

Carolina Actors Studio Theatre and the Experiential Approach to Production

by

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Acknowledgments

They appear at the beginning of the dissertation, they are the last bit of writing to be included, and they prove to be the most difficult to write: the acknowledgements. How do I properly acknowledge and adequately thank all the people who have supported me through this process and made this dissertation possible? Such a proposition is almost certain to fail, but I will give it my most valiant effort.

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How CAST has inspired me.

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Abstract

The North Carolina-based Carolina Actors Studio Theatre (CAST) is an innovative theatre whose productions subvert traditional notions of the audience-performance relationship through their unique methodology of experiential theatre. Both CAST and the theatre's co-founder, Michael Simmons, have established a reputation for creating daring, innovative productions. While some of CAST's practices echo the experiments of theorists of the 60s and 70s, its approach to production is distinct, creating for the audience a unique experience with each production. Currently there exist no principles which fully define CAST's version of experiential theatre. With no guidelines to which all artists adhere, and without a firm foundation of similar theories developed in the 60s, the theatre struggles to create cohesive productions and maintain consistency, and cannot sufficiently evolve in their methodology.

This study concludes with a proposed set of axioms for experiential theatre, as well as a working definition to start a greater discussion of the topic. CAST and experiential theatre are valid topics worthy of greater exploration, both in theory and in practice. This study and its results are meant to be a starting point for further study of experiential theatre and CAST: a vibrant, innovative theatre worthy of emulation.

Chapter One Introduction to CAST

In 1998, Carolina Actors Studio Theatre (CAST) and a small film production company, Victory Pictures, combined resources to produce John DiFusco's Viet Nam-era play *Tracers*. The small, guerilla-style production team begged, borrowed, and procured from the community to entirely transform the small Neighborhood Theatre. After dressing the inside of the theatre with accoutrements like sandbags at the entryway and the box office, a .50-caliber machine gun and members of the North Carolina National Guard to greet the patrons, the production team took pause, collaborated, and decided that, if they could transform the interior of a theatre, why not the exterior as well? So they procured two regulation army trucks and placed them in the parking lot along with a 1968 Volkswagen van, camouflaged the exterior of the building, hired protestors to picket the theatre, and placed "snipers" on the rooftop. The interior of the theatre included video projections of a variety of events from 1968—some of Richard Nixon's speeches, helicopters flying overhead, and the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy—which ran concurrently with the performance, undoubtedly giving the small theatre a dizzying simultaneity of action. This collaboration between CAST and Victory Pictures was the genesis of a long-standing investigation and exploration of what they refer to as "experiential theatre."

CAST is a vibrant and artistically thriving independent theatre operating in Charlotte, North Carolina. In their roughly decade-long existence, they have experimented with productions that challenge the traditional theatre's audience/performance relationship. As the above example illustrates, their

theatrical presentations focus not only on the script they are staging, but also on the various ways they can incorporate the audience into the environment of the play. Their philosophy, in brief, is that if they can immerse the spectator in the world and themes of the play from the earliest moments of their arrival, spectators are more apt to make connections to their own lives and to make a difference in the world at large. This is certainly a lofty goal, but as this study will explore, an immensely worthwhile one.

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the work of CAST, which presents what they refer to as an “experiential” theatre practice. Is CAST’s approach to production worthwhile and potentially influential, or a difficult form of theatre to produce, and thereby problematic? Is CAST’s work a continuation of previous forms concentrating on the audience/performer relationship? I believe that, though Michael Simmons, Managing Artistic Director of CAST, comes from a tradition of experimenters, and the brand of theatre that CAST produces is worthwhile and rewarding, CAST’s story is a cautionary tale about the difficulties and disadvantages of trying to produce theatre experientially.

Productions at CAST contain echoes of the theories of The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, and other experimental theatres of the 60s and 70s (as discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this study). Many of the principles CAST’s co-founder and Managing Artistic Director, Michael Simmons, explores are predicated on the idea that the relationship between the spectator and performance is at the heart of theatre. The examination of these links to the past and how CAST incorporates some of these established principles, as well as creating several of their

own is important in this study of the viability of experiential theatre. One of the primary goals of this study is to provide documentation of CAST's principles and an analysis of their strategies in order to accurately gauge the effectiveness of experiential theatre. Furthermore, this study of CAST will allow other theaters to better understand these concepts of experiential theater and determine if CAST serves as a viable model for production.

In assessing CAST and experiential theatre, this study is broken down into seven chapters. The remaining portions of Chapter 1 give a detailed analysis of CAST's Mission Statement and attempt to define some of the terms guiding the theatre, like "Thinking Outside the Blackbox," "Experiential Theatre," and "Total Immersion." Chapter 2 then provides a context for CAST's experimentation by presenting a general history of the many developments in the exploration of the spectator/performance relationship in Western theatre. This chapter also focuses on some of the precursors to experiential theatre and early theorists who explored the audience/performer relationship, most notably, Richard Schechner and his environmental theatre. Chapter 2 will also explore in detail Schechner's "Six Axioms to Environmental Theatre" as a means of establishing a framework from which many of CAST's ideas stem. In Chapter 3, I will then position CAST in relation to Schechner's Six Axioms, exploring how CAST both echoes and diverges from Schechner's principles. Next, in Chapter 4, I will provide an extensive history of CAST and the various spaces the theatre company has occupied, as well as the evolution of the practical elements of the theatre's experiential approach to production. Chapter 5 will explore, in depth, a single season of CAST productions,

focusing primarily on the theatre's approach to presenting theatre experientially, from concept to implementation. In the penultimate chapter, Chapter 6, I will discuss CAST as it is positioned in Charlotte's cultural and economic landscape, as well as the reputation the theatre has fostered over the years. Finally, Chapter 7 will evaluate the viability of some of CAST's principles, and offer conclusions and recommendations regarding the future development of CAST's presentation of experiential theatre. To begin exploring CAST and their experiential theatre and to begin to understand the style of theatre they present, it is necessary to examine their Mission Statement and then unpack the various terms and phrases they use.

Since moving to Charlotte, NC in 2005, I have appeared as an actor in several shows produced by CAST and have assisted in areas of production and set building for many others. Since beginning this study in 2007, I have largely refrained from active involvement with CAST in order to maintain a level of objectivity, but have always been welcomed as a passive observer. During the time of my study of CAST, I visited the theatre several times to observe rehearsals and the various artists as they prepared for a production, I attended CAST productions as a spectator, and I was invited to observe strategy sessions between Simmons and other artists. Furthermore, I sat in on a meeting in 2007 between the Board of Directors at CAST and Terry Milner, consultant for the Arts and Science Council, as they explored how CAST could evolve administratively in the future. In addition, I was granted access to several other primary sources, including scrapbooks containing reviews of some of the initial CAST productions, copies of email correspondences, photographs, and other production materials saved from CAST's early years. I was also granted access

to several ledgers and other bookkeeping and managerial data collections from the early days of CAST.

A primary source of information gathering for this study, however, was through a series of interviews conducted with Michael Simmons. After suggesting to him that I might have an opportunity to study CAST, Simmons, and experiential theatre, he responded with great support and welcomed me to any information and help he was capable of providing. Over the course of three years I conducted a total of five audio-taped interviews with Simmons and shared numerous email and phone conversations. Simply put, those interviews were scheduled according to our mutual availability and were all conducted at CAST. (The transcripts of those interviews are provided in the appendices to this study.) Those interviews have proven invaluable for this study about Simmons, CAST, and a methodology of producing theatre that had yet to have any serious academic discussion.

At the heart of CAST's experiential theatre is the desire to explore ways of subverting the traditional theatre's concepts of the audience/performance relationship. The purpose of the first chapter is to investigate carefully the CAST Mission Statement and identify the terms Simmons and the other artists use to challenge that relationship. This chapter will break down the CAST Mission Statement into its six essential parts, and will provide brief examples from past productions in order to help illustrate their meaning. I will also examine how CAST explains two terms that guide their vision, including "think outside the blackbox," and "total immersion." Investigating the Mission Statement and defining these terms, according to CAST, will provide a foundation for understanding CAST's vision.

MISSION STATEMENT

Michael Simmons, Managing Artistic Director and Co-Founder of CAST, helped draft the theatre's mission statement in 1996, which was revised in 2007.

The CAST mission statement now reads:

To "think outside the black-box" and produce culturally diverse EXPERIENTIAL theatre incorporating multi-media and other performing art forms, which involves and ultimately moves the audience to make a difference in their family, community, and in the world at large (CAST Homepage).

In order to understand the CAST approach to productions, it is essential to further break down the company's mission statement into its six core components, as well as define certain terms and how their meaning relates to the CAST aesthetic.

1. "To think outside the blackbox"

The notion of a black box theater developed in America in the 1960s as a tool to accommodate the large influx of experimental theatre of the time, although its roots can be traced back to the staging techniques of Adolphe Appia in the early 1900s. Named for its entirely black walls and box-like shape, the "black box" is typically a small, bare space with flexible seating to accommodate any number of production requirements. Simmons wanted to explore the black box theatre's limitations and potential. Around 2001, Simmons adopted the idea of "thinking outside the black box" as a motto for his production team. His approach was to explore how to stage a production in a typical black box theater, and then push those possibilities to their extreme. The space of the theater, the relationships created by using various seating

formations, and the ability to combine the production in the black box with the entire theatre building all became acceptable variables to exploit. Simmons states:

I'm proud that we coined that phrase. It's a nice reminder to say "don't get caught in your paradigm." Rather than getting caught in your paradigm and trying to find ways to get out of it, don't get in it in the first place. It's a reminder on [sic] how to execute. Just because it's a black box doesn't mean it has to be a box. (Simmons Interview 4)

2. "Culturally diverse"

The demographics of Charlotte, North Carolina, are shifting in a fashion similar to other moderately populated cities in the south. There has been a large influx of minorities finding work and homes in and around the Charlotte metropolitan area. CAST and Simmons recognize this trend and, perhaps for marketing and fiscal reasons, embrace (and sometimes challenge) the growing cultural diversity in Charlotte. Casting is open to the public regardless of cultural background. Simmons brings his own history to his practices: "I think it is important that we don't limit ourselves to what might be considered mainstream talent. I was raised as one of four white kids in my entire school. I think it is important, having been a minority, to always make that circle bigger" (Simmons Interview 4).

Along with their policies on casting, CAST also rigorously chooses a season that includes works by members of various cultures and backgrounds. In recent years they have produced plays like *Limbo* (an original work about the devastating effects of immigration on Costa Rican Marie Gonzalez) by resident playwright Glenn Hutchinson, as well as Suzanne Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog*, and the collaboration *Neon Mirage*. One of the most daring play selections for CAST has been their production of David Mamet's *Edmund*, a dark commentary about the seediness of

the inner-city and one man's fall into sex, gambling, and racism. Simmons states, "I got a lot of heat for the following statement, and I don't know that it was taken in the right light, but when we did *Edmund*, I said *that* was my anti-Black History Month play." He goes on to defend his choices, "So much of the commercial theatrical service was all about going out and finding that 'black play'—the one time out of the whole year where blacks come to their theatre. And all they're doing is targeting that market to make money. They have nothing to do with serving that particular community. But by doing *Edmond*, where we have a multicultural cast, and having David Mamet's commentary on racism and suppressed anger, I thought it was a brilliant choice for Black History Month" (Simmons Interview 4). To Simmons, "Every month at CAST can be black history month. And every month is Asian month. There can always be some kind of cultural mixture going on." As a result, CAST feels it is fulfilling its obligation as a theatrical voice for the people of the community.

3. "Experiential theatre"

Perhaps the most difficult phrase in the mission statement to unpack is CAST's elusive term "experiential theatre." Experientiality, what it looks like and why CAST chooses to produce plays with this approach, will be discussed in greater depth in subsequent chapters of this study. While they have no concrete definition of experiential, they would consider the basic working definition for CAST to be: a methodology of producing theatre whereby the entire audience is immersed in an experience. Patrons don't merely come to see a play. Rather, audiences experience

the play, surrounded by the play's themes, motifs, and symbols during their entire visit to the theatrical event.

The genesis of the term 'experiential' is not very romantic—Simmons merely appropriated it. As a response to the allegations that what he was doing was "experimental theatre" Simmons wanted to characterize the type of theatre his company did in a new and unique way. He explains, "I want people to come in and be enveloped in an experience. It's not just 'experimental,' it's 'experience-tial.' And Rob and I went back one day and explored what that would look like. So I did some research and found the Latin word 'experientia,' but audiences wouldn't know what that is. So I said it's experiential" (Simmons Interview 2). While the term itself is essentially borrowed, much of what CAST does is not. Productions at CAST contain echoes of the theories of The Living Theatre, The Performance Group, and other experimental theatres of the 60s and 70s (as discussed in Chapter 2 of this study). Some of the production elements even seem to be direct incarnations of what Schechner espoused in his experiments with audience interaction, but CAST offers a unique variation of these forbearers through its experiential vision and its attempt at creating a "total immersion experience."

4. "Multi-media and other art"

CAST employs a variety of media in their shows, depending on the needs of each individual production. Sometimes these examples are incorporated into the lobby. For the production of *Metamorphoses*, they used a giant piece of muslin (approximately 12 X 12 feet) as a screen on the far wall of the lobby and projected video of various seascapes, ancient sea ships, and various reenactments of Greek sea

battles. They have also used live musicians to fill the lobby with Bluegrass music (for the production of *Foxfire*) and hired a graffiti artist to “tag” the inside and outside of the building (for the production of *Savage in Limbo*). They incorporate these and other forms of media into their lobby displays as a means of providing the audience with a bridge of sorts between the outside world and the world of the play and to encompass the spectator within the tone and expectations of the production.

CAST also incorporates various media into the production onstage. These have included live music onstage (*Foxfire*, *Metamorphosis*), film as part of the actual production (*Autobahn*), and the re-creation of a computer interface (*Dark Play*), to name merely a few examples. CAST incorporates various media to tell each play in a unique and innovative way, and to provide the audience with a greater theatrical experience. Simmons also sees a practical reason for using various media: to provide an innovative alternative to television and other theatrical events. Simmons explains: “People expect this HBO-level quality performance. But by adding the multimedia, you are also meeting some of their expectations from outside the theatre. I think that makes us ingratiate ourselves” (Simmons Interview 4). At the risk of stating the obvious, theatre is battling to get audience members off their couches and into their theaters more than ever before. Americans are bombarded with images at a frenetic pace. Simmons believes the company’s methodology provides a viable alternative to ordinary television entertainment, largely through their use of media that people seem to desire so greatly.

5. Involves audience

Audience involvement is not to be confused with audience participation. CAST productions do, on occasion, ask the audience to participate in the show via verbal responses or getting up on stage (as in the finale of their production of *Pavilion*), but that is not the type of involvement referred to in its mission statement. What CAST attempts to do is involve each audience member in the play through a unique, shared experience. Simmons explains that when seeing a television show or a movie, the viewer puts distance between the experience and one's own life, a gap they are attempting to eliminate (Simmons Interview 4). There is a certain responsibility placed upon the audience when they arrive at CAST. Generally speaking, the safety of traditional theatre on the dark side of the fourth wall is erased. From the parking lot, to the box office, to the lobby, to the restrooms, to the performance space itself, events, images, and presentation could be happening all around the audience, depending on the methodologies employed for that particular production. Simmons explains, "If I can involve you from the moment you walk in the door until the moment you leave, we've had a shared experience. You are going to go home and something, hopefully, is going to transpire within you" (Simmons Interview 4). Granted, this involvement may prove uncomfortable to some people. (This will be discussed in greater detail later in this study.) What CAST is attempting to do is prevent complacency, forcing the spectator to engage with the production, on some level, and thereby be transformed.

6. "Moves them to make a difference"

Creating a social experience, as mentioned above, is not enough to bring an audience to a CAST performance. Rather, the aim is to create a change within each patron.

Like many theatres around the country the goal is to affect the audience member in such a way that they take their experience with them and out into their community. Experiential theatre, according to CAST, provides the best chance for that goal to be achieved. Simmons explains:

I love Neil Simon plays and we've actually done one. But in general we try to find plays that have that potential for making a change. Everything we do—when you put all the elements together—that is what experiential theatre is all about: to do it in such a way that we can effectively have an impact on just one audience member. That's why we fight the fight every day. That's why we do theatre even when the roof leaks and the actors don't get here on time. (Simmons Interview 4)

While box office receipts certainly provide information about attendance and the fiscal success or failure of a show, it is through audience reaction that CAST measures artistic success. When the company hears that someone has taken something from the show, or has been affected by it in a way that moves them to make a difference, this keeps Simmons and the other members of the CAST team fighting to create exciting theatre. Simmons explains that he gets worried when audience members come out of a performance and rave about how wonderful the show was (Simmons Interview 4). He explains that when this happens,

I get a little worried that maybe I didn't do my job. When someone comes out of a show and they can't talk, that's a sign to me. There's a seed that's germinating, a thought that's cogitating, there are a bunch of mental gymnastics going on. Then I'm successful. I feel even more successful when they get to the parking lot, and they still haven't talked. And when they get to the third traffic light and they still haven't talked to the other person in the car, and if you really, really did your job, it's three days.

While this desire to make a difference in people's lives and create a community through theatre may, to some, seem idealized, Simmons keeps it in perspective: "I'm not going to say life is going to be great and everything will be wonderful because

you came to see this play. But maybe we've moved you a little bit. Hopefully we've moved you off your datum [sic] and you've reflected upon your life. And that does make a difference" (Simmons Interview 4).

TOTAL IMMERSION

A phrase not seen in the CAST mission statement but at the heart of their philosophy is "total immersion." What they are attempting is an experience for the audience whereby they are completely immersed in the theatrical milieu for the entire time spent at the theatre. Like Schechner, Simmons despises the conventions that have developed from the traditional proscenium theatre. The physical distance between the audience and performance on the proscenium stage is manifested in the emotional distance between the patron and the performance. The potential connection and the ability to reach the audience with a significant message are often lost. This connection can best be found through the intimacy of performance and audience: "We could have a Pulitzer Prize-winning play but nobody comes to see it simply because the last thing they came to see was at a proscenium, and they were so distanced from it. No matter how great it was, they still felt it just wasn't engaging, it wasn't more engaging than sitting home and watching HBO. At least when you sit home and watch HBO it's intimate" (Simmons 1). This intimacy is manifested in the CAST space and Simmons's experiential approach to the productions.

As illustrated above, CAST's objective is to present theatre that subverts the traditional theatre's notions of the performer/spectator relationship. Elements of

their Mission Statement, like thinking “outside the blackbox” and presenting their brand of “Experiential Theatre” to totally immerse the audience indicate the theatre’s commitment to exploring the nature of that relationship. This impulse, however, is certainly not new. To better illustrate how CAST is situated within the tradition of experimentation, Chapter 2 offers a brief survey of theatrical experimentation across the eras of western theatre, as well as discussion of two relevant theorists, Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski, whose ideas about the audience/performance relationship most closely resemble those of CAST.

Chapter Two A Brief History of the Audience/Performance Relationship

This chapter places CAST and the idea of “experiential theatre” in a theoretical and historical context. CAST attempts to subvert the relationships between the audience and performance, but they are not the first company to do so. Theorists such as Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski have attempted to define this relationship in ways that would be instructive to CAST and Simmons. I will explore some of these theorists/practitioners and compare and contrast them to the work of CAST. I will explore in detail Schechner’s principle texts for this study, his article “Six Axioms for Environmental Theater” and his book *Environmental Theater*, as well as various articles by and about Grotowski.

Significant attention to experimentation and expanding contemporary notions of theatre and its limitations classify American theatre of the 1960s. Richard Schechner, a theatre practitioner working in New York City, has made major contributions to the exploration of theatrical limitations and new ways to approach the performance-spectator relationship. Founder of The New Orleans Group and The Performance Group (NYC), Schechner developed an “Environmental Theatre” characterized by the transformation of space, shifting of focus, and the inclusion/infusion of the audience within the theatrical milieu. The entire theatre space was considered flexible and usable, being adapted according to the appropriateness for each production. For Schechner’s productions, many scenes were performed simultaneously, causing the audience to choose a focus (*simultaneity*). Furthermore, he de-centralized the text, feeling it was not essential, nor the point of the production. His productions included deconstructions of

classics, collages of various texts, and some entirely original works. These and other theories were consolidated into Schechner's "Six Axioms of Environmental Theater."

Jerzy Grotowski, a contemporary of Schechner, focused much of his work in the 1960s on the relationships between the theatrical space, the text, and the performance. Along with a focus on actor training and a codified system of engaging the audience through body movement and gestures, Grotowski developed a "Poor Theatre." He considers large commercial productions the "Rich Theatre," that which is adorned with "decoration" and all the material trappings superfluous to the key relationship between the performance and the spectator. For his "Poor Theatre" the theatrical production is stripped of all its superfluous elements, including props, set pieces, and costumes, so as not to distract in any way from the relationship between the spectator and the performer. Grotowski's was a more philosophical view of the way in which theatre can be used.

Schechner and Grotowski's ideas, however, were not unique. Exploration of the relationship between the theatrical audience and the performance, as a means to heighten the experience of the spectator, can be traced back to the Classical era, and through to the present day.

HISTORICAL PERIODS

Roman theatre is characterized by several methodologies employed as a means of raising the spectator experience from the Greek theatre that preceded it. "Naumachia" were elaborate reenactments of great sea battles. Life-sized sea-faring ships were put to sea in enormous auditoriums flooded with water. The audience

watched as the “performers” created a visual accompaniment to stories that had previously only been shared orally. These events were not entirely dissimilar to contemporary reenactments of various American wars (the Civil War, Revolutionary War, etc.). The difference in these events is that the casualties incurred in the Roman theatrical battles were paid by actual lives. Slaves were used to heighten the adventure and realism of the event, leaving the audience with a response to the event we cannot even begin to fathom in contemporary ideas of civilization. This example illustrates that Classical theatrical experimentation and the production of the theatrical event with the experience of the audience in mind.

Likewise, examples of theatrical experimentation with the audience-performance relationship can be charted across the history of western theatre. In the Medieval era, the church began to regain its foothold after the Dark Ages, but its services were almost entirely performed in Latin, thus excluding much of the uneducated masses. To bring the teaching of the Bible to the people, the church endorsed various theatrical presentations. Among these were “pageants,” in which a series of wagons served as stages for the reenactment of various important Biblical stories. Occasionally the wagons remained stationary and allowed the audience members to congregate in the streets in front of them, watch the short performance, then move on to the next wagon in order to continue hearing the story. Most often, however, the wagons were the more mobile portion of the theatrical exchange and the people remained in the streets and waited for the next wagon to roll by. When it did, the actors performed the story, then moved on to a section of the street further down where other “patrons” were waiting. The

processional-style approach to theatre not only involved a practical component (bringing the Word of the Bible to the people), but also, perhaps unwittingly, added to the development of theatrical experimentation with the use of multiple staging areas.

Theatre of the English Renaissance and Italian Renaissance also employed techniques to heighten the audience experience. Theatre of the time was as much a social event as it was educational or entertaining. Audiences went to the theatre to see others and to be seen. In the English theatre, the “cheap seats” (which weren’t seats at all) belonged to the poorest citizens. The “groundlings,” named for the area in front of the stage, were forced to stand on a section of ground in front of the stage. Crammed in the space shoulder-to-shoulder and forced to stand throughout the performance, the groundlings were considered the lowest of the theatrical audience, paying merely a pittance of the fee the elite paid to be seated with a vantage from the balconies. It was the groundlings, however, who were, again, perhaps unwittingly, the most involved in the evolution of the audience-performance relationship. The groundlings certainly enjoyed an experience unlike that of their counterparts in the seats above. Often a rowdy bunch, the groundlings would insert themselves into the performance, boisterously sharing their feelings about certain characters or performances. The performer was then forced to negotiate with the audience directly, often chastising them from the stage or returning the fruit thrown at him. It is also believed that the original intention for soliloquies was for the actor to directly address the audience as a means of provoking reactions (Barton). Even playwrights, like William Shakespeare, joined in this relationship in the text of the

play itself. In *Hamlet*, the title character advises a group of actors how to perform. In this speech he directly references the lowly groundlings in front of them, saying they were “capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise” (3.2.).

(Imagine the visceral response the actor delivering that line must have endured.)

Theatres of the Italian Renaissance (like the Teatro Farnese and Teatro Olimpico) were also considered social venues with delineated areas defining members of various classes. Balconies, or “ashtrays,” were built into the sides of the stage, nearly on top of the actors, partly to provide a better vantage point to watch the play, but more for the spectator who purchased the prime seat to be seen by the audience below. (These seats are often considered the worst in the house due to their odd angles to the stage and their clear view of one side or the other of the offstage wings.) The point of the seating placement was less about the relative proximity to the stage and more about the perspective of the viewer. Developments in architecture and art brought a new perspective to the viewer with specific concentration on giving a third dimension to typically two-dimensional spaces. Theatrical scenic design reflected these developments. Systems of scenic design and the shifting of scenery, like the chariot-and-pole and groove systems, allowed for dramatic scene changes, capitalizing on the recent artistic developments of the concepts of the illusion of depth, horizon line, and vanishing point. These new concepts and the social sensibilities in the theatre audience conspired to add great significance to the notion of audience experience. The proscenium seating arrangement and the single vanishing point resulted in giving primacy to one seat in the house. Often referred to as the “King’s Seat”(because it was most often occupied

by the king or the person of highest social standing at that particular performance), this one seat allowed for the effects of the design to have the greatest impact. The further an audience member was from this one seat, the less effective the elements heightening perspective became. All patrons were given a slightly different perspective from their neighbors. The physical space occupied by the audience member greatly affected his viewing of the performance—another significant addition to the development of the audience-performance relationship and the experience of the spectator.

The tradition of the audience-performance relationship continued in America. Theatre of the 18th and 19th centuries (and, arguably, the early part of the 20th century) was marked by a propensity for base humor and romanticism which appealed to the common man. The colonists, later the global immigrants, didn't care to be intellectually challenged, rather preferring brief diversions from their arduous lives through popular entertainments, such as vaudeville acts, variety shows, and short musicals. In order to compete with the many forms of cheap entertainments that filled the populated cities, the American theatre employed more elaborate staging, more melodramatic plays, and increased visual sensationalism. (Tactics such as the use of actual horses on stage running in full gallop along fast-moving treadmills to simulate a horse race, giant ice chunks flowing across the stage, and scrolling upstage scenery on enormous canvasses simulating travel are just a few examples.) Thus the American theatre joined the tradition of experimentation with the spectator-performance relationship and the creation of a heightened experience.

Concurrent to the creation of intriguing melodramas was a push (in many art forms) to explore the psychology of the individual and present the interior of the mind by the most realistic means. Playwrights like Eugene O'Neill, Henrik Ibsen, and Anton Chekhov provided groundbreaking plays in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that explored concepts of psychology and the internal subconscious struggles within the common man. There rose a great dependence on the fourth-wall convention and a more firm reliance on the bifurcation of the theatrical space. The audience was allowed a voyeuristic peek into the lives of the characters on stage but was even more rigidly forced to sit quietly watching in the dark in their own specified space. They were continually shut off from the performance in an effort to force them to examine the characters in his/her "natural habitat" and then reflect on their own lives and situations as a result. The popularity and intellectual significance of realism (and naturalism) rose dramatically during the 20th century and can certainly still be felt today not only in theatre, but also in film and television. Many theatre theorists and practitioners viewed the precepts of realism as limitations to the aforementioned lineage of the relationship between the audience and the performance. While the popularity of realism and naturalism flourished, there was a groundswell of defiance of the current systems and a growing need for a return to experimentation.

Theatre historian Brooks McNamara explains, "In a sense the whole of the 20th century in Europe and America demonstrates a gradual retreat from these conventions [realism, naturalism], a retreat made clear by the development of the arena and thrust stages and the growth of various schools of design which modify or

abstract the naturalist vision of reality. But a number of more radical reactions against the naturalist-proscenium idea have concentrated on replacing the two chambers with a single shared space, the whole of which is transformed scenically for the production” (McNamara 10). This notion of undoing the bifurcation of the space and creating one whole space for both the audience and spectators to reside in is a major identifying mark of American theatrical experimentation of the 50s and 60s. Such an idea was not entirely original, however. In the 1930s, Nikolai Okhlopkov, Artistic Director of the Realistic Theatre in Moscow, “combined a number of separate acting areas with several audience seating areas in a single performance space. For his famous production of *Mother*, for example, Okhlopkov created not only a central arena containing a platform stage, but a peripheral stage around all four sides of the room, joined to the arena platform by runways and step units. The audience, seated in four separate sections between the central arena and the peripheral stages, was surrounded by a montage of scenes handled in a basically cinematic way, using such devices as cuts and stop action” (McNamara 8).

With this growing culture of experimentation rising in the 1950s and 60s, many theatre theorists turned their concentration back to the audience experience and sought to revitalize what they saw as a diminishing art form. Theatre theorists and historians cite 1965 as a year in which various changes and movements had been planted in the theatre (Schechner in McNamara 22). Instead of the tired building of mainstream theatre, the streets had become authentic stages for artists and performers (22). Parks, public transit systems, schools, shops, fountains—all “found” spaces—became arenas for highly mobile productions varying highly in

form and style (French in Redmond 177). Political demonstrations, protests, parades, Mardi Gras, and re-enactments all served to bring theatrical events back into the streets. The pervasive motive all these outdoor, makeshift productions shared was “a desire to break down barriers, especially those they felt had been arbitrarily erected to keep theater indoors serving a frivolous, elite audience. By destroying traditional conceptions of theater as indoor, class-bound, and largely verbal, and by giving birth to what Gerald Berkowitz calls a ‘theatrical movement of direct experience rather than a depiction or description of an experience,’ the street-theater people hoped to make a theater that brought actors and audiences together in a shared space” (French qtd. in Redmond 177). As a result, the audience does not expect “to enter passively into an illusion of reality created for them. Rather, a street audience understands that the performance excites their ability to respond to the conditions of their own lives and life about them” (French in Redmond 184-85). What then evolved out of these street-theatre performances were even more loosely structured performances known as ‘happenings.’

Theatrical Happenings were born from a trend that already existed in the early part of the 20th Century. Painting, collage, and environmental art were already exploring installations that completely surrounded the viewer (McNamara 11). Theatrical happenings are loosely structured, largely improvisational events that occur with minimal planning or organization, usually happen only once, and explore the idea that theatre (or any other artwork) can take place anywhere, not merely in specifically designated spaces like theatres, museums, or concert halls (Wilson and Goldfarb 447). While “naturalism opened theatre compared to the sentimental and

heroic forms that preceded it” it was still “hemmed in by conventions of staging, narrative, characterization, dialogue. Happenings made possible a formal as well as thematic expression of the theatrical range” (Schechner in McNamara 25).

Happenings showed that performance space could stand in clear contrast to the conventions born out of the Renaissance theatre architecture “in which the actor is removed, architecturally and scenically, from his audience. This separation has never been seen as necessary, and performance space has been viewed as a single, all-encompassing unit. The result has been that the boundaries between actor and spectator have been informal or indefinitely drawn, and there has been not only close contact but often an intermingling of the two groups” (McNamara 3). This notion of merging the audience and the performance was a focus in the studies and practices of two influential theorists, Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski. The influence of these two practitioners will be examined in more detail.

There were certainly other theatre theorists besides Schechner and Grotowski who experimented with subverting traditional theatrical arrangements and theorized about the nature of theatre. Before them, Augusto Boal, Antonin Artaud, and Bertolt Brecht each made significant contributions in their examination of the theatre’s relationship to the audience and their scrutiny of Aristotelian notions of audience pacification. These theorists influenced Schechner, Grotowski, and many of their contemporaries, like Julian Beck and Judith Malina (of The Living Theater) and Peter Brook. These theorists, in turn, influenced the work of other contemporaries and later theorist/practitioners. Joseph Chaikin worked with Beck and Malina’s The Living Theater until he formed his own theatre, the Open Theater,

which focused on evolving their theories of performance ensemble training.

Eugenio Barba was a pupil of Grotowski and eventually started his own theatre, the Odin Theater, which focuses on the “barter” between performance and community. His “productions” were ritualistic outdoor performances paid for by the attendees with traditional songs and dances.

Each of the theorists and practitioners mentioned above has contributed considerable scholarship in several areas of theatre. Among them, Schechner and Grotowski emerge as the most valuable to this study for a number of reasons. The most fundamental is that Schechner and Grotowski’s theories of environmental and “Poor Theatre” are more pertinent to Simmons’s than those of the other theorists mentioned. In order to identify some principles of CAST’s experiential theatre, it is imperative to look at those theorists whose work most closely resembles the theatre’s methodologies. The principles of Schechner’s “Six Axioms for Environmental Theatre” share a relationship to CAST’s environmental theatre methodology, and Grotowski’s notion of a “Poor Theatre” share with (and challenge) Simmons’s ideas about the audience/performance relationship. Other theorists, like Artaud, Beck and Malina, and Brecht, espouse a more radical agenda than that of Simmons, guided by more overtly political ends, thereby making them less relevant to CAST than Schechner and Grotowski. That is not to say that Schechner and Grotowski entirely lacked political motivation through their theatres. But their preoccupation with the spectator/audience relationship is more germane to the current discussion. Using Schechner and Grotowski over the other theorists mentioned above also serves to position CAST within a tradition of theorists

experimenting in a similar fashion with orthodox notions of the audience/performance relationship. Because Simmons avows to having no knowledge of any of these former theorists or their influence on theatrical experimentation, discussion of how these theorists influence Simmons and CAST would be entirely speculative. I believe that Simmons is missing a vital element in his experimentation: the work of others as a guide for his own. This also means, however, that Simmons is not constrained by previous approaches, but instead finds his own way. Exploring Schechner and Grotowski's principles, therefore, helps to determine CAST's distinctiveness from this earlier generation and positions CAST as a theatre that is both replicating older experiments and building on them.

RICHARD SCHECHNER

In 1960, Richard Schechner arrived in New Orleans as a member of the Tulane Drama Department and immediately became entrenched in the city's rich culture, vibrant street life, and its fusion of participatory democracy (Schechner 66). It was there that he began formulating his ideas about theatre and the nature of the audience-performance relationship. Schechner remembers his first years in New Orleans as a time when he "fused participatory democracy, New Orleans street life, and my own developing ideas about what theater could be." For the next four years he would continue to explore his theories throughout the deep south until, in 1965, he founded the New Orleans Group alongside Paul Epstein and Franklin Adams.

Schechner gives credit to two individuals for influencing and helping shape his initial ideas about theatre. The first was John Cage, with whom Schechner had a

four-hour meeting in the summer of 1956. Cage was an American composer and a champion of the avant-garde in music, who, according to Schechner, helped formulate ideas about art and theatre that he was previously unable to express (Schechner 66). But perhaps more important was the influence of Allan Kaprow. Kaprow, an Abstract Expressionist painter of the 1950s, was himself influenced by Cage and his exploration of non-traditional forms of music and moving outside the traditional barriers of the art form. Kaprow had begun creating collages in larger and more inclusive ways, enlarging the spectrum of art from the mere gallery displays and museum offerings to an “event” for the spectator. This interest in the spectator and how he/she experiences the artwork spilled over into the streets, where Kaprow began experimenting with a more “theatrical” look at art—the happenings of the 1960s. These happenings explored not only the relationship between art and the spectator, but also the use of an all-encompassing environment where the artwork and spectator coexist, each affecting the other. The idea of theatricality in art, pushing the boundaries in all art to include the spectator as a part of the “performance,” dominated the thought of the American experimentalists of the 1960s, including Schechner.

In 1966, the New Orleans Group attempted what Schechner called an “environmental” approach (borrowing the term directly from Kaprow’s happenings) to a traditional play. Arnold Aronson, former assistant editor of *The Drama Review*, defines environmental theatre as “nonfrontal”, explaining that, “Proscenium, end, thrust, alley and arena stages are all frontal in that a spectator observing a performance rarely has to look more than forty-five degrees to the left or right in

order to view the whole production. . . In all cases the audience is facing ‘forward’ and is generally focused on the same space and action. Any performance of which that is not true—in which the complete *mise en scene* or scenography cannot be totally apprehended by a spectator maintaining a single frontal relationship to the performance—must be considered non-frontal or environmental” (Aronson in Condee 169). Stephanie Arnold provides perhaps a more succinct definition, suggesting that environmental theatre is used to describe “theatre works which use ‘whole space’” (Arnold 259). The New Orleans Group’s production of *Victims of Duty*, is credited as the first American ‘environmental’ theatre production, as defined by Aronson, thus giving birth to Schechner’s “environmental theatre” (McNamara 2).

Due to its particular relevance to Simmons and CAST, for the purposes of this study I have elected to concentrate on Schechner’s ideas formed when working in the late 1960s with The Performance Group, which were eventually published in his book *Environmental Theatre*. There have been many subsequent studies on a variety of topics surrounding Richard Schechner. For the purposes of this study I have sifted the vast amount of information available to specific references to Environmental Theatre and his theories about the audience/performance relationship.

Since the 1960s Schechner has moved away from experimentation in the theatre proper and creating his own productions, and has become a prominent voice in the interdisciplinary field of Performance Studies, an anthropological look at the metaphors and connections between performance, ceremony, and everyday life. His

interest in Performance Studies, which dominates a majority of his later writings, fascinating as it is, lies outside the scope of this study. (For a further discussion of Performance Studies, see Schechner's *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 1985, and *Performance Theory*, 1988.)

ENVIRONMENTAL THEATRE

A significant aim for artists of all disciplines in the 1960s was to break from the confines of tradition, and that was no exception for Schechner's "Environmental Theatre." Schechner was continuously dissatisfied with the western theatrical tradition of constantly imposing separate spaces for the audience and the performance. This bifurcation of space, Schechner argues, creates a distance between the two essential components of theatre, the performer and the spectator, thus preventing them from working together and affecting one another. He states, "Although the audience is present at an orthodox theater performance, 'presence' is a way of saying 'as absent as can possibly be arranged.' Feedback is kept to a minimum" (Schechner 72). Philip Kolin reaffirms Schechner's view that "traditional views of the audience" were just "as passive as the set" itself (Kolin).

Schechner notes that the tradition of separation inherent in the orthodox theatre dates as far back as the Greeks and runs throughout western theatre history, "From the Greeks to the present a 'special place' within the theater, the stage, has been marked off for the performance. Even in the medieval theater which moved from place to place on wagons the performers generally stayed on the wagons and the spectators in the streets" (Schechner xxviii). Even as the theatre began to be

moved indoors, as in the various European Renaissances, the creation of the proscenium stage perpetuated, and perhaps advanced, this notion of distance between the audience and performance. He states, “The commandment ‘pay attention’ ... is architecturally built into the rigid up-facing seating the uni-directional front-looking, the focus downward into the picture frame” (Schechner in McNamara 28). But Schechner reserved his harshest criticism for the dominant commercial, regional, and academic theatres of the time, calling them “cancerous and therefore dangerous, deserving to be destroyed.” He goes on to explain that “The term ‘orthodox’ suggests a rigidity, stubbornness, inertia, and stupidity which I find in the commercial theatre that takes all art as ‘property’ (not to be traded as in Australia or Africa but to be capitalized), to those regional theatres that see their job as pleasing the drugged consciousness of the middle classes” (Schechner in McNamara 35). In orthodox theater, “fixed seating, lighting design, architecture [...] everything is clearly meant to exclude the audience from any kind of participation in the action. Even their watching is meant to be ignored. The spectators are put into the semi-fetal prison of a chair, and no matter what they feel, it will be hard to physicalize and express those feelings” (Schechner 36-37).

Adding to the physical and aesthetic distancing the traditional theatre had on the audience, according to Schechner, was the performer himself. But he did not lay blame with the individual actor per se, but rather, he faulted the actor training methods of the traditional “realist” theatre as a fundamental barrier hindering a shared experience between the audience and the performance. Actor training methods in the traditional theatre are used as a means for an ultimate goal, that of

“getting inside” and “losing oneself” in the character. In Konstantin Stanislavski’s *An Actor Prepares*, the narrator confesses that he feels the strong need to overcome the effect of the “black hole” he sees before him before he can proceed in his exploration of the character (Stanislavski 12). Schechner asserts that this “black hole” to which Stanislavski is referring is “the audience as seen from the stage of a proscenium theater. Or not seen. It never occurred to [Stanislavski] transform the black hole into a living space. He devised instead his method of ‘circles of attention’ so that actors could learn how to systematically exclude the audience and the fear that attends knowing that so many anonymous, hidden viewers are hungrily watching” (Schechner 72). In short, the orthodox actor is to “become” that person who he is embodying, vanishing inside his/her role (225).

Schechner was influenced not only by Kaprow and the Happenings of the era (as mentioned above), but also by Artaud’s call for all experimental theatre practitioners to engage in an “elimination of the stage” that advocated demolition of “the destructive nature of the traditional theatre in order to shock or urge the audience into a more active participation in the event” (Arnold 260). As Artaud put it, “It is in order to attack the spectator’s sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which, instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators” (Artaud 87). In order to encourage this “more active participation” through an “attack” of the “spectator’s sensibility, Schechner concentrated his ideas around deconstructing the three fundamental elements of traditional theatre: the performer, the space, and the audience.

Schechner dismantled the typical notion of separate areas for the performance and the spectator. Instead, his theatre created a single area, shared by all the participants. This area would come to include the entire theatre, not just what would be typically considered “the stage.” He advocated for the abolishment of the “king’s seat” of the Italian Renaissance (Schechner xxxvii). “Once fixed seating and the automatic bifurcation of space are no longer present, entirely new relationships are possible. Body contact can occur between performers and spectators; voice levels and acting intensities can be varied widely; a sense of shared experience can be engendered” (Schechner xxix).

With regards to the actor, Schechner’s environmental theatre does away with the notion of the two entities (the actor and the role) becoming one. “Rather, there is the role and the person of the performer; both role and performer are plainly perceivable by the spectator. *The feelings are those of the performer as stimulated by the actions of the role at the moment of performance*” (Schechner 166). He further explains the variation between the orthodox and environmental approaches to creating a role, “In orthodox theater the role exists outside the performer—like a suit of clothes, a blueprint, a project to be fulfilled, and objective to be realized. In environmental theater the role is as unknown as the performer playing it; the two are in a dialectical relationship, and each illuminates the other. The process is a spiraling series of tension-release cycles. Finding out what the role is and what it is becoming, experiencing it in its changes, are what rehearsals are for” (Schechner 225). The result, then, is an implicit need for an “acting style different from either that used in most illusionistic productions where actors and audiences are

separated or in most environmental productions where actors do not attempt to create a fiction” (Arnold 266). Schechner then goes on to consolidate his thoughts with a more simple approach to the matter: “Rehearsals are not to practice the finished thing, but to prepare for something to happen” (225). Theodore Shank relates this style of acting back to the style in the Happenings, that “rules and tasks are determined in advance and the scenario is followed. Performers do not play characters and do not intend to create any illusion” (Shank 172). This fits in with Grotowski’s idea of “No-Character” where “the actor does not play a character, but tries to seek a more authentic self” (Slowiak 94). But this idea distinguishes the performer both in a Happening and in an early Grotowski production from an actor who works with Simmons. The latter is still attempting to distinguish him or herself from the character being played.

Similar principles apply to the environmental approach to special design as well. In keeping consistent with the use of the entire theatrical space as having the potential for events to take place, so too is the entire theatre used, or not used, for scenic elements. “The fullness of space, the endless ways space can be transformed, articulated, animated—that is the basis of environmental theater design” (Schechner 1). Schechner states that the “first scenic principle of environmental theater is to create and use whole spaces. Literally spheres of spaces, spaces within spaces, spaces which contain, or envelop, or relate, or touch all the areas where the audience is and/or the performers perform” (2). The designer needs to treat the space and the events happening inside it as having no beginning and no end (Condee 170). The audience, the performance, and any scenic elements share the same

space, resulting in a new configuration. This new set of relationships, new to the typical audience “can startle the audience into looking at the space, play and production in new ways” (Condee 159). Even the lighting is a necessary ally breaking down the systems of separation from the traditional theatre. Typically lighting is used in the proscenium space to, once again, separate the audience from the action. The acting space is to be lit and the audience space is to be darkened, reinforcing the commitment of the traditional theatre to instill in the audience a sense of distance from the events on stage. “Environmental theatre lighting is not used to create unity, balance, rhythm, and the like, through pictorial organization; it is used as *activity* within a constantly changing and fugitive space in a living theatre situation” (Rojo in McNamara 17).

Schechner’s ideas about theatre are guided primarily by his study and attitudes about non-western rituals. Going to the theatre is a communal event. The spectator understands, on some level, that he/she is going to leave home and travel to a place where others like him/her are going to congregate and form a community. Designer Hugh Hardy argues that if this isn’t the case, then spectators wouldn’t leave the confines of their homes and VCRs (or perhaps now DVDs and DVRs). “It has to be about the communal experience of sharing with other people the discoveries of the performance. The notion that movie theatres are based on—perfect sightlines for a single individual seeing the full screen, which leads to a fan-shaped auditorium—is screwy for theatres. It has to include the audience” (Condee 36). English theatre director and pioneer, Tyrone Guthrie, went a bit further, stating that “the theatre makes its effect not by means of illusion, but by ritual.” Guthrie

believed that illusionary theatre is not only poor ritual, but fundamentally self-defeating, "because spectators do not fall for the illusion" (Condee 33).

Schechner asserts that human beings have a "participatory appetite" and that people look to the theatre to consummate it" (Schechner 249). This does not necessarily mean it is a theatre of "question-and-answer" or calling people up on stage, as our contemporary reference may lead us to imagine. Rather, participatory to Schechner and other experimentalists really meant that the audience could affect the performance, however slight, just by their presence. The spectator is a participant, each according to his/her own willingness to participate, and to what degree. The new system of relationships (spectator/performer, spectator/space, spectator/spectator) established an opportunity for choice. In the traditional theatre, the spectator sat in a chair and watched the performance, having little else to do because of the strict confines of relationships established. But now, with environmental theatre, the spectator is not only allowed to make choices, but, to a certain degree, *must* make choices: "Where should I sit? Should I stand? Where is my focus? Do I change my perspective? Where should my attention be now? Should I converse with the actor? Should I interact with my neighbor? How involved in the production do I want to get?" All these are not only acceptable questions to ask, but necessary to the environmental production, and each of the spectators responding to each of these questions creates in the performance constant and shifting variables that not only he/she, but also the actors, are required to negotiate. The traditional roles of who is receiving the story and who is telling it (and who therefore has the opportunity to change the story) are now being

shared, or even reversed, and “The sharing and reversing is possible because of an assumption everyone makes: *Anything that happens in the theater during the performance time is part of the performance*” (Schechner 83-84). As a result, each spectator has the possibility, and perhaps the responsibility, to change or alter the telling of the story and, Schechner asserts, “only in participatory theater is that possible” (Schechner 250).

For the 1966 production by the New Orleans Group, Schechner’s first attempt at an “environmental” play, he chose Eugene Ionesco’s play *Victims of Duty* (a highly theatrical, Absurdist, detective story) for its great possibilities for invention. He asserts that what was special about *Victims* was the use of the whole space—the entire theatre was converted into Choubert’s living room. “The New Orleans Group did not ‘do’ Ionesco’s play; we ‘did with it.’ We confronted it, searched among its words and themes, built around and through it. And we came out with our own thing.” (Schechner xlv-xlv). Scenes overlapped one another in various spaces simultaneously, and not every spectator was able to absorb everything that happened (Schechner 68). But Schechner was still left with greater questions about the performance’s relationship to the audience. “Staging ‘Victims’ helped clarify my ideas about environmental theater, but it did not much advance my thinking about audience participation” (68). The production ran for a mere twelve performances in May, 1967. The day after it closed, Schechner left New Orleans, deciding that he wanted to explore his ideas about environmental theatre and the role of the audience in performance on a larger scale, and headed for New York City where, in 1967, he formed The Performance Group.

THE PERFORMANCE GROUP

In 1967, Schechner began his work in what he would call the Performing Garage in the SoHo district of New York City. There he quickly assembled a collective of performing artists and began experimenting with his ideas of environmental theatre. Their first, and perhaps most seminal work, was in 1968 with *Dionysus in 69*, a collaboration and improvisational piece loosely based on Euripides' *The Bacchae*. For this production, he had spectators enter the theater one at a time. Some protested at the thought of being asked to ignore the typical comforts of the theatre entrance, but Schechner insisted that each spectator "be confronted by the space" with anxiety or surprise, not "blanked out by the presence of a known other" (Schechner 253). He further explained that he wanted to reverse the arrangement created by the traditional proscenium space, "no longer would the illusion originate on stage and be sustained by the audience; the illusion was now originating with the audience and enhanced by the performers" (43-44). In a *Time Magazine* review of the piece in June, 1968, the critic explains of this reversed spectator arrangement upon entering the theatre space: "There are no seats. Instead, spectators can perch on random, wooden-towered scaffoldings with platforms, unless they prefer to sit on the floor or lean against a wall." He continues in a tone of frustration and irritability for this deviation from the traditional role of the spectator, "The audience participation destroys illusion without enhancing reality." He goes on to criticize much of the performance itself, including the gratuitous sexuality of the performers, the incomprehensible "voodoo gibber" of the

actors' speech, and the theatre's misguided attempt to hearken back to the theatre of Antonin Artaud and its visceral, immediate response extracted from the audience.

Nonetheless, the performance found some success with the public, perhaps for its attack on the traditional precepts of the realistic theatre, or more likely as a result of the titillation and voyeurism so available for the curious masses. But Schechner did not find success in his work, "I did not enjoy *Dionysus in 69* because images I had in my head were not being played out in the theater. Every time a performer would make a suggestion either about the mise-en-scene or about Group structure I read it as an attack on me" (261). This attack he saw lead to a rift within the group that eventually resulted in its demise. In the spring of 1969, Schechner felt his authority slipping away, and he was not about to relinquish it. There was a growing request by the Group members for the sharing of power, but Schechner demanded and fought to hold on with desperation. Instead of easing up, he tightened his administrative fist, creating a litany of new rules and regulations for his actors. Furthermore, on July 1, 1969, he had his lawyer draw up a document confirming Schechner's sole authority over all matters to do with the theater—selection of plays, implementation, hiring and firing actors, etc, essentially an exercise to confirm and expand his authority (259-60). The more he tightened his authoritative grip, the more the members resisted him (263).

The Group continued to perform various works, including its next production, *Makbeth*, but rehearsals went slowly and Schechner started to doubt his leadership abilities and the organization of the Group as a whole (258). Evidence of

this insecurity with his team and with himself is evidenced in various performance journal entries nearing the end of 1969:

November 27: Schechner shows a concern with the state of his theatre.

Attendance has begun to wane and he is worried about commercial failure, as well as “Death of the theater.” He further explains his dissatisfaction with the performers and his abilities to push them, saying that many are not very good and many have stopped growing (205).

December 14: Schechner expresses depression about the state of the theater.

All the non-creative elements of running a theater are getting in the way and he continues to question the organization of the theatre. He confesses he has no formal structure of management in place, no associate director to take over for him to take a vacation, or a manager or even actors to keep it going with him gone. He writes that he is “Sick at heart” and “I am drained emotionally, physically, financially. I do not see a way out except resignation” (205-06).

Also on December 14: “When I left *TDR*, I wanted to devote myself to theater and writing. I have not done so. I am devoting myself to caretaking and some patchwork thinking. I have failed. I do not want another two years of furious anger leading to people-ruined concepts, torn-up hearts, hatreds, distrust . . . The end of things is as unbearable as the beginning of things” (207).

January 3, 1970: “Quite frankly, the problems with the play are overshadowed by and are functions of the problems within the Group” (207).

By the end of January 1970, *Makbeth* closed and the Group had “split irreparably” and was reconstituted (264). Soon after, Schechner left on hiatus for over two years. In his absence, the Group was completely reorganized as a corporation, and five group members were named to a newly formed Board of Directors (Schechner 207). Schechner returned from overseas in April, 1972, and continued to work with the Group off and on for another eight years, but it was clear his control and vision of The Performance Group was gone (267).

SIX AXIOMS

While Schechner may view his time with the Group as a partial or complete failure, an influence of his experiments remains in what he published in *The Drama Review* in 1968, entitled “Six Axioms for Environmental Theatre.” Below is a detailed exploration of each of Schechner’s Six Axioms. (A further discussion of how CAST approaches, diverges from, or completely contradicts each of these axioms follows in Chapter Three.)

Schechner’s Six Axioms:

1. The Theatrical event is a set of related transactions
2. All the space is used for the performance
3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in “found” space
4. Focus is flexible and variable
5. All production elements speak their own language

6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production.

There may be no verbal text at all

1. The Theatrical event is a Set of Related Transactions

Schechner's first axiom offers a general overview of perhaps the most important component of his environmental theatre—the various relationships at work in a performance. He explains the three primary sets of relationships in the theatre: 1) among performers, 2) among members of the audience, and 3) between performers and spectators. The first can be most readily identified with the teaching of Konstantin Stanislavski and his “method.” The play is identified with the ability of the performers to interact with one another as the audience watches behind the barrier of the fourth wall—what Schechner derides as a “self-enclosed ensemble” (Schechner xxiii). The second, the relationship between audience members, Schechner characterizes as a relic of orthodox theatre. Here the audience and performers each obey strict rules of behavior while relegated to their specific codified roles. But the third primary relationship, that between performers and spectators, is the one most absent in orthodox theatre, and subsequently the most essential to environmental theatre. In brief, confrontations between audience members and the performers are necessary to actuate change (xx). These confrontations need not necessarily be considered a divisive instrument, but rather a tool to orchestrate a new set of “rules” governing the audience-performance relationship. The New Orleans Group's production of Eugene Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* provides an illustration of the possibilities in this relationship where “three

'private' senses were stimulated. During a seduction scene perfume was released in the room; frequently the performers communicated to the spectators by means of touch. At the very end of the show, chunks of bread were forcefully administered to the audience by the performers, expanding the final cruel gesture of Ionesco's play" (xxii). The traditional barriers of the orthodox theatre are broken down and a new relationship between the audience and spectator emerges. The audience's senses, their personal space, and the safety of the auditorium are fair game for subversion, all to the contrast of the orthodox theatre.

That is not to say, however, that all of Schechner's ideas about the relationship between the space and the audience, nor the breakdown of traditional barriers, were well-received. To the contrary, influential theatre critic Mel Gussow felt the staging of the Performance Group's production of *The Tooth of Crime* was actually a hindrance. Gussow writes "Richard Schechner gave the work an environmental treatment, awkwardly trying to involve the audience in the action. For greater effectiveness, *The Tooth of Crime* should be seen on a stage, preferably a proscenium, at a remove from the audience" (246). This illustrates one of the potential dangers of disrupting audience expectations and placing the spectator within the production (an area of examination at the end of this study), that resistance to these newly created relationships is highly likely.

2. All the space is used for the performance

Throughout Schechner's work he expresses a dissatisfaction with, if not disdain for, orthodox theatre. More appropriately, he rails against the bifurcation of

space—the history and continued tradition of separation between the audience and the performance. Throughout western theatrical performance, from the Greeks to the present, there has been a distinct separation of space, the masses gathered in the house and the performers allowed into a “special” place, each group unable to enter the world of the other. Even in the eras of traveling theatre, like the medieval era, the theatre wagons traveled through the streets and among the people, but during the performance there was still a physical disconnect of bodies. The stage has been a privileged area to which the audience can only watch, not “participate.” The result has been a tradition of possibility denied for the exploration of the numerous relationships available between the audience and the performers. And the culprit is the space. But, as Schechner states, “Once fixed seating and the automatic bifurcation of space are no longer present, entirely new relationships are possible. Body contact can occur between performers and spectators; voice levels and acting intensities can be varied widely; a sense of shared experience can be engendered” (xxix). Once the barrier of the stage apron is erased, possibilities abound. William Condee explains the designer’s approach to an environmental production, where “the designer needs to think in terms of designing the entire theatre space, not just the stage area” (Condee 170). He then quotes Tony-Award-Winning set designer John Napier who calls his approach to environmental design “non-pictorial” or “one that treats the space, and the performance happening in it, as a place that doesn’t have a beginning and an end. The audience and the performance are in the same space” (170). Napier goes on to call this approach the opposite of Brechtian, which maintains a clearly defined separation of audience and performance.

Rather than having defined areas strictly for performers and audiences, Schechner asserts “the space of the performance is defined organically by the action. Spectators watch from a variety of perspectives, some paying close attention, some ignoring the goings-on” (xxviii). In order to allow the action to define the space, the orthodox tradition of bifurcated space must be eliminated, leaving an empty space/canvas whose edges are not limited upon the start. The space need not only be limited to the interior either. Events like happenings (Allen Kaprow), street performances, demonstrations, and parades can be seen as an extension of this idea of allowing the performance to occur among the people and resulting in the shared experience (xxx).

3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in “found” space

In this third axiom, Schechner clearly illustrates his disdain for the orthodox theatre’s tradition of the bifurcation of the theatrical space by using scenery as his example of the limits of that tradition. He states, “In the orthodox theater, scenery is segregated; it exists only in that part of the space where the performance is played. The construction of scenery is guided by sight-lines; even when ‘the theater’ is exposed—bare walls of the building, curtains removed—as in some Brechtian scenography—the equipment is looked at as an indication that ‘this is a theater you are seeing, our workplace’; the place where the spectators are is the viewing place, the house. In short, mainstream attitudes toward scenography is [sic] naive and compromised” (xxx). The use of scenic elements in traditional theatre helps to

preserve this separation of the viewing and performance areas, describing it as “a kind of propped-up painting”, whereas “environmental design is strictly three-dimensional. If it’s there, it’s got to work” (31), and work “all the way, to the limits of its possibilities. There is no bifurcation of space, no segregation of scenery” (xxx). William Condee provides several practical illustrations of environmental scenic devices used in the small theatre space at Circle Rep, “For *Harry Outside*, by Corrine Jacker, the theatre was arranged with the audience on four sides of the stage, which represented a clearing in the woods. John Lee Beatty placed trees not only on the stage, but also in front of and amidst the audience. Beatty ‘put in obstructions to make the audience feel more a part of the action.’ *The Harvesting*, by John Bishop, was performed in the end-stage configuration, but a photo mural covered all four walls of the theatre. The play was about a town, and designer Loren Sherman ‘felt that the audience should feel as if they’re in this town’” (Condee 174).

Schechner further explores the notion of the three-dimensional painting as a parallel to his approach to the stage, citing Harold Rosenberg’s 1952 essay, “The American Action Painters,” on what it means to “get inside the canvas”: “the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze, or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event” (xxxii). Like the emerging notions of the canvas as a potential site for an event, a shared experience, Schechner’s idea of the stage is one where an event unfolds, an action takes place. The traditional theatre, he asserts, uses scenery like the tradition of the canvas, as a means to replicate or express. His environmental

theatre is one where the stage needs to be used as an opportunity to engage the audience in a new way, to make them a part of the scenery, thus making them an essential part of the performance.

Using totally transformed spaces or a found space for a production allows for the audience to more easily be situated within the scenery itself, thus disintegrating the traditional notions of performance/audience spaces. "Once a performance 'takes shape' in a space, either transformed or found," Schechner explains, "spectators correspondingly take their places. A definite reciprocity occurs. Frequently, because there is not fixed seating and little indication of how they should receive the performance, spectators arrange themselves in unexpected patterns; and during the performance these patterns change, 'breathing' with the action just as the performers do. Audiences can make even the most cunningly transformed space into found space. In environmental theater it is not advisable to block all the stage action with [the] same rigidity as can be done in orthodox theaters. The actions develop more as in a sports match, where certain rules govern how the physical action unfolds as moves by one person or group opens [sic] opportunities for responses. Performers need to take advantage of the audience's mobility, considering it a flexible part of the performance environment" (xxxvi).

4. Focus is flexible and variable

In this axiom Schechner offers an evaluation of three forms of theatrical focus. Single focus is most closely associated with orthodox theatre where the audience is focused on the events within the borders of the proscenium, not having

to move their heads more than a degree or two to catch every aspect of the performance. The “king’s seat” is typically referred to as the one pure seat in the house to which all the action is focused. For the new relationships between audience and performance to exist, the entire tradition/rigidity of the single focus and the king’s seat must be dismantled (xxxvii).

But Schechner also explains that, while theatrical rigidity is to be dismantled, theatrical anarchy is just as intolerable. What is needed is an “extreme flexibility yielding harmonious combinations—a kind of intellectual-sensory kaleidoscope” (xxxvii). In multi-focus staging this kaleidoscope of activity abounds. Here various events/scenes occur simultaneously and are presented throughout the space, each competing for the attention of the audience. “Events happen behind, above, below, around, as well as in front of the spectator. The spectator is surrounded by a variety of sights and sounds” (xxxvii). Schechner asserts that multi-focus staging and sensory overload are not synonymous, but are coincident (xxxvii). “Sensory overload leads to a feeling of a small space exploding because it is so full. Sparse events evoke the feeling of space that is large, barely populated, with most of its volume still unexplored. The range of multi-focus extends from one extreme to the other including all intermediate points” (xxxvii). Viewing an environmental performance, then, is based “less on comprehension of all the details of a single highly focused theatrical event” and more on “the involvement of the spectator in a complex of theatrical experiences in a distinctive performance environment” (McNamara 4). The burden then falls upon the spectator to move his/her attention to and select which areas to focus on, for no one spectator is able to see everything.

The inverse of multi-focus staging, which is no less demanding of the spectator, is local-focus staging. Here the events are staged so that only a small group of spectators can hear and see certain events at any given time (xxxviii). Still involving a kaleidoscope of events, local-focus staging can alienate the audience by not allowing them at times to enter certain areas of the production, and at others make them privileged spectators. “Real body contact and whispered communication is possible between performer and spectator on a one-to-one basis. Local whirlpools of action make the theatrical line more complex and varied than in performances relying on single-focus. The environmental theater space becomes like a city where lights are going on and off, traffic is moving, parts of conversations partly heard” (xxxix). Again, when certain scenes are brought to only a select group (or single) spectator, the burden falls on the audience to create their experience; do they make efforts to engage in the scene or do they ignore what is not presented to them? Either way, the audience is a key member of the negotiated relationship.

5. All production elements speak their own language

Implicit in the other axioms, Schechner explores the secondary relationships developed in a performance—those between production elements. Orthodox theatre has situated the performer as the key in the hierarchy of production elements, with the other productions elements (lighting, scenery, sound, etc.) as secondary to the performer. But in environmental theater “one element is not submerged for the sake of others. It is even possible that elements will be rehearsed separately, making the performance itself as the arena where cooperating or

competing elements meet for the first time” (xl). From his perspective as a designer and technician, Jerry Rojo broadly defines environmental theatre as “an organic production process in which an ensemble of performers, writers, designers, directors, and technicians participate on a regular basis in the formation of the piece through workshops and rehearsals” (Rojo in McNamara14).

Schechner contends the technical elements of a production are as integral to the production as the performer, and sometimes more so, and should be a creative part of the performance, “The technicians themselves must become an active part of the performance. This does not necessarily mean the use of more sophisticated equipment, but rather more sophisticated use of the human beings who run whatever equipment is available” (xxv-xxvi). This *use* of the technical human beings involves including them in workshops and rehearsals, and even allowing them to “improvise as the performers, modulating the uses of their equipment night-to-night.” (xxvi). Rehearsals were not merely for performers to develop their character or for the director to create stage pictures, but rather a place where all elements of production could engage in the process of “collecting, discarding, of selecting, organizing, and showing” (Schechner in Kenyon, 86). Performers then are sometimes at the top of the pyramid of supporting elements, sometimes at the bottom, and sometimes there is no pyramid at all.

6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no verbal text at all

For Schechner, the playwright is no longer the first creator—the authority whose intentions serve as the guidelines for performance. According to Schechner, authorial intention is overwhelmingly limiting to the making of a production, where the artists may “stretch these intentions to the limits of ‘interpretation’ but no further” (xli). In environmental theatre, “there may be no principle author, or the texts may be a collage of classics, or a mix from many sources or periods” (xliv). The text is not a blueprint for reconstruction based on a predetermined destination, but rather a pliable instrument that can be redirected, redrawn, or ignored altogether. Through workshops and rehearsals the production develops organically with no prior fixed points and results in a production almost surely not where the playwright intended (xliv). Of course this initiative of taking extreme liberties with the text raises a series of contestable issues—copyright issues, ownership of a production, intellectual property, to name just a few—and it might be useful to explore these in another study, but for Schechner and the various theatre groups he piloted, these issues were simply obstructions, if not altogether irrelevant for their ends.

JERZY GROTOWSKI

A contemporary of Schechner and certainly an influence, Polish director Jerzy Grotowski was also exploring the possibilities of the theatrical space and how to break out of the confines of the traditional theatrical scenography. Grotowski contended that meaning was most readily conveyed through the relationship of two essentials—the actor and the audience—and not with excesses like sets, special

effects, and costuming. His theatre of the 60s and early 70s relied upon a reconfigured space for each production, attempting to include the audience in the action as observers within the play's milieu. Like Schechner, Grotowski was an instrumental figure in the exploration of the audience-performance relationship, but while Schechner's approach can best be described as a practical one—creating environments and shaping his ideas based on the theatrical experience—Grotowski was entrenched more in a scientific approach.

Grotowski was the founder and director of the small, yet influential Laboratory Theatre (established 1959). The aptly named Laboratory Theatre was a place where Grotowski approached the theatre scientifically; he worked out his theories and hypotheses through experimentation in a controlled environment and with willing test subjects. On its surface, the idea of a laboratory seems to be in contrast to the “spirituality of Grotowski's enterprise,” but Grotowski liked to invoke the idea of research to acting, believing that “great acting is a product of method, not inspiration” (Wiles 254). The building itself then serves as a laboratory, “an inert shell surrounding live human organisms” (254). According to Grotowski scholar Jennifer Kumiega, Grotowski considered his Laboratory Theatre as a place to analyze the actor's processes as a means of therapy for the actor “and by implication the spectator” (Kumiega 121). While much of his research resulted in a codified manual of sorts for actor training within experimental theatre, his theories and discoveries regarding the potentiality of the theatrical space are vital in the discussion of the audience/performance relationship. Grotowski stated clearly what his intentions were with the Laboratory Theatre: “We are seeking to define

what is distinctively theatre, what separates this activity from other categories of performance and spectacle. Secondly, our productions are detailed investigations of the actor-audience relationship. That is, we consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art”(Grotowski 15). (The first part of his intentions, to define what is specifically theatre, requires the most attention for this study; however, his investigations and summaries about the actor’s role in the production also yield fruit.)

To define what is distinctively theatre, Grotowski extensively studied the vast types of theatrical performance. Instead of trying to compile a comprehensive list of all that was considered theatre, he stripped it down to all but the most essential, most indispensable elements these forms of theatre shared. “By eliminating whatever proved superfluous,” he wrote, “we found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting or sound effects, etc.” (19). After removing all its superfluous elements, what he determined, simply, was that theatre cannot exist without two: the actor and the audience. “We can thus define the theatre as ‘what takes place between spectator and actor.’ All the other things are supplementary—perhaps necessary, but nevertheless supplementary” (32-33). Theatre, therefore, “cannot exist without actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion. This is an ancient theoretical truth, of course, but when rigorously tested in practice it undermines most of our usual ideas about theatre. It challenges the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines—literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, and acting (under the direction

of metteur-en-scene). This 'synthetic theatre' is the contemporary theatre, which we readily call the 'Rich Theatre'—rich in flaws" (19).

Grotowski criticizes the Rich Theatre for its "artistic kleptomania" as it steals from "other disciplines, constructing hybrid-spectacles, conglomerates without backbone or integrity, yet presented as an organic artwork." He then goes on to criticize the Rich Theatre's attempt to combat the rise in competition with film and television with what appears to be the use of their competitor's strategies

By multiplying assimilated elements, the Rich Theatre tries to escape the impasse presented by movies and television. Since TV and film excel in the area of mechanical functions (montage, instantaneous change of place, etc.), the Rich Theatre countered with a blatantly compensatory call for 'total theatre.' The integration of borrowed mechanisms (movie screens onstage, for example) means a sophisticated technical plant, permitting great mobility and dynamism. And if the stage and/or auditorium were mobile, constantly changing perspective would be possible. This is all nonsense. No matter how much theatre expands and exploits its mechanical resources, it will remain technologically inferior to film and television. (20-21)

What Grotowski then proposes in its place is poverty in theatre by stripping the stage of all its superfluous materials, leaving just the spectator and the performer, and by impoverishing the theatre from all its material goods (20-21). In this way the performance is left to recreate images and arrangements with the audience. The dramatic event is then shaped by "the relative relationship of embodied actor and embodied spectator" while the "shell that surrounded that relationship [is now] cut off from the corrupt, materialist world outside" (Wiles 244). Grotowski offers a detailed explanation of his vision:

We have resigned from the stage-and-auditorium plant: for each production, a new space is designed for the actors and spectators. Thus, infinite variation of performer-audience relationships is possible. The actors can play among the spectators, directly contacting the audience and giving it a passive role in the drama (e.g. our productions of Byron's *Cain* and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*).

Or the actors may build structures among the spectators and thus include them in the architecture of action, subjecting them to a sense of the pressure and congestion and limitation of space (Wyspianski's *Akropolis*). Or the actors may play among the spectators and ignore them, looking through them. The spectators may be separated from the actors—for example, by a high fence, over which only their heads protrude (*The Constant Prince*, from Calderon); from this radically slanted perspective, they look down on the actors as if watching animals in a ring, or like medical students watching an operation (also, the detached, downward viewing gives the action a sense of moral transgression). Or the entire hall is used as a concrete place: Faustus' 'last supper' in a monastery refectory, where Faustus entertains the spectators, who are guests at a baroque feast served on huge tables, offering episodes from his life. The elimination of stage-auditorium dichotomy is not the important thing—that simply creates a bare laboratory situation, an appropriate area for investigation. The essential concern is finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements. (20-21)

Schechner describes Grotowski's stagings as scalpels with which to dissect both the souls of the performers and the condition of contemporary European society and culture" (Schechner in TDR, 6).

As for Grotowski, like Schechner, he too moved further away from his theories about the relationships between the audience and performance. He later referred to some of his ideas about audience participation as "completely naive things" (Schechner, TDR). As the 1960s ended, Grotowski had virtually abandoned his experiments with his "Poor Theatre," and instead took his ideas about actor training and began to concentrate more and more on developing the individual and his/her "true self" (what he would later call "Paratheatre"). He eventually stopped doing theatre performances altogether in order to concentrate almost exclusively on developmental workshops as a means of exploring personal growth and enlightenment. He and members of his company would guide select audience members (certainly not what we would consider to be paying audiences) on a

participatory journey of what it meant to be a human being. For the purposes of this study, his writings and ideas formulated after his ideas about “Poor Theatre” are certainly outside the mission of CAST and Simmons and, therefore, irrelevant to this study.

WHAT HAPPENED

While working with The Performance Group, Richard Schechner asked an important question in his production journal: “Why has audience participation appeared at this moment in Western theater history, reintroducing methods that have been dormant since medieval times?” (Schechner 45). His answer provides succinct insight into the nature of theatre and the desire for interaction:

The theater is a particularly sensitive measurement of social feeling and action. It is also a holdout, technologically speaking: the last of the hand-crafted entertainments. In society in general, and in entertainment in particular, the movement is to self-contained, electronically processed, unresponsive systems—closed systems on which the individual can have little effect. Shout as you will at the TV set, Johnny Carson does not hear you. And even the phone-in programs have the famous “five-second delay,” giving the broadcaster absolute control over what goes out over the air. Closed, one-way systems are inherently oppressive. They are even more maliciously so when they wear the costume of openness, as so much of “media programming” does. Orthodox theater is much more open than TV or films but much more closed than environmental theater. Environmental theater’s attempts at audience participation are both last-ditch stands, and tentative first-tries at creating and enhancing entertainment, art, and actual situations by opening the system, making feedback not only possible but delightful. (45)

Since the 1970s, theatrical experimentation has certainly continued, but without some of the major discoveries, fervor, and advancements of the earlier era, at least on a large scale. Some theorists altered or abandoned their earlier theories (Grotowski later concluded that the strategies of his “Poor Theatre” made the

audience self-conscious) and audiences saw a renewed interest in traditionally narrative theatre. The 1980s and 90s saw a dramatic rise in alternative theatrical voices. Chicano theatre, gender diverse theatre, multicultural theatre, and postmodern theatre all rose to prominence. Perhaps due to economics, or a changing audience aesthetic, or cultural shifts and a changing generational spirit, those experimenting with the theatrical space seemed to have lost some of their urgency. According to theatre scholar and critic Mark Pizzato, the decrease in theatrical experimentation and energy since the 60s and 70s can be attributed to the change in attitudes stemming from college campuses.

I am somewhat disappointed with current college students. With the series of wars we've had recently, students haven't been more militant about their feelings. But they didn't have a draft, so it's obviously different. But that sense of crisis in the 60s that came both from the Cold War and the Viet Nam War and the draft, and maybe because there were jobs available back then and they didn't have to focus so much on getting a career, or maybe they weren't in that mindset. I think a lot of the energy in the 60s came through campuses. It was greater in certain places than in others where the audiences were eager, like the Living Theater where this group became famous with this 'We're going to change the world by taking our clothes off and touching each other! Let's go!' I think the culture has changed a lot since the idealism of the 60s and 70s. [The idea] that art can change the world or that people can levitate the Pentagon. There was a lot of energy from the younger generation to reinvent theatre. Now it's much harder to get audiences to come and participate or mingle with the performance. It's something that's edgy. So what happened to experimental theatre? I think the politics changed and the newer media have changed people—I think they have dramatically changed people. (Pizzato Interview)

Steve Nelson concurs with the assessment, that current attempts at environmental productions lack the urgent political and artistic agendas that typified such efforts in the '60s. They are more reliant on the eclectic, smorgasbord-style blending of techniques and traditions that typifies much postmodern performance" (Nelson 72).

Michael Simmons is one theatre practitioner in a long history of those who have experimented with traditional forms of the audience/performance relationship. The culture of experimentation that arose from the 60s challenged typical notions of the theatre space by connecting the audience with the performance. Most significant for the study of CAST are Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski who each experimented, for a very specific time in their careers, with the theatre space as a means of subverting the spectator's traditional expectations. Schechner's "Six Axioms" are a valuable tool in identifying the principles of environmental theatre, a form that shares a great deal with Simmons's experiential theatre. Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre also provides a valuable look at the study of the relationship basic to theatre, that between the audience and the relationship. While that spirit of experimentation and investigation into alternative relationships appears to have died, or at least greatly subsided, after the 1960s, we find Simmons and CAST taking up some of the same challenges as their predecessors. Unlike Schechner and Grotowski, however, Simmons does not theorize about the performer's presentation of a character or of the self, but deals exclusively with defining the performance space in relation to the audience. In order to more specifically identify CAST's experiential principles, it is helpful to investigate how Simmons compares to Schechner and Grotowski, and how CAST's experiential theatre both emulates, and diverges from many of their earlier theories about the audience/performance relationship.

Chapter Three CAST's Response

Since there is no current definition of experiential theatre, it is necessary to explore how CAST responds to Schechner's Six Axioms of environmental theatre and Grotowski's notions of a Poor Theatre. This chapter illustrates how Simmons and CAST's experiential theatre share a number of attributes with these previous theorists, particularly those of Schechner's Six Axioms, but also diverges from some of these older ideas. This divergence will help in determining the principles that assemble CAST's experiential theatre. This chapter also illustrates how CAST isn't merely replicating the theories that preceded them, but is branching off to distinguish their experiential theatre as a separate method for producing theatre.

SCHECHNER'S AXIOMS

Once again, Schechner's 6 AXIOMS are:

1. The Theatrical event is a Set of Related Transactions
2. All the space is used for the performance
3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in "found" space
4. Focus is flexible and variable
5. All production elements speak their own language
6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production.

There may be no verbal text at all

1. The Theatrical event is a Set of Related Transactions

For CAST, the transaction between spectator and performer is the most important of Schechner's three aforementioned sets of relationships. CAST still adheres to certain principles of the first two sets of relationships (among the performers and among the audience members), but this third relationship stands at the center of the CAST mission as it "involves and ultimately moves the audience." Jerry Rojo, set designer for Schechner, echoes this part of the CAST Mission Statement, "Each environmental production creates a sense of total involvement on the part of the audience and performer" (Rojo in McNamara14). As discussed later in Chapter Three this idea of involvement of the audience, rather than passivity, is paramount to experiential theatre as well. Like Schechner and his first axiom, CAST attempts to break free from many of the trappings of the orthodox theatre with disruptions to expectations of sense, space, and safety. Upon entering the theatre (as early as the parking lot or the box office), the audience realizes that the traditional barriers of the bifurcated space of the orthodox theatre are subverted. The spectator is not safe to be an anonymous witness to the action. They may find safety in certain areas of the lobby or in the house, but there is no avoiding the disruption of traditional theatrical expectations. The audience is being asked to be involved in several areas of the performance:

- 1) Entering the theatre: In a recent production of *Marat/Sade*, the box office employees and ushers dressed and behaved like the inmates of the asylum. The spectators were forced to receive their "tickets" (bloody Barbie dolls) by extending their arms through a guillotine—each element a representation of the play's themes.

The actor-inmates from the institution where the play-with-a-play was being performed were then responsible for ushering the spectator to his/her seat.

2) In the lobby: Quite often in CAST performances, the lobby is filled with improvisational performances by the characters of the play. (The lobby is actually where much of the “experiential” event takes place, an idea to be explored further in Chapter 7 of this study.) In *Metamorphoses*, several actors filled the lobby and engaged one another, and audience members, in character. Bacchus, the king, drunkenly and boisterously disrupted conversations and demanded attention as his guards rolled their eyes and apologized to patrons. This scene led into the opening of the performance. In *Edmund*, spectators milled around the unadorned lobby before the show, enjoying a cocktail from the bar or casual conversation as two striking prostitute-actors attempted to solicit them.

3) Direct address: CAST often chooses plays in which there are either specific instances of direct address to the audience, or where there are opportunities to create a milieu where the audience is “present” at the event portrayed. In a recent production of *Master Class*, the entire audience was part of a master class held by operatic legend Maria Callas. In *The Late Henry Moss*, the roof of the Moss house protruded over the audience area and the plaster walls surrounded the audience, creating a sense of being inside the Moss home, which the audience helped occupy.

4) Inclusion of the spectator in the performance: On occasion, CAST performances ask the audience to become characters in the play, with limited responsibility in the progression of the action. In *The Pavilion*, a three-person play taking place at a 20-year high school reunion, the play ends with the final dance of the class reunion. As

the lovers danced, and as the Narrator gave his final extensive monologue, he pulled several audience members out of their seats, paired them up, and instructed them to dance on stage as reunion couples filling the dance hall. Such a technique is relatively rare at CAST, but is employed on occasion to help disrupt the safety of the audience and thrust them into the action. While the outcome of such a tactic is debatable, it certainly disrupts the traditional notions of audience involvement in the orthodox theatre.

To an extent, CAST follows a similar principle with regards to stimulation of the private senses. In the third act of Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*, the character Esteban cooks a vile concoction of menudo over a stove to help cure Earl's hangover. In the CAST production, Esteban cooked a pungent stew over a hot flame, and the result was a theatre filled with an offensive scent. This is one of many examples in which CAST productions have overtly attempted to involve the senses, an avenue of their experiential theatre they wish to explore more deeply (Simmons Interview 3).

2. All of the space is used for the performance

Like the first axiom, CAST certainly adheres to the principle that the entire space can be used for a performance. They have incorporated the various spaces on the property into the performance and continue to explore those possibilities. The exterior of the theatre, including the parking lot, the box office, the restrooms, the lobby/bar area, and the two theatre spaces in the building, have all been used in a variety of ways. Sometimes these spaces are used as a means to support the action

and at times are the place where the action unfolds. The environmental designer, Jason Barnes, Production Manager at the Royal National Theatre's Cottesloe Theatre and contemporary of Schechner, could have been speaking to CAST when he said, "as you come in, hang up your coat, go to the lavatory, there's an actor doing something to you as you go in. You could decorate the lobby as well as the performance space" (Condee 170). As described in Chapter One, CAST's production of DiFusco's *Tracers* utilized the exterior of the theatre to assault the audience before they entered and created an atmosphere to be reflected inside the theatre and in the play's action and themes. For *Savage in Limbo*, CAST arranged for a graffiti artist to "tag" the CAST truck and sides of the building each night as the spectators entered the building, creating a sense of a seedy New York bar in a less-than-desirable neighborhood. Also, CAST utilized the bar area of the theatre as the performance space. Before the production, the bartender (Murk) served drinks to the patrons as the character of April remained passed out at the end of the bar. The spectators found their seats on barstools situated at various tables around the lobby and watched as the action morphed seamlessly from the pre-show pleasantries into the scripted performance.

Currently, CAST is merely scratching the surface of what they can achieve in their space. The manner in which CAST utilizes their space and how they can better explore the theories of Schechner and others will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Seven of this study.

3. The theatrical event can take place either in a totally transformed space or in “found” space

Using a totally transformed space for each performance can be beneficial for exploring the notions of experiential theatre. Currently CAST reconfigures the lobby area and the box office, and adorns various other spaces according to the production needs. In describing the environmentalist’s approach to various spaces, Jerry Rojo could be just as easily talking about CAST. In the traditional theatre, he writes, “the bifurcated space of auditorium, stage, lobby are each designed for autonomous functions.” Contrarily, “in the environmental theatre there is a tendency to unify these areas or at least arrange them so that the spaces seem to transform one into the other . . . With each production the entire complex is transformed in appearance or feeling to suit the needs of the particular piece. Thus the theatre, space, and environment are one and the same and change for each production” (Rojo in McNamarra 15). However, CAST has done little to redefine the seating areas of the theatre. They have added and removed seating, as well as elevated the seating a few feet due to sightline issues for a specific production, but that is all. There have been numerous examples of adorning the seating area and creating the atmosphere of certain spaces, but there has yet to be experimentation with the complete overhaul and transformation of the seating areas. Such transformation would be highly useful to CAST’s experiential theatre. The idea of three-dimensionality in painting applies to CAST’s objective of their “total immersion experience.” They are attempting to create an event in which the spectator can step inside and be surrounded, rather than watching a two-dimensional canvas in front of them. Such

a mindset of three-dimensionality can further enhance CAST's objectives of creating the sensation that the spectator is actually present at an event. These ideas of being present and surrounded are certainly enhanced by transforming the current space.

Such a transformation would require more than the reconfiguration of the seating arrangement, however. It would require actor training to negotiate the new relationships with audience members and other actors. There would certainly be a large influx of improvisation in both speech and movement, requiring the actor to have specific tools to be able to handle such improvisation on a nightly basis. There would also have to be a new comprehension of the uses and possibilities of scenery. This, too, would require significant training and imagination by the designers on how to best utilize scenery to enhance the experience. Such improvisation and ever-new relationships between the audience and the performers is one key element shared by both the environmentalists and the experientialists. Further exploring the current ideas of transforming the CAST space would help in their development of experiential theatre.

4. Focus is flexible and variable

The idea of where the audience is to focus their attention is an important element of a CAST production and one of the central principles in CAST's exploration of the performer-spectator relationship. Generally speaking, the stage action of their productions can best be described as having a "Single Focus." The two theatres at CAST, a three-quarter thrust stage with multiple entrances and exits, and a theatre-in-the-round, both allow for various perspectives in viewing any of

their performances. Such theatres, by their architectural nature, erase the notion of “the king’s seat.” Most of the performances at CAST can be considered orthodox with respect to the audience focus within the borders of the theatre walls. Basically speaking, the audience can absorb the events of the performance from their seats without having to change focus to catch every part of the performance.

While CAST productions rely primarily on a single focus while actors are on stage, they experiment extensively in each production with multi-focus and local-focus (although perhaps unaware they are following Schechnerian principles), most often in the lobby prior to the show and during intermission. CAST takes incredible care to design the lobby (which includes the box office, bar area, and the restrooms as well) with a cacophony of disparate elements. Live performers, artwork, video, collage, and other media are gathered in various forms and combinations depending on each script and the nature of the show itself. For example, prior to the performance of *Master Class*, a play depicting the late Maria Callas presiding over an operatic master class, several cast members milled about in the lobby. As patrons were getting their drinks, conversing, and perusing their programs, some excited “students” would interrupt select individuals and discuss the upcoming class to be taught by Ms. Callas. Other audience members were then forced to choose how they wanted to proceed in watching these improvised scenes. They could eavesdrop on the discussion, ignore it, join it, approach it, retreat from it, or even drift away from any excited student. There was a choice of where to center their attention. They could inject themselves into conversations or exclude themselves from others, but

there was no way to observe each conversation. Choices had to be made as to where to direct their focus among the various whirlpools of action.

It must be noted that there are exceptions to CAST's unique use of focus in the lobby area. As discussed in Chapter 2, in CAST's production of *Italian-American Reconciliation* one of the characters on stage engaged in quiet discussion with various audience members as he milled about, asking for donations. This, and other examples exploring the various practices CAST employs as part of its Experiential Theatre, will be discussed in subsequent chapters. (Also, see Chapter 7 of this study for follow-up mention of how CAST can develop their philosophy on audience focus more fully in the future.)

5. All production elements speak their own language

CAST often includes technical elements in their productions and occasionally brings attention to them as part of the performance, but they certainly do not go as far as Schechner maintains in Environmental Theatre. Lately, CAST has included the use of video in more of their productions. In their production of the technological play *Dark Play*, however, the video projections were not used as an entertaining addition to the story, but rather acted as an integral character. The actors often referred to and interacted with them, even confronting them at times. CAST also often experiments with various technical challenges in the lobby to be negotiated prior to the performance. There have been a few occasions where technical elements are part of the performance, as in their production of *Foxfire* which included a live band, costumed like the other performers, as part of the performance

itself. But CAST's use of technical elements in their productions can largely be considered "typical" of other theatres. Those creating and running the lights, sound, and other technical elements are considered to be part of the "illusion-making" of the performance. They are confined to their places in the dark above and around the theatre and perform their roles without drawing attention away from the performance itself. CAST certainly does not share Schechner's notion of allowing the technicians to "improvise" or change their routines night-to-night. Their role is to aid in the performance through their ability to enhance the audience's experience of the production, but usually not as part of any stage action.

6. The text need be neither the starting point nor the goal of a production. There may be no verbal text at all

This is the one axiom in which CAST most severely diverges from Schechner and the environmentalist theatre. Despite some improvisations before the show, in the lobby, occasionally during scenes changes and the like, CAST productions are generally devoted to the text. They certainly make decisions regarding adhering to or ignoring stage directions, as is typical of most theatres across the country, but from the start of rehearsal through the end of the run, the text is what guides the production. That is not to say CAST suggests a fixed point of destination or an allegiance to authorial intention, as Schechner criticizes. Rather, they use the text as the starting point at which to develop their production, then use the script to inform and justify all positions throughout the process. For CAST artists, it is what is "underneath" the words on the page that matter. And in order to discover this

depth of subtext, Simmons and other CAST directors continuously urge their actors to “raise the stakes” higher than what is suggested by the author. Using a sort of heightened Stanislavkian approach, Simmons will not allow actors to become complacent with the “given circumstances” unless they have been stripped away of all superficiality. (This idea will be explained further in Chapter 4.)

Unlike Schechner’s material, the script is indeed a blueprint for CAST productions. But the architecture created by the text is merely skeletal, needing enhancement and decoration, through interpretations that raise the implied stakes. There is room in rehearsals and workshops, like Schechner advocates, for the play to develop organically, but this development is limited to the performances, show designs, and other visual and sensory elements. The script itself does not change, nor is it “redirected, redrawn, or ignored altogether.” For CAST, interpretation of the script is necessary and beneficial, but the script remains intact.

CAST found itself in a small storm of controversy in 2001 because of the misperception of the CAST attitude towards playwrights. In the playbill for their November production of *Talking With*, they inadvertently forgot to mention the playwright, Jane Martin. On November 3, 2001, *Charlotte Observer* theatre critic JoAnne Grosse blasted CAST for the oversight, accusing Simmons personally of contributing to the diminishment of the playwright and the lionization of the director. She wrote, “Many directors forget that their job is to serve the play and not vice versa.” What Grosse failed to realize was that she had it backwards, that CAST is remarkably steadfast in their allegiance to the playwright and take the attitude that the director is employed, largely, to serve the playwright. The

December 9 edition of *The Charlotte Observer* included several letters from the public defending CAST and their approach to the text, and pointing out Ms. Grosse's error in judgment.

GROWTOWSKI

CAST certainly adheres to many principles similar to that of Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre. At the heart of both is the preoccupation with the relationship(s) formed in a production between the spectator and performer. The physical, aural, oral, and emotional relationships created can (and should) vary according to the production and the space in which the audience is positioned, or position themselves. (This is an area for future exploration and development for CAST, as laid out in the final chapter of this study.) The notion that there must exist in the performance live communion between the actor and the spectator, who must be included in the architecture of action, is essential to the livelihood of their respective theatres. Furthermore, Grotowski and Simmons share a common view that the theatre is in a great battle against the modern entertainments like film and television. They both express a desperate need to explore ways of distancing their theatres from the ever-developing technological advancements with which they have little chance of competing.

However, CAST's approach to this spectator-performer relationship diverges greatly from Grotowski's minimalist approach. Grotowski advocates poverty in the theatre, where all the "synthetic" elements are torn from the stage. His is a stripping of the theatre of all non-essentials, or decoration, focusing almost

exclusively on codified systems of training so the relationship between the actor and the spectator can be unencumbered. CAST, on the other hand, relies upon excess, decoration, and non-essentials as fundamental to their experiential experience, their “total immersion.” Instead of stripping the theatre of adornment, CAST attempts to inundate their productions with elements of various artistic disciplines (literature, sculpture, painting, and architecture, as mentioned above) in a way that uses them to the fullness of their potential in enhancing the audience experience. For instance, rather than eliminating set pieces or constructed elements, CAST explores ways to manipulate, add to, and massage those elements in order to use them to their fullest potential.

Simmons is, essentially, straddling both categories of Poor and Rich Theatre. On the one hand the muse of CAST’s experiential methodology is the primordial relationship between the audience and the performance. Simmons and CAST consider that relationship with each production and try to maximize their experience through the architecture of the space. CAST does not, on the other hand, remove elements from the stage, as in the Poor Theatre. Instead, Simmons calls upon the antithesis, what Grotowski refers to as the Rich Theatre, to infuse the theatre with as much accoutrements as he can manage, sometimes regardless of their relationship to one another. Grotowski would identify, it could be argued, this straddling between the two categories, this reliance upon excess as a means of connecting the audience to the performance, as superfluous and antithetical to his stripped down productions, like *Akropolis* or *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Simmons, however, could learn some basic principles from Grotowski that could

help expand his ideas about experiential theatre, namely Grotowski's ideas about repositioning the audience with each production in order to break down expectations between the audience and the performance stemming from the orthodox theatre, and thereby creating new relationships with each performance. This would help CAST fulfill a basic premise of their experiential theatre, one Simmons shares with Grotowski: "finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements" (Grotowski 20-21). It is apparent that CAST and Grotowski both share the same goal, but approach it from opposite ends of the the synthetic spectrum.

As is evidenced above, CAST echoes the principles and philosophies of past theorists and practitioners, particularly of Schechner and his Six Axioms, but varies in several regards. Schechner and CAST share similarities in the principles regarding notions of related transactions and the use of the whole space, illustrate slight variations with regards to flexible focus and the redefinition of space, and diverge significantly with the incorporation of technical elements and the reliance upon the text. They also share with Grotowski principles regarding the essential nature of the relationship between the audience and the performance, but vary with regards to the appearance of that relationship in practice. Having situated experiential theatre within the context of experimentation and how CAST employs some theories and diverge from others, it is now necessary to investigate more completely the nature of experiential theatre according to CAST. The next step in that process is to explore more fully CAST's history and evolution, its spaces, and Michael Simmons.

Chapter Four History of CAST

Having discussed the more theoretical elements of CAST's approach to production and CAST's relation to other theorists, it is now necessary to look more closely at some of the more practical elements defining the theatre. Michael Simmons, CAST and experiential theatre each have a uniquely itinerant past. Each of these histories, as well as the circumstances surrounding their convergence, help identify the current state of CAST's experiential theatre. The purpose of this chapter is to track the genesis, history, and evolution of experiential theatre, CAST, and its performance spaces. Examining each of these three elements help in further identifying the principles of experiential theatre.

SIMMONS HISTORY

Michael Simmons grew up performing theatre in a small middle-class suburb in Williamston, New Jersey. He graduated high school and decided he would major in theatre at Rutgers University in order to pursue a career in filmmaking. Although he was also courted by Brescia College in Owensboro, Kentucky, with theatre and tennis scholarship offers, he chose Rutgers as a means of remaining close to his hometown and his mother. He was informed, however, that an administrative error on the part of someone at Rutgers might put his admittance in jeopardy. Mere days before he was scheduled to arrive for orientation at Rutgers, he decided he would forego that school altogether and hop the small plane to Owensboro and begin his college journey at Brescia. (This decision, he admits, may have been influenced by seeing his mother's extreme glee at the possibility he would go to a college where

she could visit him often.) When he arrived at Brescia, he quickly realized it did not have the sprawling Kentucky bluegrass and beautiful coeds he had seen in the brochure. Feeling “stuck” and wanting to leave, he met with the head of the Theatre Department, who informed him he had already been cast as the Witch Boy in *Dark of the Moon* without the benefit of an audition. This, he admits, lifted his spirits, but he remained reluctant to stay. It was not until he met his acting teacher, Ray McIntosh, a slight, aging Scottish woman, that he realized Brescia was where he was meant to be.

McIntosh was a former stage actress of modest acclaim whose career had been some decades earlier in Scotland. Perhaps Simmons and McIntosh felt a kindred pull towards one another because they were both a bit trapped in that small Kentucky college. (McIntosh had followed her husband to Owensboro several years before, and she landed a job teaching, as there was little professional theatre there at the time.) Whether or not they were kindred spirits, Simmons admired the fact that he was being taught by a professional actress and immediately embraced McIntosh’s style. From the start, she encouraged him to avoid doing anything in the way he thought it “should” be done. Simmons recounts a time in McIntosh’s class when he didn’t get the praise he expected from his Shakespeare monologue (Simmons Interview 1). Instead she challenged him on the true nature of what he was saying. After much pressing Simmons realized he was performing the monologue merely the way he thought it was supposed to be done, not really understanding the words and the circumstances. (This approach to acting had worked for him in the past, so he hadn’t seen a problem before.) McIntosh showed

him that there were an infinite number of ways a monologue could be performed based on his approach, experience, and questioning of the material, and encouraged him to experiment with these. This incident encouraged Simmons to think about theatre in broader terms than merely superficially. It didn't take long for him to question the kind of theatre he had come to learn and instead to take his aesthetic to the limit of possibilities, by taking risks.

As a child he was always rebellious, spending his youth testing the limits imposed on him by his mother and other authority figures and even skirting the law on several occasions. This attitude did not change during his higher education. The Brescia College Theatre Department's stage was meager; a tiny transformed classroom space with one long row of theatre seats without any real stage proper and completely lacking in any technological necessities for a working theatre. In fact, Simmons claims their theatre's lighting system was comprised of 75-watt flood lamps tied to coffee cans with little ceramic bases. Brant McKenzie, the Chair of the Theatre Department at Brescia at the time, committed the students to working within a set system, and any deviance from that was unacceptable. In essence, Simmons was limited by several factors: the type of theatre he was forced to do, the way he was being forced to do it, and the mechanisms that he was asked to do it with. "They did me the biggest favor in the world. I'm sure when I was there I was cursing not going to Rutgers, but they couldn't have given me any better training, especially for what I'm doing now. Because every solution was a creative solution. It *had* to be" (Simmons Interview 2).

With his newfound “lens” he began looking at theatrical possibility, and coupled with his penchant for thumbing his nose at tradition and expectation, Simmons took control of his experience at Brescia. He began pushing the boundaries of his theatre experiences and turned those limitations into possibilities. For example, his Senior Thesis project was to direct Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. Simmons had a grand vision, especially for this small theatre. He told his superiors he wanted to make the entire theatre feel like the Air Force base in which the play is set. With the help of some of his friends with carpentry skills, he planned to gut the whole theatre in order to start with four bare walls, encase the front of the building with barbed wire, and make the audience feel as though they were standing on the base (Simmons Interview 2). Predictably, he was met with great resistance, having been told he could not do theatre that way at Brescia. “That was their mistake, right there, to tell me that I couldn’t do something . . . When somebody tells me I can’t do something, that’s what starts my ball rolling.” Simmons took control of his experience at Brescia. He once again gives credit to Ms. Macintosh, explaining that, even though there may have been people in the college who “were really pissed off” about many of the things he was doing, it was Macintosh who “gave me the faith and the confidence in myself to believe that [I] could do that” (Simmons Interview 1). That experience at Brescia, Simmons says, and in particular his experience with his Senior Thesis project, was his first introduction into what he would call “experiential theatre.” The phrase itself did not emerge until years later, however.

After college he began acting professionally and teaching at the nearby University of Louisville. By this time he had married and had a son (Robert Lee

Simmons), but was feeling the pressure from his wife and family to give up on his dream and get a “real” job. He did so, reluctantly, taking up the only other passion besides acting and film he had ever had, flying airplanes. He did so for twenty years, flying for Piedmont Airlines, which was eventually bought out by US Air in 1989. It was then that Simmons was re-introduced to his passion. Through a series of fortunate circumstances, his superiors discovered his previous experience with shooting films and Simmons found himself in charge of shooting training videos for US Air. His objective was at first to teach those in charge to shoot video more efficiently, but it soon became Simmons’s charge. For several years he flew across the Atlantic Ocean and back filming videos and various promotional spots for US Air and British Airways (one of which actually aired during a Superbowl telecast). Then in 1995, after several years of being away from home, he took a retirement offer from US Air. Now with a substantial pension, a renewed interest in film and arts, and time on his hands, it was easy for him to grant his son’s request for help on his theatre company’s next production, *Suburbia*. This collaboration and the production that ensued were the birth of Simmons’s experiential theatre.

CONCEPT/ORIGINAL INTENT

In January 1998, the fledgling Charlotte-based theatre troupe, Another Roadside Performance Company, was looking to make their production of Eric Bagosian’s *Suburbia* different, more engaging than a “typical” production. The artistic staff agreed to consult Michael Simmons about the production. Simmons, the father of one of the production team members (Robert Lee Simmons), was the

owner and primary director for a video and television production company, Victory Pictures. Now retired from a career as a commercial airline pilot, Simmons accepted the invitation and joined the production team. In the rehearsal process he was able to merge his experience in film and his extensive background in theatre to create a production that, at least, made an impact on Charlotte audiences. In his 1998 review of *Suburbia*, Tony Brown recognized the potential of this new theatre, “you've just got to love a theater company that so obviously relishes what it's doing. Another Roadside Performance Company could well evolve into a welcome and continuing shot of innovation to Charlotte's often stale theater scene” (“Hardest Working Slackers”). Part of that innovation was in their set design. Instead of building a two-dimensional set that intimated a gas station, they set out to build a more three-dimensional gas station, along with the conveniences often found within. The production included working traffic signals hung over the set, a fully-stocked grocery store with a working refrigerator, and a sound design that was constructed with the audience experience in mind:

We got ten speakers from an old movie theatre and set up a surround-sound system . . . what we could do was *surround* the audience with sound. There was one scene where a jet flies over and we made sure we did that in THX. And the same thing in the final climactic scene when the trash truck comes; we foreshadowed that. We started [the noise] back in the audience and crossed it [with] 270 degrees of sound so the truck got closer and closer to the stage, and the final speaker was set directly behind this dumpster where they find the body in the climax of the show. So in your mind you experienced a trash truck arriving there to pick up a dead body, even though you didn't see it. (Simmons Interview 1)

Meanwhile, Charlotte acting instructor Ed Gilweit owned and operated a small teaching studio a mere stone's-throw away from the Neighborhood Theatre on Cullman Avenue. The studio was a training facility for Charlotte-area actors, aptly

named Carolina Actors Studio Theatre. There, actors studied Stanislavski and the Meisner acting method, focusing primarily on “actionable verbs, raising the stakes, and exploring honest performances” (Simmons Interview 1). In the fall of 1999, one of Gilweit’s students, Robert Lee Simmons, invited Gilweit to “Another Roadside’s” upcoming production of the Viet Nam-era play *Tracers* by John Di Fusco, directed by Michael Simmons. For that particular production the elder Simmons, an active member of what was now called Victory Pictures, helped to create an environment aimed at maximizing the audience experience.

We made the set out of sand bags—which we’ll never do again because they’re heavy. Then we decided that if we were going to dress the inside of the theatre, why not dress the outside of the theatre? So we sandbagged the outside of the theatre and the box office. We put .50 caliber machine guns in there. We put snipers on the roof. We covered it in camouflage. We got mortar replacements. We got two “deuce and a quarter” army trucks. We got a ’68 Volkswagon van. We painted [it] hippy colors. We got the National Guard Honor Guard to meet you inside the theatre, and we got all of Rob’s friends to protest outside the theatre every night for the show. We utilized seamless film and theatre where we tied the two-story camouflage screen outside and projected all of the helicopter scenes. We projected Nixon’s speeches and everything that was going on in ’68. King was getting assassinated, Bobby Kennedy—all of this was happening while the show was going on. (Simmons Interview 1)

Another, perhaps more significant result of that production, was the relationship created between Simmons and Gilweit. Simmons remembers, “So Ed comes to see *Tracers* with two of his actors in it, and he asks us to see if we can’t merge our two companies” (Simmons Interview 1).

In 2000, two articles appeared in the local periodicals, *Creative Loafing* and *Charlotte Magazine*, featuring Ed Gilweit and examining the marriage between his company and Simmons’s. In it we get a glimpse of Gilweit’s perspective on theatre, Simmons, and their initial partnership. When speaking about theatre, Gilweit

sounds remarkably similar to Simmons. He argues that theatre has “lost its ability to affect social change” (Hart 25). The purpose of theatre, he argues, is to force people to think and potentially even change them because of it (Hart 25). Tired of the marginal work he saw on Charlotte stages, Gilweit started CAST as a laboratory for local actors to improve their skills and try new work.

Gilweit had seen what Simmons and his son had been doing and was impressed, partly by Simmons’s direction, and mostly through the technical elements he brought to the performance (“All About the Work”). He had been inviting the public to the actor showcases he presented, when he decided to check in just down the road and see what Victory Pictures was doing. What he saw was possibility. Simmons and Victory Pictures had exactly the two things Gilweit lacked in his studio space: technical expertise and creative fuel (“All About the Work”). Both Simmons and Gilweit admit that the agreement to do the third weekend of *Steambath* at Gilweit’s CAST space was originally a test to see if the two could get along (“All About the Work”). (This transition of the show will be explained below.) But on the Thursday before the show opened at CAST, Gilweit and Simmons shared a conversation that would solidify their partnership before the opening curtain on their joint venture. As the story goes, feeling that Simmons was reluctant (or perhaps elusive), Gilweit pulled Simmons aside and told him, “Michael, I am *not* going to drag you into this kicking and screaming. You either believe that I’m all about the work or you don’t.” Simmons knew at that moment Gilweit was not only sincere, but they shared the same fundamental belief, that theatre was all about the work (“All About the Work”).

Simmons agreed to Gilweit's offer but kept the company name of Victory Pictures and continued using the Neighborhood Theatre for productions. Now he was able to use the CAST space for rehearsal and preparation, as well as its stable of CAST-trained actors. Victory Pictures went on to produce John M. Synge's *The Well of the Saints* at the Neighborhood. All the while, Gilweit supported Victory Pictures and his students in the ensemble, spending considerable time with the company and Simmons. It wasn't until the year 2000, when Victory Pictures was more or less forced to leave the Neighborhood Theatre, that Simmons took Gilweit up on his offer to join together to create a theatre company. In the spring of 2000 the two made it official and created the Off-Tryon Theatre Company (OTTC). Named for its proximity to the main artery of Charlotte roads, Tryon Street, OTTC would be housed in Gilweit's CAST training studio. It was here Simmons would begin to formalize the theories he had put in place with Another Roadside Performance Company and Victory Pictures, what Simmons would later call "experiential theatre."

SPACE

Since 2003, CAST has been operating out of a large transformed warehouse on Clement Avenue in the Plaza-Midwood neighborhood, roughly one mile from the heart of downtown Charlotte. But from the theatre's inception in 1998 until landing at its current home, CAST endured a bit of a nomadic existence, bouncing from theatre home to theatre home and enduring a number of hardships along the way. While searching for a stable theatre to use, if not a permanent home, Simmons was

able to use these various spaces as a means of exploring and developing his ideas about the relationship between experiential theatre and the theatre space.

1998-2000

From ARPC's humbling beginnings in 1998, until the Spring of 2000 when they had become Victory Pictures, the Simmons team used the Neighborhood Theatre as the home for their productions. Set in the North Davidson arts district of North Charlotte, this 300-seat proscenium stage was built in the 1940s and was originally a movie theatre. After several changes in ownership, the theatre became a venue for small local bands and theatre productions. Because it had been a popular multi-purpose facility, it is understandable that the owners may have been a bit shocked to see their building being transformed by a rag-tag theatre company into the site of a Viet Nam-era re-enactment, including protesters and large machine guns on the roof. So in 2000, as Victory Pictures was preparing for their production of *Steambath*, management shared their apprehension or perhaps frustration with Simmons and informed him the theatre could only accommodate two weeks of the production's scheduled three-week run. Simmons, frustrated in feeling the confines of bureaucracy while performing in someone else's space, made an agreement with Ed Gilweit (of CAST). They would uproot the production after two weeks and move it to Gilweit's space not far away on Cullman Avenue to finish out the third scheduled week in partnership as CAST/Victory Pictures.

Of course this unorthodox move caused some incredibly difficult logistical challenges, such as the need to move a working shower and steambath from a 300-seat thrust theatre with 30-foot ceilings into a 93-seat studio theatre with 10-foot

ceilings. But Simmons and Gilweit managed to overcome many of the challenges thanks to precise planning and forethought. Prior to building the original set, they took the exact measurements of the CAST space and built the set so that it would fit there, as well as in The Neighborhood Theatre. (During the move some pieces, Simmons recalls, were left with a mere ¼-inch to spare.) They even engineered their thirty-degree raked stage at the Neighborhood, and the several pillars built on it, so that they could be transformed into a flat stage at CAST; this was done by sawing the base precisely to make the elements fit and level.

One technical challenge they were not able to foresee was the issue of the steam. For the production Simmons had designed a series of pipes that would emit enough steam to create the illusion of the set being misted over. That design and his calculations concerning the amounts of steam worked well for the large 300-seat former movie auditorium, but when they moved over to CAST and turned on the smoke machine, the entire 90-seat studio theatre filled with smoke (Simmons Interview 1). During intermission of the first night's performance in the new theatre, Simmons and Gilweit were greeted by the fire department responding to the electronic smoke alarm. (Forced to turn off the smoke machine just so they could finish Act II, Simmons would later tape over the smoke detectors for the rest of the shows.) But this technical oversight turned out to be a creative seed for Simmons. At the Neighborhood Theatre, the steam was minimal and acted merely as an indicator that the action was taking place in a steam bath. But at CAST he realized that even spectators in the back row of the theatre were really *in* the steam, perhaps giving the feeling that they were in a working steam bath. He had

inadvertently created an environment where the audience was literally surrounded by the atmosphere of the show, and was fascinated by this idea.

He gives credit to that experience as a major turning point in his thoughts about what he began to call “experiential theatre” (Simmons Interview 1). Having almost complete freedom in a smaller, less bureaucratic space, Simmons began consolidating his theories on experiential theatre and putting them into practice. This major disruption in the early stages of the theatre’s life, being forced to move theatres in the middle of a run, was a key moment for Simmons in formulating his theories about how the play’s experience related to the space in which it is being performed. In order to do what they wanted with each production (even if those theories were hardly formulated by this point), he realized it was necessary to have a certain degree of freedom to use the space at his discretion and not worry about how an owner of the building might react. Gilweit’s CAST space was exactly that, so the joint venture between Simmons and Gilweit certainly looked like a promising partnership. Soon, however, the bureaucracy and misaligned visions, which Simmons had tried to escape, arose again.

2000-2001

The early partnership between Simmons and Gilweit flourished and quickly yielded two elements that immediately set them apart from other theatres in the Charlotte area. First, Gilweit, Michael Simmons, and Robert Simmons refurbished the CAST space by installing fixed seating, refining the lighting booth, and creating what one critic called “the best little black box theater Charlotte has ever had” (“All About the Work”). The second important element produced from the merger was

the inclusion of another local theatre into the CAST/Victory Pictures partnership, Off-Tryon Theatre Company. This ultimately meant that the recently renovated spaces would house a year-round season of no fewer than ten productions (“All About the Work”).

The two men seemed to share a total commitment to putting in the work necessary to create theatre that would move people. Gilweit’s theories and experiences in teaching acting gelled with Simmons’s more technical and special vision of what experiential theatre could be. Simmons recalls fondly Gilweit’s words to him at an early meeting between the two, “A lot of people say ‘I’m all about the work. I’m all about the work.’ But they’re really not. They’re concerned with themselves” (Simmons Interview 1). Simmons goes on, “That’s why I never wanted to be anybody’s partner. Ed and I hit it off. We were both about getting the work done . . . And he was never afraid to do the work himself.” He goes on to reminisce about the many nights when the two would stay at the theatre until the early hours of the morning working on designs, programming, character development, and acting.

In June of 2000, CAST/Victory Pictures produced their first show together, Arthur Kopit’s two one-act plays, *Asylum*. By this time, in keeping with their collaborative ideals, CAST had brought in several other theatre artists. Dee and Muhammad Abdullah were well-respected theatre directors and had worked for many years with Gilweit at CAST. John and Suzy Hartness were also well respected in the Charlotte theatre community as lighting and costuming mainstays, respectively, and brought their larger, more recognizable Off-Tryon Theatre

Company (OTTC) to the CAST space. The triad of CAST, Victory Pictures, and OTTC was meant to be a hub for small, edgy theatre in Charlotte and a truly artistic, collaborative home. At first, the company worked well, producing a successful run of Mamet's *Oleanna* at CAST and then beginning preparations for their next show, *Italian-American Reconciliation*. But this smooth collaboration proved to be artistically toxic. Not all the partners would embrace the experiential concept Simmons so desperately wanted to explore and was implementing in "Reconciliation." Instead, the Abdullahs and the Hartnesses wanted to pursue a theatre more akin to Grotowski's Poor Theatre, without costumes, set pieces, and other superfluous trappings. The relationship quickly became the classic "either-they-go-or-I-go" scenario. Simmons recalls his reaction to one of his final conversations with one of the members of OTTC, "And I realized at that moment, I told him 'You know what? I agree with you, I'm not willing to do that. That's not what I'm about. I'm about experiential theatre. I'm about doing the work. I'm about involving the audience. I'm older than you. I've already done theatre with coffee cans and seventy-five-watt light bulbs. I'm not interested in doing that. If we can't do something experiential . . .' And we parted company" (Simmons Interview 1). In September of 2000, after only about ninety days with Off-Tryon Theatre Company, Simmons left with his company to work separately as Victory Pictures.

Simmons did return to CAST briefly in order to finish directing his son, Robert, in *Reconciliation* and to see through the extremely ambitious production he had begun. This was the first production in which he had been truly able to explore his theories about experiential theatre without limitations, an experience that had a

lasting effect on Simmons. What he did in *Reconciliation* was to turn the CAST theatre into an Italian restaurant. He changed the façade of the building to resemble a small Italian diner. Furthermore, CAST just happened to have a working kitchen in the back, so Simmons enlisted the help of his Italian mother who cooked before and during every show. The small space, hot kitchen, and excessive oregano, garlic, and other spices, provided another layer of sensory assault when the spectators entered the building. In conjunction with the copious wine-drinking in the play, Simmons also arranged for free wine to be passed out during the show. *Reconciliation* became a giant playground for Simmons to explore, virtually unencumbered, his ideas about the complete envelopment of the audience in the experience of the play. After the show closed, Simmons left OTTC for good, but with a firmer sense of what he wanted to explore, and the confidence that his vision could be attained.

At first, the split caused friction between Simmons and Gilweit. Gilweit had a financial stake in the recent merger, depending on the other members for an infusion of cash in exchange for using the CAST space. Furthermore, the exposure of the three respected companies was getting some local notoriety, and the theatre was on the brink of success. But Simmons would not be dissuaded. He took his vision with him, once again as Victory Pictures, and started over. It was not long before Gilweit would follow Simmons out of CAST. Gilweit was suffering from severe esophageal cancer and was unable to find the physical strength to run the building, a theatre, and an acting school. He had also become disenchanted with the new management of his space. He explained in an interview, "A couple of things became clear. Number one, we're not going to be able to function as a theater and a

school at the same time. . .the school was not in the mainstream, and that's what I wanted" ("Theater Charlotte's New Education"). So in October 2000, Gilweit was forced to leave the building to Hartness and OTTC in exchange for their agreement to assume the building's debt. While undergoing chemotherapy, Gilweit joined Simmons and Victory Pictures, who were now producing Neil Simon's *The Good Doctor* at the stalwart community theatre space of Theatre Charlotte.

The two men closed *The Good Doctor* and soon after signed a year's agreement to use the newly renovated Matthews Community Center. The neighboring city of Matthews had invested 1.3 million dollars in a former school and its auditorium to create an adequate 300-seat proscenium theatre. Simmons saw its potential to generate some stability and visibility for Victory Pictures. He and Gilweit vigorously began to plan for the upcoming season for CAST/Victory Pictures until April 17, 2001, when Ed Gilweit lost his battle with cancer.

Admittedly, this took the wind out of Simmons's creative sails (Simmons Interview 1). After several months re-evaluating his goals, Simmons decided to press on with the scheduled season at the Matthews Community Center. He would now have a more stable home to explore what was still just a mass of creative ideas floating around in his head. Once again, the move to a new theatre and the fresh start looked promising for Simmons and Victory Pictures.

2001-2003

The relationship with the Matthews Community Center began amicably, but Simmons soon realized he would be confronted with some of the same challenges he faced while at the Neighborhood Theatre. Management of this newly renovated

space, in a very conservative town, would neither allow him to produce plays with foul language, nor to alter or damage the theatre in any way. “We couldn’t even drill in the floor.” Having committed to a one-year-agreement/lease with the theatre and unable to break it, Simmons was forced to get creative. He would have to achieve his long-sought after vision of experiential theatre without being able to experiment with the space much at all. Simmons asked himself, “Even if we can’t do stuff with the lobby, what could we do with the play that would involve everybody?”

(Simmons Interview 1). For their first production in Matthews, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, he and Rob Simmons (who had now rejoined his father in Victory Pictures) were forced to improvise. Due to the limitations, they devised a number of approaches and practices that they still use today.

For *Cuckoo’s Nest* Simmons decided the audience experience was going to have to be in the details. He obtained the original drawings and blueprints from the Western State Mental Institution where Ken Kesey wrote the play and built a replica of the institution’s common room at the theatre, down to some of the finest details (Simmons Interview 1). Furthermore, he had the floor and parts of the set extended into the audience, creating a sense of being in the same room as the action taking place.

Another experiment Simmons employed during that production was the use of film. Victory Pictures was originally a film and commercial production company, and Simmons had always wanted to fuse film and theatre. Here, he was able to do that during McMurphy’s shock treatment. He arranged for two seven-foot screens to come down from the ceiling and then show cinematically what was going on in

McMurphy's head. He also used video images of pop-culture in 1968, including assassinations, Brill Cream commercials, and Woody Woodpecker cartoons. All these examples "really did suck them in," according to Simmons (Simmons Interview 1). Rather than allowing the audience to sit in the confines of the theatre and watch the play, they were thrust into the scene, albeit still as passive observers. Again Simmons had explored the possibilities of bombarding the audience with images, sounds, and designs that presumably elevated the experience of the audience. "So it just goes back to what you can do with limitations" (Simmons Interview 1).

Victory Pictures finished out the 2001-2002 season at the Matthews Community Center, but decided not to return for another year. Riding the wave of artistic success, feeling as though they had overcome issues of censorship, management, and design in their one season, they decided to move again. This time they found a home at the old Hart Witson gallery housed in a warehouse on Graham Street, once again closer to the heart of Charlotte. It was there they planned to do more experiential, more cutting-edge adult-themed material. Yet again, the relationship was short-lived.

Whereas at the Neighborhood and in Matthews, Simmons had to re-configure the existing infrastructure of the theatre, the Hart Witson Gallery space had nothing to begin with. It was a three-story 25,000 square foot empty warehouse next to an active railroad track. They had no heat or air conditioning, no lighting system, no stage, and no real definition of spaces for the audience and the performance. He recalls that the electrical system there couldn't handle a dozen 500-watt lights, so

they were forced to create an entirely new grid system (Simmons Interview 1). Simmons wanted a sort of *carte-blanche* beginning and he found it. While now dealing with limitations on the other end of the spectrum, Simmons was just as creative in expanding his approach to experiential theatre.

Simmons started with *Snapshot*, a play that had just finished a successful run at the Humana Festival in Louisville. Simmons was uniquely attracted to this play because he felt that it was written experientially. The play evolved as follows: the Humana Festival in Louisville, Kentucky, approached seven writers. Each would write a scene based on a snapshot of the visitor's center at Mount Rushmore. Then each of the scenes would be compiled into one cohesive play. Using this piece, which was ripe with experiential possibilities, Simmons began once again with the spectator's entrance into the space. There, a series of video projections and a tour guide welcomed the spectators to Mount Rushmore and led them from scene to scene. One of those scenes took place at the top of Mount Rushmore, which they conveniently set on the third floor of the open warehouse. With this play and the space they occupied, they stumbled upon the Schechnerian idea of using the entire space for the performance, a fundamental principle Simmons has carried with him since.

They then followed up *Snapshot* with the play *Closetland*. Set in an interrogation room that more resembled a mausoleum, the play allowed Simmons once again to explore the idea of surrounding the audience and incorporating the audience space into the design of the show. In order to best manifest the moans emanating from the adjacent room, he and his technical advisor, Greg Crubman,

built an intricate PVC piping system that surrounded the audience. Every twenty feet along the pipes, Crubman inserted a small speaker that was controlled by the dimmer board. He also constructed the theatre so that the audience sat in their seats surrounded by the walls of the mausoleum, and the actors made their entrances and exits among the spectators. The result was the illusion for the audience that they were actually inside the mausoleum. Simmons's use of the empty space created in the audience a sense that they were surrounded by the action of the play, both physically and aurally.

Simmons seemed to be enjoying his home at the Hart Witson Gallery. He had successfully managed to reconstruct the space to his liking in order to best serve his experiential vision. It would appear that Simmons would stay on and continue using the pliable space in order to explore his ideas. But now for the fourth time in as many years, Simmons was forced to move. First, according to Simmons, the woman who ran the Gallery was "psycho." He doesn't offer evidence of his characterization of her, except for the fact that she tried to raise the rent on opening night. Second, unbeknownst to Simmons until he settled in, a new owner had already bought the property and was preparing to tear down the building. Obviously, it was time for Simmons and Victory Pictures to move.

2003-Present

Over the previous five years, Simmons's nomadic journey had allowed him the opportunity to develop his experiential theatre experiment using a number of different strategies. As a result of those experiments several were deemed moderately effective:

- Surrounding the audience within the physical space of the play
- Incorporating a multitude of senses
- Using the entire theatre for potential playing areas
- Incorporating a variety of found/acquired items into the production
- Developing an acting technique suitable for the style of play
- Using light and sound experientially

But Simmons had yet to really explore each of these elements to their fullest. After leaving the Hart Witson Gallery in October 2002, he almost immediately found the space where he would stay and develop his theories with freedom and stability for several years.

Since 2003, Simmons has housed CAST on Clement Avenue, and operated solely under the CAST name. Once again Simmons found an abandoned warehouse he would have the freedom to convert. At first he was reluctant. After one of his designers showed him the space, he passed on the opportunity. At the time he remembers thinking, “It’s just one 50x100 foot warehouse that was littered with old furniture and vacuum cleaners and junk and dirt. And I could not see it. Maybe it was because I was depressed that we had to move to yet another space” (Simmons Interview 4). Now, years later, Simmons views it as “a blessing.”

Eventually, because of the warehouse’s proximity to downtown Charlotte, its low rent (\$1800 per month), and his ability to use the space freely, he chose to start fresh in the new space. In order to continue the creative and economic momentum he had built up in his previous two shows, he and his team quickly gutted the entire space. Out of sheer necessity he built a thrust stage, a tiny room they used as a

makeshift box office, and a rudimentary lighting grid, thanks to equipment donated by Marc Masterson, Mike Brooks, and the Actors Theatre of Louisville (ATL). Rob Simmons was then working at ATL, and Michael Simmons, having worked in Louisville many years before, was in constant communication with them. When Michael told them he was starting over in his own space, ATL provided Simmons with the packs and controlling systems he needed to start the theatre (many of which are still in use today). “If it wasn’t for Actors [Theatre of Louisville] I can’t say we wouldn’t have CAST, but I don’t know what we would be doing because that got us going” (Simmons Interview 2). In 2003, with the help of ATL and a core team of supporters, they readied the theatre for its first production, David Mamet’s *Speed the Plow*.

Ever since that hurried opening of the theatre Simmons has been constantly updating and renovating various spaces within the building. He built a bar to divide the space in half, eventually with the theatre on one end and a rehearsal space of several hundred square feet, a storage area, and an office area on the other. He obtained theatre seats from a local theatre that was closing and permanently affixed them to risers, allowing for a comfortable seventy seats. He then built a booth for the stage manager and lighting operators, a dressing room, a loft for costume and prop storage, and he re-configured the box office and the lobby areas. After several years of constantly altering the space to make it more accommodating for each production and the growing needs of the theatre, CAST began its largest construction project ever.

In the spring of 2007, Simmons decided he would produce the Teresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros dinner-party play, *Omnium Gatherum*. Robert Simmons was a cast member in the Louisville premier several years before, and Michael had wanted to produce it since seeing his son perform in it, but the play brought with it an overwhelming challenge—it was written so the set revolved on a turntable for the duration of the performance. (Rebeck and Gersten-Vassilaros wrote the play knowing it would be performed at ATL, which already had a usable revolving stage.) Fortunately for Simmons, he just happened to have a turntable, pulled apart into several large pieces, collecting dust, propped up in the back of the theatre. Two years earlier Charlotte Reparatory Theatre, the financially doomed professional theatre in Charlotte, had folded. In their liquidation they sold their turntable to Opera Carolina, who eventually decided they wanted to get rid of it, and sold it to CAST for \$500 (Simmons Interview 4). So, in keeping with his defiant streak, and not allowing anything to get in his way, he and his son Rob (who was now on staff full-time as the technical director) began construction on an entirely new theatre within the current CAST space. In that effort they were forced to reconfigure the available half of the CAST space. They extended the loft above the dressing rooms and over the box office in order to accommodate the depleted storage space, removed the office area and replaced it with a small backstage area with a makeshift greenroom, and moved the bar back several feet in order to accommodate a substantial lobby area. After a summer of constant work they opened the “Morris Theatre,” a 48-seat theatre-in-the round, complete with a working revolving stage. Now CAST was outfitted with two theatres, each complete

with all the necessary technical requirements to produce plays (except for the lighting instruments, which they move between the two spaces).

Their efforts garnered significant notice during their production of *Omnium Gatherum*. One reviewer offers his perspective, “The biggest surprise for me was walking into CAST, sitting up close to their revolving stage, and finding that *Omnium* hadn't lost a whit of its original relevance and power. Like those ambiguous lurid lights in the wings, it's still hellishly hot” (“After-hell.”) (Note: At the time of the writing of this study, CAST is the only theatre in Charlotte to provide regular theatrical programming in the round.)

According to Simmons, the building's owners support local theatre and enjoy having a theatre working out of one of their buildings (Simmons Interview 1). Impressed with the level of work CAST produces, they are particularly happy when the theatre and the space get good press. So the owners leave Simmons to his devices, without interjection, and Simmons returns the favor by taking almost complete responsibility for the building. When there are repairs to be made or if the air conditioning goes out or if the theatre floods (which it has done three times in his tenure there), it is Simmons who takes the financial and physical brunt. And while constantly being responsible for the upkeep of an aging warehouse can get expensive and time-consuming, Simmons relishes his current position and feels the price of his freedom is invaluable.

Simmons gives credit to the freedom that came with the new space for allowing him the opportunity to explore his ideas about experiential theatre. They were now able to do whatever they wanted, take as much time as they wanted, and

not worry about any backlash for modifying parts of the building. His exuberance and excitement at being the master of his own theatrical space are clearly evident when he speaks about the original move to the theatre, “if we were going to put in a black box, who said it’s got to be square? Maybe it could be octagonal. Maybe it could have a revolving floor on it? Why couldn’t we put a wall in here and make two theatres? And who says we can’t paint the floor? Who says we can’t knock down this wall? Nobody. It’s ours. We can do whatever the hell we want” (Simmons Interview 1). It was also soon after the move to the current space that Simmons coined the phrase “thinking outside the black box.”

Simmons argues that any theatre can experientialize a play, regardless of the space they are in or the script being presented. While there are factors that certainly limit the choices a theatre can make, there is always a *level* of experientiality that can be achieved. Whether it is with the ticket, the lobby, the advertising, etc., there are always elements the theatre can employ to bring its production a degree of experientiality. He rails against traditional proscenium theatres that present plays with the typical bifurcated space. Like Schechner, who detested the separation between the playing area and the dark viewing space of the house, Simmons finds that traditional proscenium theatres inherently distance the audience from the action. After attending a production of *The Heidi Chronicles* at Theatre Charlotte (a 300-seat traditional proscenium theatre), Simmons shares his views on the distance he felt:

The one thing I missed about going to see that was the intimacy between the actor and the audience. And that *was* a function of distance, and your director, and space . . . I found it so difficult to sit out in that audience and be so far separated from you. And I saw the work that you were doing,

wonderful level of commitment in emotion by an actor, and I'm fairly close to you, I'm like four or five rows back, yet I feel this level of separation. I was involved but I was not nearly as involved as I could have been. If you'd have done that show at CAST, the impact that that would have had would have been much greater, I think. (Simmons interview 1)

But according to his philosophy, it is not just the smaller, more intimate theatres that are capable of presenting experiential-style productions. Large proscenium theatres can still employ elements of experientiality to remove some of the distance between the actor and the spectator. "If something would have happened in the lobby it would have gotten me prepared, or got me engaged prior to that. There are ways you could be experiential in any theatre . . . There were so many opportunities for experiential theatre that Theatre Charlotte didn't do" (Simmons Interview 1).

EXPERIENTIAL

History of the Term

At present, experiential theatre is without definition. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the language and approaches CAST uses to create what they call experiential theatre. In short, CAST sees experiential theater as a methodology of producing theatre whereby the entire audience is immersed in the unique experience of a production and therefore will be more inclined to take the messages of the play with them as they continue to live their daily lives.

In 1998, when Rob Simmons approached his dad to assist in the production of *Suburbia*, to find a way to do it differently than would be expected, the elder Simmons relished his return to theatre, particularly one that was engaged in subverting traditional presentations. As they proceeded together, trying new and

innovative ways to envelop the audience in the theatrical experience, they found themselves operating without a vocabulary suitable to describe their methodologies and collaboration. They knew of no term or phraseology to effectively describe the tactics being employed and the innovative approaches to productions. As a result, it was left up to audiences and critics, who repeatedly used the term “experimental.” Simmons understood that while CAST was indeed experimenting with various productions, (attempting certain practices, which may or may not be effective for their purposes), the term “experimental” was not an effective description of their practices. An experimental production suggests that a hypothesis is developed and, through the production process in a controlled environment, one may prove or disprove that hypothesis. Simmons was more interested in the experience of the patron: “I want people to come in and be enveloped in an experience. It’s not “experimental,” it’s “experience-tial” (Simmons Interview 2). His approach was (and still is) less of a scientific one, and more of the “throw it against the wall and see what sticks” variety. Years later, tired of the misperceptions of the theatre and in an effort to try to explain to audiences what they were doing, Simmons looked to the dictionary and found the Latin word “experientia” (Simmons Interview 2). Afraid that audiences wouldn’t understand what the term meant, but certain that experience was at the root of his theories, Simmons looked at “experientia” and simply invented the term “Experiential Theatre.” Even then it took some time for the public and reviewers to catch on. Ironically, the first time the term “experiential theatre” was used in print with regards to CAST it was used incorrectly. In his preview of *“The Colored Museum,”* Peter Hannah writes, “But it’s not *The Colored*

Museum's content that should get people's attention. It's the presentation.

Embracing the company's philosophy of "experimental theatre" [sic] *Museum* invites audience members to board a "Celebrity Slaveship"—with airline ticket and all and embark down a jetway, through the main cabin door and into the makeshift plane ("The Colored Museum").

Purpose

CAST operates under the philosophy that the stronger the experience, the stronger the connection to the messages and the people populating the production, and the more apt they are to be affected. The ideal result then is that audiences will make a difference in their own lives and the lives around them. Simmons illustrates this, "Anybody can go see a play. I think that is an outdated construct. If I can involve you from the moment you walk in the door until the moment you leave, we've had a shared experience. You are going to go home and something, hopefully, is going to transpire within you" (Simmons interview 4). Like Schechner, CAST rejects the traditional theatre's distancing of the performance from the spectator. He compares it to attending a movie or a sports match in an arena. In such events there is a distance between the spectator and the action, a distancing from the emotion and the potential of the performance. Simply, CAST is trying to eliminate that distance and include them in the play (Simmons Interview 4). This inclusion can include any and all elements of production.

According to Mark Pizzato, the modern theatre battles with the various media who are actively seducing audiences to expect something more experiential. "What theatre struggles against is how much film can take you imaginatively into its

space. So it's all just on a wall, or OMNIMAX where it's all around you, but you can get an experience of traveling through space, the camera movements and the cutting of jumping space and time—almost Godlike or some ghostly power. Television has this sense of power with the remote control. And with the internet and video games there is that sense of interactivity where you can play the character” (Pizzato Interview). He goes on to theorize that although these various media seem to have a monopoly on creating an ever-heightened experience, the theatre offers value of its own: “Theatre seems to be something people are seeking that is more complex and more challenging. It gives me a way to escape my own mortal concerns.” With this rise in the desire for a heightened experience, however, perhaps the traditional theatre finds itself to be an antiquated model.

So how does CAST offer its audiences something more complex and challenging? They ask the audience to step outside their comfort zone and be an active participant in the theatre production (Simmons Interview 4). In her 1985 essay, “Multiple Spaces, Simultaneous Action, and Illusion,” Stephanie Arnold consolidates the motivations of earlier experimenters like Schechner:

From the 1950s to the 1970s, spatially innovative theatre works appear to have several interrelated common intentions: (1) to increase audience involvement in the theatre event, involvement which may be physical, intellectual and/or emotional/psychological, (2) to create a theatre experience in which the spectators are not observers of a separate, illusory world but participants in the immediate theatre experience which occurs primarily in real time and space rather than in the fictive time and space of a story, (3) to restore vitality to the theatre. (259-60)

With a slight alteration of Arnold's second intention listed above, CAST's experiential theatre shares the same motivations/purposes.

The traditional theatre patron has been indoctrinated with the idea that they will come to the theatre, sit in their assigned seat in the dark, not be bothered, see the play, then leave the theatre without being forced to engage with the production on any level. Schechner, CAST, and various other like-minded theorists throughout theatre history simply try to break the audience of their sense of security, their sense of “This is our space, that’s your space and it won’t be invaded” (Pizzato Interview). Experiential theatre is one method to break down this territory of safety. Once this territory is broken down, the audience is “severed from their expectations” and are “provoked into playing along because they don’t have that security” (Pizzato Interview). This sense of safety is challenged from the moment they enter the building, and sometimes when they enter the property.

The key then, after the goal of breaking the audience’s expectations of safety, is to determine what role they are to play, and that is determined by the setup of the theatrical experience. Schechner brought the patrons into the world of the play and forced them to make decisions on where to stand, where to focus, and even how to experience the production itself. Brecht set the audience in a position to think critically about social issues through various techniques like his *Verfremdungseffekt* and other distancing methods. CAST employs a variety of tactics with its building and lobby design, its various levels of performance within those spaces, and various events within the theatre proper to effectively uproot the audience from their expectations. (In an oxymoronic way, by bringing the audience closer to the performance, or even into it, CAST might actually be producing a Brechtian distancing.) Once the role of the audience is defined and expectations are

negotiated, the audience then, in theory, is ready to receive the experience of the production in a manner far greater than the traditional theatre offers. There is also a danger, though, that must be addressed: pulling the audience out of their comfort zones can backfire. It is dependent on the spectator and their willingness to participate (Pizzato Interview). More of this will be explored in Chapter 7.

Result

The ideal result of an experiential theatre production is the creation of an atmosphere that CAST believes provides the greatest chance to affect each audience member. The goal is to become more aware of the self, to use the production as a mirror to reflect the spectator in a more personal way. "It can be a healing, therapeutic thing. It could be [on the other hand] an avoiding or re-confirming of stereotypes" (Pizzato Interview). When speaking of their production of *Limbo*, Simmons offers insights into the ultimate goal of reaching the self and others:

All I am asking you to do is listen to this one person's true story, understand what she is going through, relate it to your own life, and go out and think about it, go out and talk about it. Share that with somebody. And maybe all that it will do is validate the position you already have. Great. That position is now stronger. Maybe you'll realize you are being a little closed-minded about this, or realize your grandfather was an immigrant as well and what if they had done that to him? Whatever that story is. Maybe you will see *Edmond* and the next time you see a black person on the street and you are inclined to think they are people. Maybe the next time you have a prejudiced thought you'll catch yourself. Maybe nobody knows. This could be something that works on a one-on-one basis. It could be a thought. "This person does make me uncomfortable. Well, wait a minute." I'm not going to say life is going to be great and everything will be wonderful because you came to see this play. But maybe we've moved you a little bit. Hopefully we've moved you off your datum [sic] and you've reflected upon your life. And that does make a difference. (Simmons Interview 4)

Simmons maintains that "by putting that message in an experiential package, our chances of having you make that difference are more likely" (Simmons Interview 4).

He then sums up the reason for pursuing an experiential model rather simply, “Everything we do, when you put all the elements together, that is what experiential theatre is all about: to do it in such a way that we can effectively have an impact on just one audience member. That’s why we fight the fight everyday” (Simmons Interview 4).

EVOLUTION

The evolution of CAST’s experiential principles is, at best, difficult to map. So little has been documented about the approaches to productions and the effects of their experiential experiments. To date, no empirical data has been formulated as to the viability of experiential theatre. Nor has there been much written about the approach and methodologies they employ. Therefore, an accurate analysis of the evolution of the experiential approach is highly challenging.

Simmons says he has been exploring experiential theatre since before he knew what it was. Examples of the seeds of the experiential can be found in the history of Simmons’s undergraduate tenure and his brief time at the University of Louisville. It was at Brescia and Louisville that Simmons began experimenting, albeit modestly at best, with manipulating the theatre space. Whether the strategies Simmons sought to employ were a means of subverting audience expectations, experimenting with the audience-performer relationship, thumbing his nose at the administration, or just trying to be innovative, is unclear. What is perhaps more important is that Simmons was inspired to challenge the traditional forms of

theatrical presentation. He took with him a desire to produce theatre in a distinctive way, even without a name for this type of approach.

After his return to theatre with Another Roadside Performance Company and Victory Pictures, those initial ideas were given a slightly freer environment in The Neighborhood Theatre and the Hart Witzen Gallery. Through the limitations imposed by the owners of those spaces, Simmons tested his ideas about how to provide the audience with a greater experience. The production of *Tracers* certainly tested the limits of the space and the expectations of the audience via the exterior of the building, the video projections, and military theme throughout. For the Victory Pictures production of *Steambath* in 2000, they piped steam into the house to immerse the audience in the milieu of the play. Then later that same year for their production of Shanley's *Italian-American Reconciliation*, they filled the house this time with the sounds and smells of a working Italian restaurant. Such tactics echo those of Schechner's earlier attempts to assault the audience's senses. The following are just a few examples that illustrate the type of experience Simmons was attempting for the audience—with salient excerpts from various early reviews:

Tracers as the “ultra-atmospheric play” and “I don’t think anyone will go away unmoved.” (“Flashback to Nam.”)

“Director Michael Simmons, whose immigrant Italian mother raised him in South Philly, is going for the ‘smell-o-rama’ approach to John Patrick Shanley’s folk tale of love and food in Manhattan’s Little Italy.” (“Love”)

"I can't tell you how much of a multi-sensory experience it was. The smell of gunpowder, smoke and wet dirt were in my clothes when I left." ("Monica")

"a reality-jarring experience" ("Flashback to Nam")

"The authentic, stark-white set evokes a creepy I-am-locked-inside-a-mental-ward severity, sterility and coldness that envelopes both the audience and the actors."
("Crazy")

"*Reconciliation* offers theatre the way it's supposed to be experienced" ("Q-Notes")

"The intimacy of the space and the proximity to Simmons only serve to intensify the theatrical experience. His energy and emotion are palpable. To be within arms [sic] reach of an individual who, for all intents and purposes, is experiencing a complete an [sic] utter emotional breakdown is as exhilarating as it is disturbing. No matter how good the program, you'll never get that kind of experience in front of your T.V."
("Reconciliation")

"Hart-Witzen Gallery becomes a better theatrical space every month, despite being flanked by nightclub jamming and railroad rumbling." ("Giving Torture")

In his 2003 review of *The Colored Museum*, longtime Charlotte theatre reviewer Perry Tannenbaum was among the first not only to recognize the innovation in the design of various elements, but also to associate such innovations with the themes of the play,

Our playbills are cleverly configured like airline boarding passes. Refreshments are served at our seats from a cart on loan from USAir, and there's ironic "For Coloreds Only" signage on the restrooms . . . The ultimate questions from Wolfe apply with a fierce pertinence to all oppressed peoples. How do we carry the baggage of the past into the future without hampering and crippling ourselves? And how do we leave this baggage behind without discarding key parts of our culture, our heritage, and our identity? These grim questions go unanswered, but watching this energized ensemble wrestling with them will likely double you over with laughter. ("Trashing")

But not all early reviews responded as favorably to the attempts at a heightened experience the theatre was making. Responding to the same production, JoAnn Grosse chastised the attempt at innovation, "What I didn't get, though, was the halfhearted attempt at presenting the entire production as a flight, tickets resembling boarding passes, for example. Wolfe's title indicates the appropriate setting" ("Trashing"). In his 2001 review, Tannenbaum offers a brief look at the problem with the production of *Talking With* at the Matthews Community Center, "Yet, I couldn't help feeling how much more magical this would all be if we were sitting closer to Mitchell, at the same level or above, or perhaps even surrounding her." These are just a few of the reviews that provide evidence that, although Simmons was attempting to apply innovative approaches to creating a new and exciting experience for the audience, at times he was doing just the opposite. The various experiential effects and the space were not all working in unison to affect the audience as Simmons would have liked.

It appears the early years can be characterized as a series of experiments in a search of an identity for the company. And the resulting company aesthetic would be one of a total immersion of the senses. Audiences were bombarded with the sights, sounds, smells, and assaults common to the themes of the plays that were being presented. Certainly not all the plays they produced lent themselves to such an ambitious approach as the aforementioned examples. Critics (and some audiences) certainly did not receive all the plays and approaches favorably, but it is evident that each of the productions in the early years acted as a test to see what was possible in terms of subverting the traditional audience experience.

Over the next several years, CAST grew financially, but appeared to settle artistically. This is due in large part to the fact that they were able to take residence in a more stable facility at the current CAST space. That is not to say, however, that Simmons or the theatre grew complacent in their efforts. On the contrary, they had to work even more diligently to support a building they were responsible for, and they continued vigorously to maintain a base standard for their experiential theatre. Yet it appears that having the stable environment has been both a blessing and a detriment to their experiential evolution.

Simmons believes CAST is always evolving (Simmons Interview 6). He acknowledges they may have missed their goals on the level of experientiality with some specific productions because of time, budget, or assistance available. But then again, by his own admission, Simmons is incapable of being purely satisfied, “There’s all kinds of shortfalls we’ve had in all of our productions. There’s never anything the way that I want it. These guys know it’s never good enough” (Simmons

Interview 3). They also may have suffered from ignoring their own mantra of “thinking outside the black box” in their ability to see the potential in addressing their various spaces. That is to say, in thinking outside the typical blackbox paradigm, they may have created a new one to which they have become beholden. Simmons notes that being in the same space for so many years has forced them “to experientialize the shows in many of the same ways because the experience is directly related to the physical space that we have. We know we always have the box office to experientialize. As soon as you walk into this space something is going to happen with the tickets. Something is going to happen with the bar area. And then of course there’s the physical participation of getting into the show” (Simmons Interview 6). This preoccupation with the design of the building’s interior appears to be at the sacrifice of two strategies they previously explored.

CAST has retreated from their initial ideas about engaging the audience upon their arrival into the parking lot. *Tracers* was certainly their most bold attempt at engaging the audience in the experience of the play before ever entering the building, and they followed that up with a few modest attempts, but the current CAST space has not attempted to house any such experiments. For their production of *Savage in Limbo* (2007) they employed a graffiti artist to “tag” the side of the CAST UHAUL van parked outside the theatre. Other than that example, there does not appear to be any other such attempt at exploring the exterior of the building. The reasons for that are not clear, but it can be assumed that logistics, resources, and a higher dependence on the interior of the space can all be considered factors.

They have also retreated from assaulting the senses. Early in the group's history, they were preoccupied with creating a sound design that pulled the audience into the world of the play, as in *Suburbia*. CAST was also proud of the effects the smells of cooking Italian food had on the overall presentation of *Reconciliation*. And in *Steambath* they used copious amounts of steam to affect the audience's ability to clearly see the action of the play and to contribute to a feeling of smoldering heat. Since 2003, however, few examples exist that illustrate such a desire to use the senses as a means of heightening the audience experience. For their production of *The Late Henry Moss* (2006), the character Esteban cooked actual menudo on stage, not only as a hangover cure for Henry, but to draw the audience into the world of the New Mexico trailer. But the lack of mention in reviews suggests the effect was lost on the audience.

On the other hand, an area of production CAST has continually developed since their inception has been the desire to experientialize their front-of-house strategies. Simmons and CAST have been exploring unique ways to market their shows since they began producing in 1998. Limited in what they could do with the physical space while at the Neighborhood Theatre, they often leaned on their marketing strategy to be (what they considered) experiential. For their production of *Steambath*, Simmons and the actors donned towels and drove up and down the streets of North Charlotte inviting people and handing out leaflets promoting the show. (Grassroots marketing, to be sure.) They then provided towels to patrons upon entering the theatre for the performance, many of whom arrived in their own towels. "We were ahead of the power curve then too. We hadn't thought that far

ahead on the marketing. And even though the tickets were kind of marketing, people remembered us from that” (Simmons Interview 1). They have also continued to develop the tickets used for each show. Mutilated dolls, speeding tickets, bath towels, rubber mice, and cans of tuna are just some of the alternative means of entry they have used to jar the audience’s expectations.

Another area of development over the past several years has been to explore more fully the use of technology as a tool for experientializing productions. Prior to 2008, CAST had used technology, to a degree, in their lobby displays and in their actual productions. But such examples are few and rather ancillary. In 2008, inspired by their production of *Dark Play*, CAST began exploring technology more seriously. The text for *Dark Play* explores the dangers of an evolving technology, focusing particularly on the rise of social media. CAST explored ways to use such technology to market the show and within the show itself. The original idea was to exploit technology to such a degree that they would ask their audiences to bring their laptops, Blackberrys, and cell phones, and actually encourage them to use them during the performance, perhaps even getting text messages from characters during the performance (Simmons Interview 1). These ideas, however, never made it to the actual production. What the production did include were emails and texts from the show’s main character, “Adam,” to the patrons. Roughly twelve weeks prior to the show’s opening, CAST began email and text blasting their patron lists with messages from “Adam.” They also used projections and a technologically-inspired set design to carry the themes throughout the viewing space.

The Subconscious

One area that CAST has begun to investigate more seriously, and where it appears they are now evolving, is in exploring ways to affect the patron's subconscious. In its early years, CAST implemented elements in their productions that the audience may or may not be consciously aware of while watching. It is CAST's belief that although the audience may not have recognized it consciously, a seed is planted that will ultimately grow and affect the patron. In many respects, experiential theatre works on a subconscious level. The audience goes through a multitude of sensory effects prior to and during a performance. The goal of those effects is to subconsciously (although not always) make the audience more prepared and connected to the show. CAST took this idea and began working elements into the play itself to give the audience a greater appreciation for the play and its themes.

The germ for this idea began to be implemented fully in 2002 with their production of *ClosetLand*. When thinking about how to experientialize the play, Simmons and the team kept returning their attention to the floor (Simmons Interview 2). It was painted in large black and white squares to resemble ornate marble tiles. During a moment of brainstorming between Simmons and his lead actor, Mike Harris, they began exploring some of the themes of the dark play and ultimately decided the lead character was playing a large strategic game with his captor. They then decided the nature of the show and the actions of Harris's character most resembled chess, therefore, all the characters' movements throughout the show were blocked as a chess match. Simmons remembers talking to the actors, "For every scene we decided 'who are you?' 'I'm a pawn.' How does a

pawn move? One square at a time. And that's exactly what happened. He would move one step at a time and hold his position. And then she would do something. And then sometimes he was the Bishop. And all the blocking was in diagonals. When he was the Queen he could move in a straight line in any direction. Sometimes he was the Rook, and would takes two steps, turn ninety degrees and take one step, hold that position" (Simmons Interview 2). This approach to the blocking was a physical way to manifest a particular theme of the play. No one was aware of the blocking patterns but Simmons, Harris, and the female actress, but that was by design, according to Simmons. He explains how he sees such tactics playing out: "If the director recognizes it, and the actor recognizes it, and we've all explored it together, even if we are the only three or seven people on the stage that know it, the audience knows something. They felt it. They might not even recognize it. But hopefully three days later, they might not remember the whole show, but they'll remember that line was something huge to you. And in that way, you'll have reached in and touched them" (Simmons Interview 5). Simmons goes on, "Did the audience know that? Don't know, don't care. All I know is that as a whole, they endured this experience" (Simmons Interview 2). It's a matter of providing a richer experience, "It's got to be richer for the audience. Whether they recognize 'over' or not, their experience and the intensity and the stakes you see on stage can eat away. They can sense that" (Simmons Interview 5).

Another example took place in the 2007 performance of *Omnium Gatherum*. The quiet 9/11 firefighter, Jeff, indulges in the delicacies of a dinner party. When the hostess replies that the current course is "Over," the largely silent Jeff replies

“Over?” On the surface Jeff is responding to the course being completed. The actor could play it any number of ways depending on how he interprets the character’s desires. But Simmons asked the actor (as well as the other actors in the show) to take everything further, to raise the stakes, and personalize each line to its extreme. Jeff, the audience later discovers, was killed in the towers on 9/11. As a firefighter in the towers, it is possible, if not probable, the last words he heard before dying were shouted over the radio, something akin to “Jeff, are you there? Over?” Then, the actor takes that one short word “over” and gives it the proper resonance in the performance. Again, Simmons does not care if the audience gets it right away. Rather, he believes a seed has been planted and the audience takes it with them, only to realize its effects later.

These are just two examples of the ways in which Simmons and CAST are exploring how to subconsciously affect the audience. Simmons maintains the strategies they are exploring are a way to provide the audience with a more lasting impression of the performance. He compares the idea to an impressionistic painting, explaining that when getting close to one “I can see all those little brush marks and everything. That’s not where it’s at. It’s being able to step away from it and take a whole and realize all those little marks, they all mean something” (Simmons Interview 2). Simmons’s hope is that later, when the audience member is doing something entirely unrelated to the play itself, perhaps with the examples above—playing chess or see on TV a firefighter or police officer saying “Over”—they will be affected, in part, by the performance they saw at CAST (6). That,

Simmons argues, is the reason they do theatre, “If they’re not thinking of the play after they leave the building, what’s the point?”

By and large Simmons feels CAST has continued to evolve by maintaining or exceeding the level of experience from year to year (Simmons Interview 6). And to a large degree that appears to be true. Since taking up residence on Clement, they have continued to experiment with the spaces available to them. Their lobby and bar continually serve as areas where the audience can, or is forced to, prepare for the show. The efforts put forth in those spaces continue to receive critical notice. Most reviews of CAST shows over the past several years include mention of the lobby and bar design or of the entrance into the theatre. Theatre critic and educator Mark Pizzato has been seeing CAST plays since their days at the Neighborhood Theatre and recognizes a big jump in their abilities when they moved into their current space, “I remember when it was just the one bigger space and a larger lobby. Then when they created that little space with the revolve, I thought, ‘They’re really getting inventive’” (Pizzato Interview). CAST has also collected a large number of nominations and awards in all areas of production, but most notably in their technical and design fields. (See Chapter 6 for a list of yearly nominations and awards.) But Simmons struggles when asked about the theatre’s evolution, saying “We’ve evolved in the sense that sometimes we know enough to plan ahead with pieces for the lobby, with reconstructing the floor, being able to use those for multiple shows. Evolving? I just think we’re getting better at it. So I guess we’re continuing to evolve. Maybe it’s evolving so slow I don’t see it” (Simmons Interview 5). Perhaps merely doing what they do “better” is sufficient for CAST, or any

theatre, in their evolutionary process, but evidence and history suggest that does not coincide with the personality of Simmons or CAST. Chapter Six of this study provides suggestions as to how CAST may continue to evolve their experiential principles and to follow their own principle of thinking outside the black box.

Thinking Outside the Black Box

If the blackbox theatre is historically a reaction to the limitations and distances created by the proscenium theatre, CAST then is attempting to push through the conventional notions of black box theatre. Simmons coined the phrase “thinking outside the black box” soon after moving into the CAST space on Clement Avenue, and it has been a major operating principle for CAST ever since. A play on the clichéd business phrase of “thinking outside the box,” the term encourages unconventional thinking and new perspectives in finding solutions to a set problem. Simmons thought it a catchy phrase to encourage CAST and its members to come up with creative solutions to experientializing a production, but it also serves as a reminder for the company to avoid getting caught in any rigid pattern of production in the first place. Simmons explains, “It’s a reminder on [sic] how to execute. Just because it’s a black box doesn’t mean it has to be a box. It can be an octagon. It can be round. People often label us a black box theatre. That part of the mission statement originated out of the fact that we were always getting called a ‘fringe’ theatre or an ‘experimental’ theatre. But we’re not” (Simmons Interview 4).

Presumably stemming from Simmons’s abhorrence with authority and structure, CAST has certainly stayed strong in their commitment to thinking outside the black box. To their credit, they have garnered a reputation for innovative works,

style, and mode of operating. This idea of breaking out of the mold, of creating one's own identity amidst a potential sea of others, however, may ultimately result in more work. Systems are usually in place for a reason: they work. That doesn't dissuade Simmons, however. His determination to produce according to the CAST/experiential aesthetic trumps the potential pain involved in creating against the grain. And in this area, there is little development, little compromise since the inception of the idea. If CAST chooses not to create a season and sell season subscriptions, they won't. If they desire to redesign their theatre for each production, at great cost and man hours, they will. CAST has continued to operate far from the typical norm for a black box theatre, with no apologies.

Total Immersion

As stated in Chapter One, the traditional theatre creates an inherent distance between the performance and the spectator. The cost of this distance is the emotional distance from the play itself. Audiences are able to safely avoid confronting, and being confronted by, the performance. CAST attempts to completely subvert this attitude by submerging the audience in the world of the performance for the entire duration of their stay at the theatre. CAST achieves this by presenting the opportunity for what they call a "total immersion experience."

Theatre history suggests the rise of the lobby area in the modern theatre was born out of a motivation to provide the audience with a buffer between the outside world and the world of the performance. Rather than stepping straight into the theatre from the streets, and thereby bringing some of life's hassles and preoccupations with you, the lobby gave audiences a chance to begin to reflect on

what they were about to see. At their core, the CAST entryways serve the same basic function.

For most CAST productions, upon entering the space the patron is immediately engaged by some physical manifestation of the play's themes and events. That usually starts with the design of the box office and its personnel. The box office and waiting area have their own area separate from the actual lobby, which allows CAST to give a strong first impression of the aesthetic of the show. For *Metamorphoses* the area was turned into a cave and the box office attendees were dressed in togas. For their production of *Marat/Sade*, the area was designed as the entryway to an asylum, complete with iron bars separating the salesperson from the patrons. The patron then had to slide their hand through a small guillotine in order to obtain their ticket (which happened to be a headless Barbie-like doll). In most instances, the physical space and the activities held therein manifest the themes and expectations of the show. The lobby and bar area itself are then another space usually filled with various elements that serve the same function. Video projections, actors mingling in character, bartenders dressed in period costume, signage and original artwork on the walls, various other bric-a-brac throughout, decorated bathrooms, and basic sound and light designs all have been employed in some fashion over the years. The result is an immediate breakdown of traditional theatrical relationships. The patron no longer has the benefit of safety. They are thrust into the world of performance. It is around them in the design and oftentimes in front of them as they get their ticket.

The lobby serves the same fundamental purpose as it does in the traditional theatre, it acts as a buffer between the outside world and the world of the play. What the CAST lobby is meant to do is heighten, accelerate, and prepare the audience for the world of the play far more effectively than that of the traditional lobby. Simmons explains, "I'm just trying to create an impression of the place. When the audience first walks in, what is their first impression?" (Simmons Interview 4). The audience is immersed in a sort of impressionistic minefield. Instead of the soothing lobby music and friendly employees at the box office and coat-check counter of a traditional theatre, CAST takes the time before the show starts as an opportunity to inculcate the audience into the world of the play via more jarring methods. They are then, once again, immersed into the world of the play. This world may merely be the prelude to the actual events onstage, or it can be the actual performance itself. Either way, there is an interaction, a transaction of relationships between the audience and the performance. These relationships, generally absent from the traditional theatre, set the audience up (theoretically) to better engage the production itself.

All this work and effort, Simmons maintains, is to serve the playwright and the themes of the play. Often it takes a patron, or an entire audience, several minutes or even several scenes to warm up to the play. By immersing the audience in elements of the play when they enter, CAST is giving them an opportunity to ready themselves for the play before they take their seats, giving the play a greater chance of reaching the audience.

PRODUCTION HISTORY/TIMELINE

1998

January

Suburbia (Eric Bogosian) Another Roadside Performance Company

The Neighborhood Theatre

1999

November

Tracers (Various authors, organized by John DiFusco) Victory Pictures

The Neighborhood Theatre

May

The Well of the Saints (John M. Synge)

as Victory Pictures at The Neighborhood Theatre

2000

April

Steambath (Bruce Jay Friedman)

As Victory Pictures at The Neighborhood Theatre (then May 4-7 at CAST on Cullman Ave.)

Spring 2000

Victory Pictures and CAST merge to form Off-Tryon Theatre Company, along with John and Suzy Hartness and Dee and Muhammad Abdullah

2000

June

Asylum (Arthur Kopit)

As Off-Tryon Theatre Company at CAST (Cullman Ave.)

2000-2001

July

Oleanna (David Mamet)

As Off-Tryon Theatre Company at CAST (Cullman Ave.)

September

Hamlet (William Shakespeare)

As Off-Tryon Theatre Company at CAST (Cullman Ave.)

November

Italian-American Reconciliation (John Patrick Shanley)

As Off-Tryon Theatre Company at CAST (Cullman Ave.)

December

The Good Doctor (Neil Simon)

As Victory Pictures/CAST at Theatre Charlotte

April 17, 2001

ED Gilweit Dies

2001-2002

The first complete, published season. All shows held at the Matthews Community Center under the name Victory Pictures

September

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (Dale Wasserman, based on the novel by Ken Kesey)

November

Talking With (Jane Martin)

January 2002

The Good Doctor (Neil Simon)

March

Terra Nova (Ted Tally)

May

Neon Psalms (Thomas Strelich)

May

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (Dale Wasserman, based on the novel by Ken Kesey)

Re-staged at the McCelvey Center in York, SC

2002-2003

September

Snapshot (Various authors)

Hart Witzen Gallery

October

ClosetLand (Radha Bharadwaj) and *Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling)

Hart Witzen Gallery

2003

At the current CAST space on Clement Ave.

Victory Pictures/CAST

January

Speed the Plow (David Mamet)

April

The Colored Museum (George C. Wolfe)

May 2003

Some Things You Need to Know Before the World Ends: A Final Evening with the Illuminati (Larry Larson and Levi Lee)

2003-2004

At the space on Clement Avenue, listed as the Central Avenue Playhouse

August

Kiss of the Spider Woman (John Kander and Fred Ebb)

September

Finer Noble Gases (Adam Rapp)

October

Dear George: Letters to the President (Marcus Woollen)

January 2004

Glengarry Glen Ross (David Mamet)

April 2004

Laughing Wild (Christopher Durang)

May 2004

White Men Dancing

June

Lenny's Back (Sam Bobrick and Julie Stein)

2004-2005

September

The Faculty Room (Bridget Carpenter)

October

Dark of the Moon (Howard Richardson)

November

Dangling in the Tournefortia: The Charles Bukowski Experience (Charles Bukowski)

January 2005

Sans-Culottes in the Promised Land (Kirsten Greenidge)

April

I'm Not Rappaport (Herb Gardner)

June

Orphans (Dennis Kelly)

July

Laughing Wild (Christopher Durang)

2005-2006

September

A Few Good Men (Aaron Sorkin)

October

Orange Lemon Egg Canary (Rinne Groff)

December

Mrs. Bob Cratchit's Wild Christmas Binge (Christopher Durang)

January 2006

The Late Henry Moss (Sam Shepard)

June 2006

Rembrandt's Gift (Tina Howe)

Samuel Beckett's "Act Without Words" and Jon Jory's "CAMERA" shown beforehand

2006-2007

October 2006

Neon Mirage (Liz Duffy Adams)

December

Tuna Christmas (Jason Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard) at the McGlohon Theatre
at Spirit Square

January 2007

Omnium Gatherum (Teresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros)

February

The Pavilion (Craig Wright)

April

Some Girls (Neil LaBute)

May

Topdog/Underdog (Susan-Lori Parks)

June

American Buffalo (David Mamet)

2007-2008

August

Autobahn (Neil LaBute)

September

Omnium Gatherum (Teresa Rebeck and Alexandra Gersten-Vassilaros) restaged at the Duke Power Theatre at Spirit Square

October

Dracula (an adaptation of Bram Stoker's story)

December

A Tuna Christmas (Jason Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard) at the McGlohon Theatre at Spirit Square

January 2008

Edmond (David Mamet)

March

Dark Play (Carlos Murillo)

July

Limbo (Glenn Hutchinson)

2008-2009

September

Foxfire (Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn)

October

Monster (Neal Bell's adaptation of Mary Shelley's story)

November

Savage in Limbo (John Patrick Shanley)

"Cirque de Morte" presented in their AvantVanGuard (Late Night Series)

January 2009

Someone Who'll Watch Over Me (Frank McGuinness)

February

Killer Joe (Tracy Letts)

April

No Exit (Jean-Paul Sartre)

May

Metamorphoses (Mary Zimmerman)

2009-2010

September

Master Class (Terrence McNally)

October

Marat/Sade (Peter Weiss)

December

A Tuna Christmas (Jason Williams, Joe Sears, and Ed Howard) at the McGlohon
Theatre at Spirit Square

January 2010

Our Lady of 121st Street (Adly Guirgis)

March

Evie's Waltz (Carter Lewis)

April

Welcome to the Monkey House (Kurt Vonnegut)

May

Ice Fishing on Europa: A Festival of New Short Plays (various authors)

June

Real Women Have Curves (Josephina Lopez)

The genesis of CAST was a merging of three independent entities, each willing to do the work necessary to create an organization that challenged the typical “fringe” theatre fare in Charlotte. While CAST struggled to gain stability as an organization, the impulse to experiment with the audience/performance relationship has been a part of the theatre’s history since its inception. The frequent changes and limitations in the CAST spaces early in the theatre’s existence helped identify the possibilities available to CAST and refine Simmons’s thinking about experiential theatre and his attempts at a “total immersion” of the audience. To further explore the various tactics CAST employs to effectively achieve this immersion experience, it is necessary to study more closely their methodology for producing the various shows within a specific season. The following chapter investigates in more detail the 2007-2008 season at CAST, one that Simmons says was a turning point for their brand of experiential theatre, and that he credits with saving the theatre.

Chapter Five The 2007-2008 Season

The next step in identifying CAST experiential methodology is to investigate carefully a single season at CAST as a means of illustrating their process for selecting shows, their organic approach to production, and their ability to make the most use of the resources available to them for each production. For the purposes of this study, the 2007-2008 season at CAST is the most appropriate season to examine for a number of reasons. First, it was the first full season for CAST as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) corporation. Second, they opened the season with *Autobahn*, the show Simmons often refers to as the show against which all subsequent shows are to be judged. Third, CAST built the “boxagon” theatre several months earlier, and in the 2007-2008 season they first began to test the use of the space. Analyzing this season will provide practical illustrations of Simmons’s approaches to productions at CAST and will identify some of the various strategies they use to experientialize their productions.

When selecting a play to produce at CAST, the first criteria taken into consideration is, simply, whether or not Michael Simmons likes it. According to Simmons, it has to be a play that attracts him as either an actor or director. Then, whether it is Simmons or anyone else who brings a title to CAST for production, he puts the play up against what he calls his five “alities” (Simmons Interview 4). These are the five criteria any potential director must answer sufficiently in order for a play to be produced at CAST. On the “Project Proposal Form” is listed each of the “alities” and a few follow up questions:

- 1) Experientiality -- How does this work help fulfill the CAST Mission/Vision?
How can we create the Experience for the patrons?"
- 2) Produce-ability -- What resources might be needed, including hardware, software, human-ware, and dollar-ware?
- 3) Marketability -- Will the show sell and how might we sell it? Who is the target demographic?
- 4) CAST-ability -- Can we find the actors, directors, designers, and technicians to do this production and at what cost?
- 5) Fundability -- Is there an opportunity to fund this project from outside resources or to use this project as a fundraising event?

As Simmons points out, "There are a lot of great plays out there that don't translate to experientiality as much as others" (Simmons Interview 4). The five "alities" act as a benchmark to make sure that the play fits into the CAST mission, as well as to ensure the director understands the expectations CAST places upon its productions.

But unlike the process for selecting plays, there is currently no set methodology CAST employs for approaching a particular play and experientializing the production. That is to say, they follow no formula, and their preparation and methods are different for each show. Simmons admits their approach is a rather haphazard one, but seems to have faith in it, "Sometimes things just work out. I don't know if there's an empirical way to explain any of it" (Simmons Interview 6). Often their approach to a show is compartmental, relying on members of the production team or trusted volunteers to take responsibility for different physical areas of the building or for gathering certain items (6). At other times the

experiential elements of the show develop organically based upon what materials and resources they have at any given time and how they might justify their use. For example, to kick-start their thinking in preparation for the production of *Metamorphoses*, they gathered a variety of LED lights and large foam columns they had recently acquired and said to each other “Okay, now what?” How can we make this experiential (Simmons Interview 4)? Relying most often on a limited budget, limited resources, and a limited pool of human help, many of their discoveries in this stage of development are a result of a series of happy accidents (Simmons Interview 4).

In an effort to better understand CAST’s approach to experientializing their productions and identify some of their strategies, it is necessary to take a closer look at a single season. For the purposes of this study, the 2007-2008 season at CAST seems like the most appropriate season to examine for a number of reasons. First, it was the first full season for CAST as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) corporation. Second, they opened the season with *Autobahn*, the show Simmons often refers to as the litmus test for their experiential theatre, and the show against which all subsequent shows were to be judged. Third, CAST built the “boxagon” theatre several months earlier and in the 2007-2008 season they first began to test the use of the space.

2007-2008 Season

August 9-September 8: *Autobahn*

September 14-23: *Omnium Gatherum* (Duke Power Theatre at Spirit Square)

October 10-November 3: *Dracula*

November 28-December 9: *Tuna Christmas* (McGlohan Theatre at Spirit Square)

January 24-February 23: *Edmond*

March 27-April 26: *Dark Play*

July 10-26: *Limbo*

AUTOBAHN

The first show of the season, and perhaps most emblematic of the experiential model, was Neil LaBute's *Autobahn*. During the time they were considering what shows to do for the 2007-2008 season, Robert Simmons introduced Michael Simmons to the plays of Neil LaBute. Simmons was so enamored with the playwright's work he considering including three of LaBute's plays in rep—*Some Girls*, *Fat Pig*, and *Autobahn*. But after some thought CAST decided to focus attention on just one of his plays. They chose *Autobahn* because they felt the script lent itself to being produced experientially (Simmons Interview 5). The play's segmented structure, diverse themes, and automobile motif all contributed to what would eventually become a unique production concept.

Autobahn is a collection of seven stories presented as a short-play cycle in two acts. All seven scenes begin innocuously enough, but soon veer into more dramatic and relevant territory. They include:

- A pedophile driving a young schoolgirl across the country
- A mom driving her daughter home from a drug rehabilitation center
- A husband and wife heading home after having just returned their foster-son to the state
- A horrified husband learning of an affair his wife had while on a business trip
- A graduate student trying to figure out how to break it off with his girlfriend who may be psychotic
- Two redneck buddies driving toward an ex-girlfriend's house, one of them trying to convince the other to storm in and take back a video game
- An angry husband trying to justify calling his wife derogatory names.

Each story contains two characters seated in the front seat of an automobile. Mark Pizzato illustrates the difficulties CAST faced with such a setting:

Forcing actors to stay in seats while pretending to drive, limits the expressive interest of their bodies. Yet, CAST has taken on the challenge of presenting seven LaBute pieces, each with two characters trapped inside a car. And four of these plays consist of a long speech by one person, while the other reacts non-verbally, increasing the challenge to the actors and audience . . . But, as the license plate depicted on the program announces, such a setting is perhaps 'The Most American of Spaces,' drawing on many associations for each person watching. ("Autobahn")

The CAST production also included a companion piece as a curtain-riser, “The Magic and the Mercury” by Rolin Jones, about two possum engaged in an existential debate.

How to experientialize the production was certainly a ground-up endeavor. CAST knew what play they were going to produce but didn’t exactly know how to experientialize it, until Simmons passed an auto junkyard and decided to stop. While looking around, he saw the station wagon they would eventually use in the show, as well as several random bumpers and lights (Simmons Interview 5). That’s when it dawned on him that the way they would experientialize the show was to inundate the entire CAST space with car parts and various other objects related to driving and being on the road. The common theme of the various scenes in the play is how much of our lives are defined by the time we spend on the road; CAST would try to manifest that throughout the production elements. Here is a representative list of some of the highlights:

- The box office “window” was fitted with a giant truck tire, which patrons had to negotiate in order to obtain their tickets.
- The box office included seating consisting of two bucket seats split by a vintage Texaco gas pump.
- The Bathrooms were peppered with various accoutrements common in a car, including dice and various beads hanging from the mirrors.
- Car parts and street signs were ornamented throughout the space.
- The passageway from the box office to the lobby was transformed into a giant odometer.

- Highway traffic lines were painted on the floor.
- The set itself was a hollowed out station wagon with the front seat and steering wheel intact. This was surrounded by even more tires, car seats, car hoods, steering wheels, and street signs.

Two elements CAST included with the production that deserve separate mention are the use of video and the rehearsal tactics they employed. Each scene was accompanied by four separate video projections on four walls. Everything that surrounded the passengers as they traveled, everything that happened in front of them, behind them, and on each side, was concurrently projected. When the actor driving the car turned the steering wheel, the four projections turned along with him. This gave the audience a sense of traveling along the road with the characters. The other notable element was in having the actors rehearse in cars while driving. The intimacy and confinement, Simmons believes, had to be real in order for it to come across on stage (Simmons Interview 5). For many of the scenes, the actors performed while driving in “real time.” That is, they would rehearse the scene while physically driving between the various locations in the script.

They also incorporated a variety of tactics to market the show. The production team developed posters that looked like plus-sized license plates and playbills with bios of each of the actors laid out like drivers licenses, and they changed their website to an image of a car radio that played music and a thirty-second commercial for the show. But the largest coup was getting a local radio station to sponsor the production. Simmons explains how he was driving home one day, thinking about car parts and what else he could find to fill the space with auto-

themed parts, when on the radio he heard the DJ say “95.7, ‘The Ride’” (Simmons Interview 6). After a phone call and a few discussions CAST had a sponsor and \$15,000 in free radio advertising (5).

Simmons was extremely pleased, if not entirely satisfied, with the overall result of the production. He believes there wasn’t anyone “who was not overwhelmed with what we did with the lobby and all the experiential twists we put on that” (Simmons Interview 5). But while Simmons cites *Autobahn* as the production in which CAST turned a new corner with the experiential theatre, reviews of the show did not match his enthusiasm. The harshest (and perhaps most confusing) criticism came from Julie York Coppens, Staff Writer and Theatre Reviewer for *The Charlotte Observer*. Coppens began by criticizing the show’s pacing. “They’re on a road to nowhere. And sometimes, dramatically speaking, so are we” (“Compelling”). She then follows with more speed metaphors, “If the intimate CAST stage really were a highway, ‘Autobahn’--again, in its most compelling moments--would be the horrific accident at which we can’t help but stare . . . For a play called ‘Autobahn,’ too, the overall experience at CAST feels slow” (“Compelling”). Coppens finishes her criticism with a rather scathing indictment of LaBute’s script and the CAST production when she touches on the themes of the play. She writes that LaBute “clearly intends to say something profound about Americans and their cars, objects that often receive more of our time and affection than other people . . . but even if LaBute’s notion were original, it’s not developed beyond the obvious” (“Compelling”). Throughout the review, however, she applauds much of the production as having “an artful scenic design and a savvy

team of directors” who “send us swerving through the emotional curves mapped by LaBute's script” (“Compelling”). It is unclear if Coppens, never accused of being an advocate for CAST, was dissatisfied with the script, the show, the experience, or perhaps the heat of the building, as CAST's air conditioning unit had stopped working days before the performance.

Coppens's assessment of the show is challenged by two other reviews. The opening paragraph in Perry Tannenbaum's review of *Autobahn* is perhaps the most overt public assessment of CAST's theory of experiential theatre in practice.

So you're a little hazy on what Michael Simmons means by “experiential theatre”? Carolina Actors Studio Theatre's presentation of *Autobahn* can sweep away your confusion as efficiently as a new set of windshield wipers. Enter the lobby and you gaze into the ticket booth through a monster truck tire. Your tickets are designed like traffic citations, and the bios in your program booklet have an uncanny resemblance to your driver's license. Bad head-shot included. Need to tinkle? There are dashboard mirrors strategically placed in the restrooms. Surely you will enter CAST's black boxagon amply primed for an intensely automotive immersion. (“Tranny”)

Like Coppens, Tannenbaum agrees there are “a few potholes in the script” but says they are “smoothed over with some luxury cruise control from an awesome CAST production team.” Mark Pizzato spends much of his review highlighting the experiential elements of the lobby, which he describes as “transformed by the spirit of the play” (“Autobahn”). He goes on to link the experiential elements with the theme of the show, “The audience is in for a long and challenging journey. But CAST provides much assistance and insight, with food, scenery, video, and a collective desire to share the pleasures and terrors of the road--changing how we experience our cars as theatres” (“Autobahn”).

Regardless of the reviews, Simmons believes the result of this production was the launching of the next phase of experiential theatre for CAST. According to Simmons, *Autobahn* was the litmus test, the standard bearer against which all subsequent productions would be judged because of the way they engaged the audience in an experience from the moment they entered the building until the time they left (Simmons Interview 1). With this show, CAST had finally reached a certain level of experience they had been working toward: “*Autobahn* had the car, it had all the experiential stuff when you came into the lobby; the traffic lights, the reaching through the tire, the speedometer, the bathrooms being rearview mirrored. And then we had literal film elements projected during the actual live theatre. That was 100 percent experiential, 100 percent seamless film and theatre. That project allowed itself to work at that level” (Simmons Interview 3). Here, CAST reached a level of production they had been searching for since *Tracers*. And every production afterwards would be judged against *Autobahn*.

OMNIUM GATHERUM

The play *Omnium Gatherum* is a post-9/11 discussion set in an opulent dinner party complete with seven characters from diverse backgrounds: a ditsy Martha-Stewart-esque hostess, a conservative author, a feminist, a New York firefighter, an African-American Christian, a British Alcoholic, and an Arabic scholar. They are met near the end of the show by the surprise guest, a Muslim terrorist. In January 2007, CAST opened their new “boxagon” space with “Omnium,” complete with revolving stage and a five-course meal for the characters onstage. While that

production received mixed reviews with respect to the acting, directing, and pacing, the response to the set and the opulent presentation was overwhelmingly positive. *The Charlotte Observer* review most effectively shares the experience the CAST production was going for, "It's hard to imagine a better setting for the play than CAST 's new 'black boxagon,' a revolving, circular stage surrounded on four sides by a single row of seats. An actual dining room in a real home would be less theatrical; a more conventional theater setup would feel too safe. Of course, our proximity to the food in this staging carries its own danger. Eat beforehand, or risk disrupting the performance with your growling stomach" ("Omnium Chews").

Soon after that production, Douglas Young, Director of Theatrical Programming at the Blumenthal Center for the Performing Arts, approached Simmons and proposed remounting "Omnium" in their black box space, the Duke Power Theatre at Spirit Square. The two discussed timing the re-staging to capitalize on the sixth anniversary of 9/11, as well as adding a meal to the show for the audience. The collaboration made sense practically, financially, and thematically, so Simmons agreed to the re-staging. The motivation for CAST artistically was the opportunity to take the show to the next level experientially. Their attempts would focus on a revamped set design to include the audience within the milieu of the play. The original design included the entrances and exits as part of the set; the audience had to walk down a long corridor and enter the playing space through a large hatch-steel door (Simmons Interview 1). Then, in Schechnerian/environmental style, they planned to make the dinner table a giant square with the audience seated amongst the performers. Then, to add another

layer to the experience, they were to serve the patrons the same menu the characters enjoyed. In essence, the audience would be present at the same dinner party, unable to escape or hide from the emotion and the tension. One of the most poignant moments of the script, when Mohammed, the militant terrorist agrees to eat along with the same Americans he professes to hate, would certainly be an experience for the patrons. In a *Charlotte Observer* preview for the show, Robert Simmons says that ideally "there will be 42 people who've all had dinner together, strangers, sitting at this table, facing each other across the stage . . . That could be more important than anything that happens in the play. It's sharing space and sharing energy with people" ("This Production").

Unfortunately for CAST, the production goals didn't work out as proposed. Because of logistics, communication, time, and perhaps management, much of what CAST planned was scrapped. They compromised their original set, omitted serving dinner to patrons, and placed them at tables that surrounded the smaller main table where the dinner party took place. The result was an artistic and financial failure. Simmons feels their efforts were successful and their ideas about the play and the experience had evolved from the production eight months prior, but the implementation and the experience of the audience fell short of their expectations. Most of the blame he places with the Blumenthal management and marketing teams. He describes the Blumenthal as a co-producer of the show. CAST would produce the art, and the Blumenthal would produce the space and the people to see it (Simmons Interview 6). He explains that "we were working with an organization that said they wanted us. They were going to make it happen. We can change the whole theatre!

It will be the only show ever done in the round with tables, etc. But they didn't get the passion and excitement around their marketing team." He goes on to say, "There was a lot of energy and dollars to reinvent that show to a new level of experience. The only thing we were missing was the people to see it."

Simmons describes the production as a major disappointment, not only because of the financial and artistic shortcomings, but because he began to question whether or not experiential theatre could be done in another space, habitually used for presenting theatre the traditional way (Simmons Interview 6). He also sees the silver lining, however, "we at least certainly set the stage for experientiality in a space that would otherwise have been a conventional arena" (Simmons Interview 2). Whether or not that is actually the case has yet to be determined.

To add an ironic spin to the whole production, the reviews of the restaging were far more complimentary than when it was initially produced at CAST. The cast for the revival was the same as the original CAST production, and this time the acting was vigorously applauded as "powerful" and "Some of the best acting of the year" ("Omnium"). Most of the accolades, however, focused on the experientiality of the show. Pizzato cites how CAST was able to transform the entire space of the Duke Power Theatre into an intimate, elegant dining room that encompassed the audience into the world of the play ("Omnium."). Perry Tannenbaum goes even further, explaining how this production managed to hammer home "how desensitized we had become to the original wound that had been gouged into Ground Zero--and our presumptions of security and invincibility" ("Oliver Twisted"). Having seen three productions of the play—the Premiere at the Humana

Festival in Louisville, and the two CAST productions—Tannenbaum writes, “A week after our annual commemorations of the horror, I reacted quite differently. Of the three productions I’ve seen—including the revolving stage original in Louisville—this one is the most opulent, truest of all to the Martha Stewart style of super-rich soiree that detonates when the vacuous hostess drops a terrorist into the contentious repartee (“*Oliver Twisted*”).

DRACULA

The reason to select *Dracula* as their October show was simple—it was a great marketing opportunity for their Halloween season timeslot. Not only does *Dracula* bring with it a recognized name and franchise, it also has inherent theatricality. The potential for a company like CAST to stage an adaptation of the classic story, and the many avenues to experientialize such a piece, were too good to pass up. The combination of keeping true to their artistic values, while also turning a profit was enough to convince Simmons to do a piece with a sub-par script (Simmons Interview 6).

In experientializing the play, CAST employed many of the same tactics from their history. They decorated the box office and lobby/bar areas with cobwebs, garlic, candelabras, and various bloodthirsty iconography. At the intermissions, when the stage went dark, people in wolf costumes would reach out and touch some of the audience members. The lighting for the crypt scene in Act III was practical, done completely with candles, torches, and a chandelier. In keeping with his rebellious spirit, Simmons jokes, “We tried not to let the Fire Marshall know about it,

of course . . . If we'd had a sprinkler system we might have been allowed to do that" (Simmons Interview 5). Furthermore, for the curtain call they filled Dracula's coffin with smoke. The actor (who happened to be Simmons) took a deep breath and waited for the coffin to be opened and take his bow. Then, when the coffin was opened, Simmons's Dracula emerged in a giant plume of smoke. The proud Simmons beams, "That was the coup d' grace for the experience" (Simmons Interview 5).

In keeping with the new experiential standard set for the company, as well as the high theatrical potential of the show itself, they needed something more. They discovered their solution was in better use of the space itself. It is not clear who exactly came up with the idea, but at some point in the rehearsal process it was suggested they could perform Act I in the boxagon, then perform Act II in the Gilweit Theatre space, during which time the crew would re-dress the boxagon, and then the performance would return there for Act III (Simmons Interview 5). And to appease any audience anxiety of where they would sit after the change of venue, they laid out the seating arrangement in the Gilweit Theatre, traditionally a thrust stage, to match the round seating from the boxagon. Of course, along with such an ambitious idea comes an immense amount of work and the need for more personnel. Instead of the typical front-of-house areas and the one theatre they were accustomed to focus on, they now had a second theatre to address. Plus, the boxagon would need two designs, a residence for Act I and a crypt for Act III, as well as a running crew to make the changes during intermission.

Simmons claims his experience with *Dracula* was one of the few times since he has been with the theatre that he didn't know if the show was good or not, if the audience would respond (Simmons Interview 6). But their production resulted in one of the best-selling shows the theatre has ever had, although Simmons didn't know it at the time. It also resulted, based on the reviews, in perhaps one of the most critically polarizing shows of its history.

Almost all the reviews of the show comment on, for better or worse, the overt sexuality placed upon the female performances. Coppens lambasts this in her review, "Like the wretched undead of the Dracula legend, forever suspended between this life and the next, CAST 's stage adaptation lingers uncomfortably between self-parody and soft porn. When we're not laughing, uncertainly, at the show's lame shipwreck, goofy garlic follies and a ridiculously grotesque blood transfusion, we're squirming through endless vampire-girl-on-girl action" ("Sadly"). But Pizzato disagreed, saying the three "bewitching female vamps" brought the "seductive allure and horrific bestiality of this popular mythic figure to the intimacies of CAST's two theatres" ("Dracula."). Tannenbaum does not belabor the point, merely adding a tongue-in-cheek wink to Simmons, saying he "is certainly aware of the macabre story's sensuous possibilities" ("Fang-tastic Voyage").

The reviewers were also split on the use of the multiple spaces. Pizzato's perception was that the convention was cumbersome and contributed to the struggle "to convey the novel's plot by jumping through brief scenes and moving the audience to new spaces (with two intermissions between the three acts). Perhaps it is also competing with the many movie versions of the myth, including the recent

popularity of Anne Rice's novels onscreen" ("Dracula"). But Tannenbaum offers a completely different account of the effectiveness of the multiple spaces. He explains "what often trips up stage adaptations is the difficulty of spanning the continents and the panorama of elegant, decrepit and subterranean settings in Stoker's vivid novel. All the fiendish obstacles aren't overcome, but Simmons audaciously tackles the problem. He uses both of CAST's stages, splitting the evening into three, and shuttling the audience back and forth during the intermissions" ("Fang-tastic Voyage").

One aspect of the production the reviewers seem to agree upon is the detrimental script. Pizzato is uncharacteristically blunt when he comments on the script, "And the drama becomes difficult to fully embrace, despite the seductive imagery, because of the melodramatic acting and fragmentary plot" ("Dracula"). Coppens questions Simmons's choice of scripts, explaining that "horror, regardless of the source, is tough to pull off live - even with an unlimited special-effects budget, which CAST lacks. Still, there are stage-worthy "Draculas" out there; why didn't director Michael Simmons choose one?" She then quips with a bit more venom, wondering if "Simmons and company will be able to suck any more life, dramatic or comic, out of their bloodless script. Of all the mysteries Stoker inspired, the greatest might be why 'Dracula'—a book that's spawned so many spine-chilling films—so often bites on stage ("Sadly").

If the reviews are at all emblematic of the audience's reaction, the packed houses must have gone away either entirely satisfied by the show or completely

despising it. Either way, it appears the CAST production of *Dracula* brought out the passions in everyone who saw it.

TUNA CHRISTMAS

At the onset of the 2007 season, CAST found themselves in uncomfortably familiar territory—they were struggling financially. Their previous seasons did not generate the revenue needed to sustain them for much longer. Plus, many of the shows they were producing were not very recognizable titles, resulting in constant uphill marketing battles. The first few shows of the 2007-2008 season saw an uptick in ticket sales, but they needed an influx of cash in order to sustain the theatre and their experientiality at the level they desired. That influx came serendipitously with their production of *Tuna Christmas*.

In November 2007, CAST received word they had been granted the rights to *Tuna Christmas*, the riotous 2-person quick-change holiday comedy. CAST had been trying to obtain the rights for several years through Samuel French, but finally received permission after contacting the writers personally. Approval came merely five weeks before they would need to open in order to capitalize on the ideal Christmastime market. Having to work fast and needing as much assistance as possible, Simmons listened when Douglas Young approached him about presenting the show at the Blumenthal's McGlohan Theatre (Simmons Interview 3). It was certainly a curious reunion, as CAST had recently come off a disappointing experience with the Blumenthal in their collaboration on *Omnium Gatherum* in September. Douglas Young and the Blumenthal were excited about bringing a

popular, exciting holiday show to their McGlohan Theatre. Simmons knew the show did not lend itself to experiential methodology very well, and performing the show at the McGlohan would lessen their ability to experientialize it even further, but since the show promised to be such a needed financial success, Simmons was forced to agree to the production.

Admittedly, there was not much they were allowed to do with the space, and Simmons abandoned almost all efforts to experientialize the show (Simmons Interview 3). CAST was at the mercy of the Blumenthal's management and was forced to abide with their protocols. They still tried to surreptitiously put their signature on the space by decorating it with Christmas-themed paraphernalia, but they didn't get very far. He recalls that when one of the CAST volunteers placed a bit of garland around one of the theatre's brick columns, thus partially covering some aisle lighting, she was reprimanded and told to take it down (Simmons Interview 5). Reluctantly, they agreed, recognizing that "if you're not in your space you have to abide by what they tell you" (Simmons Interview 5).

Simmons explains they did the best they could within their limitations and, in the end, he and Young were correct—the show was a financial success. Critics, however, panned the show. After scouring reviews of the production, it is difficult to find any satisfaction, apart from a passing mention in one review about the scenic and costume design as "arguably better than Charlotte Rep's" ("A Prime World Premier"). (Charlotte Reperatory Theatre had produced the show for several years until that theatre closed in 2005.) Whereas *Tuna Christmas* couldn't save the financially sinking Charlotte Rep a few years before, it had the opposite effect for

CAST. Paige Johnston Thomas, CAST Board member and occasional director, put it in no uncertain terms, that the production of *Tuna* “saved us” (Simmons Interview 3). Simmons agrees, saying the money they made from *Tuna* (they did the show for two more years) funded the rest of the work they did that year (3).

This artistically challenged, yet financially successful show yielded two significant lessons for CAST and certainly at an opportune time. (Elements of the following list will be discussed further in Chapter 6.) First, CAST began to look ahead to the future and what they would look for in their next space. CAST had enjoyed a comfortable relationship with the building’s owners on Clement, but they had repeatedly made reference to potential redevelopment of the complex. Short, year-long leases also hinted to the company that at some point they would be forced to find another home. After *Tuna* and the restrictions with the spaces they used at the Blumenthal, Simmons began to question himself and the creative team about what they would need in their next space. When thinking about moving forward, he wondered if they would, “lose the ability to experientialize the shows the way we are now? We could be the resident company at Spirit Square tomorrow, but we’d be stuck at Sprit Square. I’d have to ask permission to put a poster in the front of the theatre” (Simmons Interview 5). The theatre’s history suggests that their ability to produce experiential theatre at a level they feel defines their mission is directly proportionate to the freedom within the space. At the time of writing this study, these issues of their next space and the freedom within it are unresolved. But this production (perhaps along with *Omnium*) incited the company to actively question their aesthetic and their needs to fulfill it going forward.

Secondly, the production of *Tuna* forced CAST to look with a new lens at their financial model. For many years they had been producing shows largely based on their ability to be experientialized. As is certainly evident to this point, experiential theatre can be quite expensive to produce. This put a constant strain on their ability to lure people in the door, and they also didn't have many productions with a largely recognizable title, or author for that matter. Certainly their new non-profit designation would do nothing but help them financially, through donations, grants, and tax exemptions, but their method of selecting shows was called into question. *Tuna* was selected solely for its ability to make money. CAST reluctantly sacrificed their experiential ambitions and focused on producing a show that would be economically valuable. In comparison, many theatres are reluctant to produce recognizable musicals or fan favorites like many Neil Simon plays, but theatre management models illustrate that those shows are necessary to fund some of the less popular dramas. CAST had long thumbed its nose at such proven methods and, as a result, they spent much of their efforts trying to "do it their way." But this production of *Tuna* proved to them that for their longevity and survival, they needed to rethink the titles they produced to include more financially solvent proposals.

EDMOND

For their February timeslot, many theatres try to find a show that creatively and honestly portrays the African-American experience in order to pay tribute to Black History Month. For CAST's February 2008 show, Simmons chose what he

refers to as his “Anti-Black History Month” play, David Mamet’s *Edmond*. It follows the journey of the title character from his white collar New York apartment into the violent and seedy underbelly of New York City. During his one-night journey he is robbed, meets a waitress, has sex, then murders her, is arrested and interrogated, all while spouting highly racist existential philosophies. *Edmond*, ironically, ends up in prison with a black inmate who becomes his only true human connection. On the surface, Simmons’s statement about this show and its relation to Black History Month appears to be somewhere between short-sighted and racist. He thought, however, that February was a perfect time to challenge his audiences with a show that personifies racism and suppressed anger in order to encourage them to confront their own attitudes and perceptions (Simmons Interview 4). Furthermore, he was attracted to the message of how a man can disintegrate so quickly but find some degree of love and reconciliation amidst an environment of such violence and hatred (Simmons Interview 6). The challenge the production team faced was how to experientialize the violence, sexuality, rapid shifts in location, and themes relating to racism and imprisonment.

Simmons refers to *Autobahn* as the standard for their experiential theatre, but it can be argued that *Edmond* is a more appropriate choice for that moniker. If the objective is to provide an environment where the audience is more ready to ingest the themes of the play, then it can be argued this production did that more effectively than *Autobahn*. In *Edmond* CAST explored more fully several methodologies for experientializing their shows which appear to have been received as effective. At the outset, Simmons and the production team had difficulty figuring

out how to tie the lobby interactions and design to the themes of the show (Simmons Interview 6). Usually, they have the idea for experientializing the entrance and lobby areas long before the first rehearsals (6). This time they were without inspiration. Then one day during rehearsal, someone flashed a camera through the beaded curtains separating the lobby from the stage, reminding Simmons of a police crime scene. It was then that the inspiration came concerning the play's themes of violence and imprisonment.

First, their approach to the lobby was quite different than usual—essentially they didn't do anything to the spaces. The audience came into ordinary lobby and bar areas, certainly subverting the audience's (at least the repeat audience's) expectations. The one strategy they did employ for the entrance was to include two scantily clad actresses playing prostitutes and mingling with patrons at the bar—a subtle, yet effective way to prepare the audience for the seedy world they were about to enter. Then, as Act I began (with Edmond killing the coffee shop girl) the production team transformed the lobby and restrooms into a crime scene. The final moments of Act I depict Edmond dragging the girl into her bathroom as the audience hears the sounds of her murder. When the patrons exited into the lobby for intermission, they walked into an active crime scene. It included, among other things, a chalk outline of the body, an excessively bloodied bathroom where Edmond presumably washed his hands of the blood, photographs of the slashed girl, crime scene tape, and the three detectives (who appeared later in the show as the detectives hunting for Edmond) taking crime scene photographs. This idea for *Edmond* echoes Schechner's sentiment that the intermission should be used as part

of the performance, “You don’t want to throw away that social moment, and just have them forget about the performance” (Condee 44). CAST brought the performance into the space for intermission, thus surrounding the audience with the remnants of the violence onstage and providing them with a bridge between the acts.

The second approach CAST took that stretched their experiential theory was to bring the audience briefly into the world of the performance. At the start of Act II, Edmond is seeking refuge. He stumbles into a church where a preacher gives an impassioned sermon subtly commenting on Edmond’s transformed psyche. CAST placed several chairs in front of the preacher, many of them empty. Just before the preacher began his sermon, the actors/characters scoured the audience/streets, encouraging people to come forward and listen to the preacher’s message. According to Simmons, every night over half the audience sat in those chairs and became a part of that scene (Simmons Interview 5). The audience’s performance responsibility was minimal—they merely played witnesses to the interaction between Edmond and the Preacher. There were some spectators who were reluctant to join them, and the CAST actors did not pressure them (5).

CAST is certainly not shy about engaging and interacting with the audience at various times throughout their time in the building. There are numerous examples in which an actor directly addressed a patron, or interacted in some way, before, during, or after the performance. Bringing patrons onto the stage and surrounding them with the action of the play, however, was a strategy CAST had rarely used before.

Simmons saw *Edmond* as an opportunity to explore in practice a technique he had been flirting with in productions for many years, the “35 millimeter presentation.” To be brief, film acting requires a far more intimate approach to line delivery than acting for theatre. The film actor does not have to worry about theatrical concerns like sight lines and projection. Rather, the actor’s focus is on the immediacy of the scene. Some four decades prior to CAST’s *Edmond*, Schechner had explored the notions of approaching a theatre production like a film, “the techniques of film—especially montage, quick-cutting, musical back-up, and iconographic gesturing—have heavily influenced my work in *Commune* and *The Tooth of Crime*. In fact, when Rojo and I worked out the environment for *Tooth*, we thought it would offer the audience a film-like experience” (Schechner 241). Like Schechner’s environmental theatre, his practice of bringing film acting to a stage performance certainly challenges traditional relationships between performers and spectators.

In his direction, Simmons had been encouraging “35 millimeter acting” for the stage for several years and saw the opportunity in *Edmond* to explore the concept more fully. The play is segmented, written more like cinematic scenes; this format encouraged Simmons to incorporate more film-like techniques into the performances and the production (Simmons Interview 4). When talking to actors about his expectations, however, he was met with confusion. He recalls an interaction with an actor who wanted clarification on the “stage picture of the scene.” Simmons corrected him: “No, in this particular scene I want you to picture it in a 35 millimeter close-up” (Simmons Interview 3). In talking about transitions

from one scene to the next, he used film terminology, “We are going to dissolve from Scene 1 into Scene 2.” To do this they used the revolving stage to show the actor’s journey. When Hutchinson walked, indicating his transition from one scene to the next, the stage revolved at the same speed. The result was the appearance that the set for the next scene approached *him*. (A more popular example of this technique is in the Broadway production of *Les Miserables*.) The result was a film-like dissolve—a short journey and quick transition so the character appears to seamlessly exit one scene and enter another. Simmons felt great satisfaction when Perry Tannenbaum and Mark Pizzato mentioned the effect in their reviews. Pizzato wrote, “There’s a physical stirring, too, as the turntable moves beneath this and other scenes, involving the audience in Edmond’s spinning world and transforming identity. The set deftly travels through 18 locations, with many telling details displayed” (“Edmond”). Tannebaum adds, “The stage itself revolves, and Hutchinson’s supporting players literally come at him from all four points on the compass” (“Cutthroat”).

An area of experiential production that was not new to CAST but was significantly developed in *Edmond* was what Simmons refers to as “echoes.” A tactic he learned from Gilweit (who studied under Sydney Lumet), it is a method for Simmons to connect various elements of the performance with one another as a way to illustrate thematic connections for the audience. For example, the fortuneteller Edmond visits at the beginning of the play places tarot cards down in front of him. Similarly, in Act II, the detective who apprehends Edmond places crime scene photographs of the murdered girl in front of him. Through collaboration, the actors

realized they could present the cards the same way, slowly, one-by-one, then snapping each down on the table from the top right corner. The effect was subtle, just a small echo between two seemingly unrelated moments in the play. What this tactic does, according to CAST, is illustrate how Edmond was unable to avoid (or was perhaps driven to) his destiny. The fortuneteller sets up the expectation that Edmond will fall, and in the scene with the detective that prophecy is fulfilled; both are connected with a subtle snap of the card.

Another example using echoes in this production was in the presentation of their confinement motif. To be brief, Simmons unified the lighting, costumes, blocking, and acting to interweave the echoes of confinement throughout. The play ends with Edmond in prison. The company realized that in each scene Edmond is, to some degree, in some area of his life, confined (Simmons Interview 2). Simmons, therefore, instructed the actor playing Edmond (Glenn Hutchinson) to move as if he were in prison throughout the show: “What we are going to do is start with a prison cell that is ten by ten. And in the next scene your prison cell is going to be nine by nine, and eight by eight and seven by seven. And we are going to keep compressing and forcing you into smaller spaces” (2). Combine this blocking tactic with subtle shifts in lighting to include the faintest hint of bars, a pinstripe suit, and a cold, sterile set floor and the result is a unified production. All areas of the show “spoke the same language” in order to echo the feeling and theme of confinement.

The net result for CAST, optimally, was that the audience would leave the theatre having consciously or subconsciously felt as though they had endured their own confinement. Exploring and developing the echoes throughout the play added

to the level of experientiality. Simmons affirms, “We talk about experiential theatre as what happens right when they walk in the door, but you can carry that theme right to every immediate element” (Simmons interview 2). Mark Pizzato commented in his review about this spillover, “The current CAST production finds ingenious ways to fit this play into its intimate theatre and turntable stage, while parts of it also overflow into audience spaces” (“Edmond”). He then concluded with a poignant statement on the affect for the audience “In this difficult play, spectators, too, may find not just the titillation of traveling safely through a steamy underworld, but also a discovery of primal passions that point to different potential destinies for our lives.”

DARK PLAY

For their spring play, Simmons chose Carlos Murillo's *Dark Play (or Stories for Boys)*, a cyber-horror play of deception and temptation. In the play, Nick creates a fictitious online profile (Rachel) as a lark to convince the innocent Adam he has found the perfect girl. But after his initial success in the chat rooms by stringing Adam along in his perverse fantasy, Nick takes the game further by luring the naive Adam into a real world sexual liaison that ultimately leads to a violent outcome. Simmons saw the play the previous year at the Humana Festival and was intrigued by the text and contemporary themes of internet predators and the dark games people play. But what intrigued Simmons more was the potential to do the show with a more experiential twist (Simmons Interview 6). As he watched the show at

Louisville he began thinking about how they would do the show in the CAST space and what sort of experiential elements they could deploy.

Once again, Simmons approached the experiential development of the show organically, starting with the script. His contention is that the ideas, more often than not, come from the text, “Sometimes it’s letting the play happen. I talk about trusting in the work. If I just trusted in the work, it would give me the ideas” (6). After careful deliberation, he focused his attention on the script’s comment on the dangers inherent in social media and technology.

First, he started with the physical space. He remembered that an old acquaintance of his dealt in used computer parts (6). Soon after his first visit to the man’s warehouse, Simmons was given permission to load his truck with all the monitors, circuit boards, and various other computer parts he could take with him. Simmons then began developing his experiential concept from the thousands of computer parts the theatre now had at hand. Eventually, he (and Robert Simmons) decided on an environment where, upon entrance into the playing area of the theatre, the audience would feel as though they were entering a sort of hyper-real computer. The entire set was designed as the inside of a computer, complete with chipsets, power connectors, various headers and connectors, and silver circuits. The production team then expanded the design outside the stage area and into the house by reconfiguring the seats to represent the keys on a computer keyboard. For instance, instead of a patron sitting in “Section B, Row 3, Seat 4,” for *Dark Play* they were to sit in seat “F1.” The *Creative Loafing* review commented, “and your seats? Picture yourself sitting on a single key in the infinite keyboard of the cosmos” (“Chat

Room”). Perry Tannenbaum describes how, upon entering the theatre, the audience would feel as though they had “penetrated a portal housing the nuts and bolts of the computer universe. Circuit boards line the walls and the ceiling, your program and your ticket—a memory chip?—get handed to you through server shelving by people immune to claustrophobia” (“Chat Room”).

Simmons then looked at how he could incorporate technology further into the design of the show (Simmons Interview 1). The most overt way was to construct projection screens on the four walls of the theatre that looked similar to computer monitors. CAST’s new film expert, Jay Thomas, created a technical design that simultaneously projected on the screens the computer images of the various chats and text messages between Nick and Adam. Tannenbaum gave high praise, but also insight into the effectiveness of the video screens, “Even before the production begins, your eyes are drawn to the huge LCD screens that dominate the walls over your fellow audience members. You’re gliding low across a keyboard terrain until the lights go down. Thanks to the brilliant multimedia exploits of Jay Thomas, you often feel creepily online—and in a chat room—once the action begins . . . There were times, I confess, when I had to wonder. The technical sophistication of this production is high enough that the unfurling texts in the projected chat room dialogue boxes are like the heartbeat of Murillo's characters” (“Chat Room”). For their marketing, the original plan was to cyber-stalk their patrons with text messages sent to their phones saying that something big was to happen at CAST. They also had planned to have patrons bring in their Blackberrys and laptops so they could receive messages throughout the show. Because of logistical (and

perhaps legal) issues, however, they eventually settled on sending out emails to their patron list that appeared to be sent from “Adam” or “Nick.” Simmons explains the purpose of the deceptive emails was “to intrigue you, to mislead you as to what *Dark Play* would reveal . . . a sort of jumpstart before the audience got to the theatre. They knew there would be somebody on the internet pretending to be somebody else” (Simmons Interview 5). Simmons was pleased with the result, but there was a danger in the tactic he hadn’t foreseen. He explains how a few concerned patrons contacted him, alarmed that “somebody had hacked into the theatre’s email and is sending out emails about pretending to be somebody else on the internet” (5).

Their production of *Dark Play* illustrates a development in three areas of CAST’s Experiential Theatre. Most significantly, they began exploring ways to market their shows with technology (Simmons Interview 1). Certainly the nature of the show’s dark themes of deception and the dangers of social media lent themselves to ideas like sending out text messages. Regardless of the reason, they now had a starting point to draw from in order to incorporate marketing into the audience experience. Next, they explored new ways to subvert the expectations of the audience. Before *Dark Play*, CAST had focused on creating the environment of the play largely throughout the building itself (the box office bunker for *Tracers*, the undead decorations in *Dracula*), but now, whether it was through email messages or other marketing tactics, they had discovered they could set expectations about a show even before the audience arrives at the theatre. Finally, they expanded the notions of immersing the audience in the world of the play. Prior to *Dark Play*, this was generally saved for the front-of-house areas. Only on occasion did they employ

methods to incorporate the actual stage space in the immersion (overhead traffic lights in *SubUrbia*, overhanging beams and stucco-ed walls in *The Late Henry Moss*), but here the stage was the prominent space that created the environment for the audience.

LIMBO

For the final play of CAST's 2007-2008 season, they produced Glenn Hutchinson's *Limbo*. The play depicts the real-life dilemma of immigration activist Marie Gonzalez, a "legal, yet illegal" Missouri college student who wishes to stay in America, but is beholden to a student visa that is about to run out. To add another layer of tension, her parents were deported back to Costa Rica some years before, and Marie wants desperately to reunite with them. If she leaves the country, though, she risks being barred from returning because of her legal limbo. Lawrence Toppman, theater critic for *The Charlotte Observer*, pointed to some of the complex questions this play asks, "Should parents' legal sins be visited on kids who had no hand in the decision to immigrate and may not have known anything was wrong? Should such children be allowed to finish school and move quickly toward citizenship? Why should those who marry legal residents get a free path to citizenship, while those who wish only to become citizens have a much harder time?" ("A Moving Tale").

Limbo was funded by the first grant CAST had received since turning their operation into a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation. The play was a new work by a local author, was to incorporate the Latino population into theatre, and would be

produced in accordance with CAST's mission. As a result, they were awarded a Special Projects Grant to serve the Latino Initiative, sponsored by the Arts and Sciences Council of Charlotte.

With funds from the grant, CAST was able to incorporate a multitude of elements to make this a highly experiential, highly theatricalized production. Simmons explains that, as part of the grant, the Arts and Sciences Council wanted to see multi-media and a cross-discipline of the arts in the production (Simmons Interview 5), so CAST hired Peruvian-born Carlos Herrera Burgos to paint a giant mural (actually an Aztec calendar) on 4x8 foot panels that spanned the entire lobby and stage area. When the audience stepped into the lobby space, they were surrounded, literally and figuratively, by the play's themes of Latino identity and the overwhelming sense of time. They were also able to incorporate Latino-themed dance and art, both in the lobby and in the show itself. Latino music and video projections played throughout the theatre, adding to the atmosphere. The result was a cacophony of Latino artistic elements that surrounded the audience both before and during the performance. The most effective part of the experience, according to Simmons, happened after the performance when the audience was able to talk to the real-life Marie Gonzalez (Simmons Interview 5). CAST brought Gonzalez in for the opening weekend run and provided talkback sessions to give the audience an opportunity to hear Gonzalez's experiences firsthand.

The Charlotte critics unanimously applauded the show and the experiential elements the company had incorporated. Perry Tannenbaum illustrated the sense of artistic cacophony on display in his Creative Loafing review, "Simmons has caught

the documentary vein of Hutchinson's script—with interwoven Spanish and Spanglish translations by Claudia Lemus Farnandez—and enriched it with projected videos directed by Jay Thomas, a generous sprinkling of live salsa and merengue, and an explosion of glorious mural art from Carlos Herrera Burgos” (“Dream Act”). Lawrence Toppman offered a similar response to the experience: “Once again, CAST has transformed its lobby, as well as its larger theatre space, for this production. Murals with Latino images (created by Carlos Herrera Burgos) extend from the lobby into the theatre, forming a background to the stage. The audience is invited to join in a salsa dance prior to the show. There is also much dancing, guitar playing, and singing at key points during the play, with traditional folk ballet and brightly colored costumes, or newly choreographed movements (by Christy Edney and Brenda Giraldo) in the drama's transition points” (“A Moving Tale”). Mark Pizzato offered his own opinion, “The multi-media, multi-ethnic, and multi-lingual mix thus reflects both the play's creation and the participation of many in the audience--as well as the cast--in its stories, emotions, and politics” (“Limbo”). Reviewers also applauded CAST for presenting a new voice in the Charlotte theatre scene, in what Tannenbaum called an “awakening, galvanizing event for Charlotte's Hispanic community and a watershed for the local theater scene” (“Dream Act”). What these reviews illustrate is a common idea, best illustrated by Toppman when he asked readers what they desired in a theatre experience, “Why do you go to a play? To be swept up in an escapist narrative that gives two hours of relief from your daily grind? Or to be swept into a culture that lurks in the shadows of your own and

wants to immerse you in its complicated reality? If the latter, you have two weeks to get to the CAST production of ‘Limbo’” (“A Moving Tale”).

CONCLUSION

Simmons considers the 2007-2008 season a “benchmark season” for CAST (Simmons Interview 5). This particular season was marked by advancements in the company’s experientializing of their playbills, marketing, multi-media, use of technology, and thematic ties between the design of the space and the performance itself, but Simmons maintains that as CAST evolved, audiences came to expect more (5). The result was an added pressure on the theatre to produce on the level that met or exceeded expectations. He explains that for the 2008-2009 season, people who were familiar with CAST, and particularly those who saw many of the shows in the previous season, were expecting a working log cabin for their production of *Foxfire* or a real pool onstage, as called for in *Metamorphoses* (5). For the production of *Evie’s Waltz* CAST was working on the installation of a working barbeque to cook the beef kabobs on stage. As Simmons sums it up, “There’s no middle ground . . . We can’t go backwards” (5).

Simmons recognizes that CAST’s approach to production may be counter-intuitive, but defends his unorthodox approach, “And maybe what we do isn’t efficient. Maybe it was too autocratic and tactical, not strategic. But part of the whole CAST concept was to find what resources we have and all of a sudden we have an epiphany . . . I could be wrong about this but maybe we don’t have to think the way the other theatres do” (Simmons Interview 3). The pressing question

remains: does the time and energy put into experientializing a production and designing spaces come at the sacrifice of the presentation of the play itself? Simmons recognizes that potential, but echoes the sentiment of his former partner when he asserts: “The work still comes first” (Simmons Interview 6), and CAST’s allegiance (as mentioned in Chapter Two of this study) is to the script; therefore, CAST is aware that whatever their experiential ideas and motivations may be, the tactics they employ can never be at the expense of the words the playwright has put forth. If something needs to be sacrificed, the sacrifice cannot simply come from “the acting or the production value parts of the equation.” Simmons explains, “I could have the greatest, coolest lobby or ticket in the world and if the play sucks, then it’s all for nothing. All this outside experience is part of the set up to make the work on stage the most effective it can be. Even if you like this experiential theatre, you’re still coming to see the work and by that I mean the author’s work. And that’s really who we’re supposed to be serving” (6).

Simmons gives credit to the 2007-2008 season, and in particular to their production of *Autobahn*, as the show that helped CAST turn a corner in their level of experientiality and created a standard for which all future seasons and productions would be judged. While this Chapter gives insight into the variety of experiential tactics used in their productions, it also provides evidence that there is no consistent methodology to their selection of shows or in their approach and implementation of experiential theatre. As a result, the artisans involved in creating the various elements of the production are strained by the amount of work required, and critical reception shows how there can be an inconsistency to the elements

within their productions. Despite some of the unfavorable reviews, CAST and Simmons have established a reputation as an innovative theatre through the implementation of their experiential principles. In order to evaluate the success of CAST and its experiential principles, it is necessary to now explore the nature of Charlotte's cultural and theatrical landscape, and to position CAST and other fringe theatres in that landscape.

Chapter Six CAST in Charlotte

As this study is focused on assessing the viability of CAST as a potential model for other theatres, it is necessary to investigate the nature of the Charlotte cultural and theatrical landscape and position CAST within that landscape with regards to their success and reputation. The following chapter investigates Charlotte's cultural and theatrical landscapes, the impact of the Arts and Science Council on the Charlotte arts community, as well as CAST's position in Charlotte as a fringe theatre. I also illustrate CAST's rising reputation in Charlotte through excerpts of reviews for CAST productions that reference some of their experiential tactics and then a list of the nominations and awards they have earned by local arts organizations.

CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

Charlotte is a major U.S. financial center. It is the nation's second-largest banking center after New York City and home to Bank of America and the former corporate home of Wachovia (now Wells Fargo). Several other Fortune 500 companies are based in Charlotte and the surrounding areas, including Lowe's Home Improvement, Duke Energy, and Family Dollar. Several other major U.S. companies reside in Charlotte, such as LendingTree, Time Warner Cable, The Speed Channel, ESPNU, the North American Division of Continental Tire, Belk, Harris Teeter, Meineke Car Care Center, and many others. Charlotte is also the home of NASCAR, having recently completed construction on the NASCAR Hall of Fame. It is reported that 75% of all the NASCAR industry's employees and drivers live within

two hours of Charlotte. The city has also recently become known as “Charlotte USA—The New Energy Capital” with an enormous influx of energy-oriented businesses and organizations. There are over 240 companies in the region directly associated with the energy district, and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte is known for its energy education and research. Furthermore, there has been a populations explosion since 2000, primarily of Midwesterners following jobs and more amicable weather. The city center has over twenty skyscrapers completed or under construction, the residential areas continue to stretch to the ends of the county and beyond, and the “Uptown” area has become the cultural center for the region with an array of opportunities for the growing city.

Although the rapid growth is a welcome surge to the economy and visibility of the city, it also presents many cultural maladies. The chief bi-product of the expansion (relative to this study) is that Charlotte suffers from a lack of cultural identity. Charlotte is a city built on commerce. The banking sector in downtown Charlotte is surrounded by high-rise condominiums. The city itself is surrounded by various small towns and many residential areas. These towns are mostly populated by transplanted individuals from the Midwest and Northeast, resulting in an array of small communities each with their own developing identity. The young, commercial downtown area and the family suburbs are then joined by a large influx of NASCAR influences that permeate both the downtown and suburban areas. Combine these areas with several pockets of a growing minority population, and the result is a city without an identifiable personality. Each small neighborhood or district may have its own budding identity(s), but there is little legacy or history looming in these

areas (or the city itself, for that matter), resulting in a lack of cultural cohesion. The benefit to so many identities operating in relative seclusion, however, is a diverse array of upstart cultural organizations, each struggling to find an audience.

ARTS AND SCIENCE COUNCIL (ASC)

According to the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce, Charlotte area cultural organizations produce 65,000 events annually which support 4,700 jobs and rely on 1,300 volunteers in order to engender \$158 million for the local economy (Charlotte Chamber website). The primary source of funding for these events is the Charlotte Arts and Science Council, whose mission dictates their commitment “to building appreciation, participation and support for arts and culture. The non-profit organization serves and supports our cultural community through grant-making, planning, programs and services to ensure a vibrant community enriched with arts, science and history.” The bulk of the organization’s funding comes from its annual fund drive where 40,000 private donors and 600 corporations help raise \$11.5 million annually. The balance of their funding comes from various forms of community support: the City of Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and the North Carolina Arts Council. The total grant allocation of more than \$14 million “is awarded annually to cultural organizations, neighborhood cultural projects, arts education and creative individuals.” Below is a representative list of those organizations:

- Carolina Voices
- Charlotte Children’s Choir

- Charlotte Civic Orchestra
- Charlotte Philharmonic Orchestra
- Charlotte Symphony
- Harvey B. Gantt Center for African-American Arts & Culture
- The Light Factory Contemporary Museum of Photography and Film
- McColl Center for Visual Art
- The Mint Museum of Art
- The Mint Museum of Craft & Design
- Bechtler Museum of Modern Art
- Levine Museum of the New South
- Charlotte Museum of History
- Carolina Raptor Center
- Charlotte Trolley
- Discovery Place
- Wing Haven Gardens & Bird Sanctuary
- Historic Rosedale Plantation
- NASCAR Hall of Fame (opened in 2010)
- Several Colleges focusing on education and training in the arts, including the acclaimed Davidson College
- Public Art programs
- North Carolina Dance Theatre
- Opera Carolina

In addition to the aforementioned organizations vying for their dollars, a fair percentage of the ASC's funds is allocated to a number of various theatres (see Appendix). The result is that the major arts funding source in Charlotte is stretched thin, and the competition for ASC funds is fierce.

THEATRICAL LANDSCAPE

The most acclaimed theatrical organization in Charlotte, which also boasts the most impressive facilities, is the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center. The "Blumenthal," which opened in 1992, sits in the heart of downtown Charlotte and is the premiere venue in the region. Its "Broadway Lights" series, the yearly presentation of national touring Broadway productions, draws spectators from across the Southeast, as well as the estimated 8,000 to 10,000 annual subscribers. (It hosts many other special performances such as concerts, speakers, and presentations.) The center boasts four main performance spaces:

- Belk Theatre (2100 seats)
- Knight Theatre (1150 seats)
- Booth playhouse (430 seats)
- Stage Door Theatre (150 seats)

In 1997, the Center added a new space adjacent to the Blumenthal (Spirit Square) for arts education and community theatre. It houses two theatres:

- Duke Energy Theatre (180 seats)
- McGolhon Theatre (720 seats)

The Blumenthal Center certainly has spaces for all types of theatrical events and presentations. While such a venue is the highlight of the theatrical landscape in Charlotte, it caters almost exclusively to visiting productions. The touring Broadway shows and the other acts that pass through the Blumenthal Center often enjoy sold out runs with thousands of patrons attending one of the Center's shows in a single night. Many of these tickets are several times the cost of the fringe theatre ticket cost, some upwards of \$150. Recent musicals like *Wicked*, *Jersey Boys*, and *Rent* drew audiences from all over the Carolinas resulting in sold-out runs in record time.

Two other well-known theatres in Charlotte are Children's Theatre and Theatre Charlotte. Children's Theatre of Charlotte is the only other purely professional theatre in Charlotte, producing popular titles and new adaptations aimed at family audiences. Children's Theatre has become one of the foremost professional children's theatres in the nation. In 2005, they moved into their current space at ImaginOn, a state-of-the-art facility housing two theatres and a section of the public library. In 2005, Children's Theatre broke attendance records dating back to 1948 with more than 300,000 participants attending one of their shows or touring programs (Children's Theatre Website).

Charlotte's oldest community theatre, Theatre Charlotte, began in 1927 and has been in its current building, a 222-seat traditional proscenium stage, since 1941. Theatre Charlotte recently survived financial disaster with the 2005 addition of a new Executive Director, Ron Law, and rebounded with three seasons turning large profits. Their ticket sales have risen from 58% capacity in 2005 to 87% in 2010,

resulting in the generating of operating funds of over \$140,000 each year (Durkin, “Revival”).

The success of the Blumenthal, Theatre Charlotte, and Children’s Theatre confirms that Charlotte residents and members of surrounding communities are attending theatre in Charlotte. These organizations have become mainstays in Charlotte because of their reputation for producing quality work. They have not only survived a down economy and diminished donations, but have thrived in adverse conditions. Yet, as in many metropolitan areas, the artistic landscape of Charlotte has not been kind to small, independent theatres.

In July 2000, an article appeared in *Charlotte Magazine* illustrating what appeared to be an emerging theatrical culture based on a growing and newly-thriving fringe theatre movement. At the heart of that movement was CAST. Allison Hart wrote:

Walk into the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center downtown and you will see one of the most elegant performance spaces in the state. Mammoth-sized lights line the arched ceiling and walls of the 2,100-seat Belk Theatre. State-of-the-art equipment can be found on and off stage. Walk into Carolina Actors Studio Theatre (C.A.S.T.) on Cullman Avenue off North Davidson Street, and you’ll see a small, dark room with about seventy seats, limited lighting, and a conglomeration of sofas and chairs hashed out of Archie Bunker’s living room. To most Charlotteans, the Blumenthal would be an obvious choice for a Friday evening at the theater. But an undercurrent is flowing through the city’s cultural scene. A hunger for voices and minds fresher than those found in many established theater companies is being satisfied by groups of independent actors, directors, and producers. Like artists in more metropolitan areas such as Chicago, where an independent theater is practically on every block, these artists have formed their own companies as a way to express a vein of theater they feel is missing. (21)

By the end of 2004, however, any sense of a thriving fringe theatre movement in Charlotte had disappeared. In December, 2004, theatre writer for *The Charlotte*

Observer Julie York Coppens, wrote an article illustrating the state of Charlotte's independent theatre scene. She highlighted several independent theatres and cited local theatre artists who discussed the difficulties local independent theatres faced in Charlotte. While the article is six year old, the information is entirely consistent with the environment at the time of this study. Her opening statements encapsulated the nature of a decade-long struggle for Charlotte theatres: "When an irresistible force—say, a theater artist's urge to produce plays—meets an immovable object—the Charlotte audience, for instance—something's gotta give. For several fringe companies this season, the strain is beginning to show" (Fringe Theaters"). That strain involved a number of theatres being forced to make drastic changes. For example, CAST, Epic Arts, Barebones, and Off-Tryon cancelled many of their productions, Off-Tryon gave up its lease at the original CAST space and moved in with BareBones Theatre Group as the resident theatre company at the SouthEnd Performing Arts Center, and several other companies were forced to re-examine their organizational model and reevaluate their long term viability ("Fringe Theaters"). Coppens cites Anne Lambert, an independent producer and theater consultant in Charlotte, who argues that change and uncertainty are simply part of the fringe theatre's nature, and explains that most ground-up theatres "typically fail within a few seasons, even in the most theater-friendly cities" ("Fringe Theaters").

It is not unheard of for a city with approximately 1.5 million residents to be able to support six or eight independent theatres. But recent history suggests that in Charlotte, this does not appear to be the case. Charlotte audiences have proven over the years that they prefer shows like the large touring Broadway productions

and family fare with recognizable titles or playwrights, to the more gritty and unknown productions of local fringe theatres. Simply put, Charlotte theatres have failed to develop an audience who is willing to take a chance on experimental, lesser known, or avant-garde works, favoring more those titles and playwrights they have heard of ("Fringe Theaters"). Director of the Blumenthal, Tom Gabbard, humbly illustrates the nature of the Charlotte theatre community, comparing it to an unbalanced ecosystem. He explains that theatres of all sizes play a critical role in the theatrical identity, and in the overall culture of the city ("Fringe Theaters"). If independent theatres fold, Gabbard and the Blumenthal don't see it as a competitive benefit for them, but rather as the deterioration of the theatrical ecosystem. "For Charlotte to be the dynamic city that residents want it to be," Gabbard asserts, "then it needs an arts scene that runs the gamut from mainstream to quirky" ("Fringe Theaters").

In her article, Coppens provided a breakdown of expenses for a typical production for the now-defunct Barebones Theatre Group illustrating the actual costs associated with an independent theatre production. After figuring in rent, royalties, utilities, production costs, equipment rental, marketing, and potential stipends for designers, the total expense for a production was between \$5,600 to \$6,700 dollars ("Fringe theaters"). (This is a conservative budget, with many independent productions costing closer to \$10,000.) Without assistance from grants and private donations, fringe theatre companies like CAST were forced to rely solely on ticket sales and the modest concessions revenue to fund its productions. On its surface, the \$6,700 price tag seems rather modest relative to larger cities like New

York, Chicago, or Atlanta. If the average ticket price for an independent Charlotte theatre is \$20, then it would require 335 paying patrons to break even. With twelve performances in the run, the company would need to average 28 paying patrons per performance. Again, these numbers do not appear impossible to attain in an ordinary large-city setting. But the unseen variable affecting all independent theatre in Charlotte is the aforementioned immovable object—Charlotte audiences.

According to Coppens, there are several factors specific to Charlotte that hinder the potential success of the city's independent theatres. First, only a fraction of the donations to the arts in Charlotte go to the organization directly. Instead, the money is collected and lumped together by the Arts and Science Council, who eventually channel it through the grant process and allocate resources at their discretion. This leaves most small theatre companies out of the picture when funds are distributed ("Fringe Theaters"). Second, as previously stated, the business culture of Charlotte was born out of the desire for commercial success. As a result, experimentation in the culture is rarely embraced and certainly does not thrive. Third, and perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome, is a theatre-going public who, for whatever reason, has largely rejected fringe theatre productions in favor of safer offerings ("Fringe Theaters"). The public is simply hesitant to take a chance on a show they have never heard of, or to leave the confines of the city center in exploration of more audacious experiences.

There are also several more practical considerations adding to the difficulties for fringe theatres. There is a distinct shortage of qualified actors to fill the number of shows produced in Charlotte. Most independent theatre productions are unable

to pay their actors, leaving them vulnerable to actors leaving for paying jobs and a growing film and television market in Charlotte. Also, there is often a lack of an effective infrastructure and business plan. Theatres in Charlotte often lack the necessary skilled staff, dedicated volunteers, and donors to adequately serve their patrons. They also often lack appropriate knowledge of the business and management of a theatre, resulting in unforeseen shortfalls in time, materials, or finances. Lastly, theatre companies often allow their “personal enthusiasms [to] overcome a rational analysis of what the local theater market will bear” (“Fringe Theaters”). Often, a theatre in Charlotte will want to stage a play they find exciting but the community fails to respond. The “build it and they will come” model is too often employed, and inevitably fails in Charlotte.

In her article, Coppens listed the following as the independent theatrical production companies operating in Charlotte for 2004. None of these companies, at the time, were receiving any aid from the Arts and Science Council or any other institutional support in Charlotte. (Theatre Charlotte, Actors Theatre of Charlotte, and Charlotte Reparatory Theatre were not included because they were receiving ASC funds.) The “fringe”/independent theatres in Charlotte in 2004 were:

Actors Scene Unseen

Known for: Live Internet radio theater.

Home base: Various venues; currently performing at Spirit Square.

BareBones Theatre Group

Known for: Bold contemporary plays.

Home base: SouthEnd Performing Arts Center, 201 Rampart St.

Classics Theatre of Charlotte/Actor's Gym

Known for: Classics Theatre is a new venture by Tony and Courtney Wright, whose

Actor's Gym specialized in theater with a physical component.

Home base: CAST, 1118 Clement Ave.

Carolina Actors Studio Theatre

Known for: Edgy plays, polished productions.

Home base: CAST, 1118 Clement Ave.

Chickspeare

Known for: Estrogen-charged reinventions of the classics.

Home base: Various venues.

Epic Arts Repertory

Known for: Original works, large-scale productions.

Home base: Actor's Theatre of Charlotte, 650 E. Stonewall St.

Generations Theatre Group

Known for: Plays that appeal to senior adults.

Home base: Company has performed in various venues

Off-Tryon Theatre

Known for: Offbeat shows, often with gay themes.

Home Base: Company moved from its Cullman Avenue space to SouthEnd Performing Arts Center.

Theatre for Change

Known for: Readings of socially and politically oriented plays.

Home Base: Evening Muse, 3227 N. Davidson St.; other venues.

With the exception of CAST, none of the companies listed above are operating in Charlotte at the time of this study. Added to the list of closings are The Farm Theatre, Pi Productions, and InnerVoices, all of which closed around the time of Coppens's article. (It should be noted that Charlotte Reperatory Theatre also closed its doors soon after the publication of this article, although for reasons unrelated to this study.)

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of independent theatres popping up in Charlotte, including Queen City Theatre Company, On-Q Productions, Collaborative Arts, and a variety of individuals who periodically self-produce a show. Time will tell if these new theatres will survive the gauntlet of economic and managerial pitfalls that await them in the Charlotte marketplace. According to Lambert, unless the Arts and Science Council opens its coffers up to the more fringe theatres, the only way for those companies to survive is to raise their ticket prices to

a level that would most likely eliminate a large majority of potential audiences (“Fringe Theaters”).

As for CAST, professional theatre scholar and practitioner, as well as a reviewer and patron, Mark Pizzato offers a unique perspective on CAST’s evolution and the nature of their place in Charlotte.

CAST IN CHARLOTTE

After graduate school, while living in Washington, D.C., in the 1980s, Mark Pizzato worked at the famed regional theatre, Arena Stage, as a House manager and script reader. He also volunteered his help at a small, independent theatre on 14th Street, in a part of town known for prostitution and other nefarious activities. His own plays were performed in small theatres in Washington and New York City. From his early professional career, Pizzato gained an appreciation for the difficulty in starting and maintaining an independent theatre (Pizzato Interview).

Pizzato began attending CAST productions when they were performed at The Neighborhood Theatre. He recalls that from the beginning he was impressed by their ambitious attempts to re-create the lobby with each show and “make that part of the audience experience. And I even said that to my colleagues; even though they are working on a small budget, at least the scenic devices, which include the lobby, I’m impressed by” (Pizzato Interview). In general, he says the quality of the work they have produced over the years is in direct relationship to the space they have been in, and says the biggest growth CAST has made artistically has come since they have been in their current space on Clement Avenue (Pizzato Interview). He

particularly recognizes a shift in production quality which came when they added the second theatre to their current space. He recalls, “the space they are in now, I remember when it was just the one bigger space and a larger lobby. Then when they created that little space with the revolve, I thought, ‘They’re really getting inventive.’”

Pizzato recognizes that one of the premiere obstructions to CAST’s further development is the lack of consistency in the productions. While the pre-show experientializing of the front-of-house areas may be more effective for some shows than others, there is always an impressive effort to create for the audience an experience, a level of expectation, and to prepare the audience for the themes held within the stage presentation. That same effort is not always realized across the production itself, however. Pizzato recalls one of his colleagues, who has been in Charlotte for ten years, raving about CAST’s production of *American Buffalo* as one of the best shows he had seen in Charlotte. But in talking with other colleagues, his assessment was that the level of production was inconsistent. He says,

I often warn people if I’m taking them and they’ve never been to CAST that the acting can be hit or miss sometimes—I often cringe at the acting. But I’m always impressed by the effort they put into shows regarding the technical side. Now that’s not always successful either, but I’m impressed by any group that can actually make a theatre viable. Plus, they are able to have grown to have their own space with two small theatres in the space, to be able to redecorate the lobby with each show, which must take a lot of work, so you get a complete theatre experience from the moment you step in the door. (Pizzato Interview)

He also cites the CAST practice of having the actors come out to the lobby in costume after the show and greet the patrons as a distinguishing characteristic that aides in the overall experience for the audience. “That to me is a wonderful thing

because going to theatre and just experiencing it like a movie where you come in, you sit down, and you see it, and then you leave, to me is much less than a live, full experience when you are able to talk with other people in the audience about it at the bar, but also meet the actors and talk to them about your understanding of the play. And I would think for the actors it would be a wonderful experience, too.”

Another characteristic Pizzato says he and his colleagues discuss is the apparent lack of professionalism at CAST. Actors and designers from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte faculty and student body sometimes take part in a CAST production. Inevitably, news of their experiences permeates the theatre department at the university. The consensus, according to Pizzato, is that there is an inconsistent level of professionalism in the creation of the plays, but Pizzato quickly defends CAST:

I think there are different expectations at CAST. They’re more of a scrappy organization. They were on the edge struggling just to create a space for several years. And Actor’s Theatre has been around longer. It’s hard for me to present the other side because I am not actively involved in the productions. I think it’s more an impression Michael gives sometimes of ‘Can I get this from you? Can I borrow this actor from you?’ But for me that’s what has made him successful, too, that he’s able to persuade people to donate their time and make connections. (Pizzato Interview)

Reviews

In examining the various reviews of CAST productions over the years, it is clear they have created an identity for themselves based on their innovative approach to theatre. Primarily, CAST has made a name with their inventive lobby creations and the technical excellence of their productions. As illustrated below, CAST has been recognized with many regional nominations and awards, the

majority of which praise CAST for technical achievements. In fact, for the 2010 Creative Loafing Awards, CAST swept all the technical categories, winning eleven awards total. They have also become known in particular for their sound designs, having become the perennial favorite to win the MTA and Creative Loafing awards for Best Sound Design.

From CAST's original incarnation as Another Roadside Performance Company, Simmons created a theatrical identity based on an experiential approach and an overall affect on the audience. Reviews of their earliest productions illustrate their innovative approach, sentiments that would be echoed for over a decade. The review for *Tracers* that appeared in *The Charlotte Observer* made reference to their yet unnamed experiential theatre, saying the production "spares no effort to throw us back into the war, from the gunfire onstage to the protestors chanting 'Peace!' and holding 'Make Love, Not War' signs outside the Neighborhood Theatre," resulting in an "ultra-atmospheric play" that would inevitably move the audience ("*Tracers* May Reopen Wounds"). The review that appeared the same week in the now-defunct *The Times* shared this sentiment: "The use of TV is an innovation . . . unique to this production, but how the play could ever have been done without it is beyond me . . . Here, the effect enhances an already engaging experience" ("Charlotte Celebrates").

Early reviews also commented on several staples that would later become hallmarks of CAST productions, including the innovative technical qualities, the use of space, and the exploration of the audience-spectator relationship. *The Charlotte Observer* review of *Suburbia* stated, "Roadside starts with a sturdy, well-appointed

set, a close approximation of a convenience store that can be, as the script indicates, crawled on top of" ("Hardest Working Slackers"). In Perry Tannenbaum's *Creative Loafing* article he applauded Michael and Robert Simmons for their ability and innovation in creating a new and vibrant theatrical space. He wrote, "Two very positive things happened when Michael Simmons & Son took their Vic Pix across the tracks and took up residence at CAST. They refurbished the studio, replacing the folding chairs with permanent banked seating, refining the lighting booth, and creating the best little black box theater Charlotte has ever had" ("All About the Work"). Toppman's also commented on the *Tracers* sound design, not merely its use, but more importantly its effect, "and the music of that era—The Doors, Jimi Hendrix, The Stones—lays down an aural carpet that hurls you back in time" ("Tracers May Reopen Wounds"). Another early review, this one of *Italian-American Reconciliation*, pointed to two aspects of Simmons's theatre he would continue to develop: the effects of the special relationship between the audience and the performer, and the battle to offer a moving diversion from ordinary T.V. Brian Myer wrote, "The intimacy of the space and the proximity to Simmons only serve to intensify the theatrical experience. His energy and emotion are palpable. To be within arms reach of an individual who, for all intents and purposes, is experiencing a complete an [sic] utter emotional breakdown is as exhilarating as it is disturbing. No matter how good the program, you'll never get that kind of experience in front of your T.V." ("Reconciliation Offers).

It is apparent, however, that the inconsistent acting, which Pizzato commented on a decade later, was evident from the theatre's beginnings. *The*

Charlotte Observer cited the production of *Tracers* as having acting that “can be rough-hewn at times” (“*Tracers* May Reopen Wounds”). Regardless of these early inconsistencies in performance, Tony Brown’s *Charlotte Observer* review of *Suburbia* offers a telling prediction as to the possibility of what the theatre could become. Brown wrote “Another Roadside Performance Company could well evolve into a welcome and continuing shot of innovation to Charlotte’s often stale theater scene” (“Hardest Working Slackers”). His comments, written in 1998, appear to have been accurate.

As Simmons bounced from theatre space to theatre space in the early 2000s, his reputation for refurbishing and rejuvenating each performance space followed him, as evidenced in many reviews. Tannenbaum commented, “Once again Michael Simmons and Victory Pictures have brought a slick-looking production to the fabulously refurbished Matthews Community Center” (“Spooks in the Attic”). Then in 2003, after Simmons took over the CAST warehouse space on Clement Avenue, several reviews of subsequent productions pointed out the extensive overhaul and the effective use of the space. Regarding the production of *Finer Noble Gases*, Tannenbaum wrote, “With this magnificently detailed set, with superbly executed lighting, sound, make-up, costuming and electronic effects, the Simmons family enterprise has jumped back into the lead as the most technically accomplished fringe group in town” (“Pat and Cat do Argentina”). For “*Illuminati*,” one review commented on the use of the space, “What had been the anteroom for performances earlier this month at 1118 Clement Avenue—an old warehouse, really—is now gloriously consecrated as a theater, with nice, cushioned pews adding to the

righteous ambiance" ("Village Co-Education"). A 2003 preview of *The Colored Museum* went so far as to promote the experiential elements above all else, "But it's not *The Colored Museum's* content that should get people's attention. It's the presentation" ("The Colored Museum").

From 2005 to the present, reviews illustrate how Simmons and CAST began to settle into the space on Clement and solidified their reputation as technically proficient and as an innovative theatre. Below are a series of excerpts from reviews of CAST productions broken into four categories: basic perceptions, references to the experiential, references to the audience-performance relationship, and references to Simmons himself. The purpose for these four sets of examples is to illustrate the public perception of CAST's experiential theatre, as well as to provide a greater sense of the type of theatre and practices employed for CAST productions.

1) The excerpts from the following reviews help illustrate the sorts of strategies CAST has employed with various shows, how they transformed various spaces, and how some of these strategies worked. Moreover, the following list goes to a larger point of providing a sense CAST's public identity and reputation for creative and unique productions:

DICKENS PLAYS DEFENSE

Two shows put the screws on Scrooge

Creative Loafing – November 30, 2005

By Perry Tannenbaum

“Artistic director Michael R. Simmons has once again reinvented the CAST venue, creating a new performance space facing out at the audience from the bar area. Having a tavern-like backdrop for a twisted Christmas parable turns out to be a curiously apt fit.”

SAVAGE IN LIMBO

ArtsalaMode.com – Spring/Summer 2009

By Mark Pizzato

“Once again, CAST has transformed its lobby and bar area for a new show--but this time into the performance space itself. Spectators sit on stools around the edges of the lobby, while several unique characters with deep New York accents populate the stools nearer the bar. Signs also pack the walls from many other bars in the Plaza-Midwood area, with graffiti in the entryway, making this show an intimate intersection of icons and personalities, both familiar and strange.”

“[T]his small jewel of a theatre has once again shown remarkable creativity through unique staging and powerful actors (one of the best casts I've seen at CAST), involving the audience as collaborators at the edges of performance.”

CAST GOES COUNTRY!

Foxfire turns the experiential theater into a barn

Creative Loafing – August 27, 2008

By Perry Tannenbaum

“Watch where you're steppin', city boys and city gals! Carolina Actors Studio Theatre—where past audiences have voyaged into the innards of a computer's

motherboard, to the brink of nuclear disaster, to a high school reunion, to a bloody crime scene, and beyond—now takes us to a haunted farmstead near the peak of Stony Lonesome Mountain. Yee-ha!”

“When *Foxfire* opens on Sept. 11 at CAST's multitheater complex on Clement Avenue, you won't really have to dodge cow-pies. But CAST remains the home of experiential theater, so the Hume Cronyn/Susan Cooper play with music will surely spark a signature transformation that will be instantly evident as you enter.”

“CAST managing artistic director Michael Simmons is going overboard to deliver this Hee-Haw-style welcome.”

“That is merely the beginning—as anyone knows if he or she has experienced past CAST productions of *Autobahn*, *Dark Play*, or the recent sell-out smash hit, *Limbo*.”

REVALATION REDEFINED
Plus, savoring *Foxfire*

Creative Loafing – September 16, 2008

By Perry Tannenbaum

“Ticket stubs to gain admittance to the slope of Stony Lonesome Mountain? Pshaw. Try an ear of corn. The CAST lobby has undergone a makeover with all the inspired insanity of a Wall Street broker investing in a Cracker Barrel franchise. You can read folk remedies for burns and fever in the restrooms. Scoop up peanuts from a feed trough to munch on during the show. Or popcorn.”

CIRQUE de MORTE
AvantVanGuard Series

ArtsalaMode.com - Fall/Winter 2008

By Ann Marie Oliva Arts a la mode

"You have to hand it to Carolina Actors Studio Theatre (CAST). They're not afraid to try new things. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't, but I admire their spirit of adventure as they "think outside the black box." One such "experiential" effort is their new late night AvantVanGuard Series."

KILLER JOE

ArtsalaMode.com - Spring/Summer 2009

By Mark Pizzato

"As usual at CAST, the lobby experience becomes part of the show."

"So once again, CAST throws the gauntlet down to its audience"

NO EXIT

ArtsalaMode.com - Spring/Summer 2009

By Mark Pizzato

"CAST is unique in the Charlotte theatre community, doing contemporary plays in very intimate spaces, with scenery extending into the lobby and box office areas."

METAMORPHOSES MAKES A SPLASH
Creative Loafing – June 9, 2009

By Perry Tannenbaum

“About the only thing I can find fault with is the effect CAST's *Metamorphoses* will have on first-time theatergoers. It could spoil them for anything else. Whatever the scale, theater is rarely this rich and spectacular.”

METAMORPHOSES

ArtsalaMode.com - Spring/Summer 2009

By Mark Pizzato

“If, as a theatergoer, you think you've seen everything, look again. Maybe theatre cannot compete today with movie spectacle or TV immediacy, but it can still impress. Especially when there's a pool in the middle of the stage, actors appearing from underwater, and detailed scenery and costumes that evoke ancient Greco-Roman myths.”

“CAST is a small theatre that likes to take on big challenges. But this may be its biggest yet.”

MASTER CLASS

ArtsalaMode.com – Fall/Winter 2009

By Mark Pizzato

“CAST has outdone itself once again. This time with operatic splendor. The lobby overflows with magical masks, props, sculptures, and costumes, arousing La Scala spirits in the audience's imagination—for their "master class" with Maria Callas.”

SMALL CAST WINS BIG LOCAL THEATER HONORS - CAROLINAS ACTORS STUDIO
THEATRE NAMED COMPANY OF THE YEAR.

The Charlotte Observer - September 22, 2009

By Lawrence Toppman

"This company has made its name by redesigning its building for every show, in accordance with the themes of the productions."

2) Since 2006, mention of the term "experiential" has found its way into many reviews. CAST, having coined the phrase, has managed to permeate the lexicon of Charlotte theatre with their terminology. The following examples show how various reviewers perceive "experiential" theatre and how CAST has created a degree of expectation for its audiences. However, it must be noted that longtime *Creative Loafing* reviewer Perry Tannenbaum is not entirely consistent in properly identifying the CAST terminology, as evidenced below. Perhaps due to personal confusion, or with an intentional nod to Schechner's theatre of the 60s and 70s, Tannenbaum occasionally refers to "experiential" theatre as "environmental" theatre. Nonetheless, the examples are still illustrative:

CUTTHROAT EVERYMAN

Creative Loafing – February 6, 2008

By Perry Tannenbaum

"CAST, with its trademark environmental staging, keeps it realer than usual."

TRANNNY TRIUMPH

Creative Loafing – August 15, 2007

By Perry Tannenbaum

“So you're a little hazy on what Michael Simmons means by "experiential theatre"? Carolina Actors Studio Theatre's presentation of *Autobahn* can sweep away your confusion as efficiently as a new set of windshield wipers. . . Surely you will enter CAST's black boxagon amply primed for an intensely automotive immersion” (“Tranny Triumph”).

TOP ARRIVALS AND RETURNS

Creative Loafing – March 26, 2008

By Perry Tannenbaum

“When they tell you they do ‘experiential theatre’ at Carolina Actors Studio Theatre, they mean business. The revolving "boxagon" is the cherry atop the cake, but the Simmons Family ladles plenty of icing underneath—beginning when you walk into their lobby and pursuing you when you sneak away to the john. In 2007, the main dish experience also rose several notches, particularly onstage.”

REVELATION REDEFINED

Plus, savoring *Foxfire*

Creative Loafing – September 16, 2008

By Perry Tannenbaum

“Get into the proper rustic spirit, and the leisurely-paced musical play by Susan Cooper and Hume Cronyn oozes with pithy charm. Nudging you along in that

direction—and not being gentle about it—is CAST artistic director Michael Simmons and his trademark environmental staging.”

SANTA SERVES COCKTAILS

Creative Loafing – December 16, 2008

By Perry Tannenbaum

“Whether it's the automotive theming of *Autobahn* or the rustication for *Foxfire*, scenic makeovers of the Carolina Actors Studio Theatre lobby, bar, and loo have been the centerpiece of the company's experiential style. Occasionally, there have been pre-show activities in the tavern space that have nearly risen to the level of theater.”

3) Since 2006, there is an undeniable trend in Charlotte theatre reviews highlighting the visceral feelings evoked and, ultimately, a heightened experience in CAST productions. Below is a representative example of reviews illustrating how CAST creates an expectation and an environment in the audience who not only watches the play, but experiences the productions as well:

CONVINCING JOB OF RAISING THE DEAD - AUDIENCE SENSES GHOST IN CAST PRODUCTION OF 'THE LATE HENRY MOSS'

The Charlotte Observer - January 18, 2006

By Julie York Coppens

“... puts us in the remote adobe shack where a father's spirit howls, philanders, drinks to oblivion ... Leave it to this playwright, and CAST, to give a dead man so much life.”

A REVIEW OF *SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME*

Creative Loafing – January 13, 2009

By Perry Tannenbaum

“With CAST's open, arena staging, the humor and vitality of these men can breathe as freely as their anger and despair, liberating for me what was a grimly suffocating experience when I first encountered this drama. You're there.”

FAMILY DYSFUNCTION GOES TO SCARY, WEIRD PLACES - 'KILLER JOE' THROBS WITH TENSION BUT HAS UNEVEN PERFORMANCES, AS WELL AS A LACK OF POLISH

The Charlotte Observer - February 17, 2009

By Lynn Trenning

“The close quarters of Carolina Actors Studio Theatre lend an uncomfortable excitement to the production. The sense of impending violence is palpable.”

CAST's *NO EXIT* IS SUITABLY CLAUSTROPHOBIC

Creative Loafing – April 14, 2009

By Perry Tannenbaum

“True to its experiential code, Carolina Actors Studio Theatre casts you into the company's revolving boxagon space, shutting no fewer than four doors behind the audience and the fresh meat. Your ticket, coming to you from behind coal-black bars at the box office, is a mirror about the size of a silver dollar, to be surrendered as you enter Sartre's inferno.”

“CAST does confinement well, as *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* demonstrated back in January. Compared with the production of *No Exit* that I saw at the Stratford Festival of Canada in 2003, presented on a thrust stage, the CAST version is far more intensely claustrophobic. With those four doors thrust forward, serving double duty as projection screens, there's a sense that the walls behind the audience—just a single row of 40 seats surrounds the circular stage—are the same walls confining the actors.”

POLITICAL POLEMIC 'MARAT/SADE' STILL SCARES, CHALLENGES AUDIENCE

The Charlotte Observer - October 24, 2009

By Lawrence Toppman

“That's why Carolina Actors Studio Theatre has revived it with intelligence, relentless energy and a disturbing intimacy that makes theatergoers feel more than ever like voyeurs.”

“CAST has a history of performing with absolute conviction, and you'll see that here: Actors in the tiniest parts never break the mood, grimacing and rocking and

laughing giddily at nothing. Their final interaction with the audience, heightened by terrific sound and music effects from Alex Mauldin, is overpowering.”

OUR LADY OF 121st STREET

ArtsalaMode.com – Spring/Summer 2010

By Mark Pizzato

“With this show, as soon as spectators open the door of CAST, they experience uptown Manhattan.”

4) Michael Simmons (and, to a lesser extent his son, Robert Simmons) has also garnered a professional and artistic reputation as a maverick, willing to take on great challenges and unwaveringly dedicated to producing theatre experientially. On occasion, previews and reviews of shows highlight Simmons, thereby offering insight as to how he and his approach to theatre are perceived:

‘MIRAGE’ AIMS HIGH WITH HITS, MISSES - TALENTED ACTORS MAKE THIS FUN AND MAKE YOU WANT TO SEE THEM AGAIN

The Charlotte Observer - September 27, 2006

By Julie York Coppens

“Michael Simmons, the reckless impresario behind Carolina Actors Studio Theatre is the kind of stage artist who—holding 17, 18 or even 19—can't resist going for 21. Often, Simmons beats the odds. Even when a CAST show busts, we admire the

director's ambition and ability to rally talent behind an irrational proposition: big productions of edgy plays in a funky former warehouse off Central Avenue."

SWIMMING POOL WITH AN ESCAPE TUNNEL IS PART OF THE 'INSANE' LABOR BY
CAST FOR THE PLAY 'METAMORPHOSES'

The Charlotte Observer - May 22, 2009

By Lawrence Toppman

"Need five truckloads of dirt in your living room, so you can replicate an Appalachian mountain or an Arab prison? Michael Simmons is your guy. Want a swimming pool with an escape tunnel built in your rec room, so you can make visiting Greek gods feel at home? He's at 1118 Clement Ave. right now, trying to keep just such a project afloat. He and son Robert Lee Simmons are the Daedalus and Icarus of Carolina Actors Studio Theatre, flying ever higher with their dream of "experiential theater" - and, so far, not plummeting to Earth with melted wings."

"Those are the trials of their brand of theater, which may be unique to the Carolinas. Each show immerses you in an alien environment, from the lobby to the seating area. Robert Lee Simmons had to supervise construction of a pool that was 11 feet wide, 15 feet long and 3 1/2 feet deep, with a seven-foot "escape tunnel" that lets actors swim out of sight and appear as if by magic. (The cast rehearsed underwater at Huntersville Family Fitness & Aquatics.)"

"'We're both insane,' says Robert Lee Simmons. 'We're both huge dreamers; once

we buy into an idea, we pump each other up. It's not always (harmonious), but we always move forward with a concept. And if that means you don't sleep, then you don't sleep.”

“Michael Simmons realizes CAST has created a monster: His loyal audience has come to expect the extraordinary.”

Simmons

As for Simmons, he contends that he is more concerned with continuously raising the level of productions that CAST presents than with his professional reputation. However, he does harbor significant resentment towards the Metrolina Theatre Association (MTA) and its awards, “They just purposely won’t look at this work. They will not look at the work. I don’t care about me, fuck you. But can you not see that what we’re doing here is special? On every level?” (Simmons Interview 1). He also accuses reviewers, particularly Julie Coppens (no longer working in Charlotte), of writing inaccurate reviews based on preconceptions and personal attitudes (Simmons Interview 1). By all accounts, Simmons is a defender of the work CAST does, and his concern is with the reputation they have established with the audience. Moreover, his belief is that their experientializing methods have influenced, if at least slightly, the way other local theatres behave. According to Simmons, both Actor’s Theatre of Charlotte and Theatre Charlotte have begun to incorporate elements of experiential theatre into their lobby and shows. For instance, the 2010 production of *Steel Magnolias* at Theatre Charlotte displayed in their lobby kitchen aprons and various hair cutting tools and accessories. He also

cites the detail in the set in Actor's Theatre of Charlotte's 2009 production of *Yankee Tavern* as a clear appropriation of CAST's methods. Whether these other theatres are employing experiential ideas or if they are altering their methods of production based on what CAST is doing is certainly debatable. However, Simmons sees these small changes in the community as a direct reflection of the influence CAST has on the theatrical community. He shared this after seeing *Steel Magnolias*: "If imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, then I'm flattered" (Simmons Interview 6).

Nominations and Awards

Creative Loafing of Charlotte: This publication is the premiere arts and leisure periodical in Charlotte, publishing weekly editions. Its theatre reviewer, Perry Tannenbaum, presents a yearly (well, almost yearly, as he misses an occasional year) list of nominations for various theatrical awards. Two weeks later he publishes the winners. The decisions are solely that of Tannenbaum, which certainly creates some turbulence when considering the validity of such awards. Nonetheless, the Charlotte theatre community takes the nominations and awards seriously as a means to help promote the various theatres and the individuals who work hard to make them survive.

Some highlights with regards to the Creative Loafing awards:

2005 Theatre Person of the Year: Michael Simmons

2007 Theatre Company of the Year: CAST

2007 Theatre Person of the Year: Rob Simmons

2007 Actor of the Year: Rob Simmons

2003 Best Sound Design: CAST

2005 Best Sound Design: CAST

2006 Best Sound Design: CAST

2007 Best Sound Design: CAST

But CAST also managed to earn the dubious distinction of producing the worst show of the season, according to Tannenbaum.

2005 Worst Show: *Sans-Culottes in the Promised Land*

Below is a history of the nominations and wins for CAST. As illustrated, CAST has successfully managed to grow relatively consistently in terms of total nominations and wins.

2002 8 Nominations, 2 wins

2003 6 Nominations, 4 wins

2004 15 Nominations, 6 wins

2005 13 Nominations, 2 wins

2006 No Nomination process, 2 wins

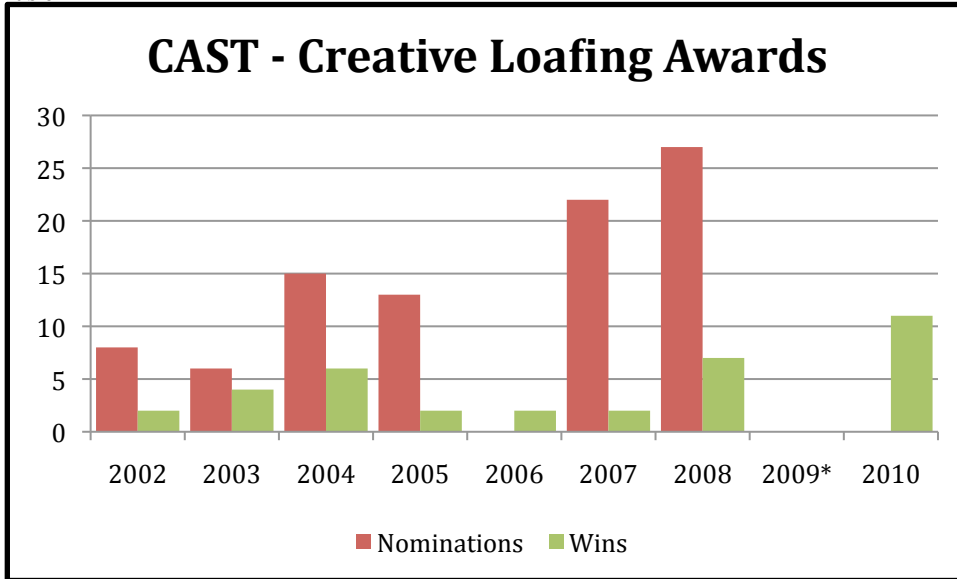
2007 22 Nominations, 2 wins

2008 27 Nominations, 7 wins

2009 NO AWARDS

2010 No nomination process, 11 wins: CAST wins all the tech categories

Table 1



MTA (Metrolina Theatre Association): Established in 1984, the Metrolina Theatre Association is an all-volunteer organization aimed at supporting and advocating for local theatre artists and organizations. A yearly staple in Charlotte theatre since 2004, MTA presents their version of Broadway's Tony Awards to local theatres in seven categories: comedy, drama, musicals, companies in the northern region, companies in the southern region, colleges and universities, and special events. (These awards are carefully arbitrated, with a nominating and selection core of theatre artists in each of the seven categories.) For the Charlotte theatre community, the MTA nominations and awards are the major source of public recognition for theatres, shows, and individuals each year.

Highlights:

2009 MTA Theatre of the Year: CAST

2009 MTA Theatre Person of the Year: Michael Simmons

Nominations and wins:

2003-2004 5 Nominations, 0 wins

2004-2005 13 Nominations, 2 wins

2005-2006 17 Nominations, 1 win

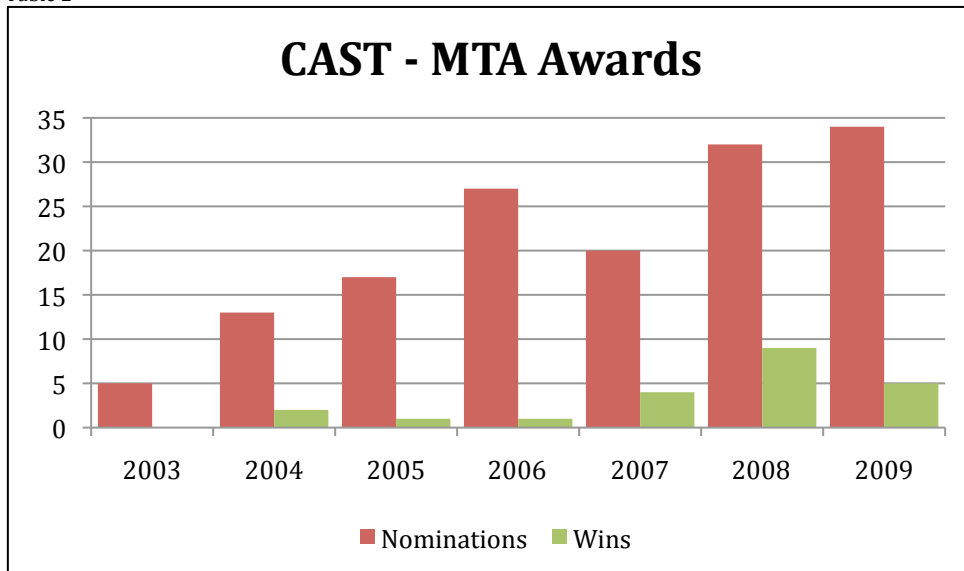
2006-2007 27 Nominations, 1 win

2007-2008 20 Nominations, 4 wins

2008-2009 32 Nominations, 9 wins (almost sweep the drama category)

2009-2010 34 Nominations, 5 wins

Table 2



As the above discussion illustrates, CAST is a thriving theatre in Charlotte's unstable theatrical climate, thanks in part to the financial support of the Arts and Sciences Council and the donations of patrons. The reviews provided offer insight into several areas of CAST's reputation, including the effects their experiential theatre has on the audience, the ways in which CAST explores the space, the level of expectation they have created in their audiences, and Simmons as a dedicated artist

willing to take great risks. Furthermore, CAST's method of experiential theatre, while not always critically, artistically, or financially successful, has managed a brand awareness in the Charlotte theatrical community, and CAST has become known to artists, reviewers, and audiences alike for their innovative and daring productions. These insights into CAST's reputation and survival help to formulate several conclusions about CAST's experiential theatre and its viability, which will now be discussed in the final chapter.

Chapter Seven Results and Discussion

The purpose of the final chapter in this study is to synthesize the various issues discussed in earlier chapters and to assess numerous areas of CAST, including the fidelity to their mission statement, the management of CAST, and the limitations to experiential theatre. This chapter further provides recommendations for CAST's managerial and artistic future, as well as a proposed definition and six axioms for experiential theatre. Providing such conclusions and definitions will not only provide a better understanding of CAST's experiential theatre and the role they play in experimenting with the audience/performance relationship, but also promote further discussion on such matters as CAST moves into the next phases as a developing theatre.

FIDELITY TO EXPERIENTIAL

Dan Shoemaker, Executive Director of Actor's Theatre of Charlotte, states a relatively obvious concept, but one that not all theatres must adhere to, "You want to stay true to your mission" ("Staging a Season"). This simple idea is what appears to have guided theatres like CAST, ATC, and Theatre Charlotte in order to guarantee their stability, whereas other theatres have sacrificed their identity for what appeared to be certain gain. CAST has been staunch in its belief in experiential theatre (even if the theory lacks definition) and has evidently created an audience that continuously wants to see more. It is evident that CAST's commitment to create edgy new works, in conjunction with Simmons's fidelity to presenting those works in an experiential package, has created what the marketing world calls "brand

awareness.” This branding of CAST as an experiential theatre is what has sustained the theatre from its inception to its current thriving state.

Despite this allegiance to experiential theatre, CAST has endured many theatrical failures, from lobby design, to the production itself, to attempts to create new productions. In 2005, Charlotte’s *Creative Loafing* awarded CAST’s production of *Sans-Culottes in the Promised Land* as the “Worst Show” of the year. The Charlotte Observer stated, “This is an interesting play but not a seamless one. All the relationships are skewed; no one seems to understand boundaries” (“Sans-Culottes Poses”). Perry Tannenbaum’s *Creative Loafing* review echoed the sentiment of *The Observer*, with phrases like “most of the CAST cast fails to tune in to Greenridge’s frazzled wavelength,” “Nuance seems an alien concept,” and “[it is] difficult for audiences to care” (“Failure to Communicate”).

More recently, in the spring of 2010, CAST attempted a unique presentation of thematically linked short playlets, *Ice Fishing on Europa*. While the effort and purpose for the project were visionary, the result was an undeniable flop. The Arts and Science Council had awarded CAST with a special projects grant with the understanding that *Ice Fishing* would explore, and possibly change, the way a play is built. The premise for the project was that instead of having the playwright write a play in seclusion, then having each member of the production come on board and work to unify a cohesive work, they would bring all the people in the process together from the start and collectively create small pieces in a purely collaborative effort. Each member of the team would be on equal footing in every element of the process. A lighting designer could make suggestions on costuming, and the sound

designer could suggest changes in character. Simmons referred to the members of the production process as “theater-wrights,” as their roles would be interwoven in the construction of the various pieces. Some of the pieces incorporated music and dance and they varied in topic from a crippled ballet dancer to aliens from Jupiter’s moon (Europa) commenting on the nature of humans. But Tannenbaum points out, “With CAST’s intrepid spirit, a thumping belly flop like the current *Ice Fishing on Europa* was inevitable.” Tannenbaum highlights the apparently ill-defined concept as the originator of the production’s problems:

... getting artists to accept cross-disciplinary input, when they have been schooled to ‘trust your own instincts’ and have often grown in confidence and daring to the extent that they’ve developed thick skins, is a dubious expectation and a tough sell. A playwright might seriously consider what an actor or director says, but ideas from a costume designer? And is a lighting designer *really* going to take notes from a playwright? ... [Y]ou’ll find little wit, wisdom, poetry, emotion, depth, or drama in this collective effort. While it’s quite possible that there was synergistic input from one or more of the playwrights into the pictorial beauties of “Emergence and Evolution,” there was no comparable synergy flowing toward the script. Perhaps the actors, designers, and directors that Simmons assembled in his theater-wright community had no ideas—or only bad ones—to offer. More likely, the playwrights just weren’t listening. (“Theater Review: *Ice Fishing on Europa*”)

Tannenbaum’s assessment is unequivocal as he goes on to suggest, “If the writers had truly bought into this process, the outcome might have been far different. Or not. To my mind, the journey that has become *Ice Fishing on Europa* began with a dubious choice of destination by Captain Simmons and proceeded with a catastrophic lack of cooperation and insight from his crew.”

Simmons refers to the project as “the hardest thing I’ve tried to accomplish in the theater,” and this was even after redesigning the space to create the revolving stage, as well as installing a functional swimming pool onstage for *Metamorphoses*

("Plays"). Even he reluctantly recognizes that the project perhaps did not come together as expected. He states, "I need time to think about it now. I'd like to think we'll move on to phase 2 of a theatre-wright project . . . Maybe some of us never want to do this again. Or maybe all of us! But I hope we've evolved enough to embrace this (method) for new works" ("Plays").

It goes without saying that any theatre will inevitably generate failed productions, either financially or artistically, or both. CAST is no exception. Rather, they perhaps create more failures than other theatres. But as Tannenbaum states above, their willingness to take artistic and financial risks with the types of shows they produce is what makes it possible for them to create innovative productions that make an impact on Charlotte theatre. Simmons and CAST tend to operate under the "high-risk, high-reward" model, often choosing unconventional plays and doing them in innovative, jarring ways. The result inevitably leads to a higher percentage of failures than other theatres, as the demands on the production, its artists, and the audience are not always in harmony. The willingness to take risks also leads to a greater number of productions that make a major impact on audiences, garner significant recognition in the theatre community, and challenge what local fringe theatres are capable of. Thus, CAST can be considered a model for fringe theatres with respect to their willingness to take chances, so long as they are rooted in the theatre's mission and adhere to the goals set forth. Provided the theatre is stable enough to withstand the occasional failure, the reward of taking risks for a theatre like CAST far outweighs the inevitable failures that occur along the way.

MANAGEMENT

Before 2006, CAST operated under a management model few theatres would want to emulate. To begin with, Simmons was the autocratic leader of CAST. He was, largely speaking, responsible for all areas of the theatre, both artistic and managerial. It was Simmons who was responsible for designing many of the sets and lighting, marketing of the shows, directing, occasionally acting in them, designing and implementing the experiential elements of the lobby, working the box office, and seating patrons, among other roles. He did accept some assistance, though. His son, Robert, had spent some time in Louisville and New York City pursuing his acting career, but returned permanently in 2005 to help with many of the technical aspects of the theatre, particularly in set design and construction. Simmons's wife, Victoria, who has been with CAST since its inception, has assisted in the theatre's bookkeeping and performs several front-of-house tasks. Furthermore, CAST has been aided over the years by the generous support of many volunteers. Occasionally a dedicated volunteer would stay long enough and work on enough shows so Simmons would give them some responsibilities, but by and large, those individuals would only stay for a short period of time. Whether from burnout or career/personal change, they moved on.

Regardless of the assistance of family and volunteers, Simmons remained the sole decision-maker of the company. Furthermore, CAST had been operating under a "thinking outside the black box" model. But with respect to theatre management, this strategy may not be the most advantageous for a theatre like CAST. The past several seasons they had refrained from selecting a season in advance, and certainly

didn't have any sort of season subscription option. Instead, Simmons chose a play or two, produced the shows, and then moved on to the next. The reasons could be many, but suffice it to say the theatre's planning was typically an afterthought. With regards to funding, CAST operated with even less organization. From all accounts, CAST operated financially from show to show, taking losses on most of them. They received only nominal funds in private donations and had never received a public grant. Records were kept well enough by Victoria Simmons, but were compiled on papers and ledger books in shorthand only she was able to decipher.

At the risk of mental and physical burnout (Simmons's health had been failing in recent years as he had several surgeries to correct several abdominal maladies) Simmons and CAST began exploring the steps necessary to take the theatre towards a more professionally run organization. In 2006, CAST held a meeting of its faithful volunteers. At that time it was agreed that in order for the theatre to survive and flourish they would need to take measures joining them to the "establishment" of Charlotte theatre. Their days of "thinking outside the black box" from a managerial perspective would have to end. The linchpin to their survival and the catalyst for growth was the changing of their status to a 501(c)(3), non-profit corporation. When they fulfilled all the requirements and received that designation in early 2007, the theatre took on an entirely new managerial identity and began to rebound financially.

According to Simmons, there were two principal reasons for becoming a non-profit organization. The initial motivation was to allow patrons and companies to make tax-deductible private donations to the theatre (Simmons Interview 6). Now

with the incentive to donate, Simmons estimates CAST's private contributions "have increased conservatively ten-fold, both in the number of people who donate but also in the amount of money they donate" since 2007 (6). (Records on private donations before 2007 are incomplete, so it is not possible to verify this estimation.) With the help of many local businesses offering a matching donation program, in the past year the theatre has received more than \$25,000 in private donations. The other key motivation for becoming a non-profit organization was to have access to grant opportunities they were otherwise ineligible to receive as a for-profit corporation (6). Prior to becoming a 501(c)(3), CAST had never received a grant. Now, according to Simmons, they have been awarded almost every grant for which they have applied (6). Since 2008, they have received six grants from the ASC totaling \$58,400. The most prominent grant they received was the 2010 Innovation Grant, an award of \$30,000 from the Arts and Sciences Council of Charlotte. The Council awarded the grant, according to Simmons, to help CAST move to a new space to best accommodate their experiential theatre.

The result of these new funding opportunities, Simmons is oddly reluctant to admit, was the rescue of the theatre (Simmons Interview 6). He suspects the theatre would still be in existence but perhaps neither performing at the level it currently enjoys, nor operating as a professional theatre as easily without the support they receive. Simmons cites as an example CAST's production of *Metamorphoses* which received a grant totaling \$7500 for the show, which they used for their marketing. Simmons recognizes the production enjoyed a successful run with largely full houses, but questions whether it was the grant money for marketing or the pool

they installed in the theatre that is truly responsible for the attendance numbers. He starts by admitting their receiving the money “was directly related to having the 501(c)(3) through the grants that helped us market the show, absolutely our numbers peaked with that. Without that, we wouldn’t have had that money. I would not have had \$7500 to invest in marketing” (Simmons Interview 6). But he defends the marketing he and CAST were able to do with the show apart from the \$7500 grant money, arguing that it was perhaps the experiential model they had always followed that was truly what led to their success. He explains how they were “clever” with their own marketing and makes his case that “the real great marketing we did had nothing to do with the \$7500 grant, and that was taking actors and training them in a pool, making sure the press was there, and shooting some photos underwater with scuba gear. All that stuff got the newspapers and TV people involved” (Simmons Interview 6). While it remains unclear why Simmons is hesitant to give direct credit of their success to their 501(c)(3) status, he does recognize its implications on the level of administrative professionalism, “we’ve been able to grow into a more professional theatre because of the 501(c)(3) and the grant process. We’ve been forced to do more professional bookkeeping, run the business like a business now and keep better records. All that has helped our profit margin and our ability to apply for larger grants. So it’s only been good for us” (Simmons Interview 6).

[Also worth noting is that in early 2007, CAST contracted a secure events ticketing platform, “TICKETsage.” The system offers a number of benefits for CAST, including online ticket sales, automatic record-keeping, the ability to run reports specific to

the theatre's needs, and a comprehensive ability to track patron identification and activity.]

Despite the benefits in the transition mentioned above, there were elements to becoming a 501(c)(3) corporation that required some significant changes to the nature of their operation. In order to be sufficiently registered, CAST was required to implement an official Board of Directors. This meant Simmons would be required to relinquish a great deal of his responsibility and control to a governing body. Skeptical about releasing some of his authority to others, Simmons had fought the idea for many years. But with the future of the theatre at stake, Simmons relented, and a Board of Directors, comprised of five members who were already mainstays at CAST, was formed.

As a result, Simmons is now accountable to other people, a relationship he still tries to reconcile. As Managing Artistic Director, he is responsible for producing the best possible product with the resources available. But he is also required to manage the input of those not involved in the art-making process. Simmons is then caught in a game of politics, a sort of "Catch-22" situation. He explains, "on the one hand you want the freedom to do your art, but on the other hand you have to have a Board of Directors, all to have the 501(c)(3), all to have more money to do your art" (Simmons Interview 6). He cites a more specific example with regards to the 2010 production of *Savage in Limbo*. Days before the show opened, a member of the CAST Board attended a production at another local theatre where they presented a curtain speech. The Board member, and subsequently the Board itself, then encouraged Simmons to implement a curtain speech of his own before every show.

On its surface the decision appears to be simple—institute a curtain speech. But Simmons recognized there would be far greater consequences of a simple curtain speech; it would comprise the type of experiential theatre they produce. *Savage in Limbo* took place in the bar area of the CAST space. Patrons entered the space, got their drinks or read their programs, and waited to be invited into the theatre. Then at the appointed time, the show seamlessly flowed from the usual preshow bar activities to the production itself. Simmons maintains that for this production (and perhaps others like it), a curtain speech would have hindered the transition he and the director were trying to create, “If we would have stopped and given some curtain speech it would have hurt the experience. I say we do a curtain speech at the end of the show. For people who knew it was set in a bar, they came and they got it. If you didn’t know it was set in a bar and you were told to just have a seat and order a drink, you’re still waiting to go into the theatre and you’re five minutes into the show before you realize this IS the show. That’s so rewarding to catch the audience by surprise like that” (Simmons Interview 6). Suffice it to say, Simmons is still negotiating his relationship to the Board of Directors. (For their production of *The Elephant Man* in October, 2010, the patrons were invited from the bar into the theatre/“freak Show.” This potentially seamless opening was interrupted by a curtain speech.) But Simmons acknowledges the necessity for the Board and simply must manage the dichotomy between the artistic and fiduciary responsibilities to the theatre (Simmons Interview 6).

LIMITATIONS

While CAST enjoys the success of their new management and their creation of a brand for which they are known in Charlotte, there still remain a number of potential limitations to their experiential productions. The three most primary limitations are discussed below. They are 1) the resistance to participation, 2) potential burnout, and 3) economic viability.

Resistance to Participation

Mark Pizzato asserts that in live theatre, the audience always plays a role (Pizzato Interview). He explains that it could be more or less explicit, that “It could even be unrecognized by people, or it can be ‘I’m challenging you to do something. Right now! I’ll sit in your lap. What will you do? I’m casting you, even if you didn’t expect it, in a role as audience member.’ Even when the audience feels safe and nobody is looking back at them from the stage they are playing a role” (Pizzato Interview). As stated previously in this study, CAST often relies on some level of audience participation in their productions. This participation is often explicit: in *The Pavilion* where audience members were pulled from their seats to join the final reunion dance, in *Master Class* where actors pretending to be students waited for the great Callas master class and engaged the audience in conversation, and in *Edmond* where the audience was encouraged by a roaming fortune teller or were selected to be part of the congregation to open Act II. Sometimes the participation is more implicit: in lobby video projections associated with *Metamorphoses* encouraging the audience to make thematic connections with the play, in *Autobahn* in which the various examples of road iconography make the audience examine

their own perceptions of the road, and in the headless dolls given as tickets for *Marat/Sade* that set up audience expectations. Regardless of the type of participation they are asking of their patrons, theatre that involves the audience on a participatory level runs the inherent risk of defeating their own purposes. Rather than immersing them in the play, as is their objective, oftentimes they end up alienating their audience and actually distancing them from the performance.

In addressing the dangers of audience participation in theatre, historian William Condee quotes a number of directors who illustrate the various negative reactions to the practice. He argues that many directors “dislike deploying the actors into the auditorium under any circumstances.” He cites Mark Lamos, director of the Hartford Stage Company, who has never found the practice to be effective and worries about the unpredictable nature of such practices, preferring his actors stay within the safe confines of the stage. He also reports that director Ron Lagomarsino “hates” sending actors into the audience and having them interact with the audience, as he considers it to be “leftover from the 60s” and does not involve the audience in anything. Rather, he argues it makes the spectators “self-conscious and nervous,” with a resulting “loss of focus.” Finally, Condee quotes director John Tollinger, who is even more adamant, “Hate it. Would never do it, ever. Hate it. Hate being in the audience, hate doing it as an actor. I hate it. I think it’s bullshit.” (Condee 44). Condee explains the basic premise that, while some may consider audience participation to be involving, others find it distracting (45).

Richard Schechner also shares his updated views on audience participation. Reflecting on his environmental theatre after his seminal productions like *Commune*

and *Dionysis in '69*, Schechner concludes that "Participation is legitimate only if it influences the tone and possibly the outcome of the performance; only if it changes the rhythms of the performance. Without this potential for change participation is just one more ornamental, illusionistic device: a treachery perpetrated on the audience while disguised as being on behalf of the audience" (Schechner 77).

Making this distinction, between participation perpetrated on the audience versus on behalf of the audience, is one CAST must make. But that alone is not sufficient.

Schechner continues,

The more I examine the question that audience participation raises, the more I see that these penetrate to the heart of the audience-performer relationship. What does the performer 'owe' to the spectator, and vice-versa? If a spectator 'finds out' that a character is not 'real,' does this diminish his enjoyment of the play? How does this knowledge change his experience of the play? To what degree is the performer a story-teller and not a story-actor? How deeply do performers need spectators to support the illusion of character and situation? Can this support suddenly be removed, a new situation created, and then transformed back into the support? Why does a performer feel threatened when a spectator "moves into" the performance space? Why does a spectator feel threatened when directly addressed by a performer? What is clear is that the relationship between the performers and the spectators needs to be straightened out by being painstakingly scrutinized—examined not in theoretical discussions but by means of many, many experiments in participation. (Schechner 60)

Schechner later summarizes the six primary objections and obstacles he finds to audience participation:

1. The rhythm of the performance is thrown off, maybe destroyed.
2. All participation is manipulative because the performers know things the audience does not.
3. A free-for-all such as what happened frequently at *Paradise Now* is neither art nor a party but a mess; and not in any way liberating.
4. Once the question "Who is boss?" is raised between performers and audience, nothing but hostility follows.
5. The audience comes to see a play and has the right to see a play. There can be no mixture of dramatic and participatory structures without confusion.

6. Neither the actor nor the spectator is trained to deal with participation. Probably more objections could be added. They indicate that the root problem is with an aesthetics and the social system that are not built to accommodate participatory arts (or participatory politics, economics, education, or religion). To encourage participation is to demand changes in the social order—radical changes. (Schechner 82)

In order to be considered artistically viable, CAST must begin to understand the theoretical nature of participation if they are to continue to use it as a strategy as they grow. Otherwise, they are merely guessing/playing. For if they want to use participation as a means of immersing and affecting the audience, as they assert, then it is paramount they understand the various ways to involve the audience and what types of effects these strategies have. Condee offers a similar recommendation for theatres using participation: the production needs to decide “to what extent one wants the audience involved in the production, and then how to manipulate the theatrical variables to achieve the desired effect” (45). Furthermore, CAST would be wise to take Schechner’s advice noted at the end of the quote above. They have certainly experimented in audience participation and implemented various strategies with wide-ranging responses. However, what they lack is the painstaking scrutiny Schechner advocates. They would certainly gain a greater theoretical foundation about the nature of theatrical participation if they were to spend more time and energy on examining the strategies they employed for various shows and their results. Perhaps things like exit meetings, audience responses, and the collection of other data would help them assess the effectiveness of the participation.

Potential Burnout

Inherent in producing theatre experientially is a sort of self-inflicted physical pressure. In the weeks and days preparing for an audience, the production team's focus is split. On the one hand, the production team has the traditional pressures of presenting the play according to the director's desires and the theatre's mission. Organization of the various duties, managing the numerous artists and volunteers, and creating the art itself, all while facing an impending deadline, are all part of the typical physical and emotional stresses surrounding theatrical production. But in addition, CAST has the added responsibility of creating an environment for the patron, which amounts to what can be considered a second production. The requirements to effectively create an atmosphere uniquely designed for each production are the same as those within the theatrical space itself; strict organization of duties, management of personnel, and the creation of the various elements. What that means is that with each show, CAST creates for themselves twice the physical demands of merely "producing a play," which certainly burdens the creative teams. When directors, actors, and designers come to work on a show at CAST they need to be aware that it "is not a typical production and they're expected to work harder in order to get all the elements where they have to be" (Simmons Interview 6). Simmons is emphatic about the level of work he requires from his team because he believes that the responsibility for the production ultimately lies with him. Simmons explains his personal ties to the theatre and the work they produce, "It's about expectations. Let's say we've met or exceeded expectations in the anteroom, then you come into the production and no matter how seamless that

is, if the actors and designers haven't done their homework and they don't meet expectations, then we fail [...] And if the experience fails, experientiality fails. And if experientiality fails, then all the stuff I've been working on since we started this journey, all of it fails. Which means I fail" (Simmons Interview 6).

In order to alleviate some of the pressures, CAST relies predominantly on its volunteer-base. But Simmons realizes that even with the generosity of its core group of volunteers, they are still not able to assuage all the demands. He asserts, "If we were just doing plays the traditional way, we would have too many resources right now, even with the limited funds that we have. We still don't have the resources we need . . . And if we were doing regular plays in the traditional way, we'd have excesses" (Simmons Interview 6).

Adding to the already high physical demand is the mental pressure placed upon the theatre to meet and create new expectations for the audience. In creating new environments and experiences for each production, Simmons believes audiences come to expect not only something different from CAST, but something better (Simmons Interview 6). Simmons and the various collaborators then have the responsibility to create for the audience something they haven't seen before. Simmons recalls CAST's production of *Dracula* as an example of the pressure to create something new for the audience. For the show he decided to use multiple areas of the theatre as a sort of processional for the audience. Simmons had never employed such a strategy and wondered if audiences would buy into the convention, if it would translate (6). This insecurity illuminates perhaps a larger fear for Simmons and CAST, one which Simmons does not share easily: the fear of

failure. Simmons admits he is constantly questioning “did we pick the right script? Do we have the right actors to do it? Did we really give it our 100% at experientializing it? That’s probably the most difficult thing about experiential theatre.”

Economic Viability

Another area to explore when examining CAST as a potential model for other theatres is the economic feasibility of presenting experiential theatre. In illustrating some of the pitfalls in the environmental theatre of the 60s, William Condee’s assessment can be taken directly as a comment also on experiential theatre. Condee writes, “Critics of environmental theatre charge that it is too expensive to be practical: the entire theatre space has to be transformed, and expense goes into things the audience hardly notices, such as the floor, leaving little money for more conventional scenic effects that might enhance the play. Heidi Landesman observes that ‘nobody really wants to spend’ the time and money necessary to ‘decorate the auditorium’” (Condee 175). And not only is the decoration and reconfiguration costly, but theatres that choose to do so also run the risk of the lobby presentations overwhelming the production itself. With most fringe theatres like CAST operating with very limited resources, strict budgeting is necessary just to get a show up and running. So if a theatre chooses to allocate a portion of their budget (not to mention man-power, energy, and focus) for lobby displays and installations, it runs the risk of taking resources away from the actual production. The result, then, is a production that suffers.

FOR THE FUTURE

Managerial Future

CAST's vision for the future is clear, to become a fully professional Equity theatre. However, their immediate future is much more uncertain, not necessarily financially or managerially, but rather their desire to grow as a company hinges greatly on their future space(s). When considering the direction for CAST over the next five years, Simmons concentrates his energies primarily on the next space they will take over. When the lease on the current building runs out, CAST will be forced to take up residence elsewhere. And while the options are plentiful the feasibility of most of those options are not. For instance, CAST could take over as the resident company at Spirit Square and have the backing of the Blumenthal Center's patron list. However, they would be beholden to them with regards to the space, which would include limitations on the use of the space, union requirements with respect to ushers and technicians, and many other factors. Therefore, Simmons is careful in his consideration of the next CAST space,

I don't want to move into a space, even if it's in a nicer neighborhood and increases our attendance, if I can't touch the lobby. I met with one of our guys who might help us on this building purchase, and I told him that I thought about moving into a space on Central Avenue. I've already done theatre with poles in the audience and I don't want to do it again. And I need a space where I can feel comfortable if I want to make that lobby a cave, I need to know I can do it. I need to know I won't have some management repercussions because I am leasing a building and they want to know why I did something to the floor.
(Simmons Interview 4)

It would be unacceptable for Simmons and CAST to limit the level of experientiality they have developed as their identity. In order to move forward it is essential for

CAST to find a space that is conducive to their mission and not merely a space in which to perform.

Simmons makes no secret of the fact that he models his vision for CAST after Actor's Theatre of Louisville. Having spent considerable time there, Simmons sees the level of work they do and the opportunities with the space as a suitable vision for the theatre's future. He recounts a conversation at a board meeting where they were discussing the topic of a future space and "they asked what I wanted to do. Do I want one theatre or two? Do I want a restaurant with the theatre? Well, of course I do. I want to be Actor's Theatre [of Louisville]. I want to have several spaces and a restaurant and have people hang out here" (Simmons Interview 4). Certainly this is an ambitious goal for a theatre of CAST's size and caliber, but Simmons believes his vision for such aspirations is attainable.

He may not be that far off, since the Arts and Science Council have assisted in CAST's search for a new theatrical home. CAST was recently awarded the Innovation Grant, \$30,000 to aide in CAST's search for, and subsequent redevelopment, of their next space. Simmons says that such a grant is evidence that the ASC has faith in CAST's ability to become the next purely professional theatre in Charlotte, and they are investing their money and support in an effort to jumpstart CAST's future (Simmons Interview 6).

Artistic Future

As CAST continues to grow and develop their theories on experiential theatre, it is imperative that they explore both what has proven effective in the past and how they can evolve their theories in the future. After careful observation and

assessment of CAST practices, these eight areas are identified as key areas for them to consider as they grow:

1) Look back at Schechner

As illustrated in Chapter 2, much of what experiential theatre is, and much of what CAST does is an echo of the theatre of the 60s and 70s. Simmons, however, claims to have no working knowledge of Schechner, Grotowski, or any other influential theatre theorist of the time (Simmons Interview 2). He is under the impression that experiential theatre and many of CAST's methods are unique to his theatre.

Simmons does claim to have a growing theoretical background, "It's not like I don't study. If you looked in my bag right now you're going to see books by Boal, Anne Bogart. I'm no dummy, I do my homework" (2). If CAST is to develop their experiential theatre any further than its present state, then it is incumbent upon Simmons and the rest of the production teams to have at the very least a basic knowledge of Schechner and the theorists whose experiments and ideas gave insight into the audience-performance relationship. In researching Schechner, as well as other theorists before him, Simmons would most likely find some similar models that would allow him to explore his theories in a more organized fashion, thereby having the benefit of a body of scholarship.

2) Return to focusing on the senses

CAST gained attention in Charlotte for many reasons, among them their use of techniques that incorporate the senses. In recent years, however, they have often failed to consider, or even ignored, the opportunities for such exploration. A

worthwhile technique, it would benefit CAST to focus on ways to exploit the senses as a means of incorporating the audience into the production.

3) Develop experiential theatre within the production itself

Simmons asserts that all aspects of the production can be experientialized (lighting, sound, etc.). However, this notion is not always apparent (or attempted) in the production itself. Further development and experimentation based around this idea are needed in order to test his theory and to ultimately form a more concrete conclusion.

4) Better utilize the various spaces of the theatre

While CAST utilizes much of the lobby/box office/bar area spaces in experientializing their productions, an argument could be made for the more effective use of these and other spaces. In CAST productions, there is often a distinct separation between the areas, without allowing the opportunity for the spectator to flow seamlessly from one space to the next. In looking toward the future, perhaps CAST could make the transitions between the spaces more a part of one singular narrative than merely autonomous spaces. Furthermore, CAST does have some modest spaces surrounding the theatre, mostly used for storage, dressing rooms, and technical elements, as well as a loft area for costume storage and the operating booth. Perhaps they could look for ways to incorporate those areas in experientializing their productions (either in their current home, or any subsequent homes in the future).

5) Utilize the exterior of the building

As illustrated, some of CAST's earlier productions gained attention for using the exterior of the theatre space as a legitimate location for performance. With very few exceptions, CAST has veered away from this practice and centered their efforts on the interiors. In looking at the CAST Mission Statement, it is evident that an obvious location to further develop their theories is, indeed, the theatre's exterior.

6) Re-evaluate the approach to lobby design

A great challenge CAST faces is to strengthen their theories on experiential theatre. At present their lobby, box office, bar, and restroom areas get a makeover of sorts for each production. In strengthening their theoretical framework, the design of the lobby areas can become less gimmicky, as they have a tendency to do, and more effectively unified with the themes of the production.

7) Intermission and after the show

For the New Orleans Group's *Victims of Duty* in 1967, the performers changed the lobby so that when the audience left they had to duck under a sheet which had written on it a famous Eichmann quote (Schechner 26). What this shows is not only an example of what Schechner did, but also perhaps an avenue CAST could explore—the time *after* the production. CAST utilizes most of the spaces available for their productions. But by taking advantage of both space and time, they can further explore their theories.

8) A Theory of the Experiential

Perhaps the most important recommendation for CAST's future is to identify their principles and make them concrete. In their beginning years, it can be argued, CAST (or ARPC/Victory Pictures/Off-Tryon) was presenting theatre with a

remarkably interesting *gimmick*—create theatre with a heightened sense of reality and interaction between the audience and performance. Somewhere in their evolution, perhaps with their 2006 production of *Autobahn*, CAST seems to have turned their gimmick into an *aesthetic*, where they began to provide the audience with a greater experience of the play, thereby increasing the chances of affecting the audience. Building an aesthetic is certainly a worthy mission. However, attending several of their productions consecutively will illustrate that their aesthetic is approaching the level of merely recycled tricks, relying on familiar techniques and designs. The result, then, is lack of cohesion between the various theatrical elements, both in and out of the theatre. It is undeniable that CAST works extremely hard to present various lobby installations and entertainments that are, ultimately, often impressive and entertaining. The danger that lurks just ahead of them, though, is the stark reality that despite Simmons’s assertions to the contrary, CAST may *not* be taking their theatre experience to the next level. Without a cohesive set of principles (or axioms), CAST will grow ever-stagnant, relying more and more on gimmicks to “be different” rather than aesthetic principles in order to grow their art.

In order for CAST to further develop, they must make the next leap in their theoretical evolution—to create a concrete *theory* of the experiential principles by which they work. To date, CAST has created no definition for their experiential theatre, nor have they codified any of their principles. Ultimately, they are producing theatre according to a methodology that has no definition, instructions that have no manual. Simmons defends this practice, arguing that perhaps the essence of experiential theatre “can only be explained by example. When people ask

me, I give them an example. I always wind up saying, ‘Well, you know, we’re trying to create an overall experience for the audience member.’ It’s a sound bite—an overall experience for the patron that starts at the front door that continues through and after the production. And then people say, ‘Well, what do you mean by that?’ Well, if you’ve never been to CAST, for instance, when you walk into the lobby this is the kind of ticket that we use and this is the music that we play and how the bartender is dressed. Maybe it’s like pornography; I can’t define it, but I know what it is when I see it” (Simmons Interview 6).

If that is the case, if experiential theatre cannot be defined, then the danger of inharmonious parts runs extremely high. Simmons alone then becomes the arbiter of what is and is not considered “experiential.” Perhaps a clearer question, one that Terry Milner, former Executive Director of the North Carolina Theatre Conference, cagily addressed with the creative team, is how can a theatre company adhere faithfully to a mission statement if it is unclear what the language in the mission statement means? To provide greater clarity to what experiential theatre *means* (not what it *is*, as Simmons does by merely providing examples), Simmons and CAST leadership must begin the process of creating a definition by which all members of the company, as well as reviewers and the audience at-large, will be able to understand, identify and replicate it. If there is not a clear understanding of the experiential methodology among all members of the creative team, then the productions are bound to be mired in inconsistency and incongruous parts.

A NEW DEFINITION AND AXIOMS FOR EXPERIENTIAL THEATRE

Below is a working definition of experiential theatre, followed by four principles/axioms. These are each based on the information gathered from this study of CAST and their own development of “experiential theatre.” It is not meant to be the final definition for a theory of experiential theatre. Rather, it is a starting point to be examined and scrutinized in order to encourage further discussion and study on what could develop into a creative, challenging, and vibrant method of presenting theatre.

“Experiential theatre”:

the method of producing plays utilizing the entire theatre property and the stimulation of the senses to immerse the audience in a theatrical experience, which ultimately affects each spectator.

My axioms for Experiential Theatre:

- 1) The text is the goal of the production; fidelity is necessary
- 2) The entire theatre space is part of the performance
- 3) All production elements are thematically related
- 4) The audience is asked to play a role in the theatrical event
- 5) The space and the performers interact with the spectators
- 6) Affectation of the senses is key to experience

As suggested above, there are several avenues for CAST to explore as they move forward into the next phases of their development as a theatre and in their experiential methodology. Issues regarding the limitations to experiential theatre and audience participation, managerial and artistic development, and faithfulness to their mission are all areas for Simmons and CAST to investigate with respect to its own identity. The most imperative need, based on the information accumulated in this study, is to develop principles to help define what they consider to be experiential theatre. Such a set of principles would certainly help define the theatre for its members and artists, but also would allow for other theatres to get a firmer understanding of the CAST approach in order to determine if they want to emulate such practices. In addition, they must develop a system to measure their effectiveness, whether by audience surveys, exit discussions with the artists, or some other way of collecting “data.” Defining a set of principles for everyone and having a way to gauge the implementations of those principles will undoubtedly assist in the development of this vibrant and worthy theatre.

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Appendices

Appendix A

CAST Project Proposal Form

Project Proposal Form 2010 - 2011

TITLE OF WORK:

AUTHOR(S):

SUBMITTED BY:

DATE:

Please respond to the following questions and e-mail Michael Simmons (mrsvictory@carolina.rr.com) or send to CAST Theatre (1118 Clement Avenue, Charlotte, NC 28205).

- 1) Is this a CAST project, rental, or collaboration? _____.
- 2) When (Dates / Time frame) is this project proposed?
_____.
- 3) Please attach a one page script summary for submission.
- 4) Please share your ideas of this work with emphasis on:

Experientiality -- How does this work help fulfill the CAST Mission/Vision? How can we create the Experience for the patrons?

Produce-ability -- What resources might be needed, including hardware, software, human-ware, and dollar-ware?

Marketability -- Will the show sell and how might we sell it? Who is the target demographic?

CAST-ability -- Can we find the actors, directors, designers, and technicians to do this production and at what cost?

Fundability - Is there an opportunity to fund this project from outside resources or to use this project as a fundraising event?

Appendix B

Simmons Interview 1

October 22, 2007

DB: Can you explain the CAST mission statement?

MS: Terry Milner asked, "Do you agree with the Mission Statement as proposed by the panel?" Well what is our mission? We get out our mission statement. "To produce culturally diverse experiential works," etcetera. But then we realized that we each had our own interpretation of what that meant. Then Terry finally came around to me and said "Okay, what did you mean by that?" And the same thing with our vision—seamless film and theatre. Terry said, "So okay, let's talk about this. How much of what you do experientially—when you say experiential theatre—now that we all understand what the founders did, we all understand what everyone's interpretation of your vision is, how much of that is executable, both in the future and historically? And how much of it is aspirational? How much of it do you say that you are doing that but haven't gotten there yet?" So we had to reevaluate what we do. And I think using the example of *Autobahn* was the litmus test of what we call experiential theatre. It was seamless film and theatre, we got everybody involved from the time they walked in the door, when they were in the bathroom, the tickets, the whole experience—to the time you walked out the door. Now, what we've decided was that would be the data mark. Every show after that has to be measured against *Autobahn*. It has to be tested with the mission and the vision. A director is going to have to come to me, or I have to go to the board, and defend a particular position on a project. I have to defend the script, and if you are going to direct a show, you have to convince me that you are going to be able to do it experientially. You're going to have to show me what those elements are. The thing about CAST is it's so unique and that sets us apart, having a product that is so different than everybody else. Your show was a perfect example [*The Heidi Chronicles* at Theatre Charlotte]. There were so many opportunities for experiential theatre that Theatre Charlotte didn't do. I found it so difficult to sit out in that audience and be so far separated from you. And I saw the work that you were doing, wonderful level of commitment in emotion by an actor, and I'm fairly close to you, I'm like four or five rows back, yet I feel this level of separation. I was involved but I was not nearly as involved as I could have been. If you'd have done that show at CAST, the impact that that would have had would have been much greater, I think.

DB: And it's not necessarily just the space. You could have an experiential show in a traditional proscenium theatre?

MS: Absolutely. And that would have probably warmed me up to the fact that I was so far distant from you and that you were four feet higher than me. If something would have happened in the lobby it would have gotten me prepared, or got me

engaged prior to that. There are ways—you could be experiential in any theatre, and we're going to have that challenge with *Tuna Christmas*, doing it in a space that we don't own.

DB: But you started that with *Omnium Gatherum*.

MS: That was pretty experiential and we didn't own that space. But *Tuna Christmas* might be a little different. We still didn't get to the level that we wanted to in "Omnium," which is making the entrances and exits part of the set. In the original design you had to walk down a corridor, and there was going to be another door with a steel submarine kind of handle on it to give them the full idea that they're walking into this pit, this tunnel.

DB: You were saying measuring things against *Autobahn*?

MS: So now, you're the director and you say "Listen, I want to do a show." Okay, well what's the name of that show? How does it fit into the mission? *Dark Play*. What is it about *Dark Play* that gives you the potential of being experiential? Don't forget again about what the space is. Number one, the reason *Dark Play* is picked is it's a very contemporary show, it's about dark games people play, it's about the internet and how easy it is to be a victim of a predator when you don't know who is on the other end of that text. And since it's all about internet, what's that got to do with experiential? How is CAST going to make that experiential? Well let me think about it for a minute. It's about internet, during the show there's a lot of text messaging going on. Well, we could make that text messages in the script appear on one of four walls. We could do that as a projection. I had a meeting with Paige [Johnston] and Jay [Thomas] who were tasked with making a presentation. This show has live high-speed internet access. Hmm, what could we do? How could we market this? How can we convince people to bring in their laptops, their Blackberrys, their cell phones, pagers, that receive text messages? How could we get that information and how could we use that? What if during the show we *don't* encourage everybody to turn off their cell phones and pagers? As a matter of fact, during the curtain speech we ask everyone to leave their cell phones and pagers *on*. Nobody's ever done that, at least around here. And we get their email address. We get their cell phone number. We text them messages so not only do you get it projected but your little phone rings and it's not a message from your girlfriend wanting to know what time you're going to be back from the pay, it's a message from Adam (Adam being the main character in the play) who's text-messaging everybody. So what if we back-engineered that even further? What if people on our patron email list, the people for whom we have cell phone numbers, what if twelve or fourteen weeks before the show opens they start getting emails from Adam that talk about something coming up? We start marketing this with technology. Then Jay says "How does that apply to a physical space?" Okay, we could do stuff before the show or we could do stuff during intermission, or we could make peoples' text messages go off as the actual show is running, but what happens physically in the space? What if every seat was a letter on the keyboard? So instead of being in row A, seat 2, you are in "backslash-

semi-colon.” And you are seated in “F1.” So that’s the next level that’s happening. This is definitely up to the level of *Autobahn*. Now we are going to take this even to the next level. So now we’re going in and looking at how we can lay the seats out like a keyboard. Then all of a sudden it hits at the experiential.

DB: So forget about the whole “I want to do a play, let’s do it.” You have to do something to it.

MS: I don’t want to do something *to* it, I want to do something *for* it. The play is either brilliant or it sucks. If it’s brilliant and everything we need is already there, it’s just different ways to execute it, to help it along. We could have a Pulitzer Prize-winning play but nobody comes to see it simply because the last thing they came to see was at a proscenium, and they were so distanced from it. No matter how great it was, they still felt it just wasn’t engaging, it wasn’t more engaging than sitting home and watching HBO. At least when you sit home and watch HBO it’s intimate. The one thing I missed, and maybe because I’m prejudiced because I’m so used to working in this place the one thing I missed about going to see that [*The Heidi Chronicles* at Theatre Charlotte] was the intimacy between the actor and the audience. And that *was* a function of distance, and your director, and space.

DB: Can every play, can any play be experientialized?

MS: I think so.

DB: But maybe some are more limited, or to varying degrees?

MS: I would like to think—it’s part of our philosophy—that every play could be experientialized. But there are different levels. You could find a way to do something with the tickets, the set. When we were considering doing *Stollock-17* we figured we could build a guard tower out front. We have the opportunity to do that. We could put some barbed wire around here. We could have a guy around here in a German uniform with a German shepherd that barked at everybody when they came in and he patrolled up and down the lobby—sure, you could always do something.

DB: What’s the history of CAST, and the people?

MS: CAST itself was founded by Ed Gilweit and it was an actor’s lab. And Ed’s philosophy on acting was actionable verbs, raising the stakes, previous circumstance, and getting the actors to be more honest, and therefore he would be more engaging. We were Victory Pictures, which was a film company who then branched out to do theatre in 1998 and opening with *Suburbia* as part of Robert’s [Simmons] company of Another Roadside Performance Company. Rob’s company hired me on as a consultant. Ed was on Culman Avenue doing his thing teaching acting. Then Rob and his group of young actors asked me how they could direct this show differently, more engaging. I took what I knew about film and inculcated them. And we just started from the ground up. Instead of just building a set that looked

like a gas station, why didn't we just build a gas station? What are those elements that we can project out into the audience? So instead of putting traffic signals on the set, we actually brought them out over the set, hanging over you the patron were working traffic signals. And you could actually go into our grocery store on our set and get a loaf of bread—we stocked everything, with lights and refrigerators and everything.

Then we got ten speakers from an old movie theatre and set up a surround-sound system. So although it wasn't the experiential kind of thing we later did for *Autobahn*, at least what we could do was *surround* the audience with sound. There was one scene where a jet flies over and we made sure we did that in THX. And the same thing in the final climactic scene when the trash truck comes; we foreshadowed that. We started [the noise] back in the audience and crossed it [with] 270 degrees of sound so the truck got closer and closer to the stage, and the final speaker was set directly behind this dumpster where they find the body in the climax of the show. So in your mind you experienced a trash truck arriving there to pick up a dead body, even though you didn't see it. Our next show was *Tracers*, a Viet Nam play, which we knew we could take it to the next level. We were kind of guerilla theatre people from back in college anyway. So with *Tracers* we made the set out of sand bags—which we'll never do again because they're heavy. Then we decided that if we were going to dress the inside of the theatre, why not dress the outside of the theatre? So we sandbagged the outside of the theatre and the box office. We put .50 caliber machine guns in there. We put snipers on the roof. We covered it in camouflage. We got mortar replacements. We got two "deuce and a quarter" army trucks. We got a '68 Volkswagon van. We painted [it] hippy colors. We got the National Guard Honor Guard to meet you inside the theatre, and we got all of Rob's friends to protest outside the theatre every night for the show. We utilized seamless film and theatre where we tied the two-story camouflage screen outside and projected all of the helicopter scenes. We projected Nixon's speeches and everything that was going on in '68. King was getting assassinated, Bobby Kennedy—all of this was happening while the show was going on. This was at the Neighborhood Theatre. One thing we did know about the experiential thing too, we took the experiential theory further than just what the patrons saw. We sent all of those actors who were in *Tracers* for military training. They went out on a three-day mission with a bunch of Viet Nam vets who had their own fully automatic M-16 machine guns and it was a clandestine range—we were investigated by the ATF afterwards about it—and spent three days training and basically they set up a fire base in a remote part of North Carolina and had to live out there. They had rations, they ate bugs, they didn't get to sleep, and the last night they were "attacked." The people who lived, lived and the people who died, died. They got to fire the real M-16s and that was part of the rehearsal process. And that allowed us to take the first process to the next level. And I think it reflected in their performance. They knew what it was like to be out there. Plus it really helped us to relate to all those Viet Nam vets.

DB: So how did you end up with Ed and CAST?

MS: So Ed comes to see *Tracers* with two of his actors in it, and he asks us to see if we can't merge our two companies. We were in the process of already producing *Steambath*. And again *Steambath* was very experiential because this is where space comes into play. If every play has the potential for being experiential, then the question is does every space provide you the opportunity to do that? Obviously there are some spaces you are not even allowed to put a screw in the floor to put your set up. They are also probably the same people who are less inclined for you to re-engineer their lobby, much like we can do in this space. There are still probably things you can do, but to that end, we did *Steambath* in the same space we had done *Tracers*. And there was some resistance to what we did on the outside, the whole army truck thing, did the theatre owners really want to go through that again to do something with *Steambath*? So what we did was we almost limited ourselves to experientiality inside the theatre and we built a working steam bath. We made sure the steam bath projected out into the audience, we did it in our thrust arrangement. We made steam come out of the pipes. We had a working shower on stage. And then to help with experientiality we used marketing. We were limited physically so we provided bath towels. Our tagline was "Steam bath towels are optional." We did make sure that when we were doing the marketing up and down the neighborhood that all the actors were in their towels. We made sure that Channel 9 covered it live.

DB: So this was the first time marketing became experiential.

MS: Yes. Well, in a sense because if you go back to something like *Tracers* we made sure all the tickets were dog tags. We had to go buy a bunch of dog tags for the actors anyway. Well, what if the tickets were dog tags and we punched holes in them and had a little bit of string? That's how the audience got their tickets. So actually we were ahead of the power curve then too. We hadn't thought that far ahead on the marketing. And even though the tickets were kind of marketing, people remembered us from that. But with *Steambath* we thought ahead with what we could do in terms of a tag line to get it out in the press. There were people who actually came in their towels. We had a three-week run and there was a two-week availability for *Steambath* to be produced at the Neighborhood Theatre and we had already known that Ed wanted to collaborate with us. So what Ed and I had agreed on was we will do the first two weeks of *Steambath* in the Neighborhood Theatre but we would run the third and closing week at the CAST theatre, which was just down the street on Culman Avenue in the acting studio. So what we had to do—what we were able to do—was engineer the set ahead of time. So we took all the dimensions from the CAST theatre, built the set so it would fit in both spaces, and we only had a quarter-inch to spare because the CAST theatre had a ceiling that was only nine feet, 11 ¼ inches tall, and the set was originally designed to have all these towers and pillars to be ten feet tall. And plus an interesting thing was built to be a three-degree raked stage and so to keep all the pillars and everything level we had to build the base differently. We built it so we could saw the base off and make it a flat stage. But it also fit into CAST. The interesting thing was there was live steam pumped through the pipes and it really created a wonderful effect and you could feel in the audience that you were part of the steam bath. But experiential theatre took a

new meaning when we took it into the CAST theatre because we moved it from a 300-seat theatre into a 93-seat theatre with ceilings that were thirty feet tall at the Neighborhood Theatre to ceilings that were less than ten feet tall at CAST and when we turned the steam pipes on the entire stage including the audience was flooded with smoke. So if you were in the back row you were really in the steam—could you see the actors? We didn't realize of course it would set off the fire alarms during the intermission of our opening night we see all these flashing lights outside while people were smoking and it turned out to be the fire department. So we had to turn off the smoke alarms so we could run Act 2. And then we taped over all the smoke detectors for the rest of the run. But that's how Ed and I got involved in the whole experiential theatre thing.

DB: So did you do more at the Neighborhood Theatre?

MS: No, that was our last show at the Neighborhood. We were done with them. And the next season was basically produced at CAST. We then started inculcating his—I won't say new acting technique but it was new to Charlotte, a lot of people had been trained but they were basically presentational actors—so we were able to do our methodology of experiential theatre on technology with our ability to produce interesting environmental sets with new levels of acting technique and it was a good marriage for both of us.

DB: Do you know who he based his technique on?

MS: Just training in L.A. He had been a director for many years. And we did a lot of experiential training. For instance, an idea for Ed's training class would be everyone had to pick a character, and it was a character you already knew was going to happen, either in a showcase or some upcoming production you were in. For me I had to do the lead actor in *Oleanna*, the teacher because I knew I was already cast in that show that was coming up in June. So an experiential training method of Ed's was we would all come to the theatre at 6:00 and for 5 hours, from 6:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. we would do something, we had a cast party. But you had to come in character and had to remain in character which meant the way you looked, the way you acted, the way you walked, all of it, you could either use lines from your play or you could improv. So if you hadn't done your homework, you could get through the first thirty minutes but the last four hours and thirty minutes were pretty painful for you. A great exercise it was to be in an environment for 5 hours forced to become a character. So we were able to marry the experiential method of teaching acting, at least through that exercise, to the experiential method of producing theatre. And it was wonderful to have people who were on the ground floor of both of those genres working at the same time for the same goal.

And the manifestation of that work was that many of those actors who were in that first five-hour CAST party experiential exercise were cast in *Italian-American Reconciliation*. One of the scenes takes place in a diner—an Italian restaurant. We made the whole theatre an Italian restaurant. My mother came in and cooked Italian food so when you walked in—and I don't want to go back to the old days of

film where it was smell-o-rama—but nobody had done that in theatre, at least not in Charlotte. So for us it was a huge market to have everything lit up and to have the outside of the theatre a restaurant. Fortunately the old CAST theatre had its own kitchen so we would just cook Italian food in there and you could smell the oregano and the spices. But of course the play has a lot of other scenes too and we were able to really engulf the audience in technically the way we did the set where the walls turned. Again we were always looking to tie—there's a lot of wine-drinking going on during the show so we made sure everybody had the opportunity to get a free glass of wine. This was still at Cullman Avenue.

DB: How long were you there?

MS: We were there about fourteen months, from the time CAST merged with Victory Pictures until the time Victory Pictures left that building. And in essence CAST left that building. And how that happened was after a couple of these productions, our mission was also to be collaborative, bringing people in so some of the folks from Off-Tryon wanted to join us, and we decided that to help get the circle bigger we would allow another group of actors and directors to come in. But they didn't embrace the experiential concept. CAST was growing. Victory Pictures was growing. We technically were still separate companies and were talking about merging into one and allowing these other groups of artists to come in and we formed the Off-Tryon Company, because we were off Tryon street, and it would be a marketing tool. But we didn't have a meeting of the minds. Ed had told me in our very first meeting, "A lot of people say 'I'm all about the work. I'm all about the work.' But they're really not. They're concerned with themselves. That's why I never wanted to be anybody's partner." Ed and I hit it off. We were both about getting the work done. There were many, many, many nights after acting class when we'd stay there until three, four, five o'clock in the morning and work on designing and programming and we'd come up with things like defining a character a little bit more or being more honest and truthful about a character. So great, you do it. You get up and do this scene. And he was never afraid to do the work himself. But with Off-Tryon, we just couldn't have a meeting of the minds. I remember being told by one of their directors my problem was I wasn't willing to do theatre with no costumes, and with no set, and with no lights for twenty people a night. And I realized at that moment, I told him "You know what? I agree with you, I'm not willing to do that. That's not what I'm about. I'm about experiential theatre. I'm about doing the work. I'm about involving the audience. I'm older than you. I've already done theatre with coffee cans and seventy-five-watt light bulbs. I'm not interested in doing that. If we can't do something experiential..." And we parted company.

DB: And how long were you with them?

Off-Tryon and I were together for about ninety days before I decided I'd had enough. And Ed was a little upset because I said I was leaving, and we had a bit of a falling out over that because he felt we were really going somewhere with the theatre. But

I just wanted to keep doing experiential theatre. And for Ed it was a financial decision—an infusion of cash to help pay the rent. And he had also just contracted cancer. And the time we found out he had cancer in September, he was dead March 30, the next year. So what Victory Pictures decided to do was go out to Matthews, because we got invited to use their new 1.3 million dollar facility. But there were restrictions. Ed wanted to work out there with us too but his cancer kept getting worse and worse, so he left Cullman Avenue. He let those new Off-Tryon people have that space and they took over the debt, they took over the building, and he was only thirty days behind me after I left the space. But still he was fighting cancer and could do less and less as the disease progressed. But we had been in talks about taking a year—we had a year lease on the building out in Matthews, the Matthews Community Center. They had renovated an old school and an auditorium and turned it into a 300-seat theatre for 1.3 million dollars. But it was a cavern. And again we tried to do things a little bit differently, but we couldn't drill into the floor, they had no lighting system. But what we did with Victory Pictures was—okay, let's talk about scripts for a minute. So while Ed was recovering from cancer we moved into this new space and said what are we going to do? They had restrictions on the language we could use, they had restrictions on the kinds of plays we were going to do. So Ed said, "You know? *We should do One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.*" I read the script—I didn't know that it was a play, besides being a book, and I didn't like it. I didn't see any experiential opportunities. And he said "You know who wrote this play, don't you?" I said "No." He said "What was your favorite war movie?" I said "*The Bridge over the River Quai.*" He said "That's the same guy. He wrote that play and he wrote that screenplay. You better read it again. Only this time you better read it more carefully." So I went back and read it and I thought, "You know we could do this experientially. Even if we can't do stuff with the lobby, what could we do with the play that would involve everybody?" So Rob and I researched where Ken Kesey wrote the novel. We got the original drawings and blueprints from the Western State Mental Institution. We got pictures of their uniforms, their costumes. We built a replica of the Western State Mental Institution at that theatre. From the color of the floor tile—it projected out into the audience—we built a little extension in there. We covered the floor so then we could put anything on it we wanted to. It was very full of detail, including when you opened up the doors you could see the urinals. A lot of detail in that set. And then we went to the multi-media presentation. So when McMurphey was getting shocked we had two giant 7-foot diameter gears that came down from the ceiling, the actors spun them, and we projected all the stuff that was going on that we thought, as filmmakers, that was going on in McMurphey's mind while he was getting the shock. It actually helped me become a better director—it forced me to research when the play was written, what was happening in 1968, where he chose the play took place. So we did a lot of assassination stuff again; Woody Woodpecker commercials, Brill Cream, things they used to have on the air back then. So we really did suck them in. So it just goes back to what you can do with limitations. And right after that is when Ed passed away. And we are up to about when 9/11 happened in our chronology. We opened up that show the week after 9/11. It's hard to believe it was that many years ago. And we did some nice interesting work there.

DB: How long were you there?

MS: Less than a year. We were there for one season, from that September to the following April. And eventually we were asked to come back but Ed had died in March, and some of the steam got let out. We were pretty fired up about what we could do 'cause it was always a challenge. There were censorship issues, there was the issue of what we could do in the space. We did cutting-edge work though. We at least tried to bring cutting-edge work to a very conservative community theatre that was used to having children's plays and not real adult entertainment. So after that year we took our operation over to a warehouse on Graham Street and we opened up with what we thought again would be a very experiential.

We were outside of Graham Street, and you don't need all the details but the woman was psycho. But it was a three-story warehouse next to a set of railroad tracks and we thought "Okay, what can we do in this space? It has three stories, no air conditioning, no lights, no heat." Through the Humana Festival I was able to pull *Snapshot* which was basically a tool of Mount Rushmore—it was written very experientially—so we're talking about experiential writing now. The premise of the script was, the Humana Festival approached seven writers and they said "We'd like you to write a script. We're going to create an anthology about all these scenes put together and each of you writers will be able to write one scene, and here's what you get to base it on." And they handed them a snapshot. And the snapshot was a picture of the Mount Rushmore visiting center. And you could see Mount Rushmore in the reflection of the windows. So you were looking at a picture of somebody taking a picture from the reflection of the window. So it gave the writers a lot of different ideas and the scenes were as unique as the writers were themselves. Wonderful piece. So what we decided to do to make it experiential was we had the film, we had a tour guide welcoming you to Mount Rushmore, and so we projected a lot of stuff on the screen when people walked into the theatre. We went ahead and we took the script a little bit further and we made that tour guide the person who would lead you from scene to scene. And the scenes were already set up. One of the scenes being when they climbed on top of Mount Rushmore, which conveniently was on the third floor. And we had to control all the lights and sound from the first floor so all the—we were sending secret hand signals and encoded messages over the radio so the person on the third floor could actually go to cue 17, cue 18, cue 19. And so we just used the entire building, not just the theatre, this whole twenty-five thousand-foot warehouse. But the woman really was psycho. I think the next play we tried to do there was *Closetland* and of course we made that very experiential because we built an interrogation room that looked like a mausoleum. We surrounded—allegedly in the script you hear a lot of screams and moans that came out of the pipes—well we built our own twelve-inch PVC pipe system that totally surrounded the audience. And rather than have regular speakers Greg Crubman he actually made speakers and glued them into the pipes every twenty feet and we could control which pipe it was coming from, how it echoed through the audience—and of course you were inside and we put the audience inside the mausoleum. Just like we put them in Henry Moss's house, only more so. We made the walls—we

physically built walls and put the audience's chairs in front of them, so the door would open up and you would come right down the aisle. So we tried to make it more of an experience. But it turned out we had to leave that space and was a good thing because, besides the lady trying to raise the rent on opening night, the builder bought the property and was tearing it down. So we were forced to find a new space anyway, which takes us to roughly five and ½ years ago last February when we found this space. And that's when we started to convert the warehouse, and we came much freer in our experiential mission because now for the first time we could do whatever we wanted. We could spend as much time as we wanted and "thinking outside the black box" became our motto because if we were going to put in a black box who said it's got to be square? Maybe it could be octagonal. Maybe it could have a revolving floor on it? Why couldn't we put a wall in here and make two theatres? And who says we can't paint the floor? Who says we can't knock down this wall? Nobody. It's ours. We can do whatever the hell we want.

DB: How long were you at the warehouse?

MS: We were at the warehouse from, well we moved in the late spring, early summer when we left Matthews, but we only did two shows there—we were out of there before Thanksgiving. So maybe six months. One of the lessons to be learned for CAST and us is don't ever renovate anyone else's theatre. We had already renovated the Neighborhood Theatre—but that's what we had to do to get. In order to do the experiential theatre we wanted to do we had to change the theatre. We had to clear the infrastructure. When we got to CAST on Cullman Avenue. CAST didn't have a lighting system. They were a teaching—you know they turned on the fluorescents and they acted. We said "No, we can't have that, so let's go ahead and take it to the next level." So we renovated that theatre. And we went out to Matthews even though they spent 1.3 million dollars, they had a grid system they just didn't have any lights in it. So we went ahead and created a lighting system for them. When we went over to the Heart Witson gallery. They had nothing. For a warehouse they didn't even have enough electricity that could handle a dozen 500-watt lights. So we had to create the grid system and the lighting system and the electrical system, and it was really cold in there in November, let me tell you, and it was really hot in there in August. So we moved here. That's in January, 2002. We actually found the space right when we left.

DB: And this space the guy who owns it gives you carte blanche, lets you do whatever you want?

MS: Yes.

DB: You pay the rent and don't burn it down.

MS: We pay the rent and his wife likes theatre. But on the same token, if something goes wrong, we're pretty much left to fend for ourselves. The floor floods for the third time—we were very fortunate we got him to replace the gutters when they

were stolen, cause that's what precipitated flood number three. But he's been really good—the air conditioner broke this summer and he had somebody come out and fix it three times. But in general, we have carte blanche, it is all *liaise faire*, we can do what we want to do, they're impressed with the work we do. He sees the press that he's getting.

Now let's face the future. We're not going to be here forever. I like the intimacy of this theatre, I like the ability to do whatever I want to do, but this property is earmarked for a high-rise condo. And when the price is right, we'll be sacrificed. So then what will we do? Which is why we are thinking about where we will be in two years, where we're going to be in five years—we aren't going to be in this space. So that takes me back to experiential theatre. Where will experiential theatre be in five years? What do I want to do here? What is my goal? So I am looking ahead—I know these floors are concrete. I know the wonderful stage floor we put in here has been flooded three times—the last thing I am going to do in this building is going to be the next litmus test for experiential theatre. That is going to be the Kirsk play where we build the interior of a submarine—what I was hoping to do was build on the outside the nose and the conning tower that you could actually come through that. Why not? What the hell? And to take the experience one step further and make it a finite experience in time. If you have two hours and four minutes of air to breathe, then this play takes place in two hours and four minutes. And I don't care if I flood the floor now because I know I'm going to have to move and they're going to tear the building down. I've already got the pipes set up, the water's already in here now. We've run the pipes with the valves right above our heads. It's the same thing I used to fill the tub for *Henry Moss*, only now more. All I have to do is open the valves. You come in and what happens is you get a submarine suit, pull up your coveralls, this is your station. And put everyone else in the metal catwalk and we'll go ahead and we'll live the last two hours and four minutes of everybody on the Kirsk. And of course what you in the audience don't realize is that when you get rescued and they're pounding on the—you think it's going to be happy ending until you realize the guys who are rescuing you, the American rescue team, are from the thresher. And all the other people who come on—and as we go back in time the next person that comes in and the next person who comes in are the people from the Hunley all the way down to the Turtle. It's every submarine movie drama, life story—*The X Five*—it's *No Exit*, it's *Omnium Gatherum*—you find out we're all dead and this is everybody who has ever died under the water. And that's your experience. And then we'll have to figure out what we're doing after that. Who knows where we'll be?

DB: So you had this idea of experiential production and experiential acting and you merged?

MS: Well the experiential theatre is something I've always had—I don't know when it started, if I was like four or five years old, but I see things in film. Instead of writing a report in high school I would do a film. I would act out a scene. I don't know where it came from in my childhood—it's just something I've always had to do was take it to another level. I don't know why that is. It's a genetic flaw.

DB: Did you ever study any other theorists while with Actor's Theatre?

MS: I went to Humana Festival but I never paid attention when I was in college. I was too busy creating my own makeup in the lab and rebelling, so no. Maybe it was Mrs. Macintosh, my drama coach for thirteen years for giving me the credit—maybe not the credit, the inspiration to—we never coined the phrase “thinking outside the black box” but coming up with new creative ideas. Going back to Off-Tryon, what I didn't like about them...I had already done theatre in a black box that used to be a classroom. It was sort of what Actor's Theatre is now—it was very long, it was only four or five rows deep and there weren't any lights. So if you wanted lights you had to figure out how to make them on your own. Well what do you do? Well we can make light out of a can. Really? Okay, so that's how you make your lights. Well how do you do a set in here? How do you do this? Well I don't know. That's why you're here. That's what you're going to school for. You figure it out. And then one day for my senior thesis—and this was before there was a stage version of *Catch-22*. “Well first you can't do it here, we are a Catholic college. And second of all, you can't do that.” That's just what I wanted to do. When somebody tells me I can't do something, that's what starts my ball rolling. I decided that day, well we could do it if all these seats weren't in here. What if these seats were all over there? And my whole classroom was smaller than this whole theatre we are in right now. And I had a bunch of friends who were seniors with friends of friends and carpenters, and I said, “This is what we are going to do.” And for whatever reason they just gravitated to do that. I think that's what validated the idea of a whole new experience here. Instead of just changing the set we gutted it out and changed the whole theatre. And I know there were people who were really pissed off about that, like the administration. But why not? Who says we can't do it? And I just had a lot of—this acting coach that I had was also my drama advisor, just gave me the faith and the confidence in myself to believe that [I] could do that.

DB: What college was this?

MS: This was Brescia College, a private college in Owensboro, Kentucky, a little town of 50,000 people.

DB: And what was your acting teacher's name?

MS: Ray Macintosh. Now she was a professional actress in Scotland, she had married an Olympic weightlifter, also from Scotland, they had moved to South Africa, Durbin. So she had already had to think outside the black box anyway. She hated film because she loved working on the stage. Truthfully she was the best actress I have ever known. I remember training for Shakespeare and I went to school on a drama and tennis scholarship, so I thought I was hot shit. And I got there and she made me do a scene from—I had to read Polonius “Neither a borrower or a lender be”. And I was going on and on and I was great, until she stopped me and she said, “What are you saying?” “Well, you know, ‘neither a

borrower or a lender be.” “Yeah, but what are you saying?” So I bulshitted for a few minutes and she finally said, “You really don’t know. That’s the bottom line. You really don’t know.” And she’s Scottish so she’s perfect with a wonderful Scottish accent. She taught me a lesson. So once I realized I didn’t know what I was talking about, then I realized, “Oh, this was going to be work.” Then I realized I like to work. I didn’t like being lazy, not as an actor, not as a director. So I’d be lazy doing something else, but not this. Some people didn’t appreciate it—I think the audience got it because they were so wrapped up in the whole fucking thing. I think other theatre people didn’t get it or didn’t want to get it. And now we’ve set a different bar. That’s why you don’t see it normally. That’s why fuck you MTA, fuck you. They just purposely won’t look at this work. They will not look at the work. I don’t care about me, fuck you. But can you not see that what we’re doing here is special? On every level? If there’s something special about every show that we do—and I didn’t want to do *Dracula*, but it was a way to make money. And why are you going to do the script that way? And Julie had already made up her mind before she ever even saw the show.

We were thinking about doing *Master Class*—that is a play about something else. The vehicle is opera and the engineer on that strain is Callas—that’s what it’s all about, but it’s not. It’s about art and it’s about raising the stakes and taking the risks to go all out and not hold back. And let the chips fall where they may. And it might cost you your life and you might spend yourself in ten years. I saw some movie about Orson Welles and one of the lines I remember was they were talking about well, Orson’s doing this and that, and Orson turned around to his partner at the bar and says “It’s not how long your candle burns, it’s how bright.” That’s what I’m about.

Appendix C

Simmons Interview 2

January 14, 2008

DB: What's your theatrical background?

MS: I started in theatre as a freshman in high school at age thirteen. I got the lead role in *The Music Man* as a freshman.

DB: And where'd you go from there?

MS: I had the whole classic high school experience. My brother and I did the regular musicals and theatre and I got a full scholarship to go to Rutgers University and I also had a scholarship to go to this small college, Brescia College in Kentucky. I accepted both and through a series of either serendipity on the positive, or tragic (there's some theatrical word for everything that happened to me, I'm sure) things took me to Kentucky. I went up to Rutgers for the interview process and afterwards I got a letter saying I hadn't been accepted, which was incongruent considering I had already gotten one letter saying I had gotten a full scholarship. Well, what happened was there was a misspelling. They had sent a "Michael Symons" a letter of rejection and "Michael Simmons" letter got the full scholarship. So that summer they were trying to get all that fixed and I didn't know if I was in or not, or if I was getting scholarship money. And in the meantime, this Catholic college in Kentucky was trying to get me to go there for the drama program and a tennis scholarship. My deadline was, I think August 22nd. So basically, on August the 18th I remember getting the final letter from Rutgers saying we're really sorry, we got it all squared away and you need to be here on the 3rd or the 4th or whatever it was. We were in the kitchen and my mother was saying "This is so great because we finally got all this squared away and it's not going to cost us any money. I'll be able to come up every weekend and see you!"

DB: Where were you living?

MS: I was living in Williamstown, New Jersey. And it would take ninety minutes for my mother to get there and all the little red flags started to go up. I had my college plan laid out and none of it included my mother, 'cause it was all about girls. That's why I was in the theatre. In the meantime this college in Kentucky was courting me, trying to get me to come out there, but I had never been there—I had no intention of going to Kentucky. Then I realized that my mother wasn't going to be able to come up every weekend. I love my mom, but I wanted to get away. My mom and my dad were going through what was ultimately going to be a divorce and I wanted to distance myself. So I went to Owensboro, Kentucky with a population of 50,000 people. But the brochure looked great! There were thoroughbreds and these fields,

daisies, and chicks sitting in the quad playing guitars. I'd heard all about their "Dark Theatre." It all sounded pretty interesting.

DB: And was it everything the brochure advertised?

MS: It was nothing that the brochure advertised! In fact, you could fit the whole college on the brochure. I went back in time. I got off on Ozark Airlines and I was like "Oh my God, where have I landed?" I kept thinking my version of Kentucky was the Kentucky Derby and what I saw on TV. I wanted to go home. I asked to go back to the airport, put me on another airplane and fly me home. The lady who picked me up explained, that was the last airplane. "If you want to fly home you're going to have to wait until Monday because we don't have flights at Owensboro on weekends." "Oh my God, I'm trapped." She told me, "This is what my suggestion is...it's Friday. You're going to have the whole weekend to spend here. It's orientation weekend for freshmen. Meet some of the other people that are here, spend some time, hang out in the quad, and if you still want to leave on Monday I'll take you to the airport." There were other people there from cities like Boston, St. Louis, and other major cities who were also trapped until Monday that were in the same boat as I was. We were all trapped. But one of the things I had to do that Friday afternoon was meet with the head of the drama department. He just said "Hey, so glad that you are here. We've already cast you as the Witch Boy in *The Dark of The Moon* and we're ready to start rehearsing." So that kind of lifted my spirits. The next day I got to go see La Petit Theatre—"The Dark Theatre"—and found out that the entire theatre that I was going to be working at for the next four years was smaller than the one we are in right now. It was basically a classroom where the seats had been replaced by a long end-on row of theatre seats. And that was the stage. And it's like "Well, where's the real theatre? Where's the *theatre* theatre?" Now I *really* wanted to leave. But I didn't and I got stuck there for four years.

DB: Was there a bright spot?

MS: I started to feel better once I met my acting coach, Ray Macintosh. She was from Scotland, and when I learned all the things that she had done and that she was a real stage actress in the British Isles, I started to embrace it a little more.

DB: And after college?

MS: Ha! In a nutshell? I graduated from there, taught a year of drama at U of L, had some really good professional acting jobs, got a gig in L.A., got married to Roz my senior year in college, and she got pregnant with Rob. We had Rob and my wife said to me that if I took the acting gig in L.A. we're history. I had a great film role. And now it's 1977 and I gave it up. Plus, I did have a lot of pressure from my family; "You need to think of Rob. You need to be a dad. You need to give up all this theatre nonsense and get a real job."

DB: And did you?

MS: Yeah. (Laughs.)

DB: That's when you went to flight school?

MS: Yeah. What I wanted to do was become an independent film-maker and instead I wound up teaching high school just to make the payments. And then Roz wanted to move to Louisville to go to U of L so I taught for a year at U of L. But at the same time I told her "Listen, when I made that deal to give up the L.A. gig, I didn't know how to do anything else—it's the only thing I've wanted to do, except for flying." I wasn't going to go to my dad to get me a job in the Jeep factory. He was miserable. Why would he want me to be miserable too? Just so I could get that paycheck every month and be pissed off because my neighbors didn't like me and they were putting grass clippings on my lawn? And I said, "No, I'm not doing it." On that day when I made that decision, I never saw a movie or another play for ten years. I couldn't do it.

DB: That's pretty severe!

MS: That's exactly right. And Roz left anyway and I she left me with Rob who was now not quite a year-and-a-half old. I was a graduate student and was teaching at the university and I had a part-time job as a private detective at Pinkerton's. So here's the way it worked: I've got class at whatever time I had to teach that class, say 6:00 at night. Now if I put Rob in the daycare at 9:00 in the morning I could go into the office, get my detective assignment, drive across the river, get an airplane, fly to Hazard, Kentucky, do an investigation, set up a surveillance, be back to that airport at 4:00, fly back to Indiana, land at 5:00, get in my car and still be back to the daycare by 6:00 to pick up Rob, and then go teach my class. Oh, and hope that the lady across the hall could visit to watch Rob.

DB: What was your experience at U of L?

MS: I thought their program was bullshit. They'd be talking about all these wonderful Greek tragedies and classics, but I wanted to do something different. I once had to direct a scene from *Hedda Gabler*. Okay, let's put everything on a diagonal and as soon as the audience walks in people are already on stage. And they were like "Whoa. You can't do that!" "Why not?" That's my first introduction to the experiential—"well why not?" Why *can't* I do that? I told them, "Listen, you don't understand. I went to school where the theatre was a classroom. I went in there and gutted the whole room out. I had to do my senior project, I'm going to do *Catch-22* and the first thing we are going to do is start bare, four bare walls. And we're going to put all the seats over there, there's going to be barbed wire outside, and the whole thing is going to be like an air base and the audience is already in it." "You can't do that." "Well why not?" "Well, the theatre has always been this way." That was their mistake, right there, to tell me that I couldn't do something.

DB: So would you say this experiential idea for you came out of, was born out of necessity to make Brescia College a little more interesting?

MS: Yeah. Because when I was told I *had* to do something a certain way I was always, "Why? Why couldn't we do it a different way?" Like being in that black box...what if it wasn't round? Or square? Of course having that relationship with Mrs. Macintosh—

DB: She encouraged that?

MS: Yeah. That was part of the acting thing. You think a role has to be done a certain way and then you're going to get a stage and you are going to act that way that you think that character is supposed to be played or that's the way you think the audience wants you to behave. That's how I got caught. I was doing a Shakespeare role, Polonius. And I was doing a great job—"Neither a borrower or a lender be" blah, blah, blah. And she said, "Okay, what are you talking about?" "Neither a borrower or a lender be." "Yeah but what are you talking about? You don't know do you? You don't really understand what this means." We went through it line by line. She said, "You know you are a great presentational actor. Ninety percent of the people in this audience think you hung the moon but you are a charlatan. You are pretending. That's not real acting. Real acting is about honesty. Try it this way. That's part of the exercise. What if you did it *this* way? What if he didn't have any legs? Just to see where things go." It got me thinking in broader terms and being able to take risks and chances. Especially when looking at lighting. All the lighting in that little theatre was made out of coffee cans and 75-watt flood lamps tied hiding little ceramic bases. I kid you not! We went out and bought those little round dimmers you see on the side of your wall. That was the whole lighting system. We had things that were tripping and smoking. They did me the biggest favor in the world. I'm sure when I was there I was cursing not going to Rutgers, but they couldn't have given me any better training, especially for what I'm doing now. Because every solution was a creative solution. It *had* to be.

DB: Who else besides Ms. Macintosh? Good or bad?

MS: Well, Brant McKenzie was the head of my Drama Department. He pushed me to do things a certain way that were antithetical to what I wanted to do.

DB: So he wasn't of the same school of thought as Macintosh.

MS: No! He was exactly the opposite. You will do it *my* way, and that is the *only* way. And he might as well had drawn these little boxes right around the words "my way." But I wasn't going to do it. I was going to do it my way. And so that's where the rebellion came in. Looking back on it I realize there was one exercise, in all fairness, that really worked with me. He was trying to get me to do these lines as fast as I could possibly say them. I thought that's the way he wanted me to perform them. I didn't understand it was an exercise. I was doing *Oleanna*, my first David Mamet

play and they brought up the director from Key West and he was teaching me rapid lining techniques without any emotion or anything and I hated it. But once I understood the value of that technique, I realized what he was trying to do. I really gave him a hard time about it too. But then again that was my strong suit, giving people a hard time.

DB: Do you remember anything you studied back then? Any particular theorists?

MS: Makeup. Makeup was the only thing I really ever studied. Maybe the disservice they did for me was because I had a lot of experience living in a metropolitan area when I got into that department, they waived a lot of the courses. I got about forty-one of my credits without ever seeing a book. And because I was doing a lot of other things—they wanted me to do a lot of acting—they cut me a lot of breaks. I never saw a lot of my history classes or understood the writers the way I should. I still don't.

DB: You are in high school New Jersey and then in college in the 70s, late 60s, early 70s, starting to grasp theatre. Did you ever study any of the contemporary people or theorists? There was a lot going on in New York...

MS: Never.

DB: You just did your own thing.

They pretty much let us do our own thing. I don't know that anybody was really qualified to teach us any of that. On the other hand some of the other experiences I did get to do in high school—we didn't have a real drama department, it was the people who were in charge of the yearbook, advisors. Sometimes it was the wrestling coach. But every now and then it was the English teacher who was really cool and says, "There's this thing called *Waiting for Godot* and you guys are going to do it. You are going to come up with ideas." And there was this new thing called a video camera. Well what I wanted to do was film this piece of it and play it back while we're doing that scene. I was fortunate enough to have certain teachers that saw that and rewarded it. I was encouraged to do things differently. My English teacher said, "You don't have to think that because someone else said think that. You should be thinking on your own. Thinking is creating."

DB: On a personal note I see that in your direction. In something like *Omnium Gatherum* there are the words on the page and we can do that play, but let's do that other play that might be going on underneath it.

MS: Sure. I don't know what it stems from but it's probably systemic and seeing how things evolve if you do it that way and having other people help you probe. By no means do I have it together now. I'm still figuring out different ways to do things. But I do like working that deeper sense of text. You know, who knows what play was in the writer's mind? How do you know that's not what he was thinking? All I

know is that when I read something and I see something I think of it in 35 millimeter. There are these projectors that run in my head all the time. When he [Sam Shepard] wrote *Henry Moss* [*The Late Henry Moss*], Henry Moss was some character in his mind and he looked a certain way and he talked and he was wearing something, but all I can get on the page to give you as a director is the text. I learned a long time ago the director's first job is to interpret the script. So that is my prime directive—that's my responsibility. This is how I interpret it. This is what I think the writer is saying. I know these are the words that he is using but there is a difference between talking and saying. You can just talk those words or you can say intention. And the intention is all kinds of different things. We're sitting here right now and using words but you have an intention for what you want to achieve.

DB: Let me get back to the academic and throw a few names at you and tell me if you have any familiarity with them. Richard Schechner.

MS: No.

DB: Jerzy Grotowski.

MS: Heard of him.

DB: Beck and Malina?

MS: See I'm totally oblivious to those things.

DB: That's fascinating because you are echoing them. What you do seems to be a reaction to what they did—it seems to be taking it to the next level, or to a different level I should say, so it's stunning to me...

MS: I am either ignorant in my bliss or I am bliss in my ignorance. Rob told me this the other day. There's a guy who has done two years of apprenticeship at Actor's Theatre of Louisville, where I couldn't get it when I was in Louisville. Here the offspring gets in and does a year in acting and a year in the production thing and he comes in and says, "Dad, I feel so inadequate. I've got all these people around me in this apprentice program and they've got their MFAs from Harvard and NYU and there are guys from Princeton and Yale and DePaul. And they're quoting all these writers and they know all these Greek plays and everything and I am just—I'm going under here." And I said, "What are they doing now? They're teaching or working at the bank. They have the book knowledge, you have the experience." So I guess that's where my only salvation is. It's not like I don't study. If you looked in my bag right now you're going to see books by Boal, Anne Bogart. I'm no dumby, I do my homework.

DB: So how did you get from flying planes to running a theatre? What does that path look like?

MS: Back when I was flying corporate planes for US Air, somebody knew I was into drama and independent film production because they had read an article about me doing flying a plane across the ocean. Then it all fell together. They needed someone to teach CRE resource management and they wanted films to go with this class. I had all this film equipment and after I shot a Superbowl commercial I retired, and that's how I got stuck in theatre.

In '89 when US Air bought Piedmont I was in the training department I did my check ride with a US Air pilot and it just so happened his dad was a writer, Glen Morgan. We got to talking and he said, "Didn't you fly across the ocean? My dad wrote an article about that. And in that article they said you used to be an actor or something?" And he just happened to be in charge of this new program. They didn't know what a script was or a shot list or shooting schedule and I had a lot of experience doing that so I started shooting the training films. And through that I got involved in British Airways and went to England and shot a bunch of films, documentary films, and the Superbowl commercial. Now it's 1995 and the US Air people absolutely hated me because I was worse than not flying for a living, I am a Piedmont pilot not flying for a living going back and forth to London on the 747 and on the Concorde to shoot for British Airways. They were livid. They offered me retirement in '95 because I hated them and they hated me. From the merger until I retired every day was just one more level of contention. I took everything from organizing theatre and film and tried to get them to do it more efficiently. Plus I was getting better. I was using US Air to get an education and filming techniques. In '95 I was offered the opportunity to retire and I had only been home 35 days that year. By that time Rob had gotten out of North Carolina School of the Arts and formed a theatre group and said he wanted to do some film, while I wanted to do some theatre here in Charlotte. That's basically when we all got started with his group and the original CAST group, with Ed Gilweit. It was Rob who sucked me back in.

DB: Where did the mission statement for CAST come from?

MS: The idea of the mission statement was actually from flying. When we were doing crew resource management, teaching pilots and crew members to communicate with each other effectively, someone said it might be a good idea if we understood what the mission of this whole course is. So I told Rob if you guys want to have a theatre, let's find out what the mission of that theatre is and find a way to verbalize it. And what is our vision? Is it different than the mission statement? It was a collaboration of what we each wanted out of this partnership.

DB: Where did the term "experiential" come from?

MS: I made that up. People kept telling me you want to do experimental theatre, but it's really not. I want people to come in and be enveloped in an experience. It's not just "experimental," it's "experience-tial." And Rob and I went back one day and explored what that would look like. So I did some research and found the Latin word "experientia," but audiences wouldn't know what that is. So I said it's experiential.

DB: You mentioned this idea of doing it your way and rebellion. This seems to be a theme for you.

MS: When I was doing a mission statement for Rob's first theatre, one thing I remember saying was that to me this was a war against mediocrity. US AIR was an up-and-coming airline by JD Power and they bought three airlines and ran them with mediocrity, almost like they said let's see how we can fuck this up. And they did. My whole thing about doing independent film was, "You give me \$1000 and I'll make the film look like \$10,000. You give me \$10,00 and I'll make it look like \$1,000,000." It's preparation and vigilance.

DB: Let me go back to a phrase you just used...a war against mediocrity. Is that what this theatre is?

MS: That's exactly what it is. So if I'm going to take ten years off and I'm not going to see a play, when I go I want to see something. People will tell you right now it's a shame that Charlotte Rep folded. Well, I saw some of the Charlotte Rep shows and I'm saying "So what?" You are the reparatory theatre, you are getting a grant for \$1.2 million dollars, you get another 5 or 10 million from corporations, you get a couple million more from subscribers and you are complaining you don't have enough money. They were pissing it away. I was at Ed's house when they did *As Bees in Honey Drown*. There were several of us hanging around the pool and I happen to know this actress in the show and I told her we were planning on coming that Friday night. And I got to thinking about it and I asked what time her show was that night. She told me they went up at 8:00 but her call wasn't until 7:30. And I looked at my watch and it was 7:22. If she left right then she might make it for curtain. You are at the pinnacle of professional theatre in Charlotte and your official call is not until 7:30 and they don't even care if you are late? So here we are, passionate about preparation and getting ready and you are Rep. and your show is mediocre and I wonder why. They phoned it in. They phoned it in long distance.

DB: When you took the 10 years off and finally went back to see a show. Do you remember what it was and did it have an effect on you?

MS: I don't remember what it was. It was in Louisville. I remember the anxiety of walking in. I tell you what I did remember was it was really good and whoever was playing the role I said to myself I could have done that. And he was really good and I was pissed off.

DB: What is your relationship with Actors Theatre of Louisville?

MS: I was there when Actors theatre was nothing. It was just forming before it was really Actors Theatre. I remember Hugh [Loomis] teasing me saying "When you grow up do you want to be Actor's Theatre?" and I asked if there was problem with that. Because they have three different spaces and a bar downstairs where everyone

hung out and talked about theatre and making it better? Yeah, of course I want that. And then sending Rob back there as an apprentice and reforming a lot of those old relationships, being able to direct there, then meeting those people and the Humana Festival, he really hooked me up with them. That's how we got with some of the writers and got shows here that no one else got, like Adam Rapp's *Finer Noble Gasses*.

DB: Who is your closest contact there? Is it Marc Masterson?

MS: I know Marc, but I would say really it's Mike Brooks. He was at that time in charge of the Humana Festival and was connected with the writers, got me networking with everybody. Plus he worked with Rob directly so we would talk about how Rob was doing, share some common insights. Half the lights you see here are from Actors Theatre of Louisville. When we first opened up and had no controlling system Actors Theatre got me the pack systems, all the controlling boards. If it wasn't for Actors [Theatre of Louisville] I can't say we wouldn't have CAST, but I don't know what we would be doing because that got us going.

DB: That seems like a relationship to foster.

MS: I think so. That's why I go [to the Humana Festival] every year. It was really good this year because I would always see Marc in passing but this year I got to have lunch with him.

DB: You mention Sydney Lumet quite a bit.

MS: In 1995, I got hooked up with a director of photography who was a student of Sydney's and then everything then became about Sydney Lumet. I learned more about film from Mark Gibrado and Sydney Lumet than from anybody.

DB: You studied under Lumet?

MS: I studied his methods.

DB: You say you can experientialize a play in all aspects—experiential acting, experiential lighting, experiential costuming, experiential makeup. Is that right?

MS: That may be taking it a little too far. I don't know if there is such a thing as experiential lighting but there is certainly a way to make sure that the lighting element is incorporated in the experiential approach. It may be too simple to use this as an example but we're doing *Edmond* right now. So we know that the last little bit of *Edmond* takes place in prison. So how do we experientialize that? We could make prison bars, we could use the imagined approach. But we work with the lighting designer and say clearly in this scene what I would like is a gobo. As far as presentation of experientiality, we know what is going to happen in the prison scene. So where else is he in prison? Let's go scene by scene. Let's talk about the

opening scenes. Is he a prisoner there? Is he a prisoner of his own greed? His own shortcomings? His own insecurities? Well if that's the case why aren't—this is the process I'm speaking about—why isn't that texture on the floor or across the table when he's getting his palm read in the opening scene? In that sense the lighting became experiential because what we were trying to do was communicate his experience. So how do I take it to an acting level? Ok, Glenn [Hutchinson, who played the title character], you're trapped. Your world is four-feet wide by eight feet long and when we block it, this is how much room you get to work in. Now I'm not talking about in the prison scene, I'm talking about in every scene. What we are going to do is start with a prison cell that is ten by ten. And in the next scene your prison cell is going to be nine by nine, and eight by eight and seven by seven. And we are going to keep compressing and forcing you into smaller spaces. And that's the way we can carry it to something as simple as blocking. When we were doing *ClosetLand*, how do we experientialize it? Well we talked about the floor. The floor is a marble floor and is in big squares. And I'm talking to Mike Harris, let's talk about this...what is this? Ultimately it's a rouse, it's a charade, it's a game. Well what kind of game? It's very strategic—I know, it's chess! If you were really, really cognoscente, you would realize the entire scene was blocked out as a chess match. For every scene we decided 'who are you?' 'I'm a pawn.' How does a pawn move? One square at a time. And that's exactly what happened. He would move one step at a time and hold his position. And then she would do something. And then sometimes he was the Bishop. And all the blocking was in diagonals. When he was the Queen he could move in a straight line in any direction. Sometimes he was the Rook, and would takes two steps, turn ninety degrees and take one step, hold that position. And then she would do something. And then sometimes he was the Bishop. And all the blocking was in diagonals. When he was the Queen he could move in a straight line in any direction. Sometimes he was the Rook, and would takes two steps, turn ninety degrees and take one step, hold that position. Nobody knew that except me, Mike, and Kristen. That was a way to take that whole theme and help manifest it. Did the audience know that? Don't know, don't care. All I know is that as a whole, they endured this experience. In that play we made pipes go all around the audience. Literally, when it said so, the sounds came though the pipe because Greg had put little speakers everywhere. So it can be done. That happened right on the stage. We talk about experiential theatre as what happens right when they walk in the door, but you can carry that theme right to every immediate element.

DB: It sounds like echoes; echoes in lighting, makeup, staging.

MS: It should be. And that's the level of the whole experientiality. So look for those things you have the opportunity to do. We got him a pinstripe suit. We went through a lot of work to find that suit. We don't beat the audience over the head with it, but why? Because of the bar thing. Anybody would say it's a unified production.

DB: Where do you see CAST headed?

MS: Let's assume for a minute we are going to be here, when we move into the next space, whatever that space is, will we have that ability to do it? Will we be like Actor's Theatre of Louisville and say, "Okay, our next new space is going to be the American Music building. Somebody's going to buy that for us and we'll move in." Great, now we've got 190 seats, but we're going to be stuck with this wide stage, and will we lose our ability to be experiential.

DB: The space. If you were one of those companies like Barebones Theatre Group who rehearses in one space and then loads into The Duke Power Theatre, like you did with the revival of *Omnium Gatherum*, how do you reconcile your mission statement with that? Because you have some leeway but not total freedom by any means.

MS: The irony is that I feel that we had total freedom.

DB: But I mean taking over the lobby, for example.

MS: We could have done that. When we first looked at moving onto Spirit Square we talked about what we could have done. We could have taken that lobby over. We could have certainly taken the entrance of the little lobby— we had the authorization to do that. And our design plans were to bring in some twisted I-beams and things we wanted to load in and make that an interactive piece of art that you had to walk through. It was a compromise about time and money. If we had more time to plan and we had the money to do it we probably would have done that. Now that doesn't mean the next time we move into "The Duke" for whatever reason that we'll have that. But we at least certainly set the stage for experientiality in a space that would otherwise have been a conventional arena.

DB: That's something I want to get into another time. How do you take places like "The Duke," or Theatre Charlotte, or these traditional space and experientialize them?

Appendix D

Simmons Interview 3

February 19, 2008

The following is an excerpt from a roundtable discussion between Michael Simmons, Robert Simmons, Glen Hutchinson, Paige Johnston, and Terry Milner of the Arts and Science Council.)

GH: It challenges the audience to think. This idea of trying to make a difference, I think those are two ways of connecting with the mission or the vision.

RS: I think *Edmond* is doing a great job in fitting with the mission of experiential theatre. Even the cast is culturally diverse, which we've seen a lot more of, at least in the last year and a half, two years, which is great. I think using the turntable. Perry even said that it flowed seamlessly like a film. That's good because that was the angle.

TM: Is that a company aesthetic you are trying to establish, or is that just this show?

MS: There's still a bit of confusion as to what seamless film and theatre is. Does *Edmond* fulfill our mission statement? I think every show that we pick has a different level of fulfillment. If we can go back a minute to last season and use *Autobahn* as the litmus test. *Autobahn* had the car, it had all the experiential stuff when you came into the lobby; the traffic lights, the reaching through the tire, the speedometer, the bathrooms being rear view mirrored. And then we had literal film elements projected during the actual live theatre. That was 100 percent experiential, 100 percent seamless film and theatre. That project allowed itself to work at that level. So then we go to *Edmond*. Well, what is important about *Edmond*? It is very segmented but we saw the opportunity to do it like a film. We talked about it as actors on the set it wasn't like "Okay, I want to talk to you about the stage picture of the scene." No, in this particular scene I want you to picture it in a 35millimeter close-up. And how will we get from one scene to another? We talk about it on film terms. We are going to dissolve from scene one into scene two. That means the turntable is going to spin, you are going to carry on this chair, you are going to carry off this set piece, and when the turntable is spinning Glen is going to walk like *Les Miserables* and the chair and table will come to you. And when Perry wrote that review I thought, "Well good, he got it." In *Autobahn* we started with the script, clean table, nothing on the sheet of paper, let's see how we can do this. With *Edmond* we focused so much on the text and what the play would mean to help patrons see things differently about their own prejudices and racism and homophobia. It was very collaborative. There's a very violent scene in it. Glenn has this one scene where we looked very carefully at how we can echo and mimic and reflect certain physical elements of the play. One of them is a little card thing. Chris is playing a detective and he says what I'd like to do is put down some pictures of

the crime scene. Great. We got the actors and makeup and did a whole crime scene photo session. Then let's see where this goes. That actor who was playing the detective was very clever to say, "Here is how I see all the cards being snapped down." In the fortuneteller's scene she snaps cards down. I am going to snap down the pictures in front of Glenn. When the audience comes out at intermission those crime scene photos are all in the bathrooms. It may be goofy but we have the body outline in the bathroom, you get to see all the blood in the bathroom where Glenn washed his hands. On that level we might not have had 100 percent of the experientiality but we were still able to fulfill—we weren't going to do the show if we couldn't follow the mission statement.

TM: That's what I wanted to hear you all verbalize is in how many ways are you getting it. I want to hear what you don't think you have. If you've never had an experience of falling short then we can go home. Beyond that I want to talk about things Michael has articulated that aren't necessarily in writing in these statements. And that's really where I started out with this agenda—I'm glad you clarified that concept for me. What I was concerned about was wondering how much of this aspiration you have towards being filmmakers was being realized through this theatre work. And if that's not the aspiration, that is if it's not your feeling that you're going to be making independent film—that does appear in your mission statement, we need to be careful.

MS: Can I address that then so I can get it all out?

TM: Yes.

MS: The seamless film and theatre is a methodology using close-quarter acting—so you're acting in film methodology. And we're not there yet, I know. *Autobahn* was a really good first step to play around. We were able to do things with film in many of our productions going way back to Tracers. But the idea to make the film ourselves is where I think I'd like to see the theatre go. We've all been involved in film and that was one of our passions. I'd like to tie that into every opportunity. We've got a website—Rob and I have talked about this a lot—we've got filmmakers on our staff. I don't see the reason why we're not filming all of our rehearsals, why we're not using film as a tool, why don't we have our own film commercial as part of our web page? Why aren't we a company that stands out from everybody else? Because we have film directors, we have writers, we have actors, we have cameramen, we have an editing suite. Why aren't we making commercials for the local Charlotte media as a way to make money for ourselves, make money for our actors so that we can then have a staff that's not going to go away because they can do that sort of work right here. So now we've taken our film work to a new level, we've taken our theatre work to a new level, and somehow I feel that will all come together as a unified organization.

TM: The only reason I think this is an issue is because, not because everybody's mission statement needs to be perfect or needs to be fully fulfilled in every moment

of the day. I think it's important for an organization and the people working for it to understand what they mean by it, and to understand the difference maybe of a descriptive mission that talks about what the organization is doing today and what it aspires to be doing 3 to 5 years from now. Or one to two years from now. And I think that's much more about vision than about mission. And you guys have separated mission and vision statements on your website which leads me to think you have an appreciation for what I'm talking about. But this kind of clarification would probably be helpful, and now that I understand it, I'm not sure that I'm reading and understanding what I'm reading in these statements what your actual intention behind them is. I don't think we need to sit down and rewrite them today and I don't want to rewrite them. But I think if you are using these as a means to get funders and get folks in the community to understand what you do you might want to work on clarifying what you mean by this. Just throwing that out there as possible food for thought. Take that away and chew on it and tell me what you think. Because it's taken you two-and-a-half meetings to get into my head what you mean by this. I'm thick but a lot of people are too.

PJ: Maybe it's multimedia. One of the things working on *Dark Play*, the next show that's coming up, my original thought with this show was that scenes were going to be filmed like any kind of live scene. And then when you get into it it's very weird because you think we're doing theatre...You get bogged down and I've started feeling badly. Now we're not doing this film that I thought we were going to be doing, which would be a scene of the play on film. So people are watching acting on stage and then they're watching a film. I know that you've heard some of this before—we need to get that more specific. Because I started feeling like “Well now we're not doing film. We're going to have stuff up on but it's projection—something that we filmed.” It's using film and how does film—what does that mean?

TM: There are several different issues to sort out here. There's this notion of developing a company aesthetic, and I don't know if you want to. There are some people who think the idea of making every show look similar or that it could be said you have a style is anathema. Personally, in a crowded field of small theatre companies you guys have great potential to distinguish yourselves and to carve a niche for yourselves doing what you are doing. As we've all acknowledged, nobody's doing this the way you are. But I think you need to give some thought to separating out issues of aesthetics and style from a company philosophy, which uses different words to describe itself. If you are simply talking about an aesthetic and a style that deploys all different kinds of media to create an experience for people who come to your building, we're just talking about aesthetics and style there. And there's no limit to what you can experiment with there. What I'm afraid of is you are going to create a cognitive dissonance with your audience and with your people is when this gets confused—and when I hear people talking about film as an end, literally film, as in making films—the problem arises with misunderstanding and misbranding yourself. And that may create a potential for misunderstanding in this building and out in the community and even amongst your own creative team. We heard an example of it. Film as an end, as a product itself versus an aesthetic

employed in blocking and staging a show, which is what you just described to me with *Edmond*, all the way to employing multimedia, film, etc. in the course of a performance—all of those things are very different ideas. And I don't think you need to tell anybody what your aesthetic is. If it's your aesthetic, do it. Have the multimedia be a part in parcel and say experiential and multimedia if you want to somewhere in your marketing materials. But the clarity when you are talking amongst yourselves, this is where your mission and vision statements become important. If people are reading those and deciding whether or not they want to work with you or they want to be on your board, that's what I'm concerned about misunderstandings would come up. Does that make sense? Do these distinctions make sense to you? They don't have to. I may not be doing a good job about making clear what my feelings are. When we say film, are we simply describing what we like to put onstage and how we like to feel? Are we describing that plus using different multimedia, or is it somehow a company philosophy in a way that I don't quite understand yet? And if the answer to that is yes to all the above then all I think you need to do is craft these words in such a way that people are better able to understand them. I put that out there as a suggestion.

PJ: Did you ever imagine, Michael, having a film so it's not a live performance piece? Did you ever imagine having one of the shows that is just a film that people would come in and watch? Or do you see that as a separate part of CAST, like a branch, the film branch?

MS: We used to do independent film and we gave that up so we could open the theatre. I'm just trying to find a vehicle where we can get back into that through that process. I saw a combination of the both could work. On the one hand it is multimedia, but for us to evolve into using all the resources we had to make commercials for ourselves. I'm not necessarily interested in the CAST building coming in and saying "OK, here's a film we made, let's pull down the projectors and show it to everybody." That's not exactly what I had in mind. If there were things that we shot for ourselves and were projected as part of an entity, yes that is what I had in mind. If it's a way to make a commercial for ourselves and we air it on the A&E channel as part of marketing, then yes.

TM: But is it part of your vision, aside from the theatre work all of you have described, go out, develop a script, make a movie for distribution, I read that in this version. When it says independent theatre and film I think that you are a theatre who also wants to be in film production.

PJ: That's what it sounds like.

TM: And I think that perception may be out in the community a bit too. What we don't want to do is create a perception that you have no intention of fulfilling, therefore undermining your credibility as an organization. And that's really the only danger I see in the meanings of some of these words other than internally to you all.

PJ: So if we come up with a company philosophy and we know that is our aesthetic and our style—is there a better word than multimedia?

RS: Actors Theatre of Louisville spent \$70,000 to come up with their mission statement with a marketing company. One of their tag lines was “ignite the senses.” I thought that was brilliant in that it was specific, all-encompassing. We are going to hit you at every single angle, but general enough to include everything. That angle is something we could think about in the mission. That’s the experiential thing. We are going to hit you...

TM: What you keep coming back to is the core value. Experiential—

MS: It is for me. It doesn’t have to be for everybody else.

TM: It sounds like to me you guys are engaged with that and it’s what excites me about your company.

RS: I think that maybe it’s in the vision where we can talk about crossing the lines of theatre and film, and in the vision speak about trying to merge the two. And maybe that might be more clear. Then we generalize a little bit in the mission, taking specifically the film out but talking about the experiential part of things.

TM: What Rob just hit on for me, what made me sit up and take notice, was that a theatre would hire a marketing consultant to write its mission statement. I’m not telling you to go out and spend money on that, certainly not 70 thousand dollars. What I am saying is if you thought about the fact that nobody really cares if you have a mission statement and vision statement and if it’s only on your website. But everybody is going to care about your mission statement. All the funders are going to look at your mission statement. I was thinking this is your interior communication and this is your exterior communication. Interior [vision] and exterior [mission]. Let me give you an example, and you may love or hate this. This was the North Carolina Theatre Conference, my prior job, the statewide theatre service organization. The mission statement was “to improve and enhance the environment for quality theatre in North Carolina through service, leadership, and advocacy.” That was it. That pre-existed my tenure there. But when I came on we did a strategic planning process and we added “through service, leadership, and advocacy.” And then the marketing tagline for the organization became “Service. Leadership. Advocacy.” That is an example of how that process could work for you as a marketing tool. You could have a longer one for the funders. You put this under your logo as your marketing tag if you wanted to go that route. But this is a good example of how this can become an exterior statement. And all this stuff, in a wonky way, describes our interior thought processes as artists could be what you hand out to people the first show they do for you, or the production meeting of the team who you haven’t worked with before. And I would encourage you to because the more you can hold true to yourselves and stay distinct from everybody else the better off I think you are going to be.

MS: To clean this up, as a policy when you come in for an audition you have to at least check the box when you are filling out your information form—we forced you to read it one time—when you hand in your paperwork.

TM: So they've seen it. So that's one thought. Another option might be to leave all this alone and create a marketing—I haven't looked at the marketing materials recently so I don't know if have developed a one tagline you use throughout the season or theme. And I'm not here to have a marketing seminar but thinking about this as a marketing document that's concise and captures the spirit of what you are trying to do. And if this is your internal document I think it might be a good way to go. And you probably wouldn't have to work too hard on what you've already got to clarify those things.

PJ: So should film even be in the mission statement?

GH: If film wasn't part of the mission statement would that be specific enough to apply for grants and those sorts of things? Is that what people look for?

TM: It's the first thing they are going to see. When you're applying for grants you are going to be giving them lots of documents with lots of narrative about who you are as a company and what you do. What I'm thinking about is the audience member or the funder whose first impression of you is the mission statement. Let's see what we can do with the rest of this agenda and if you guys really want to come back and have a brainstorming process, I'm going to give you a chance to think about that and decide what you want to do about that. This is beyond the scope of artistic folks too. There's a lot of other people in the organization who probably might want to be at the table for re-crafting these things.

MS: well, we have a small board and we're basically here. You're looking at half the board right here.

TM: Let's come back to that question. We can certainly facilitate a discussion on that if you want to. It wasn't what I intended to do. Without naming names I want to encourage you to use this time in such a way to be honest and articulate something. If you do find an understanding of what we all see to be the mission as we proceed through this discussion or now I want to give you that opportunity.

PJ: Regarding "Tuna" [*Tuna Christmas*], it was a strange thing because it was such a cash cow and it really didn't fit.

MS: I apologize for prostituting ourselves but—

PJ: But it saved us.

MS: We tried so hard for so many years to get the rights. When we got the rights only five weeks before the show was supposed to open and within two days the Blumenthal said you have to come do it at the McGlohan—so all bets were off. It was what are we going to do to get the show up in five weeks when we had to spend almost six thousand dollars on a set to fit. So all the experientiality went out the window except for maybe updating the E.T. sequence. We did it and we made the money, which funds the rest of all the other experiential work we do.

TM: I am going to absolve anyone of occasionally doing something to make money when they do it at the Goodman and they do it at Playmakers and everybody in between. I'm not going to cast any stones. But look, we did just hear interesting ways in which you had identified how to make that show fit your artistic aesthetic and your style and were thwarted by organizational problems. Right? So the fact that you were five weeks out and still didn't know if you had the rights—that might make me want to go in the direction of how you all go about choosing your season and when those decisions are made. But that is not an issue of choice because as I said, it's a completely forgivable sin to pick a viable box office success in order to put a show like *Edmond* on stage. So let's talk about that. Let's talk about what process you use. You are the artistic staff of Carolina Actors Studio Theatre. So what happens when it comes time to start thinking about the next season? [Silence.] Has anybody ever participated in that process? [Laughter.]

MS: No, because we have the loyal opposition across the table and this process since 1995. So there's always discussions about what we should do, of why did we do this or why don't we do that. So it has kind of been in-house, literally. "Tuna" was a last-minute thing by way of example, we had been trying for three years to get the rights to that, to the point I was writing the writers. I had already given up. We were trying to figure out what else we were going to do in place of that.

TM: Had you advertised it already?

MS: No, no, no. This was all in-house. I got a letter one day and it says, "You've got the rights."

TM: So that wasn't a matter of you—I don't think you would be foolish enough to advertise a show you didn't have the rights for because that's all kinds of breaching of all kinds of issues. But beyond that it was an issue of you wanted to do it. You needed the money and you saw the opportunity and you jumped on it. I would applaud that as well.

MS: But in general we have been looking at festivals like the Humana Festival to help choose the shows.

PJ: And making it a habit to go every year.

MS: Since 1998 or 1999, somewhere in there. And we get a lot of our work out of there. I try to pick the ones that I see. That is a vehicle. So see some of the new cutting-edge work that no one else in all likelihood wouldn't do here for whatever particular reasons. And we got the Adam Rapp shows and we got really excited about that. But the other process was just because it wasn't in the Humana Festival doesn't mean it wasn't worthy. So there are other newer works, and established works that we could do in a cutting-edge way. And anybody can bring anything to the table at CAST, and anybody and everybody does say hey this is a great play and I think you guys should do it, or an actor in a show will bring it up. Well, make a case for me. And what we've evolved to is that if you want to bring a show to our attention and you think it's something we should do, here's the mission statement, you defend it. You do a little one-page document and show me how it fits in with experientiality and moving the audience and culturally diverse and so forth. So we've all had input into what we're going to do. Sometimes it gets really heated.

TM: As well it should, right? We're not selling eggs, you're supposed to be passionate.

MS: This season is a little bit different because we are at a crossroads too where you ask me what our tagline is. Well the real tagline, the one I certainly take to heart, is "To think outside the black box." And we were trying so hard just to survive as an organization, and one of the things I see the other organizations do is they have their seasons all planned out, they have their beautiful season brochures and they know what they are doing. And so I feel really guilty that we are in a situation that we knew about Dark Play last March. So it will be a whole year planning this show. We knew about Autobahn. We did that in September but we started working on that the previous spring. So we try to think that far ahead. Now with this program you are doing, with the evolution of us going into a non-profit, Edmond became tactical. Dark Play was just something I felt passionately that was going to serve the whole mission/vision. That's as far as we've gone because I wanted to see where this process was going to lead us. We knew this was coming up about how do we pick our plays. And maybe what we do isn't efficient. Maybe it was too autocratic and tactical, not strategic. But part of the whole CAST concept was to find what resources we have and all of a sudden we have an epiphany. We've talked before about working on a professional level and work shopping, work shopping, work shopping. We start work shopping now and find a slot when we are ready. I could be wrong about this but maybe we don't have to think the way the other theatres do. We don't have a season ticket holder base, we've never had one so we couldn't get season ticket holders. But maybe that's so far outside the black box it's—

TM: No, no, no. You've been operating as Artistic Director and Marketing Director and all of that stuff. So let's have an exercise in "what if" here. What if the company did have a Marketing Director, an Artistic Director, and a Managing Director, and a Technical Director? You guys are moving closer to being in that position, I think. You've begun to make process toward a division of labor that I think is very healthy. That doesn't mean the Artistic Director gives up the final—gives up his role as the

final keeper of the artistic vision and the final say-so. Your artistic idea about thinking outside the black box, I think I understand what that means. You are going to break out of the mold. You aren't going to do that thing that everybody does—you're going to have blood in the bathroom, whatever it is. And it's great. What it isn't, is describing managerial systems. It's describing an artistic vision. If you want to re-think managerial systems then you should feel free to do so, but it has not served you well financially. It may have served you well artistically at times but at other times you don't think so. So I wonder if we might take a look for a moment to look at what the typical season selection process might look like in a professional theatre company. And don't let me insult your intelligence if you all know all of this. I'm just going to let us walk through this thought experiment and see how you react to it. If it makes you want to run out screaming and I am trying to turn you into a cookie-cutter then you should do that, literally. So who wants to tell me, because you all are smart people, what you believe to be the first step in season selection for a professional theatre? First of all, when would you do it?

MS: A year before?

TM: So if your first show is going up in September, if you start the process of thinking about the next season in September you are right on target. Most people wouldn't have the season selection finalized probably until early spring, maybe winter before the fall.

PJ: So we'd have everything picked in January for September.

TM: So by January you know what you are going to be doing in September. People do it differently. Some might want to have the whole season set and locked in a year out. I don't know of anybody who does that successfully. You don't want to be completely unable to react and adjust what you are doing to what be timely and relevant to the community.

PJ: But Actors Theatre, don't they have it all a year out?

MS: Yeah.

TM: But I know that brochure doesn't come out the season before.

MS: No, their brochure for next year came out last month or so. Now interestingly enough Theatre Charlotte is planning 2008-2009 and that brochure came out in January. So actually the end of December. And one of the things I see them doing—it's not so much they are picking out their shows, although I think there is some of that, the other thing I think they are doing, as importantly, is they are locking down dates. This is the show and it's going to open on such-and-such, and I think we are competing not so much with shows as we are time slots. And not too many of the theatres work together.

TM: Doesn't MTA have a whole process...?

MS: They have a matrix but that doesn't stop anybody from duplicating.

TM: Isn't there an arbitration process?

MS: That process allows you as "Theatre A" to get the phone number of "Theatre B" to advise there is a conflict and you work it out amongst yourselves. But what Dan had suggested—and he wasn't getting any other support—was this is our opening date for this show, when do you want to open your show? Is there any way we could not overlap at least the openings for press coverage. Which is what we did try to do. We might not have all our shows selected but we have been working on our time slots at least not to compete with Actors Theatre.

TM: Well, you have a beautiful luxury over your colleagues, except for Dan, and that is you have your own space. That is, from your colleagues in the small theatre realm. In that sense you have a temptation and the ability to sort of do whatever you want. The nice thing you have is the ability to extend a run if you have a success. Or for that matter, God forbid, close early if you have to. But your dates are completely flexible, you can do your shows whenever you want. So I wouldn't worry about that as a real concern—I wouldn't let that drive your process. You want to know whenever it's right for your audience to know about it, and for your people to plan for it. So once your season is up and running, once your 08-09 season is up and running in September, at that point I would have the first discussions about what the 09-10 season is going to be. That's perfectly reasonable. You are always reading plays, every artistic person on the team, so that's really the first step, right? Ongoing. Everybody reads plays. And then the typical process would be, sometime around that fall, there might be an early meeting if there is any sharing of the responsibility of choosing plays, and not every theatre does that. But if you all are doing that then you would meet and each person might bring one or two suggestions to the table. You could create whatever sort of process you want for exchanging them, reading them, people could tell you what they think. A literary manager, if there were one in the company, maybe a playwright working closely with the artistic Director would vet those and maybe have a weighted opinion about those. That would be the person who got any submissions for new work if you got any. And maybe you would meet and narrow those down. By end of the year you have a short list—I can hear all my friends around theatre saying "Oh yeah, we wish we could do this. We wish we could have this done by this time period." Because none of them ever have it decided as early as they want to. But I would say by the end of the year—by the holidays you would have a short list. And then what you would do by then, if not before then, but by the very latest in early January, you have a meeting with your production people and your marketing people and say "How much is this going to cost?" And "How much can we do this for? Come back to me with a budget." So you would start introducing this potential season to the rest of the people in the organization. SO let's say January 2nd you have a broader staff meeting if you will, but you know what I mean. Department heads is what you

would have. They would all chime in, not on the artistic merit of the pieces, that's not for anybody ultimately but the Artistic Director to pass judgment on with the help from a literary Manager and Associate Artistic Director, and Company Manager, Production Manager, Actor representative if you wanted to give that authority. What would then happen is the marketing person, you would say "Alright marketing person, can you sell these shows?" Even if you're not doing a season that's still quite relevant—can you sell these shows? Do you think you have an idea about a through line perhaps about the season? Again, even if you're not selling subscriptions. And I wouldn't beat my head on the wall about subscriptions—I agree with you. That statistic is continuing its decline. Some theatres are able to sell more subscriptions now than they have in the past, but most theatres are selling fewer. Or they're tailoring them to their audience's desires—they're doing all kinds of flex passes, five punches get the sixth punch free or whatever you want to do, 2-for-1, 2-for-20, whatever you want to do is possible. But you should be hearing from these folks. And it should be as much as possible without being too terribly rigid and without encroaching on anybody's authority, a clear process of feedback from those folks who have the responsibility of selling, of producing, and designing those shows, and financing them. And in the history of the organization that's all been you [talking to MS] for the most part. And if that's not going to be the case anymore, some process to bring order to that chaos I think would serve you. But let's keep going. Let's say after that meeting you've chosen your season—oh, and I would put my rights inquiries in right now, if not before, but certainly by the time you've got a short list, probably before December, by the end of the year I would say. And then the season is final some time around...let's be generous and say February 1? And that's when you are ready to go out and market it and announce it. That would be a typical process. Now, give me some push-back on why CAST should think outside this black box, if you do think that, and how this might not work for you guys. Or, what would you add to this that you think would help you?

PJ: Well, how do you allow for somebody like Glenn, who is writing a project, if we have...I guess he just couldn't get in. It would be nice to keep it open in case there is something that somebody comes up with or you meet somebody with this great project. Then you are then able in March to decide in April that you want to do this other show. And I think that's how CAST has been working. He likes having that availability to do whatever. SO if Glenn does come up you can say "Yeah, that sounds great. Let's do it two months from now." With this you can't. There's a process.

TM: First of all, let the Literary Manager chime in on that. Can you imagine that between September of this year and November, in those two months periods, you are going to take a play from idea, to ready, to produce. I've got one on my hard drive that's been there for two-and-a-half years and I'm still revising Act I. So I don't see how, in reality, wouldn't you know about it?

GH: We've been talking about it since last September or October.

PJ: But it would be helpful if you knew there was a deadline.

GH: Right. I think having that time is necessary. I like the flexibility but I don't know when this is going to happen, it's going to take a long time.

PJ: But once you know it gets your butt in gear.

TM: It does. But the other edge of that sword is, if you stick to your guns and say "We're not going to let this thing grow beyond these shows, if you stick to your guns it does take away the flexibility that you might have had. But it has a benefit on the other side of giving discipline to a playwright who has a commission, to a theatre who needs to finance the season, it does give some discipline. I mean I look at ten shows—what did you do, ten shows last year?

MS: We might have done eight or nine.

TM: Well that is almost double what anybody tries to do. I don't want to stifle you but I wonder if that was a product of continuing to add, add, add. And is it really financially feasible going forward to continue to do the kind of quality work you want to do under those incredibly high-pressure circumstances? And is it a lack of a process that resulted in that? Or was it a lack of checks and balances that resulted in that?

MS: I'm sure there were no checks and balances in that. [Laughter.] But I guess the bad news about eh no checks and balances and the chaos theory that we operated under was it was our best season ever.

TM: Of course it was! [Laughter.]

MS: We made as much money as we'd ever made. And our quality of work suffers, not because we do too much but because we still don't have the resources. You talked about the experientiality. There's all kinds of shortfalls we've had in all of our productions. There's never anything the way that I want it. These guys know, it's never good enough. But if just had some money to pay, or to buy, or to rent, or that allowed us to have the extra time to do whatever, but that doesn't stop us either. We find new things to do when they're running, things in week 2 we didn't have time to do in week 1 where we didn't have time to do it. We don't just stop and say that was good enough, nobody's going to know we didn't do it. But to go back to your paradigm there, thinking outside the box, well could certainly be some sort of compromised situation. Again, maybe we go back to the time slot thing. It's about how much product do we have and how much time do we have to do it in? There is a value in always doing something at CAST because there's always something new going on there. It's not the same four plays per season, standard fare you know you're going to get. People come in and say "Wow! This theatre didn't look like this last month when I was here!" We do have an eclectic mix...

TM: And you don't shut down for such a long period of time and people sort of lose touch.

MS: Yes. It's an inadequacy on my part that if people aren't coming CAST, if it's not always open, there's not always something going they'll forget who we are.

GH: And you have two theatres.

MS: That's the other thing. It allows us to have something playing while we are rehearsing something else. In that essence we are always planning ahead. But we also have more than two hours in any performance night. We've talked about bringing other things into the theatre. And we see other people doing it. We see Actors Theatre has their movie night now, and they have a little thing going on, do we bring in a comedy club, or do we have the late night show? What are those possibilities. Because we do have the space, at least for the next three years, why don't we explore that? Why isn't there an opening that says "As part of our CAST education, as part of our professional film and theatre, why don't we workshop this and when it's ready we can go? Now, here's your slot. There's this much time open. There's no reason why we can't do it—we have two spaces open."

TM: I love the idea of keeping the theatre open 24/7—I think making that space work for you, especially if there is a revenue stream attached to it—is a very good idea. I don't know that you necessarily have to make it where there's something up on the stage, a show actually up and running 365 days a year. I don't know if your shows made a lot of money last year because you had so many of them, or if it was profitable. You are saying it was not just more money coming in but it was more profitable?

MS: It was more profitable.

TM: So that's a pretty good sign, but at what cost to the long-term? Can you sustain that kind of activity and still continue to bring quality up to where you want it, with resources you need to do it on? And I'm not sure how that would happen. What I do know, just as an aside about what you were saying a minute ago with regards to opening up the space to others, I don't know what is going to happen to Spirit Square. What they're saying to me, and I haven't heard anything to the contrary—somebody else in the room may have—is they are not going to tear down Spirit Square, that they are going to develop around it. But that probably means construction will probably have it out of commission for some period of time. I think right now the Blumenthal is doing everything they can to keep it open, but I don't think you can bank on that. What may happen is that it will have to be shut for a couple years and there are going to be a lot of people in town looking for places to perform. And the choice you are going to have to make, and this is where the artistic team come in to that choice is, is there a concern you would be diluting your brand if you had another theatre company coming in there and performing in your space?

You were mentioning everything but theatre and I detected a note of intentionality about that. That's part of what you might want to be thinking about.

MS: I can only speak for myself but that has always been a concern. We've had other theatre groups in there, and my mantra is when people walk through that door they see that big CAST sign and they don't know that it's not your CAST production. And if I can't be blunt about this because if the production sucks, or if it doesn't have the same production value, we take that hit.

Appendix E

Simmons Interview 4

October 9, 2009

DB: How do you choose a play? What's your method or procedure for choosing a play?

MS: This may be a bit egocentric, but first it has to be a play that I like. It has to have something to say that I want to say as an actor or director. I ask myself if this is a play that I want to direct. We've caught ourselves in a little black hole. Now that we've done all this experiential theatre so people come to expect it. It's my "alities." I force myself to answer the five questions I ask everyone else who proposes a project. The first one is experientiality: can we do this play experientially? What are we going to do in the lobby? What are we going to do with the box office? How is this going to translate? There are a lot of great plays out there that don't translate to experientiality as much as others. Then there are the other alities: the castability, the marketability, the fundability—those kinds of things. But mostly it's whether or not we can do it experientially.

DB: How has the experientiality of CAST evolved? How has it grown? It sounds like *Tracers* was extremely experiential. Getting back to the audience expectations, how do you reach that each time, and how do you evolve?

MS: I don't know if it has evolved at all. Sometimes I feel like it hasn't evolved, sometimes I feel like it's just stagnant. We are doing the same old thing that we've always been doing, just a different color with a different ticket. So I think I fight that battle. On the other hand, I look around and see what other people are doing—Theatre Charlotte had a board meeting six weeks ago to discuss how they are going to experientialize their lobby for every show. And they did a little bit with *Suessical: The Musical*. They haven't gotten to what we do. But I guess it's catching on.

Our Avante-Van Garde late night series still always me to do something experiential without having to worry about if I have to do the whole lobby or tying it in with a main stage show. So I can still do some of the plays that ordinarily don't get done by anybody else, but they might not get done. But we find ourselves in our own little paradigm—by thinking outside the black box, maybe it puts us in another kind of box. But I don't know that I've ever really changed anything because we started so far out of the box with *Tracers*—that's my measuring stick, my litmus test.

DB: You also talk about *Autobahn* as a litmus test. Did you do *Tracers* and then fall away or stagnant and then went back to *Autobahn* as a new litmus?

MS: Not necessarily. Everything I've tried to do, even when we didn't know we were doing "experiential"—we didn't call it that, that's just the way we operated. We did *Steambath* with the steam coming into the audience and they got to wear towels.

We did *Italian-American Reconciliation* with Pop's restaurant as the entire theatre, cooking spaghetti in the old kitchen, grilling oregano so the smell would come out. One thing about the evolution, and I'm not so concerned about it in this space, but as a theatre we have come to a turning point. We've been in this building eight years now and we have to think about moving. Now we have a board, what is our five-year plan, ten-year plan? We are now on a month-to-month lease. The roof's been leaking for months, we just fixed it and it's leaking today. What are we going to do? Are we going to try and buy the building? Are we going to move somewhere else? At the board meeting a couple of weeks ago they asked what I wanted to do? Do I want one theatre or two? Do I want a restaurant with the theatre? Well, of course I do. I want to be Actors Theatre [of Louisville]. I want to have several spaces and a restaurant and have people hang out here. But most importantly I don't want to move into a space, even if it's in a nicer neighborhood and increases our attendance, if I can't touch the lobby. I met with one of our guys who might help us on this building purchase, and I told him that I thought about moving into a space on Central Avenue. I've already done theatre with poles in the audience and I don't want to do it again. And I need a space where I can feel comfortable if I want to make that lobby a cave, I need to know I can do it. I need to know I won't have some management repercussions because I am leasing a building and they want to know why I did something to the floor.

DB: It sounds like that freedom is everything to you.

MS: Absolutely. Of course we're not done with the evolution. We're still planning that submarine play where we flood the theatre.

DB: Why did you choose this space?

MS: I don't know why I chose this space. I'd love to tell you that it was forethought and planning but we had to get out of the old Heart-Watson space. It was not working out. We knew the railroad was coming and they were going to knock it down anyways, so we knew from the first day it was a temporary space. One of the scene designers found this space. And I'll be frank with you. I came in here and I thought "No way." It's just one 50x100 foot warehouse that was littered with old furniture and vacuum cleaners and junk and dirt. And I could not see it. Maybe it was because I was depressed that we had to move to yet another space, but in a way it turned out to be a blessing.

DB: Was it a big move or did you slowly build what it is now?

MS: The thrust space went rapidly. That was a matter of necessity. We gutted it out. We had to have a temporary box office that did not look like it is now. It was a tiny room. Just to get a wall up and a place to put the seats against. That's why this grid is so organized and that grid, while it still works, is still piecemeal. I don't have the energy to tear that one down and build it correctly. Right now there are pipes up

there that are on cheap rails. I just don't have the physical strength to do it. Eight years ago I was forty-four. My body is not letting me do those things.

DB: Remind me about this space.

MS: This space was specifically designed for *Omnium Gatherum*. The whole reason this boxagon is here was just for that play. We lucked out having the turntable. I was buying things for the grid and curtain racks and so forth. Charlotte rep had sold their turntable Opera Carolina who had stored it and didn't want it. They didn't know what they had and were just trying to get rid of it. So for \$500 dollars we bought the turntable. Sometimes the script chooses you. I saw *Omnium Gatherum* when Rob was in it in Louisville. But when I read the original script, it was written so that the set revolved on a turntable for the entire show. She was very clear about how she wanted it to be done. But she wrote it knowing it was going to be performed at Actors Theatre [of Louisville] and that they had the ability to do it. So where are we going to put the turntable? If the turntable is round, how do we make a round theatre? We looked at it geometrically and decided it was easier to build an octagon. Then we realized what we had—the only theatre in the round in Charlotte. Let's build it and not tear it down. We've gotten some good use out of it. If you take a picture of the way this theatre is right now and go in there and take a picture of that theatre the way it is right now. There are 64 seats in this theatre, there are 66 seats in that one.

DB: I want to read you a statement and you tell me what you think. Richard Schechner did environmental theatre. He said the following: "The environmentalist is not trying to create the illusion of a place, he wants to create a functioning space." I was wondering your thoughts on that.

MS: The illusion I try to create is a reality on the stage. I'm just trying to create an impression of the place. When the audience first walks in, what is their first impression? In some ways I am trying to separate the lobby/bar area from the actual performance space, but that doesn't always happen. For *Metamorphoses*, I always wanted to have a cave and it seemed the right thing to do with the text. Then when you came through that there was a different space. Bacchus went around with his wine, there was a lifeguard stand because of the pool in the theatre. It wasn't exactly the timeline of the show—it wasn't all ancient Greece. It was whatever we decided it was going to be. With *Master Class* we papered it with operatic sheet music. Again, that's part of the challenge. But sometimes I have to remind myself the reason we are here is to serve the author. We are spending all of our time on experientiality and we shortchange the author.

DB: Sometimes when you are in the theatre it is a recreation of the space. In *Master Class* it is a theatre where she is conducting a master class, or *Omnium* where the entire space was a dinner party.

MS: Right. Maybe I don't take it as literal. We decide what that place is. We are creating a reality for the audience. For *Metamorphosis*, it's a pool. So what kind of a pool is it? That was up to us to decide. In some ways it's like a Greek and Roman-style bath. This methodology might work differently with a theatre with more funds. But we are still back-engineering things so we can do more with less. I have plastic columns, where are we going to put them? We took everything we had—giant columns, LED lights—and we threw everything literally in the center of the room and said "Okay, now what? How can we be experiential?" And it didn't turn out the way we started. I had all these giant columns that were going to be in the theatre and Rob said they're too big and not going to fit there. He wanted to bring them out and make them part of the lobby. Then we took the small columns and put them on the set. Then, I look at these cool LED lights I'm trying to figure out where to hang. And this happened by accident, but I looked at the top of the columns and they had holes in them that you poured sand in so they wouldn't fall over. Since they had a hole in them it made sense to put the LED lights in them. That's how all the columns changed colors and the lightning flashed. It was a happy accident.

DB: The mission statement. I broke it down into six essential parts. I want to know what you think about each one. First, to "think outside the black box."

MS: I'm proud that we coined that phrase. It's a nice reminder to say "don't get caught in your paradigm." Rather than getting caught in your paradigm and trying to find ways to get out of it, don't get in it in the first place. It's a reminder on [sic] how to execute. Just because it's a black box doesn't mean it has to be a box. It can be an octagon, it can be round. People often label us a black box theatre. That part of the mission statement originated out of the fact that we were always getting called a "fringe" theatre or an "experimental" theatre. But we're not. Just because we're small doesn't mean we're not capable.

DB: "Culturally diverse."

MS: I think it is important that we don't limit ourselves to what might be considered mainstream talent. I was raised as one of four white kids in my entire school. I think it is important, having been a minority, to always make that circle bigger. None of these statements live by themselves. "Thinking outside the black box" reminds me that, while at times a script is very specific of a certain type of character. And when it doesn't say that, I'm not afraid to cast in any way. And the same thing with directors and designers. And not only to go out and search for artists, but also topics that are culturally diverse. I got a lot of heat for the following statement and I don't know that it was taken in the right light, but when we did *Edmond*, I said that was my anti-black history month play. So much of the commercial theatrical service was all about going out and finding that "black play"—the one time out of the whole year where blacks come to their theatre. And all they're doing is targeting that market to make money. They have nothing to do with serving that particular community. But by doing *Edmond*, where we have a multicultural cast and having David Mamet's commentary on racism and suppressed anger, I thought it was a

brilliant choice for black history month. Every month at CAST can be black history month. And every month is Asian month. There can always be some kind of cultural mixture going on.

DB: You did *Limbo*, *Topdog/Underdog*.

MS: We also did *Neon Mirage* and I was very careful that when we cast it there was a great cultural diversity in the cast. We specifically searched for a Filipino actor. What are the chances of finding one in Charlotte?

DB: "Multimedia and other artforms."

MS: We have the ability to explore various types of media. Not every show has to have some form of multimedia in it. But because of our film backgrounds, and having Jay and Paige Johnston Thomas here and knowing what they have to offer as filmmakers, why not have that? We could have easily done *Metamorphosis* and *Marat/Sade* with the original music provided, which was quite dated. Or we could have Alex Mauldin come in and score the show, not for note, like it was a full-length feature film. Why not have the artists on stage playing? For *Foxfire*, why not have the actual bluegrass band onstage? Why use a sound effect of a whippoorwill when I can turn around to one of the players and have him create something? The fact that they got an MTA Award is validation for that part of our mission statement. People expect this HBO-level quality performance. But by adding the multimedia, you are also meeting some of their expectations from outside the theatre. I think that makes us ingratiate ourselves. *Dark Play* was the first time I felt we could really get into it, not just film, it was multimedia that came across as a construct of all the computer images.

DB: "Involves the audience."

MS: That goes back to coming to see a play. Anybody can go see a play. I think that is an outdated construct. If I can involve you from the moment you walk in the door until the moment you leave, we've had a shared experience. You are going to go home and something, hopefully, is going to transpire within you. "I saw a great movie last night," or a play, or "Did you see that great game last night?" You distance yourself between the experience and your own life. We're trying to eliminate that gap.

DB: You seem to ask the audience to step outside of their comfort zone and you are going to be an active participant—not active like getting up on stage, but rather not letting them sit in the dark and watch the play in safety, then go home.

MS: I would say that is virtually true. We don't want people to think, "Oh my God, I have to have this social experience." And it doesn't really have to be outside their comfort zone either. David Mamet would almost blatantly take people out of their comfort zone and "I'm going to make you uncomfortable." Not only is this true for a

patron, but it can also be true for the performers working here. I remember being in the first read-through for *Edmond* and thinking to myself how far out of my comfort zone this play is. And thinking of my background, the word “nigger” is totally out of my vocabulary. If I am uncomfortable about this as the director, I wonder how the other actors, including the black actors, are. How are we going to address this? We needed to have some serious discussions about what this is doing to ourselves, then how this is going to affect the audience. Are you going to automatically shut off the entire message because we are using language that makes you uncomfortable? Or is it our job to make you uncomfortable because that’s the problem in society? That’s the issue we’re discussing here. On the other hand, it doesn’t have to be out of your social comfort zone. How can you be out of your comfort zone with opera in Master Class? We are going to make you the construct. Everyone who comes in is a student. We started that with the speech at the box office: “Thank you for attending the master class. Madame Callas will be out here in about twenty minutes and she asks that all pagers and cell phones be turned off.” And “Madame Callas asks everyone to leave the theatre during the ‘interval.’” We made sure we were using her language. So there was no social construct of uncomf-ort-ability. But the fact that you were in there as a student and that she addressed you personally—she was conducting this master class with you. And that probably did make people uncomfortable.

DB: “Moves them to make a difference.”

MS: Well, that’s what we’re really here for. *Limbo* is a good example. I’m not telling you to invite every illegal alien who come into this country into your house or give them your job. I’m not telling you to build a forty-foot fence around America. All I am asking you to do is listen to this one person’s true story, understand what she is going through, relate it to your own life, and go out and think about it, go out and talk about it. Share that with somebody. And maybe all that it will do is validate the position you already have. Great. That position is now stronger. Maybe you’ll realize you are being a little closed-minded about this, or realize your grandfather was an immigrant as well and what if they had done that to him? Whatever that story is. Maybe you will see *Edmond* and the next time you see a black person on the street and you are inclined to think they are people. Maybe the next time you have a prejudiced thought you’ll catch yourself. Maybe nobody knows. This could be something that works on a one-on-one basis. It could be a thought. “This person does make me uncomfortable. Well, wait a minute.” I’m not going to say life is going to be great and everything will be wonderful because you came to see this play. But maybe we’ve moved you a little bit. Hopefully we’ve moved you off your datum [sic] and you’ve reflected upon your life. And that does make a difference.

DB: And do you think experientiality helps the audience reflect easier? Or more willing to reflect?

MS: I don’t know that it’s easier or they are more willing. All I know is that by putting that message in an experiential package, our chances of having you make

that difference are more likely. That also goes back to choosing plays. I love Neil Simon plays and we've actually done one. But in general we try to find plays that have that potential for making a change. Everything we do, when you put all the elements together, that is what experiential theatre is all about: to do it in such a way that we can effectively have an impact on just one audience member. That's why we fight the fight every day. That's why we do theatre even when the roof leaks and the actors don't get here on time.

DB: Do you ever have any kind of exit discussion or company review of what worked and what didn't? As you said, you're not experimental. You are not taking a hypothesis in order to test various things and then see if the hypothesis is proven. If we do this, if we put a pool on the stage it will make the audience feel "X." How do you gauge your effectiveness?

MS: Measurability. Isn't that what all the grant writers want? The one thing we do internally is a postmortem. We very rarely have time for it since we are always doing another show. But internally we'll look at if the show honored the mission statement. We can't look at it commercially. We know that *No Exit* and *Master Class* may be less successful commercially. If you tell people you are going to do a show with a pool, they are going to come whether it sucked or not. We are just now cautiously entering the opinionated, shark-infested waters of sending out questionnaires to patrons who have come. They all have an opinion. We're not going to change our methodology just because someone says they liked or didn't like a show. If I found in this kind of patron feedback that enough of them were not happy with the kind of work we do I would certainly take it under consideration. There is a certain dynamic I'm concerned about, and I have to think it's directly related to the kind of theatre we do. I still read my theatre marketing books. I know it's supposed to be three times harder to get a new patron to come into your theatre than it is to keep one that has already come. We do manage a sort of exit poll. Some people think we have the actors stand outside in the lobby to greet the audience because we want all the actors to receive their due accolades, and it is in some ways a chance to thank the actors for the work they've done. But it's also a marketing tool so you can tell everybody to tell their friends. What they don't know is during intermission and we send the staff around to listen to people and what they thought about Act I. That's who counts. I don't care if we get a good review or a bad review. All I really care about is what the audience thinks or feels, and whether I'm moving them. They could like the show or not like the show. What I have noticed in all our shows is that in every show we've had a larger number of new patrons coming in. What we are not getting is the return patrons to come back. It's not the return patrons who were dissatisfied, it's the return patrons who loved a show but don't come because of whatever reason. We're doing experiential theatre. We're not doing *Cabaret*, and *Seussical: The Musical*, followed by *The Sound of Music*, whatever it is—they are all good shows and interesting theatre. But the nature of this theatre has an antithetical dynamic, in some ways, to our financial success. We are always doing different shows. So I the one hand the audience can't wait to see what we'll do next—those are the ones we get validation from—but then we are doing *Master*

Class, followed by *Marat/Sade*, then *Our Lady of 121st Street*. You can see how we could be alienating some of our audience. And maybe we are too varied, too different.

DB: As an audience member, I see you are doing *Marat/Sade* and I know a bit about this play and I think to myself “What the hell are they going to do to this?”

MS: Going back to the discomfort-ability issue...Charles LeBorde, from day one, he asked what we were going to do experientially. And I told him we had some artwork and we had a list of everyone who was guillotined, and we were doing a collage, building guillotines. And our tickets are—for the last month we have been working hard to get a bunch of dolls, because Charlotte Corday went to Paris and was being sold all these dolls with the head missing that squirted blood. That’s not the frightening part. The frightening part is that she’s looking at all these children and she said, “How can these children play with these toys so efficiently?” So of course as soon as I read the script I got the ticket idea. We’re going to get a bunch of dolls, we’re going to cut their heads off and make it so they can squirt red blood. Matel absolutely, positively refused to donate and Barbie dolls...maybe because there was a rumor we were actually going to cut their heads off, I don’t know. So then let’s go ahead and build a guillotine in the box office and make people stick their hand through it to get the doll with her head cut off—of course there will be a basket of doll heads. But we’re talking about that level of experiential and trying to involve the audience. Then we ask what are we going to do with the actors? So we got all the cool stuff, but is that just a mechanism? Is that just a construct? Is that just going to be a machination or are we actually going to do something different with the play?

DB: With regards to the statement in your Mission Statement about “making a difference”, we were doing *Henry Moss*, I want to say someone sent you an email a few days later saying they were still thinking about it. And I remember you seemed really proud of that.

MS: My measure of success is not when they come out of a show and they are bubbling about how wonderful the show was I get a little worried that maybe I didn’t do my job. When someone comes out of a show and they can’t talk, that’s a sign to me. There’s a seed that’s germinating, a thought that’s cogitating, there are a bunch of mental gymnastics going on. Then I’m successful. I feel even more successful when they get to the parking lot, and they still haven’t talked. And when they get to the third traffic light and they still haven’t talked to the other person in the car, and if you really, really did your job, it’s three days. And this has happened to me. I don’t know if it was during *Henry Moss* but it was somewhere in that timeline, I saw a film with Ben Kingsley—*The House of Sand and Fog*—I couldn’t talk for two days. I could talk, I had my normal human functionality, but I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want anybody to interfere with all the emotions I was going through and still trying to process that story. That was the finest cinematic example of the experiential effect. And if I can achieve that—Of course I had been trying to do it

before then but that just validated how I process and how I hope other people will process. And it doesn't always have to be a sad thing. It could be happy as well. You come in and see *Master Class* and you walk out realizing that art is truly important. If I am going to be any form of artist I better be passionate about it. I better be doing my homework. The next play you are in you are going to walk in with a whole new attitude. Hopefully we're making a difference for some director down the road who happens to have an actor that saw this show.

Appendix F

Simmons Interview 5

November 20, 2009

DB: I want to ask you about the 2007-2008 season. A lot of what you say and do goes back to *Autobahn*. You say it is really a litmus test. How did you approach the season? How did you approach *Autobahn*?

MS: *Autobahn* came from reading a bunch of Neil LeBute scripts. There were three that we were reading and we thought about doing them all. But we read *Autobahn* and it seemed to lend itself so much to being able to be done experientially. We thought about what we could do with the theatre, how cool it would be if we could get all these car parts and working traffic lights.

DB: So when you come up with all these random things, like with *Autobahn*, does this come from simple brainstorming sessions? Or does it progress as you go along?

MS: Sometimes when we do a show we might approach it compartmentally. I'll say "I've got the lobby" or someone else will have the idea for the bar area, or the box office. But it's not always linear. For *Autobahn* I went to the junkyard and I was looking around and I saw the station wagon. And I saw the roof-rack on it and all of a sudden it dawned on me what we could do. But while I was there I happened to see all these bumpers. And we had done traffic lights for *Suburbia*, so I thought maybe we could go back and re-visit that by putting traffic lights up. So it's really about who has the idea.

DB: What kind of feedback did you get?

MS: I don't think there was anybody who was not overwhelmed with what we did with the lobby and all the experiential twists we put on that.

DB: And you also added a significant multi-media twist on it.

MS: That's true.

DB: The things you do, do you have in mind to correspond thematically with the show? I remember you talking to me about all the things that happen in a car and in a confined space. Do you think about those things when you are grabbing things from here and there?

MS: Yeah, we think about that stuff. And sometimes that stuff opens up new ideas. One thing we did with *Autobahn*, thinking of confined spaces...when we rehearsed, when we decided it would be an invisible or transparent car, the steering wheel for the car, I realized in John Xenakis's sequence when he may have been someone who might be abducting a girl, we realized we could under light it, like that Bella Legosi style. That just came from seeing the steering wheel and seeing what we could do with it. But we actually rehearsed that scene and others in real time in cars. And so for that seen John and Karina had to do it n real time, while driving in a car, plus all the back-story where he took her to the park and pushed her on the swing. Somehow or another all the things that aren't done on the stage somehow or another find a way to manifest themselves on the stage in some way. Just putting the lobby together affects the actor in some way when you go out there and see it. And all of the film sequences they did . . .

DB: With *Omnium Gatherum*, you mentioned you had built the boxagon specifically for that show. What else was there with that show?

MS: Well, we had dinner and Michael went through a case of wine, so there were things to think about like how do you get the right bottles? How do you get the right labels? He has to open them. How do you find something he can drink a lot of? We were going to have to cork the bottles, and foil the bottles.

DB: Would it be fair to say the experience you were trying to create with *Omnium* was the experience of the audience actually being there? As if they are there in the room with you? And that goes along with using real corks and real labels.

MS: When we did it at spirit Square for the second time we planned for the set to be a big table and the audience was going to be seated along with the performers. That got changed somewhere along in the process. But we went with that idea a little bit by having it banquet-style. They were actually sitting at a table around us instead of sitting in chairs. They had banquet tables and linens. And everyone had a place set for them. And I think that added to the confinement of the show, having them surrounding us. And you can't get away from the emotion and the tension. And we only had one row of people so you couldn't even hide psychologically by the person in front of you. And everything was literally right in your face. I think you can't overlook the wine thing. The fact that they are sitting there and see you open that bottle of wine and pull the cork out and undo the wrapper...they're thinking "how did they do that?" or "they really are drinking." I can't tell you how many people asked me if that was real wine. All those little details add to the realism. And not to get to a smell-o-rama but we didn't have to have hot food. We would have been the only people who knew it. But the fact that we could cook it and the audience could smell it—it's nothing new, they used to do it in movies of the 50s—but it really added to it. When we did *Italian-American Reconciliation* to have all that stuff cooking it really added to it, the senses, the sense of being there. Cooking a bunch of parsley and garlic beforehand, it gave it that restaurant feel. And in *Henry Moss* we had him cooking Menudo on the stage.

DB: Tell me what *Dracula* was like.

MS: Having it done in two spaces was the interesting part. We had Act I, the whole setup and ebbing in the castle, Jonathan Parker, who meets *Dracula*. All that happens in one space, in the Boxagon. All the seats were laid out in three-quarters, so the seats were shaped and labeled exactly so you could go from seat A-21 in the Boxagon, to go to A-21 in the thrust and you'd be on the same sightline. So we had to do two things. We had to design both theatres with the identical seating. And then we came back after Act I and a short intermission and when you went into Act II you went into the asylum. There were a couple of changes where you went interior to exterior so we had a slate look on the floor and the concrete benches. We did a lot of lighting with candles, chandeliers, and let the mood exude itself. Then in Act III when we went into the crypt, while we were doing Act II, the crew was over there redressing the Boxagon to be *Dracula's* crypt for the final killing scene. Experiential. We even did the curtain call so that when *Dracula* is killed, we filled his coffin with smoke during the curtain call, because *Dracula* was the last person to come out, and so (I was the one who played him), I just took a deep, deep breath and when I came out all those smoke came out with me. That was the coup d' gras for the experience. And of course the rest of the theatre was all dressed out in cobwebs. And in the crypt, all the lighting was done with candles and torches and chandeliers. And we did that throughout the whole bar. We had candelabras, and the old lantern-style lights, and we dropped everything down from the ceiling. We tried not to let the Fire Marshall know about it, of course. That's one thing we have against us by not being in a different space, it wasn't grandfathered. If we'd had had a sprinkler system we might have been allowed to do that.

DB: I think that it's really interesting to have the audience change seats, even theatres in between acts. Moving from one space to another...

MS: And the audience seemed to enjoy that. And we accommodated their concerns about not having the same seat. We thought about how we would have the same seat numbers. The other thing about that show was the makeup. We make sure the *Dracula* bites, when he was done biting, they actually had two fresh blood marks. All that stuff was worked out ahead of time. In film you can do it much easier. On a big proscenium you would be able to do it. But here, where people are two feet away from you, it had to look real. So we had to really think ahead and test all those things...stuff we did in that show we actually used in *Marat/Sade* because Corday has to pull the knife out of her dress and cuts her breast. Well, how do we do that? We could look back to *Dracula* at where to hide the coagulated blood so that nobody can see it?

DB: *Tuna Christmas*. The first time you did it was at the Blumenthal. That's a CAST necessity, right? How can you experientialize it over there?

MS: Not when we're in someone else's space. And that's the way it is. As we go forward we have to look at some of the dynamics we're encountering. We're looking for a new space, we're going to move forward. But the thing is when we move forward are we going to lose the ability to experientialize the shows the way we are now? We could be the resident company at Spirit Square tomorrow, but we'd be stuck at Spirit Square, I'd have to ask permission to put a poster in the front of the theatre. Roz got yelled at because she put garland around one of the brick columns, but it partly covered the lighting of it, so they made her take it down. So if you're not in your space you have to abide by what they tell you.

DB: *Edmond*. At intermission you had the body outline in the lobby, the blood in the bathroom, the jail motif going through the various elements.

MS: Not only did we have the body, but at intermission we had to figure out . . . well, we didn't have to find a way for anything, they could have just gone to intermission. During intermission we had to do a set change, so the same people who played detectives, they came in during the blackout and were shooting 35 millimeter photograph, which established and foreshadowed the actual pictures we used in Act II, and all the pictures that were posted around the bathrooms of the character who'd been stabbed. The first thing we did for *Edmond*, when we cast Jen, was to stab her and shoot all of the crime scene photos. Then the whole show was to best capitalize on that. How do we get our dividends from that investment? And that let to shooting them. To have them on the set where a patron three feet away could look there and say "My God, how does that girl get all cut up like that?" So then it's like why don't we show them all the photos in the lobby? If we're going to do that, why not have the body outline? Why not make the bathroom to be her bathroom? And that's where Edmond washed his hands. So, by dressing both bathrooms, no matter which one you went into you were guaranteed to see, have that experience of the bloody bathrooms.

DB: And what about the preacher? He was preaching to whom?

MS: Everyone in the audience. So the audience was the congregation. And several people would come and sit on the stage. We took some actors, who we were using as ushers, and when we asked people to come down, we persuaded, we encouraged, we cajoled, we didn't threaten. If they didn't want to leave their seat we didn't bother them. But almost every night we had those seats full. There were forty people in the audience and there were twenty seats onstage. Every night at least half the audience became part of that scene. And by revolving that scene it got everyone involved. Then, of course, by having the preacher and a live mic and letting him preach not just to people on stage, but treating the audience as the congregation as well.

DB: *Dark Play*, again, used a great deal of multi-media. We've talked about the set and the keys and how that evolved, but I wanted to ask about the playbill. What did you do with that playbill, as well as for *Autobahn*?

MS: In *Autobahn* they were driver's license pictures and in *Dark Play* they were like facebook profiles. The playbill and the posters were really plus-sized license plates. We also made it so that when you went to the website, what you saw was a car radio, and it had music playing and you heard a thirty-second advertisement from live from a sponsor of the show, 95.7, The Ride, because that was their logo. So we thought how can we market the ride with our show? We got fifteen thousand dollars of free radio advertisement because we were able to link those two concepts together.

DB: You talked about *Dark Play* and wanting to send out text messages from the actors and encouraging people to come see the show.

MS: Twitter wasn't really a thing at that point, but that was really the guide for what we wanted to do.

DB: You did end up sending out emails.

MS: Most people liked it. Sending out emails from one of the characters pretending to be somebody else. They were meant to intrigue you, to mislead you as to what *Dark Play* would reveal. Some people got it. Most people liked it. And they were a sort of jumpstart before the audience got to the theatre. They knew there would be somebody on the internet pretending to be somebody else. We actually had somebody contact me and say that somebody had hacked into the theatre's email and is sending out emails about pretending to be somebody else on the internet. So those people needed it to be explained to them, but they thought it was really cool. But they were worried we were being hacked.

DB: Then the last show I have on my list is *Limbo*.

MS: That was a bit of a different animal because it was a new work and a successfully funded project by the Arts and Sciences Council to incorporate the Latino population into theatre. But even that we were able to experientialize it by doing a play where we purposefully used Spanish and English. We were able to get a mural that covered the set and the entire lobby that was painted on giant 4x8 sections. And there was no place in the theatre or the lobby where you were not inside the mural. And the mural was an Aztec calendar. And so literally you were inside the mural.

DB: And how did that relate to the play? The mural, the calendar, and the audience?

MS: It had ancestry. The play was a true story about Maria Gonzalez coming from Central America. So his whole theme was Central America from this great civilization until the end of time. Her ancestors came from Central America. So that was a happy circumstance. Because we were working with the Arts and Sciences Council, they wanted to see multi media, or at least a cross-discipline arts involved.

We were able to incorporate some South American dance and Latino dancing with, and this wasn't in the script. When Glenn wrote the scene that they were going to be in a café and it had a jukebox. Well, let's go ahead and play the jukebox, and let's let them dance. And then when he wanted to do a protest segment, we changed it so the people with the signs would change into a modern dance. And of course that's part of the experientiality too, bring Maria Gonzalez to Charlotte. One of the threads that ties the whole script together was being able to see the face of Maria Gonzalez in interview, then you would see that interview play out in the live stage segment. But in the end you got to see the real Maria Gonzalez in person answering some of the questions the alleged documentary filmmakers had set out to ask which was the basis for the script. We used projections quite a bit for that one. So we had film, dance, music, the script, Then we had facilitated talk backs so you could see the real Maria and ask her questions and see how much she and the actor who played her have in common.

DB: Where would you place that season? You talk about doing such different things; multi-media, the playbills, the internet and marketing. Was that sort of a benchmark season? You've said before that *Autobahn* was the reference point for which all other shows are bounced off of.

MS: I think it was a benchmark season in that it solidified a standard for us. And it created a sense of expectation for the audience. If we were Frankenstein-ian we would have created a monster, because now everyone who had come to see that season was expecting a log cabin for *Foxfire*, and the pool for *Metamorphosis*. That was the foundation. What we did with the season, what are we going to do for the rest of the shows? That carries us through to the space. We can't go backwards.

DB: That certainly puts a lot of pressure on you all at CAST.

MS: Sure. There's no middle ground. We're doing Evie's *Waltz* and we're already talking about how we can do a real barbeque so he can cook the kabobs on stage. So then, how are we going to tie that into the box office? How are we going to make the box office look like a high school principal's office? I'm not sure where it's going yet but something's gotta happen. We've not only created a demand in our theatre, but I feel like we've set standards for other people too. I was so impressed with Yankee tavern's detail. Actors Theatre keeps adding details to involve the audience. I think we're putting pressure on them to step up their game.

DB: Is there such thing as experiential acting?

MS: Acting is living in the moment. And you have to use all your senses to do that. Experiential acting isn't really trying to define any new style of acting, we're just trying to find ways to incorporate the actor into the experientiality as well. You can also provide the actor with more than just doing their back-story and homework. Putting two actors in a car, with Equity actors, not that they are any better than non-Equity, but they have to have done something. They have to have had a modicum of

success in order to be a professional actor. And so they have a better change of bringing the ability to draw on experiences. Whereas community theatre actors, you don't know how much experience they have. It's not about talent—they could be very talented. But you can take an actor and put him in a situation where he would recognize being in that situation. Then, is there anything we can do in that acting exercise in a creative manner? We can talk all we want about what it's like to be in a car while all this is happening, like in *Autobahn*, and then you'll do it on stage. Or I could just put you in your car and you can drive and I'll sit in the back seat and we'll run the scene a few times. Then all of a sudden the actor sees what has to happen. And I do feel we need to do those things. We took everybody in the cast for *Metamorphosis* to a pool to train. Everybody practices the dead-man's float, everybody's going underwater. Now you're ready to do a show that's pitch black and you're trying to swim underwater. And we sent everybody to CPR training. Nobody's going to drown in that pool (we hope), but having those experiences together it helps solidify the cast.

DB: I think back to *Omnium Gatherum* and hearing you say many times "Raise the stakes. Raise the stakes." You're acting at CAST. It's not necessarily just a back-story. The hostess says the salad course is "Over." Jeff responds "Over?" Not like "done," but "over" is the last thing I heard on the radio. What exactly is that? Is that Stanislavski on steroids?

I never studied Stanislavski. I don't know who he is, or anybody who ever knew him. What it is though, where they came from—everything we did in designing the set—maybe if we hadn't done all those things, my head may not have been there for that discovery. Maybe your head wouldn't have been there either. By going that deep into the experience of what 9/11 was really about, you become much more sensitive and it allows you to see things you might not have otherwise seen.

DB: Its got to be richer for the audience. Whether they recognize "over" or not, their experience and the intensity and the stakes you see on stage can eat away. They can sense that.

MS: If the director recognizes it, and the actor recognizes it, and we've all explored it together, even if we are the only three or seven people on the stage that know it, the audience knows something. They felt it. They might not even recognize it. But hopefully three days later, they might not remember the whole show, but they'll remember that line was something huge to you. And in that way, you'll have reached in and touched them. And you leave them with a lasting impression. It's like an Impressionist painting. If I get real close to an Impressionistic painting I can see all those little brush marks and everything. That's not where it's at. It's being able to step away from it and take a whole and realize all those little marks, they all mean something. It's a scene on the West Bank, but it's not a replica. When you step back it's still a version of the Bank. It's an impression. It's that artist's impression of that reality. And that's what we're doing. We're creating an impression of that reality

which we hope may impress upon you. Then when you leave, you'll take something, you'll take that stance with you.

Appendix G

Simmons Interview 6

December 2, 2010

DB: Tell me about becoming a 501(c)(3) and getting your non-profit status.

MS: We are about 3.5 years into our 501(c)(3). The process is a bit interesting too. The prime reason that we went 501 was so that patrons could make tax-deductible donations to the theatre. Some people were making some donations but we felt that being 501(c)(3) would allow more private funding where people had incentive to give us money. They could take it off their taxes. The other thing it allowed us to do, it opened up the doors for some grant opportunities that were not available to the for-profit corporations.

DB: So I assume you've seen a rise in donations.

MS: Our donations have increased conservatively ten-fold, both in the number of people who donate but also in the amount of money they donate. Our grants have increased 100%. We never got a grant before we were 501(c)(3). And we have virtually gotten every grant that we have applied for including the Innovation Grant to help us grow. It increased our private donations in numbers and dollars, our ability to access grants including the number of grants we've been getting, but also the dollar figure of the grants. So the first grant we got was for \$2500, then we got another \$2500. Then we got a \$5000 grant, then we got another \$5000 grant. Then we got a \$7500 grant to market *Metamorphoses*, which we used on TV and radio and for internet advertising and Charlotte Observer sites. Then we got a couple more \$5000 grants and then we got the Innovation Grant for \$30000. And that's to help us grow because even the Arts and Science Council said that we're on their radar as the next professional theatre in Charlotte and their job is to help us get there. They know one of our issues is space. We had to identify what our greatest need was and that is our own space that is comparable to the level of art that we produce, but doing it in an area that still allows us to do experiential theatre. If we take our money and move into the Duke [Duke energy Theatre at Spirit Square] we'll have nice bathrooms, decent parking, but we can't be experiential. But you can see just by the Arts and Science Council initiative what the 501(c)(3) has allowed us to do. That also does not come without a price. You have to have a Board of Directors and they have to do their job of fundraising. Of course that's not without their input and then it becomes a whole new policy and political way to produce the theatre. So on the one hand you want the freedom to do your art, but on the other hand you have to have a Board of Directors, all to have the 501(c)(3), all to have more money to do your art.

DB: You're accountable to other people then.

MS: Yes, many.

DB: Would you go so far as to say that the 501(c)(3) saved the theatre?

MS: [Long pause] Yes, I think we would have to say that. [Long pause] I think the theatre would still be here, but it might not be with the level of presence that we have. We wouldn't have some of the support that we have. And we certainly wouldn't be able to take it to the next level. We wouldn't be able to grow to the professional level without it.

DB: Have your numbers grown?

MS: Our numbers have grown. Now is this directly a result of being a 501(c)(3)? Certainly if you look at metamorphosis where we took money that was directly related to having the 501(c)(3) through the grants that helped us market the show, absolutely our numbers peaked with that. Without that, we wouldn't have had that money. I would not have had \$7500 to invest in marketing. Maybe the show would have sold anyway because we were the only show that had a pool. We were clever with getting our own word out. I think one thing that's interesting is the real great marketing we did had nothing to do with the \$7500 grant, and that was taking actors and training them in a pool, making sure the press was there, and shooting some photos underwater with scuba gear. All that stuff got the newspapers and TV people involved.

But regarding our growth, we've been able to grow into a more professional theatre because of the 501(c)(3) and the grant process. We've been forced to do more professional bookkeeping, run the business like a business now and keeping better records. All that has helped our profit margin and our ability to apply for larger grants. So it's only been good for us.

DB: Do you think experiential theatre has evolved at CAST? Or has it devolved over the years?

MS: I think it's always evolving. And there are probably some instances where it has devolved. Being in the same space has allowed us to experientialize the shows in many of the same ways because the experience is directly related to the physical space that we have. We know we always have the box office to experientialize. As soon as you walk into this space something is going to happen with the tickets. Something is going to happen with the bar area. And then of course there's the physical participation of getting into the show. In some sense it has devolved in that not every show has had the same level of experientiality due to budget or time. But in general we have either maintained or exceeded the level of experience. I don't think too many times we couldn't come back and say we didn't get to the level we wanted. We are looking to tie the retail end of it into the experientiality and that is definitely part of our evolution. We've evolved in the sense that sometimes we know enough to plan ahead with pieces for the lobby, with reconstructing the floor, being able to use those for multiple shows. Evolving? I just think we're getting

better at it. So I guess we're continuing to evolve. Maybe it's evolving so slow, I don't see it.

DB: There's no textbook definition of experiential theatre, is there?

MS: No. And maybe that's the essence of experiential theatre, is that it can only be explained by example. When people ask me, I give them an example. I always wind up saying, well you know, we're trying to create an overall experience for the audience member. It's a sound bite—an overall experience for the patron that starts at the front door that continues through and after the production. And then people say, "Well what do you mean by that?" Well if you've never been to CAST, for instance, when you walk into the lobby this is the kind of ticket that we use and this is the music that we play and how the bartender is dressed. Maybe it's like pornography; I can't define it, but I know what it is when I see it.

DB: When you did *Metamorphoses*, Bacchus was out in the lobby before the show. So in a sense, the performance was out there too. So sometimes the performance bleeds from the lobby into the space, but other times, is it setting a mood? Is it setting an expectation?

MS: That's pretty good. I like that. Yes, we should be setting a mood. In essence what we should be doing is preparing the audience, subtly, sometimes not so subtly, sometimes surreptitiously. You don't really know if it's not directly in your face. When you walk into *Metamorphoses* and you see Zeus sitting on a lifeguard stand and Bacchus going around helping everyone has a glass of wine, that's pretty obvious. But when you walk into *Edmond*, and nothing happens, there are both expectations and a loss of expectations. In some of the other shows, you've expected an experience and it's not there and it just looks like a normal box office and you think you're going see a normal play and you wonder what's going on. Well, that's part of the set up. We purposefully disappointed you so that when ACT I is happening and the girl gets murdered, in the meantime we've bloodied the bathroom, there's crime scene tape, we put up the photos from the stabbing and everything in the lobby becomes the crime scene and you're shocked because you weren't expecting that experience and you got it.

DB: So I have to ask why? What's in it for the audience?

MS: Maybe what we should do is go out and ask the audience exactly what was in it for them. I think what's in it for them is an infusion of excitement and appreciation for theatre. If you've already been in theatre, if it's something you do as entertainment now I've got you really involved in theatre art. And if you've never been to a theatre before, your husband or wife brought you against your will, all of a sudden, you have a new excitement and appreciation for something you've never seen. If you come to CAST and you're excited by this experience, when you go to another show, even if it's a good show, and you just see a play, it won't be the same and you're gonna want to come back here. At least that's what I hope for. I went to

a play the other day and I thought. "Man, I can't sit 40 rows back," and I think we're doing something right. People have tried to steal a little bit here and a little bit there. And people are starting to do a little bit of experiential theatre.

DB: It would be interesting for another study, but I think we are moving toward that. *Phantom of the Opera* had the chandelier above the audience. That's the only thing they did, but in some sense, you are in the experience a little more than say if it weren't above you. They aren't pretending that you are in the world with them. It's just something that brings you a little closer to the performance, if not physically, emotionally. I think theatres are going to that.

MS: And I couldn't help but notice that Theatre Charlotte now likes to do things to their lobby. Little things. I went to see *Steel Magnolias* and they had little kitchen aprons and little hair cutting things in the lobby. If imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, then I'm flattered.

DB: In talking with Mark Pizzato, with our media culture you don't just go to a movie anymore. It's in surround sound or 3D and it's all around you and video games are more lifelike. You are part of the action. Media has trained the brain to expect even subconsciously an expectation to be part of the action even if it is just a chandelier above your head. The traditional theatre, where I'm going to sit in my space and you're going to perform in your space may be going away, to some degree.

MS: We're always looking for new ways to do it. Some shows lend themselves more to experientiality than others do. The current show we're doing takes place in Central Park and we're trying to design the set. We're pushing the envelope so if all of this takes place in the park. We'll put park benches on the set, we'll remove the first row of seating and so the experience will take you to the next level because now you'll be sitting not only in the park, but in the park on a park bench. And then after thinking about charging for those seats and the fact that they'll be sitting in them for an hour and fifteen minutes before they can get up, that theatre bench might get really hard. So I had to make the decision against my experiential will and said, "I'm scrubbing it." It's a great experiential idea, we've got all this other stuff we're doing we'll just live with that and we'll be satisfied. But that's not how my brain works. I hate coming up short.

DB: There's a danger in involving the audience at an experiential level.

MS: Certainly

DB: Some people will reject it. But I think by and large . . . we're not talking about people climbing up on stage, but there's certainly a risk. Some people want to have a greater experience, some people don't. Some people want that safety, to have an actor directly address you as an audience member in the lobby or in the theatre space wherever, I would think that would be high risk, high reward.

MS: It is. With experiential theatre we are raising the level of expectation. We do that by making the actors work hard and do their homework. They need to understand what our audience expects, the level of work. They need to know what I expect. I expect a level of excellence here, which means they have to take bigger risks. They have to take chances. If we are going to ask our audiences members to take a risk, then so do our actors. It's a risk for us, it's a risk for you to allow yourself to become part of that experience. In the end, I'm willing to take the risk. I think the reward is worth it.

DB: I would think the audience always has a safety net. You're not ripping out all the seats and re-creating Central Park. In "Henry Moss," the walls surrounded the audience, but the spectators weren't in the house with the actors. I mean come on, they're sitting in theatre chairs.

MS: That's true. But when we do the submarine play, you'll be in the submarine and the valves will start leaking and the water's gonna spray everywhere and you're going down with the rest of us. But we haven't gotten an audience confident enough yet to where we're ready to do that. But that day will come.

DB: That sounds straight out of the experimental theatre of the sixties.

MS: I understand there is nothing new. Experiential theatre is nothing new. The truth is we did guerilla theatre back in the 60s. Before that, Shakespeare came out and they shot off the cannon and they were beating the drums in the audience to get everyone's attention. They were heightening the experience. They just did it differently. I'd like to take the credit for inventing all of this, but I know I can't.

DB: Returning to the 07-08 season, it started with *Autobahn*, and you expressed that this was a shift, a litmus test. You said you hit a new level with that. Let's start with *Autobahn*, how did you approach that?

MS: *Autobahn* was largely because of the author. Robert said that Neal LaBute was someone we wanted to showcase. So we started reading some Neal LaBute plays. And *Autobahn* jumped out as the one. I liked the script; it was better than some of his other works. I liked it especially because it had the greatest opportunity to experientialize. The vision came with car parts. Sometimes you go down a road and you see a junkyard, and it's like "Okay, I got it now." Some of it is happenstance and some is serendipity too.

I happened to drive home and I always listen to 95.7 "The Ride." So I'm reading *Autobahn* and I'm thinking about car parts. The DJ comes out and says "95.7 The Ride." And I pick up the telephone and see if they would get involved in this. Suddenly I got 16000 dollars of free radio time. Then we did parking tickets for the tickets, and so on. So that's how all that happened. Sometimes things just work out. I don't know if there's an empirical way to explain any of it.

DB: In *Metamorphoses* you had said you had always wanted to do a cave. So you put that on the show. It sounds to me like usually the show puts it on you. We're doing the show, now what do we do?

MS: Instead of us approaching the show, maybe the show approaches us. I think *Autobahn* did us and we didn't do *Autobahn*.

DB: The next show was *Omnium Gatherum* at the Duke [Duke Energy Theatre at Spirit Square].

MS: If anything, that was just a disappointment for me. It's expectation. I expected certain things to happen. I expected the Duke to help us evolve and grow. But that was a devolve because we were working with an organization that said they wanted us. They were going to make it happen. We can change the whole theatre! It will be the only show ever done in the round with tables, etc. But they didn't get the passion and excitement around their marketing team. I was demoralized by that production, not the art. And I got to thinking, maybe what we do here in this space can't be done in another space, at least not in another space used to doing it the institutional way.

DB: So do you think if you took all of the same principles from here, do you think it could've been a success?

MS: I think it could've been. If we were to ever do it again, we would insist upon it, instead of just accepting or assuming they were all on the same experiential page that we were on. I think you have to learn from your failures. I think the people who it didn't fail for were the people who came who saw that level of production that moved them. It taught us a lesson that we have to be able to more effectively communicate what we do and what we need and what our expectations are.

DB: If not just to other theatres, but to your actors and designers as well. You're asking for a shift in the audience expectation. The production team needs to be on board to be effective. It's an expectation for them too.

MS: Also, the Blumenthal was a co-producer of that show. We produced the art, they produced the marketing and the people. I feel like we succeeded on our end. Our ideas about that play, about what the experience could be, evolved for the second run. There was a lot of energy and dollars to reinvent that show to a new level of experience. The only thing we were missing was the people to see it.

DB: One reviewer said they actually liked that production better than the first one.

MS: I think overall, the production values were higher there because we were able to have time to reflect on what we did here.

DB: *Dracula*. How did you approach that?

MS: *Dracula* was a great October show. It was a marketing opportunity. I don't want to say it was a cash cow, but it was a marketing opportunity on a show we could experientialize without compromising our artistic value. We do *Dracula* our way and we're gonna make some money. So we started with the script. Then we decided we have to read the book. And then again it sort of happened organically. We realized we could do this here and this here. Then it evolved into doing one Act in one theatre and the second Act in another. And we could decorate it in between. Cobwebs are cheap. I still have people tell me that they loved that show. Now this is a funny thing I didn't realize. When we were doing *Dracula*, I didn't think it was a good show. I am my own worst critic. I didn't know that it was a success. It wasn't until after the show that I realized that we had been full every night. I didn't recognize how much money we were making. It's actually one of the best-selling shows that we've ever done.

DB: I would think that show in particular would fit even better than some others into the experiential model. Thinking of expectation levels...it's *Dracula*! You have certain expectations. Then to theatrical-ize it in multiple spaces with all the rest of the stuff you did to the lobby and whatnot. I would think that would be extremely successful experientially. Yours would be an entirely different experience of something they are familiar with. What I'm saying is they have an expectation of theatre and an expectation of *Dracula* and you can challenge both.

MS: Ironically, that was my insecurity. I wasn't insecure about our ability to experientialize it. When it went dark, we had people in wolf costumes and they'd reach out and touch some of the audience members, in appropriate places, of course. And I know that was freaking people out, but it was in a good way. And if somebody backed away, the wolves knew not to get too close. We had some typical *Dracula* shtick with blood and fangs on the bartender, but it played well. My insecurity was in doing the script in the spaces the way we want to and will the audience buy this way of doing it. I didn't really know that the audiences bought it until after the show was over. It was the same thing with *Welcome to the Monkey House*. A certain number of people expected things when they heard Kurt Vonnegut. Like *Dracula*, will they accept it? Will they buy into it? But because of *Dracula*, I felt more secure, more comfortable about doing "Monkey House." Then of course, I got insecure on whether or not we did a good job experientializing it. People seemed to have a good time. I don't know if it translated, I just don't like to fail. So every time we do a show, I always wonder, did we pick the right script. Do we have the right actors to do it. Did we really give it our 100% at experientializing it? That's probably the most difficult thing about experiential theatre. If we were just doing plays the traditional way, we would have too many resources right now. Even with the limited funds that we have, we still don't have the resources we need. Our mission is to do more with less. And if we were doing regular plays in the traditional way, we'd have excesses. But each time we do one, my personal expectation increases, the audience expectation increases, and therefore, so does the workload. And we run the risk of burning out. We're an all-volunteer organization.

DB: On a side note, it just dawned on me that last year you did *Savage in Limbo* in the bar.

MS: We did that at the bar. That was another one chosen because of the author, John Patrick Shanley. We had three of his shows we wanted to do, but the other two took place in a setting similar to what we had already done. And also, we had a compression of time. We had big shows in different stages of production in both of the other stages. And this play just happened to be set in a bar, so we did it in our bar area. It was just the right time and the right place with the right author and the right director, who was Paige and that was her first time directing solo, and the right cast. Now this one was a little different because the spectator walked in and they were in the set. Chris Walters who played the bartender was actually bartending. Sara Pro was passed out at the end of the bar.

DB: If I didn't know these people and know what was going on, I would think I was at the bar and then the show just sort of happened.

MS: That was the idea and the bathrooms were behind you and in the play one of the characters had to go to the bathroom. And so they went in the same bathroom and that's all part of the experience. I do think the coolest part of it though was the setup. You just didn't know. The bartender was serving you the whole time. And then he starts saying lines and you didn't know the actors were part of the show, but also you never really knew when the show started. Some subtle light changes that you may not have even noticed. The drunk girl gets up and has a line and then the bartender and it was just so seamless. If there's an example of a seamless transition, that was a good one.

Here is something that has come up recently, the importance of making money on a show versus the experiential concept. At a recent Board meeting, someone said they had gone to another play and they did a curtain speech that said how much they needed everybody's donations and what their next season was and they said we need to be doing that at CAST. So on one side you've got the Board of Directors and on the other side you have the Artistic Director. And this is where having a 501(c)(3) can be a little difficult. Now I have to face the Board of Directors who have a fiduciary responsibility to the theatre, and I have an artistic responsibility to the theatre. I feel like a curtain speech can really hurt some of the plays that demand a seamless opening. *Savage in Limbo* was a perfect example. If we would have stopped and given some curtain speech it would have hurt the experience. I say we do a curtain speech at the end of the show. For people who knew it was set in a bar, they came and they got it. If you didn't know it was set in a bar and you were told to just have a seat and order a drink, you're still waiting to go into the theatre and you're five minutes into the show before you realize this IS the show. That's so rewarding to catch the audience by surprise like that.

DB: The second incarnation of *Tuna Christmas*. Cash?

MS: Cash. Now, don't get me wrong, it helped fund *No Exit* and other shows like that so I'm not going to apologize for it. But because we always have to do something, we decorated a bit with the whole Christmas-y thing even though we weren't allowed to, we put lights around the poles. And each year we do it, we improve the production a little bit; make some of the effects better. We did the best we could within our limitations.

DB: And after the New Year you had *Edmond*. Why did you pick this show? Mamet?

MS: That's exactly right. Mamet. It was a good play. It's a good script and the message attracted me. The disintegration of a human being attracted me. And the end of the story how such different characters can wind up coming together even at a violent atmosphere to be able to find some degree of love and reconciliation. That was worth doing the play even it was just doing the play.

DB: Then that one was a more thematic choice.

MS: Absolutely. Probably the most thematic, that and *Omnium Gatherum*. And frankly, we couldn't think of what to do with that show with the lobby or the tickets. Sometimes you just have to be patient and wait for the idea. Most often we have the lobby planned out by the time we get to rehearsals. And we didn't have any ideas for this one. The clock was ticking. When are you going to make that decision? And it was actually during one rehearsal. You never know who's going have the answer. And we're in there working, and accidentally somebody flashed a camera through the beaded curtains. Then it just occurred to me. We'll have policemen come in because the murder has already taken place. During intermission, the audience will come out and find the blood in the bathroom and the chalk outline.

DB: So when they come into the theatre and see nothing, they may be disappointed and again at least for return patrons, you're challenging their expectations of your theatre. And then at intermission, like the opening of *Savage in Limbo*, there's a bit of a gotcha moment.

MS: You're exactly right. It's "gotcha." Ultimately what are we trying to do? To get you in the mood—emotionally, psychologically— so that the message of the play will have more of an effect on you. It's like going to see Jay Leno or David Letterman. I'm in the audience waiting and they send out comics and another one and a juggler and another guy comes out and is all excited and says Leno's going to be out in five minutes and he talks about how the satellite is gonna come over and these cameras are gonna come down in your face and we're gonna have a really good time. And you see the applause sign thing and they've warmed up the audience. By this time, I am so ready to see Jay Leno, I think his monologue is funny, whether it's funny or not.

DB: I read somewhere the theatre lobby is a buffer zone between the chaos of the outside world and the world of the theatre, an intermediary. It sounds to me that CAST is a sort of hyper-transition. The minute you walk in the door . . .

MS: We skip a couple of steps.

DB: Yes. Sometimes the performance is starting and you are forced to . . .

MS: I wouldn't say forced. I'd say you're allowed. Encouraged. This way you're even more prepared than the traditional theatre. What's our real job when we're doing theatre? It's to create a reality. The willing suspension of disbelief. You're willing to suspend your reality, your life, your problems. All we're doing is creating a reality for you. Right from the time you walk in, this is the new reality. You don't have to wait until you get to the auditorium to start suspending your disbelief. Because that might take five or ten minutes. It might take the first scene, it might take Act I before you finally feel comfortable to accept what the author has to say. All we're doing is helping you accept it early. That's why when you have Bacchus swilling wine right next to a lifeguard stand. They're thousands of years apart, but because of those things, you are closer to what's going to happen in there than you would be if they weren't in the lobby. Now I can't be empirical about it. Let's say it takes you through Scene One of a normal play, there's a greater chance that I've got you before the first five beats of Scene One. Hopefully, I've got you before you ever take your seat. Whatever systems we put in place before the show, you're ready. Not only are you ready, you want it. And are excited about what's going to happen next. So that might be a good way to gauge the level of success. If we were to poll the audience and see how ready they were when they came into the theatre, especially if they're aware of their own sensibilities and how long it takes them to warm up to a play, I think you'd find that most of them are more ready with a CAST show than they are ordinarily.

DB: And then *Dark Play* obviously had experiential potential.

MS: That was another one I chose because of the text and its themes. One of our missions is to do cutting edge work that other people can't or won't do. I saw that play at the Humana Festival and was excited about it. Seeing it done in a regular way and knowing our potential to do it experientially, that's what really prompted me to do it. I like the play and I like the message, but what really got me was seeing what we could do with it.

DB: And did that develop organically or did you have preconceived ideas about it after seeing it?

MS: I had preconceived ideas about it from the moment I saw the show, maybe even during it. I was captivated by the text. But somewhere around intermission, I was thinking how I really like the play. And that it was something we could do and I started thinking how we could do it. And of course I brought some of those ideas to

our production. Sometimes it's letting the play happen. I talk about trusting in the work. If I just trusted in the work, it would give me the ideas. So it dawned on me, hey I know a guy who has used computer parts. So I asked him if I could walk around. I see thousands of computers and boxes of computer boards and he tells me I can have them. And he also offers up some screens. So now he's offering up ideas, "Maybe you could do this or that." So I loaded the truck. Then sometimes it's found stuff too. Nothing ever works to a plan. It's like I see this and I see that, and I realize I hadn't thought about that. So sometimes it changes based on what we have and what is found. Sometimes it's just found objects that fit into your plan as well.

DB: Do you ever feel like the time and energy that you put into experientializing the spaces comes at a sacrifice to the production itself? Do you ever lose one over the other?

MS: I have a discipline about that. The work still comes first and people are just going to have to buy into this. We have to inculcate them with it. I've given fair warning. The director is going to start sixteen weeks out, auditions will be fourteen weeks out. I want a read through at twelve weeks out because I want the rest of the time for the experience to develop. It's not good enough to have a great play. You gotta have a great experience. Directors, actors, designers need to know then that this is not a typical production and they're expected to work harder in order to get all the elements where they have to be. That's why I have my hands in almost everything. If you get somebody who doesn't have the discipline and the lobby fails or the show fails, I'm the one who is ultimately responsible. Audiences don't care who didn't do it. It means the experience fails. And if the experience fails, experientiality fails. And if experientiality fails, then all the stuff I've been working on since we started this journey, all of it fails. Which means I fail.

But getting back to the question, it can't be at the expense of the work because the work comes first. Now if something had to be sacrificed, I would not sacrifice the acting or the production value parts of the equation. This is the thing about the experiential theatre. You have to make an assumption and that assumption is the work you do in the space is excellent. It has to meet or exceed the patron's expectations. I could have the greatest, coolest lobby or ticket in the world and if the play sucks, then it's all for nothing. All this outside experience is part of the set up to make the work on stage the most effective it can be. Even if you like this experiential theatre, you're still coming to see the work and by that I mean the author's work. And that's really who we're supposed to be serving. It's about expectations. Let's say we've met or exceeded expectations in the anteroom, then you come into the production and no matter how seamless that is, if the actors and designers haven't done their homework and they don't meet expectations, then we fail.

DB: *Limbo*. That was in July, a little bit after the season.

MS: Actually, that was the first grant we got after we turned 501(c)(3). It was a Special Projects Grant to serve the Latino Initiative. It was an original work, a local

playwright and we managed to have a level of experience that involved the Latino community. We had the subject come in. That was part of the experience. In that sense it didn't have anything to do with the wall or the tickets, which we still did. It was to have her here; to have her share her experiences about the play. So some of that experience might not have been visible to the audience, but I hope the result manifested itself. And I think that shows the invisible part of the experience. It might be the way the character moves or the pinstripes throughout *Edmond*. That's another way an experiential theatre can grow and evolve is exploring these invisible things. The audience may or may not pick up on them, but they're gonna make an effect. It may only be cerebral. It could be one of those seeds that you plant and it might be a year later where you might be doing something and see pinstripes or playing chess and it'll all come back to you. That's okay. A delayed reaction is okay with me as long as there is a reaction. If they're not thinking of the play after they leave the building, what's the point?

DB: Why did you choose this space?

MS: Because it was \$1800/month and it was the only space available at the time. We were already out of Hart Witzen. And stuff was already in the truck. The place was filthy. It took us two years to get all the dirt out. Well, actually, there's still some here. In two months we had to put all the electrics in. And let me tell you. I only have one more of these left in me.

DB: One more move?

MS: Yeah. After that, I'm done.

Appendix H

Mark Pizzato Interview

October 14, 2009

DB: Let me start by asking what your impression of CAST is, both as a critic and patron in the community.

MP: People have an impression of CAST in my department and of Actor's Theatre based on one or two shows they worked on or heard about. Things change and places improve and maybe that was just an exception. Most of it was about lack of professionalism. More with Actor's Theatre. But I think there are different expectations at CAST. They're more of a scrappy organization. They were on the edge struggling just to create a space for several years. And Actor's Theatre has been around longer. It's hard for me to present the other side because I am not actively involved in the productions. I think it's more an impression Michael gives sometimes of 'Can I get this from you? Can I borrow this actor from you?' But for me that's what has made him successful, too, that he's able to persuade people to donate their time and make connections.

DB: When you see a show, particularly at CAST, are you able to detect levels of professionalism in the rehearsal process or the level of professionalism among the company?

MP: I came here, when I was younger I worked in Washington, D.C. at Arena Stage as a House Manager and a script reader. And of course that's one of the top regional theatres in the country—it goes back to the 1950s, one of the first regional theatres. It set the Gold Standard. And they tended to hire actors from elsewhere, not even locally, and actors complained about that. I went from there to The Sword on 14th Street, which was a warehouse space. I forget the name of the guy who started it but he did with his father's help, and he got into trouble because he put on a play without the rights and the board kicked him off, and I'm not even sure it's still going because this was 20 years ago. It was on a street where you had prostitutes walking up and down, and they're providing a bussing service to help people because they're having trouble getting people to that part of town. So working on both of those ends early on right after graduate school, it gave me an appreciation of how hard it is to get a theatre started. I was at Arena when they were having fancy food for their big donors. And being in Washington a lot of powerful people come in there, even had Secret Service in there sometimes. So it was like two extremes. You know, prostitutes or secret service.

DB: How different are they?

MP: There were nights when the Secret Service was there and the audience would come up and ask “Who are those guys with the dark suits and sunglasses?” Well, they’re supposed to not be noticed.

DB: How long have you been in Charlotte?

MP: Twelve years.

DB: How have you seen CAST evolve, or devolve?

MP: I remember when they were doing things in “NoDa” at the Neighborhood Theatre. It’s a big barn so it’s kind of difficult to do theatre there. Then they moved out to Matthews and I didn’t see any of their work out there. But I saw a big jump in their growth when they were able to create their own space. And the space they are in now, I remember when it was just the one bigger space and a larger lobby. Then when they created that little space with the revolve, I thought, “They’re really getting inventive.” All along I was impressed by how they would re-do the lobby according to each show and make that part of the audience experience. And I even said that to my colleagues; even though they are working on a small budget, at least the scenic devices, which include the lobby, I’m impressed by. And then one of my colleagues today said that one of the best shows he’s ever seen in Charlotte (he’s been here about ten years) was American Buffalo at CAST. Most of the people in my department I would say agree that it’s kind of hit or miss there, like at Actor’s Theatre, so you don’t get consistency. And I often warn people if I’m taking them and they’ve never been to CAST that the acting can be hit or miss sometimes—I often cringe at the acting. But I’m always impressed by the effort they put into shows regarding the technical side. Now that’s not always successful either, but I’m impressed by any group that can actually make a theatre viable. Plus, they are able to have grown to have their own space with two small theatres in the space, to be able to redecorate the lobby with each show, which must take a lot of work, so you get a complete theatre experience from the moment you step in the door. And, that they have the bar in between and the actors come out after the show to shake hands with people and talk to people in the audience—that to me is a wonderful thing because going to theatre and just experiencing it like a movie where you come in, you sit down and you see it and then you leave, to me is much less than a live, full experience than when you are able to talk with other people in the audience about it at the bar, but also meet the actors and talk to them about your understanding of the play. And I would think for the actors it would be a wonderful experience too.

DB: Do you think that when the performance spills out into the lobby area before the show, like in *Metamorphoses* where the actors come out in character, do you feel that could potentially be off-putting?

MP: Absolutely, especially because it is such a small space. And when you have Bacchus coming out there and yelling loudly, drunkenly, it can be off-putting. Probably for a lot of people they want more of that safety zone between the seats

and the stage, especially if they're used to film more so than the theatre. And having the characters come out in the lobby—not just actors after the show but characters—could be more challenging for them. But I think that's a good thing.

DB: If I were to ask Michael I think he would say "Good. I'm glad it's uncomfortable."

MP: Just make sure they buy their tickets before they come in.

DB: What is experiential to you? How do you draw this line between experiential and experimental?

MP: I don't know that I have encountered "experiential" as a term of art or a theory that is defined, per se. But I've encountered environmental, as in Schechner's work, and to me that's a way of arguing for theatre to be more experiential and to break down the 4th wall convention. And arguing that it has a long history going back to the Middle Ages like in processional theatre or where the theater audience not only doesn't have the security of "This is our space, that's your space and it won't be invaded", but also not having the security of "Where do I sit?" or "Where is my space?" Schechner argued and experimented with that back in the 60s and 70s to uproot the audience from the comfort of their territory of safety. So I think theatre can be more experiential, as well as experimental when the audience is served from their expectations, when they're provoked into playing along because they don't have that security. Even in "general admission" people have that anxiety of where they are going to sit. I remember as a House Manager at Arena Stage and we had volunteer ushers, people would get upset if they were subscribers and they didn't get the same seat they always had. So some people have that level of "I paid for this spot and I want *that* view of the stage and leave me alone." But at Arena too they were sometimes experimenting with having characters go through the aisles. They had two different spaces, one in the round, so that was a different experience. There are degrees of experiential theatre at any level of audience interaction with the performance. And I think even with film and television, what theatre struggles against, is how much film can take you imaginatively into its space. So it's all just on a wall, or OMNIMAX where it's all around you, but you can get an experience of traveling through space, the camera movements and the cutting of jumping space and time—almost Godlike or some ghostly power. Television has this sense of power with the remote control. And with the internet and video games there is that sense of interactivity where you can play the character. So theatre often struggles against that today with the audiences having been seduced through these other media to expect something that's more *experiential*. And at the same time maybe being reserved when they are being asked physically to participate by moving around or interacting with the characters in the lobby. Theatre seems to be something people are seeking that is more complex and more challenging. It gives me a way to escape my own mortal concerns. It can also be a way to become more aware in a tragedy and catharsis sense, of the passions that are remnant instincts in the brain that can go very far awry. And hopefully I can be more aware, and the group around me, and I have a better way to mirror myself. I can use the theatre

mirror to better reflect on myself in a personal way. It can be a healing, therapeutic thing. It could be [on the other hand] an avoiding or re-confirming of stereotypes.

DB: So do you think theatre is going one of two ways? Traditional or experiential?

MP: I think theatre is separating into different types of experiences: the Broadway experience, the Broadway on tour. You pay a lot of money and expect something really spectacular and musically moving and amazing, and you don't expect to be uprooted from the seat. You don't expect to be asked to get up on stage. There are some Broadway shows that have sold tickets on the stage and some people go for that, but I think that for the very expensive ticket the people want a comfortable seat. And if they're not getting it at the theatre, they want it in the movie theatre or get it at home in their lounge chair. Some people are willing to vicariously participate—they don't want to be physically challenged to move around or interact or perform as part of the show.

DB: "Experiential", then, could be a request for responsibility from the audience.

MP: It's demanding. But then theatre, when it's difficult and there is a complex script, can also be demanding. I remember being in London a few years ago seeing Derek Jacobi performing a Schiller play, I think it was *Don Juan*, and I had to be in the balcony. My knees wouldn't fit in there and I was leaning over a railing and could see down on him. At intermission I saw some empty seats so I went down there and sat in the empty seat five rows from the stage. It was a completely different experience. I saw the spit coming out of his mouth. It was so much more intimate and powerful. And so just where you are sitting in the theatre can make it more experiential. So maybe what CAST is doing is trying to give the audience, or develop an audience, that want to participate at least through a more intimate experience in a small theatre with two rows in the round and another not much bigger, and one where they can have that interaction with the characters, but also have an interaction with the actors behind the mask. That, to me, makes CAST a more exciting place to go, especially when there's free pizza! And I'm personally willing to go there even when I suspect the acting might not be as good as I would like to see but the lobby space will surprise me and envelope me, and I will get to talk to the actors afterwards, and it'll be edgy—something in the choice of plays as well as in the way it's performed that is something I can't get somewhere else.

DB: And even when they do "standard fare", like *American Buffalo*, you think "What are they going to do here?"

MP: Their use of video has helped a lot, making it more of a mixed-media experience and interactive that way. But for me, it's the friendliness of the place. I'm sure that lots of people, if they go there regularly and are greeted at the door or the box office by Victoria or Michael or someone else you recognize, it feels almost like you are

being invited to their home. That's a really nice feeling. That they are somewhat professional—they work as hard as they can to be as much as possible—but at the same time it's personal. Going to a movie where the kid is selling the popcorn and selling you the tickets, had nothing to do with the show at all. It's like it's filled with people who have a passion for sharing something that's important to them.

DB: Even the bartenders there are part of the theatre. If they're not on that show they helped build the set or did something.

MP: And you might recognize someone from the last show is now behind the bar. So that makes it more experiential in a way. You feel like you're joining a group of people that are passionate about theatre and they invite you in and are very welcoming. I would think people—it might be off-putting to some—but I think people would feel more connected to shows there just with the intimate space and with these other opportunities for interaction than they would with some big show with some famous star in it and you're there with hundreds of other people. Even *Phantom of the Opera*, which I saw recently here (the touring version), they tried to make more of a connection with the audience by having the chandelier hang out over the audience and crash down. So I think even at that level, even big productions struggle with how to make it more interactive.

DB: Experimental theatre was so alive in the 60s and 70s. What happened to it? Do you think CAST can revive it?

MP: That's something I used to ask Herbert Blau. He was involved in my Ph.D. and was a famous director from the 60s. He got famous for doing the San Quentin production of *Waiting for Godot* that Martin Esslin wrote about. He ran a company in San Francisco and they actually workshopped it. He used to say, "People are nostalgic of the 60s, and it wasn't all that significant." People idealize it in retrospect. I am somewhat disappointed with current college students. With the series of wars we've had recently, students haven't been more militant about their feelings. But they didn't have a draft, so it's obviously different. But that sense of crisis in the 60s that came both from the Cold War and the Viet Nam War and the draft, and maybe because there were jobs available back then and they didn't have to focus so much on getting a career, or maybe they weren't in that mindset. I think a lot of the energy in the 60s came through campuses. It was greater in certain places than in others where the audiences were eager, like the Living Theater where this group became famous with this 'We're going to change the world by taking our clothes off and touching each other! Let's go!' I think the culture has changed a lot since the idealism of the 60s and 70s. [The idea] that art can change the world or that people can levitate the Pentagon. There was a lot of energy from the younger generation to reinvent theatre. Now it's much harder to get audiences to come and participate or mingle with the performance. It's something that's edgy. So what happened to experimental theatre? I think the politics changed and the newer media have changed people—I think they have dramatically changed people. I think the way our brains have developed is different. When kids are seeing themselves on

video from a young age and playing video games where they get involved by manipulating the avatars, they're becoming actors and performing characters. They're getting shot and killed and coming back to life. That's a level of experiential theatre that almost ruins people for experiential live theatre because it's more fantastic and more melodramatic—the good person and the evil, simplistic plots of characters. There also might be a hunger now where people have to have real people involved. And again, I was influenced by Herbert Blau who used to say that there is something about theatre where the actor is living and dying right in front of your eyes, that you are sharing a bit of your lifetime with them and we are all mortal, and the performance is set up to consider mortality and what life means, and you are breathing with them to some degree. You are sharing something. The discovery in the last ten or fifteen years of mirror neurons. There are neuroscientists who have found that, first in monkey brains and now in human brains, there are actually neurons that fire. We have about 100 billion of them in our brain. When a monkey picks up a peanut, the same neuron fires in the monkey's brain in picking it up as seeing somebody else pick it up. It was discovered by accident—they had the monkeys already hooked up and the researcher was saying, "Wait a minute, I'm picking something up but it's only supposed to light up when the monkey picks it up!" And they checked all the equipment. And now they've identified different types of mirror neurons throughout the brain. It's a whole new field. Something I recently read about, they discovered that human mirror neurons will fire for a pantomime gesture. If there's not an object there and I'm just gesturing to pick something up, the monkey neurons will fire. So there's a difference in our evolution from our primate relatives where we started to develop a pantomiming significance in how our brains are reacting and simulating this whole other. I understand something in another person because his facial expression and gestures and body movements evoke the same feeling as if I were doing it myself. That's how I interpret the other person's mind. It's called "Theory of Mind." Monkeys and apes have this to some degree but tests show they don't have a full theory of mind like humans do. So there's something distinctive about being humans where unconsciously, because ninety-per cent of what we think is unconscious, where Herbert Blau said we are living and dying in front of each other in live theatre. And we're unconsciously communicating to each other, or imagining ourselves doing what the actor is doing, or feeling what the actor is feeling. Even certain types of neurons called intuition neurons are connected to emotions. That can happen just sitting there with the fourth wall there. I'm watching you on stage and therefore part of my brain is firing as if I were doing the things you are doing and to some degree I am interpreting your character and your emotions by simulating that in myself as if I was doing it. That's what's tricky about experiential theatre is that in one sense theatre can be more experiential if the audience forgets themselves. You are sitting there and are completely comfortable and vicariously feel as if you are up there on stage. Herbert Blau used to talk about this too. If you have an actor in your lap or if they sweat on you, it makes you more aware of yourself. How much I might feel the experience of the character on stage within the play, it could be greater if I'm safely in my seat and less aware of being there as myself. I think it's a really tricky term.

DB: How does this correspond to people like Artaud and Brecht?

Well, I think it's different for Artaud and Brecht. The Living Theatre's production of *The Brig* where the performers are in a cage and they are banging things against the cage and stomping, or *Marat/Sade* where Peter Brook had the audience as if they were and the show with the mad people. Here you have a clear division between the wild crazy people on stage and their space and the people in the audience and their space. You have a kind of intimacy or connection because the audience is playing a role. To me the key issue is what role does the audience play. How is that set up by the play? By the space? By the scenery? By the spatial dynamics? It was Brechtian in the sense of trying to get the audience to think critically about social issues, it's Artaudian because at the same time you are distancing them, but also drawing them in with primal feeling of the actors suffering, of harsh sounds, and ritual experience. But with Brecht and Artaud you have got a different emphasis, and yet that can be combined in a paradoxical way—pushing them away to think critically, drawing them in to experience something physical and spiritual and therefore profoundly life-changing. It can backfire. It depends on the spectator and how they are willing to participate.

DB: Sounds like a tall order for a company like CAST.

MP: Well, you can't control anything completely. If you try to make it a more Artaudian experience by making it very primal, some people in the audience will be pushed away instead of drawn in. And maybe vice versa too. If you try to be Brechtian and make people think critically about *Mother Courage* or some character, they might choose –Brecht complained about this—to be more sympathetic to the character. So it's a kind of dialectic, I guess. You have people interacting, at least to the point of choosing how they are going to play along. I think that's where theatre continues to develop experientially.

DB: That's something I wish CAST would do sometimes. With *Master Class* I knew nothing about the play or Maria Callas. I was going in purposefully ignorant. I didn't realize until about halfway through that I was supposed to be watching a master class. Maybe I am just ignorant and didn't pick up on it. But to set up what my world is. Where am I? What is my responsibility here? How am I supposed to play along?

MP: I think there's always an implicit role the audience has but sometimes they are much less aware of it. If it's a fourth-wall play, where the characters are not aware there is an audience, there's always a sense of some "other" in the social context. Even if it's a very realistic, mundane sort of play. And the audience represents that, to some degree, because they are watching. So you have that one level even in realistic drama of the audience as representing the social other. And even implicitly that the other is always watching. And getting back to what happened to experimental theatre—I think more postmodern playwrights, as well as directors,

performers and designers, try to open up the play to the audience even if it's in a conventional theatre space. You have gaps in the play, open endings, and of course the audience becomes part of the collaboration. I think that emerged in the 60s and continues to develop even if we don't have as much "take your clothes off" theatre, or go on a demonstration or protest after a show. I really think, and maybe this is my own bias, one of the most interesting things about live theatre is how the audience always plays a role. It can be more explicit or less. It could even be unrecognized by people, or it can be "I'm challenging you to do something. Right now! I'll sit in your lap. What will you do? I'm casting you, even if you didn't expect it, in a role as audience member." Even when the audience feels safe and nobody is looking back at them from the stage they are playing a role. What might be interesting is to explore the playwriting in the plays chosen at CAST and how they construct their theatre spaces. Like with *Master Class* we were supposed to be observers in the master class. She sees us and she mentions that in the play and she even talks directly to certain people in the audience. So that makes us play along, to some degree. It makes us part of the fantasy, or part of the fiction, and part of the collaboration in completing the play.

Pizzato is studying psycho-analytic theory: how a play sets up and how spectators participate and have a certain role. The rest of the conversation veered into his studies and while interesting, are not relevant to this study.