bizarre as it sounds it would). In my classwork the semester of the show, I was specifically working on recognizing when I was doing this so I could check myself and respond only to what my scene partner was giving me. Because there were so many group scenes and the energy transfer between lines was so difficult for us to consistently nail, it was a great show for me to be practicing this on. In particular, Unit 4 when Alan has his job interview with Kathryn gave us a lot of trouble as well as Units 8-10 and 14 where there were multiple locations on stage simultaneously and puzzle dialogue was heaviest.

### **Attitude**

My attitude during rehearsals was inherently linked to the more difficult moments. As a rule, I try to cultivate positivity in rehearsals. I truly believe that there is nothing useful about being negative in a creative space. Especially with some of my classmates who were sophomores and had less experience with the department process I made sure to check in with them and to try to set an example during rehearsals. That being said, I am much harder on myself than I am on other people and I will typically get frustrated with myself at various points in the rehearsal process. In this case though, even when I was remaining positive outwardly, I found myself getting frustrated with other people. I noticed during

this process that there were many times where rehearsal would end and I would go home feeling resentful of the slow pace, with others not knowing their lines or with peers taking longer to ‘get it’ than I thought they should be taking. I was not the only one. There were many days when my castmates were also less than joyous during rehearsal because they were frustrated with themselves, others or with the material. Some days I would be less chipper if I was annoyed with people, but I was still able to do my job during rehearsal- make choices, take notes and know my lines. This was something I carried with myself outside of the rehearsal space that I would often discuss with one of my castmates whom I was particularly close with.

I believe that much of my frustration came about as a result of the pressure that I had placed on myself during this process. I was a senior in my last show at school, I was originating a lead role in a new play, it was my final opportunity to be nominated to compete as an Irene Ryan at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (something that many of my friends had already done), and it was going to be the basis for my senior thesis. Even if I was not aware of it at the time, I wanted *Poison of Choice* to be the height of my acting career at Salem State. I also felt that because I was so close to having a degree, my performance ought to be of a professional caliber- an expectation that was unrealistic and unnecessary. This pressure definitely contributed to my being less tolerant of others taking longer, or scenes not being as polished as I wanted them to be. Additionally, there was one cast member I had a personal dislike of. They picked

up on it even though I did not think I was being outwardly unfriendly in the rehearsal room. An ability to collaborate with others is perhaps the most important skill for a professional in the theatre world where I will one day have to work with countless people that I will not get along with personally, so it is important to me that I acknowledge that if they noticed, then I needed to be aware of moments when my attitude is anything less than positive and find a way to right my behavior in the rehearsal room.

If I am being honest, I don't think that my attitude ever reached truthful positivity. I had a hard time seeing past my own expectations for myself and the show. The fact that the night before we opened the show we had not "gotten" the show two runs in a row irritated me and I did not feel like we had captured Bill's work in a way that we should have been showing an audience. Having the benefit of hindsight now almost four months after the show closed, I now have had an experience that I can learn from. I can more easily recognize when my own attitude needs to be adjusted and I have reaffirmed the importance of positivity and trust of other people in the rehearsal room. Those lessons are incredibly valuable to me as I leave school and hope to work professionally.

I have included two journal entries from nights where I was feeling particularly frustrated with the rehearsal process. I tried to stay very positive in my journals, so it was particularly noticeable on days where I went so far as to actually express

the frustration in writing. The first entry is from October 22<sup>nd</sup> and the second is from November 2<sup>nd</sup>.

10/24

Rough. Designer run. Many people still don't know their names. Sam + Bill laid into us all. I'm trying to play good cop... The run wasn't even finished. People needed that I think though. I've done some basic research on affairs + I chatted with Bill post-run tonight. He said I'm dancing around the hurt + emotion Alan feels + I'm moving so fast that I'm not giving the words time to affect me. I shake them off too quickly + move on. Alan is sooo fed up though + in real pain especially post Unit 4. I'm going to keep that in mind.

Unit 5 went well tonight with Zoe. There were some other redeemable scenes. I'm just ready to work now + hopefully everyone else is too because it was bad tonight.

I'm worried about some of

the younger actors. I'm going to keep showing up for them & checking in. I think we all need to trust each other more. I still haven't found Alan physically. I'm hoping I'll either stumble on him in life or to get some studio time to work w/ a minor somewhere. That's my biggest thing. I need to make progress on that this week.

Friday - We picked up with 89.10  
and it clicked more with people ~~but~~

but was still slow + frustrating. The frustration I've been feeling has definitely resulted in me being a bit impatient. We moved onto B & it found the 2 different realities. We didn't take too long on it though no 14 was slow again like 8-10. I wanted to cry/scream by the end of the rehearsal because it's so frustrating being so far up in my own head and I've also been feeling like I haven't found Alan, I've been working so hard for everyone else's energy I've gone astray from who he is. I talked with ~~Alan~~ Bill after rehearsal for about 30 min (poor Karyla + Cassi waited, I am going to get them something), I took away a lot from talking to Bill. Alan is not in his muscle system. In fact I don't think he'd ever push anyone. He is a writer through & through & that's his weapons. He's only ever going to subvert people through language.

Additionally, he needs more of an arc. He ~~cannot~~ peak until he is going to shoot Mackler which means he cannot know he's going to shoot him until "true". There needs to be love in units 8-10, trying to believe in Haley not hatred for Mackler. I'm going to map out his arc w/ objectives & obstacles / triggers & leaps and find Bill to meet with him on Monday. Hopefully I can focus on myself at this point. I feel like a lot of those discoveries were actually things I've been doing before but Bill talked me into thinking I was wrong. I was doing myself a disservice by creating a character with all of the energy before - he isn't that guy. I look forward to finding who he really is next week.

In addition to the harder, full cast units, there were some units that gave me the opportunity to engage in high-level scene work. Unit five, where Alan encounters Zoe following his job interview was one such moment of the show. Margaret Sweeney, who played Zoe was a formidable scene partner and we were able to listen and respond fluidly. I felt the same about unit fifteen where I was acting against Sam Nudler playing Mackler/Eli. Those two units were some of the first that we “got” during rehearsals and yet I never felt as though they began to feel old or tired even by the afternoon that we closed the show. I was able to feel the rhythm and the pace of Bill’s writing in those units and they were the most fun I had during the show. The reason those units were so successful was in part because I never felt the need to act for them and could really relax into the character of Alan. The lines flew quickly between us because we were listening and responding *on* the lines without acting in-between them. I did not feel the need to push the subtext of the scenes because my partners on stage were smart enough to hear it and play both layers of the script at once. No other units in the show felt as human to me as five or fifteen. They had a tight container (a term that we use to refer to the blocking and how effortlessly we know the material) and yet maintained their ability to be unpredictable. I appreciated the nights that we rehearsed each of those units and looked forward to them each night we ran the show.

Other moments of the rehearsal process that were rewarding were moments where I felt that I was at my most creative or inventive. One such moment came on a night where we were rehearsing unit two where Alan meets Lauren Kingsbury trying to figure out what job he is going to be interviewed for. Alan is rolled onto the stage in a spinning office

chair and I got to have fun with it rolling it all over the stage and spinning it around. At one point I pulled out a Peppermint Patty candy that was in my pocket and ate it during the scene. That night I had a lot of fun using my imagination and making discoveries about the realm of possibilities for the character of Alan- he was funnier, more casual and less put together than I had previously thought before making those choices in rehearsal. Additionally, we had one rehearsal where we brought some of the classwork that I had been doing in my Styles II class into rehearsal. It was intensely physical and involved a lot of running, wrestling and river work. During that rehearsal we explored the depth and intensity of the emotion that runs underneath Bill's cool and calculated text. It was incredibly exciting and rewarding work that night. We never achieved the same level of intensity that we did that night during the actual shows, but as my professors told me, that would be an unreasonable expectation for a student in an undergraduate program.

I have included the journal entries from these two nights of rehearsal. Reading them again it reminds me of the joy and excitement I had throughout this process even though I can tend to overshadow things with what did not go as well as I would have liked.

~~also~~ Tonight was fun! Designer presentations first. We are in a world of Color and lots of it. Jerry's design surprised me the most I think because it was very extra and colorful and almost futuristic in a Hunger Games or High Fashion sense. We also got rehearsal props tonight so we played a lot. I didn't get any notes about making it a comedy! That was because I think we were all really listening + connecting. The spiny chair was a great toy. It grounded me and let me play (I always have a hard time when there's nothing to play with or to lean on/relate to ~~with~~ even in real life). One moment I found particularly telling was the line "I suppose I should mention that I slept through the last 2 election cycles too!" I'd been having trouble with the line. Tonight I let myself breathe before it. I gave it air and space until it was motivated. The first time I whistled the national anthem & the second time I ate a peppermint patty. It not only ended up being kept (the eating that is)

But it also was super telling about my character. He is unaware of class & class war. ~~He~~ Bill said he was "cocky" but I found him to be more nervous and impulsive more than cocky, that's just how he comes off. More to follow. ☹

I was more in my body tonight but it was my body. I've been watching people to try to find physicalities I can use. I think I'm going to start extreme & perform reality like I did with Johnny Pat last year. Then I'll dial it back. I'm thinking specifically of the guy at Atlantis in the elevator. I'll try it tomorrow.

11/3 I've been busy & slipped a little bit. I'll try to recap rehearsals since last Friday.

Friday we lost a couple of people due to illness or family matters so it was just me, Asher, Shanaya & Sam. We started with me and Asher in Unit 7, (after the Haley Alan scene). I asked Bill if we could do the exercise we have been doing in Celen's class - sweating & engaging physically. We ended up finding a friendship between the characters - they have lived side by side within his head for so long & it changed the whole scene. Caleb isn't just this god-like powerful being, he is more subtly egging Alan on. I found a shove, that easy offend like demeanor was more appropriate. Then we worked Shanaya & J's scene. It was good, Shanaya started off in the room being very angry, but the physical release of the exercise

helped her channel her energy. I was trying to do a lot of work to help her, egging her on & really being a strong presence she had no response to. She had a great explosion & it was alive and living and real. Bill said he cared about their relationship after that.

Then we moved on to the end with ~~some~~ all of us. We did several explosions. After the first few I wasn't feeling it still so we started just by moving and getting active. I ran out of the PCR, down Lafayette and in the Soplex. It was enough to really get my blood pumping. I started the second ~~one~~ I got back in & my singular purpose was to get Sam. I went after him physically, we wrestled, I begged him I felt insane. I had some new choices - At one point I ~~felt~~ felt like an out of control child and it was

quite terrifying to Sam & Shanya.  
The death of Alan at the end was  
for earned and felt good.

## **Performances**

At Salem State we do eight public performances of each show over two weekends (Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday). Our performance dates were November 29, 30, December 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9 of 2018.

I was dedicated to staying very focused before every run because the show took so much concentration. About thirty minutes before I had to be backstage to start the show, I would go upstairs and run laps around the theatre, breathe the space, stretch and sometimes toss a tennis ball or a ball made of painter's tape with Sam which is something that we like to do in rehearsals or to warm up. I'm not sure yet if I was taking myself way too seriously or not. It was by far the longest that I have taken before any show I have ever done. It is also the most disciplined about it that I had ever been in that I have never carried any sort of preshow routine throughout the entire run. The fact that I did this time was something that I was proud of. I am learning to be more disciplined. A lot of the reason that I was able to do it was because the previous summer I worked at a summer stock theatre and was constantly surrounded by professional actors. The ones that I most looked up to or admired also happened to be the ones that would spend time on stage or in the theatre before each show warming themselves up.

Throughout the first weekend of shows we were still settling into the container and the shows were very much hit-or-miss. I remember that the humor took me by surprise. I knew from rehearsals that there were funny moments-especially within the first four

units, but not having an audience in the room to respond to the script I forgot that I would need to adjust and allow for laughter. A good way of gauging whether the cast was “on” each show was by gauging how the audience was responding. If they were laughing it usually meant that we were listening to each other and were not being weighed down by the style. It was difficult to judge strictly by laughter though because Bill wrote with such a specific sense of humor that not all audiences shared. If that was the case, the laughter during the show was often replaced by a nervous chuckle or by a tense silence. It varied from night to night, but we could always tell by how palpable the energy was in the theatre each night.

On the nights where I knew that I or the cast as a whole were not performing at our best during act one, I would often feel myself falling into my own trap where I grow more and more negative backstage at intermission and psych myself up before I go on stage for act two. This was something that I fought against very hard. Another one of my professors- Professor April, who was the one behind my crusade to “stop acting for other people” sat me down before we opened the show and said that if other people around me were not doing enough then I needed to “let them fail” because I could not save them. If I tried to act for everyone, all that it would do was make me look foolish and prevent me from giving *my* best performance. Though it seemed like an awful thing for her to say at the time, I knew that she was saying it for my own benefit. Throughout the run I caught myself on several occasions before act two began and got my head back in a place where I was committed to only doing what I could for myself.

During the second weekend we had become much more comfortable with the show and the audience, but there were two nights in particular where I had to fight the urge to act for others. The second Friday and Saturday, Asher Harris, the actor playing Caleb Lange was ill and could not go on to perform the show. The first night he was replaced by Bill himself (a historic moment) and on the second night by Corey Roberts, a student on the crew. Each of them took the stage wearing Asher's large black cloak which was his central costume piece and held the script so that they could read the lines. The stage manager, cast and crew handled it like pros, but those two shows were the largest test for all of us on stage. The relationship between Caleb and Alan was one of the most important relationships for me. Caleb's energy was vitally important- it fed into Alan's mind and helped to push me to the heightened state of emotion that he is in for the climactic scene in the gun range. Bill and Corey did an amazing job following the blocking, but there are obvious differences between someone who has rehearsed the role for months and someone who is performing the role for the first time. They were focused on the script and being in the right place at the right time. Because of those limitations, things were slower, lines did not come as fast and the energy was down. Those performances were the largest challenge of all for me to not go into overdrive to help give them energy by speaking faster or increasing my own heartrate so that they would hopefully notice and match mine. I had to respond honestly to what they were able to put on stage.

The final performance we got Asher back and it was our best show by far. The script was singing with the music that Bill wrote into which meant people were listening and

responding with ease. I know that I have not mastered acting or even solved that problem for myself in the future, but I do know that this show challenged me in all of the right ways given where I am in my acting career. I took a step in the right direction and can use this experience to continue to grow.

As a theatre maker and a student, I rarely give myself the time to stop and reflect on a creative process. I am always focused on what is next- the next assignment, the next show, the next job, the next project. When we closed, I did not feel like I had accomplished anything special. The audiences had very mixed reactions, I did not feel like I had gone as deep into my character as I had wanted to, I had struggled to maintain a positive attitude and I knew that it was not the best work that I had done at Salem State. If I had not taken this time to reflect thoughtfully on the process, I think it would have remained a disappointment in my mind and been filed away as a negative experience. It has been far more beneficial and rewarding for me to identify the areas where I was unhappy so I could then understand what I learned from it. It also has done me good to look back on the process to remember the majority of the nights during rehearsals where I was genuinely loving what I was doing.

Looking back now, I recognize that it was a privilege just to have an opportunity to collaborate with Bill and my peers on an ambitious, cool new piece of theatre. This play is only in the very beginning of its development in the same way that I am in the beginning of my development as an actor and a person. If I wasn't able to turn my attitude around during the process, I certainly have now, and the next time I encounter a

process that is not bringing out my best, I will have something to look back on to remind me why the battle is worth fighting and of the importance of coming out strong.

# Moving Forward

## **What's Next for Poison of Choice?**

Before I began the reflection portion of this project I went out to dinner with Bill and we spent almost four hours talking about his life, his play, our experiences during the process and the importance of theatre in the world today. Those four hours were vitally important because they were a beginning. It was the first step that I took towards trying to unpack all of the thoughts and feelings and experiences from the fall semester. I have already shared most of what we discussed except for the ending bit: the importance of theatre in the world today.

Our conversation led us to talk about the script and how it would be different if he were to do rewrites having now seen it in action in front of an audience. There were some little plot details such as showing more of the relationship between Haley and Alan and dialing the puzzle dialogue down, particularly at the end of act two so that it was less confusing for the audience. He even had entertained the thought of making Kathryn Kingsbury guilty of killing her husband. Those details aside, I pushed forward on a question that I had asked the day of the first read through of the staged-reading process: If he was writing the play as a response to the darkness in the world, why did Bill think an audience needed to see more darkness on stage?

The answer that I received was that Bill wanted to show the audience what would happen if we continue down this path of mistrust and lost faith. He wanted the message of the

play to be a warning. His answer never quite sat right with me, so I asked again when we were out. At first, I got the same answer as before and I didn't press further. Then the conversation somehow turned towards the need for theatre to be for others- something that we both very much agreed on. The need to make theatre should not come from a place of selfish desire to bring your ideas to life. If a piece of theatre is not going to impact your audience in a way that will allow them to reflect on themselves or something about the world that they live in then it is not worth creating. I have been raised Catholic and I went to a sleepaway retreat for a week in eight grade. During the retreat they introduced us to the concept of a J.O.Y. triangle, the point of which was to show that our priorities needed to place Jesus and Others above Yourself. I don't know where I stand on religion, but I do believe that this concept of others coming before yourself is important and should always be applied when creating theatre.

And then, all of a sudden, we were discussing *Poison of Choice* again. I am not sure what made Bill say it, but he suddenly had the thought that maybe he had written the play backwards- instead of Alan fighting a losing battle in which everything he loves is taken away from him, maybe the play needs to be about Alan fighting against the corruption of the people and systems around him until he got back what he loved.

I personally think that it would be worth trying this out. I think that Bill was right about the world being a dark and faithless world today, but I think that is why we need to be telling stories about coming out of the darkness. I think that in a time of darkness, it is

possible to reflect the desperate despondence of it all and, through the action of the play, leave the audience with a gift of *hope*.

Film Noir portrayed a hopeless world that during a period that followed vibrant propaganda during the war giving people a feeling of purpose. In some ways, film noir was a hearty dose of reality. The difference between *Poison of Choice* and the original film noir movies is that they did not create a tone or a mood consciously- it was a way of processing the post-war disillusionment. By meaningfully portraying today's world as hopeless, Bill pushed an image that the audience is already trying to fight- they are not processing, they already recognize it.

The way that the play ends now, Alan never loses hope and is made out to be a fool for ever even hoping. Alan never actually stops loving Haley and never stopped trying to be a good man. At the end of the play he turns his gun on Caleb not Mackler/Eli. When Haley shoots Alan she kills the only person left in the play that has any hope of love left within them. This message on reaffirms the audience's fears about the world around them. Do they really need a warning right now to tell them that if things keep going the way that they are then we are going to be in trouble? Personally, I think that it is warning the audience about something that they need only to listen to the news to learn.

If Alan was able to win back Haley and his passion for poetry and theatre and ideals again then maybe it will remind the audience that it is indeed possible to trust, that there is good in the world, and maybe it is not naive to go through life idealistically. I do not

know if Bill will decide to take that path or if that thought was only a fleeting idea that he broached one time over a meal in a bar but ultimately decided against. This is my opinion reflecting my values and outlooks and the kind of theatre that I make. Regardless, moving forward, the process for a play being produced professionally is long. The concept of *Poison of Choice* is perfect for the popular culture of 2019 and should Bill choose to continue to develop the script I think that it could be something that would interest audiences and have something important to say.

### **What's Next for Me?**

I am looking forward to leaving school with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Theatre with a concentration in performance. I am about to step out of the safety and security of a college lifestyle and into the “real world.”

I think of my life up until this point as having been a series of prepackaged bubbles. First there was the bubble I lived in before I attended school where my parents took care of me at home. When I grew too large for that bubble it popped, and I was placed in the bubble of the Marsh Grammar School where I was told what to do by my teachers and parents. Eventually that bubble popped too, but I simply found myself inside another prepackaged bubble- high school. Even when I turned eighteen and graduated from Lowell Catholic, I felt secure in knowing that I would just be placed inside of a new bubble at Salem State with enough people and resources that would provide me with food, shelter and give my life structure.

All of these bubbles came with sets of authority figures, a wide pool of peers to make friends from, financial stability and structure that I could identify and follow through to the finish line. Now, I am two months away from my last pre-packaged bubble popping and being thrown into having to create my own. I have to choose what people and experiences are going to be a part of my life. The problem is that I have never made my own bubble before and it an overwhelming, daunting task. I'm wondering if I made the right choice in getting a theatre degree and asking myself how my degree has prepared me for life on my own. Even as I write this, I hear myself saying that all of this reflection is not useful for getting a "real job" and making money and building a bubble, but I know that I have spent the last four years working incredibly hard and I have learned a lot in my educational career. I need to remind myself of what the time I have dedicated to getting this degree has left me with.

**What types of skills has my theatre degree left me with that are transferable to other fields?**

Reflecting on the classes that I have taken and my experiences on productions, I have identified skills that my past four years of education have left me with. Many of them are implied and need no explanation. For the skills where it is not immediately apparent as to how they were acquired I have offered a brief explanation of where they appeared in my education.

- **Acting**
- **Basic understanding of the fundamentals of carpenter and electrician work**

- **Basic understanding costume, scenic, lighting and sound design processes**
- **Oral communications**
- **Memorization skills**
- **Creative problem-solving**
- **Interpersonal communication skills**
- **Ability to collaborate with others**
- **Dedication and commitment**
- **Emotional intelligence**
- **Ability to analyze dramatic texts for character**
- **Ability to give feedback**

In performance classes I was quite often asked to watch and respond to my peers' work. This allowed me to practice giving thoughtful, constructive feedback.

- **Resilience**

There is a lot of rejection in the theatre industry. I have learned how to accept rejection and move on instead of wallowing in it. It allows me to bounce back much faster when I encounter a road block.

- **Ability to listen and adapt**

When a director gives a note, it is expected that I make an adjustment in my performance so that they do not have to repeat the note. This makes me great at taking instructions and making adjustments immediately, asking for clarification if needed.

- **Self-awareness and self-regulation**

Much of the training in my acting classes was focused on making me aware of my own physical habits and tendencies. There is a lot of time to given to understanding what methods or pedagogies resonate best with me which also taught me about how I process information. Additionally, I was taught to understand how my actions are perceived by others. This was all aimed at my being able to adjust my behavior accordingly so that I can control how I am perceived or how to best behave when working with different people.

- **Written Communication Skills**

In addition to physical and vocal interactive work, most of my performance classes also carried a written component to them. There were also many required classes for my degree that were in the English department. This coursework honed my ability to write articulately with clear structure and argument.

- **Self-motivation and discipline**

Working as an actor I have no boss and am essentially running a personal business. I have to take the initiative to market myself, seek out material, audition opportunities and training opportunities in order to be successful. Not only do I have to be my own driving force, but I also have learned that I need stamina and to not allow myself to slack off if I want to be successful.

Now that I am looking at the types of skills I am left with, I am noticing that they are not field specific, these are life skills- qualities that make for an effective human being. The field specific skillsets that I have acquired have come from the time that I have spent outside of the classroom strengthening my resume with work as an educator, a house manager, a box office associate, an administrative assistant, a carpenter/electrician, an assistant director and a management and development intern. I also added business administration and dramatic literature minors to my degree. While the minors did not require me to take many courses that were beyond the 101 level in business, having the formal piece of paper will hopefully help me to at least get an interview.

Something that has been contributing to my fear of the future has been the fact that I don't know exactly what I want to do when I graduate. Even though I will have a degree that implies a career as an actor, I also have vested interests in producing, directing and arts administration as well. I have been paralyzed by my own indecisiveness regarding which of these interests I would most like to pursue and it has inhibited me from making any sort of plan to create a new bubble for myself. Whenever I have discussed it with Bill he has simply said "you just have to make a choice" but I continued to avoid making it because I was afraid of making the wrong one.

During one of our most recent conversations I was discussing with Bill how my job searching has been focused on finding myself a full-time salaried position so that I can save money upon graduating, pay off my student loans and then get back into theatre

once I have given myself enough of a financial cushion. Bill helped me to realize that my expectations of the amount of money and the types of jobs that I will be working immediately after college were not realistic if I also wanted to give any type of career in theatre a shot. He said that my situation and the conversations that we were having reminded him of another student who graduated two years before me named Krystal Hernandez. He recommended having a conversation with her because she also had a similar plan before talking to Bill.

Krystal was kind enough to have a conversation with me the following week. I got the chance to ask her about how she felt when she was a month away from graduation like I am now, and what her life has been like since graduating. She has slowly but surely been building her career as an actress getting consistent work in the Boston and New England area. Much of what she told me was very similar to what Bill has been trying to tell me for the past number of months. It was good that I heard it from the perspective of someone who went through my current experience recently and is still figuring out how to navigate a life in theatre. Not only did it resonate more strongly, it also showed me that it is possible to be happy doing the things that I want to do and not be destitute. I came away with four main conclusions about what I need to do and what a life in theatre looks like:

**A flexible job (preferably in or around theatre) is crucial.**

Krystal shared with me what some of her jobs have been since graduation- in addition to nannying, she currently sells wedding dresses part time and make

commission on top of hourly pay. The job is one where she can work as much or as little as she wants so that she can have enough open time to go out for auditions or rehearsals if she is cast. Other good types of jobs are through restaurants (if they are flexible enough), ticketing services such as Arts Boston, house staff positions or administrative positions. You can get creative with the types of jobs that you look for and it doesn't have to be waiting tables, but having one that supports you while trying to pursue theatre is imperative.

**It is going to be slow, keep pushing.**

This is something that I have always known to be true. Life as an artist is often a grind. Especially after school when you enter the world and do not have many connections yet, it takes time for anyone to be cast and for them to begin to work consistently. There will be a lot of time in between gigs. Krystal emphasized the importance of actively auditioning and networking during those stretches, sending letters and emails, video submissions etc. The more that you put yourself out there the more work you will find. The blank spaces that actors have in between acting gigs has always been a deterrent for me that made the life seem impossible. After talking to Krystal, I saw it in a different light: even if it was slow and all seems like a shot in the dark, it is still *possible*.

**It is a big scary leap to take, but you have to make a choice.**

Krystal was also paralyzed by the fear of what might happen if she followed a career path in theatre. She shared with me that Bill told her if she did not go

straight into theatre and tried to get *back* into it after working a “real job” that all of her momentum would be killed. She would fall in love with the money and it would prove to be much harder than she anticipated to give it up. She had to believe in herself and that she would figure it out if she committed to her passion. It was scary leaving school without a full-time job and a salary to rely on, but she knew that unless she made a choice and committed to something that she would be stuck in a place of limbo forever and continue to be stressed without accomplishing anything.

#### **Plans change and that’s ok.**

Krystal had to make a five-year plan before leaving school in which she had to map out her life and her goals on professional, personal and financial levels. I asked her how her life two years in was lining up with the plan that she had made before graduating. She laughed and told me that she had plans to go to beauty school or to get a job in a bank, neither of which have happened. Things have not necessarily gone the way that she wrote they would. I am someone who does not like to write things down because it makes me feel like it is set in stone and permanent. I have a hard time flexing once I make a plan to commit to anything because I am dedicated to delivering on my word. The way Krystal talked about her five-year plan made me think of it as a series of arrows. They point you in a general direction and by following them you will get to where you are going, but they are not the only way to go.

Talking to Krystal did not change anything. It did not tell me anything new, but it gave me new perspective and reinforced certain ideas that I was already aware of. When I first began writing this paper, I was not sure what I was writing towards, in fact, I was scared of the prospect of writing a senior thesis period. It took a lot of time and talking to Bill to figure out what my objective was and even after I realized that I wanted to write something to help me sort through my fear of what comes next, I did not know how I would accomplish it. It took taking action for me to begin to see a shape. I didn't know what I was doing, but I was doing *something*. I was *doing* something, and page by page I began to find direction until I had a clear goal and a realistic path to achieve it. This whole damn paper has been a metaphor for where I am in my life right now.

So, I'm making a choice. I am going to pursue acting. It is what I have the most experience with right now and it is a clearer way forward than any of the other paths I want to pursue. I know that just because I am making this choice that I can always change my mind. I am twenty-two and have a long time to build my bubble. I still do not know exactly how things will play out, but I am not as worried as I was before. I'm going to be ok. I hope that if you are reading this and you were terrified when you started too, that you aren't anymore. If you still are, get my contact information from the alumni office and call me or send me an email. I'll let you know how it went.

## Bibliography

Ball, Peter. *Backwards and Forwards: a Technical Manual for Reading Plays*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983.

Cunningham, William, 2018. "Poison of Choice"

De Cordova, Richard, "Genre and Performance: An Overview." In Barry Keith Grant, 129-139. Ed., *Film Genre Reader*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986.

Hirsch, Foster, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. *The Dark Side of the Screen*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1981.

Schrader, Paul, "Notes on film noir". *Film Comment*, 1972.

"Staged Reading Code," Actor's Equity Association, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.actorsequity.org/resources/contracts/Staged-Reading/>

# Photos and more

## The Script

I have put a hard copy of the *Poison of Choice* script on file in the Salem State University library archives. You cannot take it outside of the library, but if you are interested in reading it you are welcome to go to the archives and have a look. I hope that reading this paper has piqued your interest in reading the play.

## *Poison of Chocie* Cast and Creative Team

<i>Director/Playwright</i>	Bill Cunningham*
<i>Assistant Director</i>	Maddie Roth
<i>Stage Manager</i>	Kayla Norton
<i>Sound Designer</i>	Devin McGovern
<i>Lighting Designer</i>	Kevin Dunn
<i>Costume Designer</i>	Jerry Johnson*
<i>Set Designer</i>	Christopher Morris*
<i>Props Master</i>	Caitlyn Buja
<i>Alan Lubeck</i>	Stephen Zubricki IV
<i>Haley/Chavez</i>	Schanaya Barrows
<i>Eli/Mackler</i>	Sam Nudler
<i>Kathryn Kingsbury</i>	Ilisa Flum
<i>Caleb Lange</i>	Asher Greenwood Harris
<i>Zoe Kingsbury</i>	Margaret Sweeney
<i>Peter Larkin</i>	Seth Olsen
<i>Lauren Kingsbury</i>	Grace Graham

\*indicates Salem State faculty member

**Production Photos**

All production photos were taken by Benjamin Rose Photography. Ben is a classmate of mine who takes great production shots for theatre department shows. He has graciously allowed me to include his work here for you to see what the show looked like. I hope you will take a look at his other work: <https://www.facebook.com/benjaminrosephotography/>

(I am the fellow with the beard in case you are wondering)

Enjoy!

















































































