Someone Who'll Watch Over Me: A Capstone Theatre Production

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Laura A. Pittenger

Thesis Advisor
Karen Kessler

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 3, 2012

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2012
Abstract

*Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* is a 1992 play by Irish writer Frank McGuinness. Three civilian hostages - an Englishman, an Irishman, and an American - are chained to a prison wall in Lebanon, imprisoned by an unseen Arab faction. With no hope of escape and no contact with the outside world, the three men struggle against despair and insanity, combating their demons with imagination, hope, and kinship. *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* reminds us that while as human beings we fight each other to the teeth, ultimately we need one another to survive, with hope as our strongest weapon. In February 2012, I produced and directed three performances of this play at Ball State University, and the production is the culmination of my four years of study as a stage director.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank Karen Kessler for her advice, guidance, and support through this process. My comfort zone is rapidly becoming a relic of the past, and for this she may, most gleefully, take much of the credit.

I thank Ben, Nathan, Bradford, and Shannon for committing to this process - heart, body and soul. This production could not have existed without them.

I thank Wendy Mortimer for guiding me with humor, honesty, and insight.

I thank the seventy-plus people who came to see our performances, for laughing, crying, and listening.

I would like to thank Charles Scofield, Heather Myers, and Ken Dingledine for their various support to get this project off the ground.

I would like to thank my mentors and family for their trust and support, and finally, thank God for guiding my steps, always.
Author’s Statement

Introduction

My journey to Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me began four years ago in Las Vegas. Two young men performed an abridged ten-minute duo of this play during the preliminary rounds of the National Forensics League high school competition. The scene was simple: two prisoners, stuck in the dregs of captivity, imagined themselves into a frenzy, releasing their minds into the realm of the fantastic, where they soared above the English countryside driving a flying car. The transformation was rapturous to witness, and I left the room with a strong memory of both the performance and the source material, which I eventually found three years later. I knew immediately after reading the entire play that it was a masterwork of theatre that needed to be shared.

Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me was written in 1992 by Irish writer Frank McGuinness. Three civilian hostages - an Englishman, an Irishman, and an American - are chained to a prison wall in Lebanon, imprisoned by an unseen Arab faction. With no hope of escape and no contact with the outside world, the three men struggle against despair and insanity, combating their demons with imagination, hope, and kinship. Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me reminds us that while as human beings we fight each other to the teeth, ultimately we need one another to survive, using hope as our strongest weapon. The play was nominated in 1993 for Tonys in the areas of Best Play and Best Actor for Stephen Rea, who won the 1993 Theatre World Award (IBDB.com). It is a challenging piece, reflective of the uneasy political landscape of the early 1990s, particularly in the Middle East and in Northern Ireland.
The play seems particularly relevant in 2012, a few months past the tenth anniversary of 9/11. My generation has grown up with lengthy and controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while also watching news reports about African nations fraught with genocide, dictatorships, and other human rights violations. Though we civilians may not confront these conflicts directly, we constantly hear about them secondhand or have family members or friends who have served in the military. We are affected by war one or two or three steps removed from its bloody realities. *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* is both about the direct consequences of war and the innocent people who suffer from it, the unwilling pawns of a large and dangerous game.

The audience for this play, my “capstone” (for Theatre Production degree, the final directed play), was, as I anticipated, mostly twenty-something students and a few adults. With this in mind from the beginning, I sought to not only show the effects of war from a new angle, but also to allow a generation, which hides behind social networking and electronics, to witness the beauty of genuine human connection and friendship. Through every step of the process, we strove for absolute honesty in our acting and directing choices, pushing ourselves to fight harder and discover deeper facets of these relationships, finding the “guts” of this challenging play. Over a year has passed since I began to piece together this production. “Puttin’ on a show” is much more complicated than it may appear to a typical audience-goer. The following is a narrative retelling of the process of pre-production, rehearsal, dress rehearsal, and performances of *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. 
The Process

Between my sophomore and junior years of college, I read many plays, searching for pieces that I could someday direct, not just as a college student, but as a professional. Part of the theatre production major - directing track, is to independently direct a production, known as the “capstone,” during the student’s senior year. Knowing that I would double the capstone as the honors thesis, as other directors have done before me, I tried to search for shows that both appealed to my individual artistry and carried a greater message of educational value. As I mentioned previously, Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me was merely a great memory, until I sought the title and script from the interlibrary loan program at Bracken.

Logistically, the play was ideal – three actors; a simple set, three chains binding the actors to a wall; and little to no complicated sound cues or lighting requirements. The play promised to be an intimate exploration of characters between three gifted actors and one director. I am drawn to such minimalistic plays with few actors or technical hurdles. Additionally, the play’s themes are extraordinary, and it is written with such precision that the dialogue rises to absurd, Samuel Beckett-like heights before it delivers blows of crushing reality. At this point, all other plays had fallen aside for me, and I knew that Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me had to be the one. I committed to this decision during the summer of 2011, and after consultation with my advisor, Karen Kessler, we chose the dates of February 4-5, 2012, for performances.

Of course, it is (nearly) impossible to direct a play without actors, and so my recruitment for these talented young men began in early fall 2011. I gave copies of the script to junior Bradford Reilly and senior Ben Summers, asking them to consider
playing the roles of Michael the Englishman and Edward the Irishman, respectively. Both actors were very pleased with the script itself and promised to consider taking on the roles, depending on the results of the university’s mainstage production calendar. I also gave one copy to an actor who eventually declined the offer for Adam, so I called several more friends and asked them if they would be interested, depending on other commitments. The final decision, however, could not be made by anyone until the cast lists for spring semester were posted, and I had to put this particular mission aside.

If a play has been published, anyone who wishes to produce that play must, by law, apply for the rights to do so. These rights can range anywhere from free to fees of nearly one thousand dollars, generally for musicals. The more well-known the play is, the more expensive it can be to produce. I officially applied to the Samuel French Publishing Co. for the rights to Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me in early October 2011. Each performance, I found, would cost me $75, and I planned to produce three. In order to raise the funds for this endeavor, I also applied for an ASPiRE Creative Grant of $300, which would help me cover the cost of the rights and any other expenses. Within two months of my application for the rights, on November 18, 2011, Samuel French replied that I now had permission to perform the piece at the expense of $225. The ASPiRE program also approved my request for funds, and I received a grant for the full $300. I was, naturally, ecstatic. I now had both the money and the legal permission to produce this piece, with time to spare.

The cast lists for the spring semester were posted in December 2011. My hope was that both Bradford and Ben would be cast in shows later in the semester, so that they would be free for rehearsals in January. Fortunately, both of them were cast in the
final show of the year. I confirmed with both actors that they could perform as Michael and Edward, and then I turned my attention to casting the role of Adam, the American. As I mentioned, one actor I had in mind for the part declined, while another chose to audition for another director's capstone, produced around the same time. Fortunately, Nathan Stark, a senior actor, contacted me to let me know that he was already a fan of the play and requested to be considered for Adam. I did not have to think long about this decision, and I enthusiastically accepted his offer. The roles of the three men were now cast, most fortunately by upperclassmen acting majors with many years of experience between them.

In addition to casting actors, I also had to "cast" a stage manager, someone to oversee the technical and logistical elements of rehearsal and production. My ideal stage manager would have to work the lights and sound for this production and assist with the setup/takedown of each performance. I contacted Shannon Golden, a sophomore stage manager I had worked with twice the previous semester. Though young and still relatively new to the department, Shannon had displayed an impressive command of timing when calling out lighting and sound cues, understanding the rhythm of the onstage action. She also understood and respected my particular artistic process, while keeping the cast on track and focused. Shannon agreed to stage manage Someone Who'll Watch Over Me, and with that, I had everyone I needed to begin (see Appendix A).

Our first read-through of the script occurred on December 15, 2011, just before winter break. At this rehearsal, the actors, stage manager, and I all met and read the script aloud, seated at a table. Normally, this is also when the cast and production team
meet each other and interact for the first time, but with the exception of Shannon, we all knew each other well enough that the “icebreaker” stage was unnecessary. The atmosphere felt familiar and relaxed. This rehearsal gave us the opportunity to explore initial questions we all had about the script and characters. I introduced the idea of walking a line between imagination and insanity, as well as breaking down the internal walls of each character, how these men constantly challenge one another in ways which are both aggressive and loving. I also provided them with my three ground rules for my process: 1) Ask questions. 2) Communicate. 3) What we do is subject to change – this is chaos. With that, we said goodbye for the break, preparing ourselves for an intensive four-week rehearsal period in January when we returned (see Appendix B).

During the break, I was far from idle. I created a glossary of roughly sixty terms from the play, so that some of the more obscure or outdated references would make sense to us. I have not included the actual text glossary in the Appendix section due to uncertain and untraceable citations in the research. The glossary was always intended to remain an internal document, not for publication. I can include, however, that I had to research the following terms, people, and locations: racing horse Dawn Run, Lebanon, Omagh and Strabane, Chinatown, Peterborough United, the Koran, “Hiberno-English,” Bloomfield vs. Chomsky, Virginia Wade, Immac, John McEnroe, the Old English poem “The Wanderer,” and the Irish Troubles. This is just a small sample of the colorful catalogue of references that my actors and I sifted through during this process. We learned the correct pronunciations of small British and Irish towns, and Ben and Bradford worked on their Irish and English accents particular to the regions of their characters. Both had prior training in accent work, but for specific questions, they
consulted Wendy Mortimer, a Ball State acting professor and dialect coach. As we continued to work, we discovered the meaning of these obscure references, but it was advantageous to have a guidebook for the early days.

The first blocking rehearsal occurred on January 10, 2012. We met for rehearsal Monday-Thursday, took Friday nights off, and rehearsed all day Saturday. We also met on two Sundays for badly-needed rehearsal time. During these rehearsals, we began with preliminary blocking, or placement on stage for specific moments and lines. I encouraged the actors to move naturally, rather than forcing them into movements which seemed awkward or forced. During this time, the actors memorized their lines as quickly as they could. Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me is a highly text-based script, and the last forty-five minutes of the play take place with only two actors onstage. Therefore, it is difficult to move forward with character development and blocking until the lines are familiar to the actors. This aspect of the process was challenging for me, because there was very little I could do to advance the memorization of others. I did allow plenty of time for the actors to run through their lines together before rehearsal officially began, and this was my primary solution to the situation.

Another situation that I spent many hours trying to resolve was that of the space reservation for the performances in AJ225, a lecture room in the Art & Journalism building. The room is large enough to accommodate a hundred people and includes a stage, projector, and speakers for the entire room. There is also wheelchair access up to the stage behind a white wall. The room is tastefully minimal and, because of all the white in the room, somewhat institutional and sterile. I chose the room for the performances because its institutional, simple feel reminded me of an asylum, and the
men in the play often waver between imagination and insanity. Unfortunately, because of prior student abuse to the room, it was difficult for me to reserve the space, but after talking to enough faculty and staff, I received approval to use the room for the weekend. We could not rehearse in it until the Wednesday and Friday before the performances, but the transition was fairly simple for us to make because of our minimal set.

All that is required of the set is that the three men are shackled to a wall, unable to escape. Drilling holes or chains into the real wall was simply not an option, so the solution was to attach the chains to an object on the floor. The set consisted of three hollowed concrete blocks, which held down the heavy chains attached to shackles. Each actor had a shackle around his wrist, greatly restricting his motion. The chains were strong enough to withstand snapping or breaking, but the actors could all slide the concrete blocks down the floor with a light tugging. The weight of the concrete blocks alone did not hold them down. Eventually we figured out that the only thing that would keep the frictionless blocks from sliding was strong Velcro strips, attached directly to the floor. After that, the concrete blocks were virtually immovable without immense effort.

One major adjustment to the chain setup occurred when we invited Wendy Mortimer to rehearsal, about two weeks into the rehearsal process. Wendy had previously directed Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me when she was an undergraduate, and her experience was invaluable. Wendy watched Act One and then offered me her feedback. One suggestion she had was to shorten the length of the chains, which would make it impossible for the actors to touch each other. This made the dialogue even more important, because words were now the only weapons the characters had. They also could no longer comfort each other in times of need. Physical touch was sorely
missed by all three men, and the only touch now occurred at the end of the play, when
the character of Edward is released by his kidnappers and sent home.

Wendy also challenged the actors and me to “raise the stakes,” meaning to
heighten the dramatic tension and danger tenfold. Quickly, the arguments between the
characters became nastier, blunter, more aggressive. Their emotional highs and lows
were drastically different, and I could feel them beginning to connect to each other.
However, the stakes still needed to be higher, as my directing advisor Karen Kessler
advised me, about three weeks into the process. Karen also urged me to clarify aspects
of the world of the play that seemed muddled. For instance, the door where the Arab
kidnappers sat behind should carry a sense of danger for the actors. When the
prisoners make too much noise, there should be some sort of look or indication by the
actors toward the door, in case the kidnappers might enter to punish the prisoners. We
implemented such suggestions, and the result was a much more frightening and
aggressive world for the prisoners. It certainly was not comfortable to watch.

Meanwhile, outside of rehearsals, I began to advertise the production. Based on
four years of attending other directors’ capstones, I observed that the audiences for
these productions were mainly friends and family of the director and actors, interested
theatre majors, and theatre faculty members. All marketing was, therefore, generally
directed toward attracting this crowd. I designed my own poster (Appendix C), which
featured the names of the actors, well-known in the theatre department and to BSU
theatre fans, as well as ticket information ($1 admission). These posters were primarily
hung in the Arts & Communications building, the Art & Journalism building, and one or
two posters in Burkhardt, North Quad, and Ball Gym. I also created a Facebook event
page to share information on the production and invite anyone to attend. The viral nature of social media proved to be a great asset. I reminded classmates and students for whom I TA to attend, and I reserved seats for those who requested certain evenings. I tried to ensure that I would have enough people at each performance to justify having a performance at that particular time. I was also thankful that my cast trusted our work enough to invite their families to come to the performances – it indicated to me that all of us were proud of the work we were doing and wanted to share it with our loved ones.

Four weeks is a short rehearsal period, and this process was a whirlwind. Our dress rehearsals with full costume (shorts and t-shirts), music, and lighting took place on February 1 and 3. Karen came to watch one dress rehearsal and offered me further guidance – when putting together the final details of a performance it is easy to neglect the basics, and she did not allow me to forget them. She reminded the actors to listen to each other, to keep pushing the action forward instead of wallowing in their feelings. Peter Zapp, the associate chair of the theatre department, also sat in on a dress rehearsal and offered words of encouragement. The amount of faculty support I received in producing the play was tremendously helpful.

It was at the dress rehearsals that we integrated the simple lights up, lights down transitions between scenes, and more importantly, the music (Appendix D). As one might imagine, the song “Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me” sung by Ella Fitzgerald is prominently featured in the show, and many of my music choices complemented this classic American jazz standard. I also chose songs with a distinctively Irish flavor, as well as British wartime tunes, all of which represented the different tastes of the three men: English, Irish, and American. The songs were also slow tempo and often in a
minor key, to set the delicate and somber mood of the performance. For the curtain call song, I chose something upbeat and in a major key, "If I Ever Leave This World Alive" by Flogging Molly. Its lyrics convey a message of hope and wistful memory, certainly the state in which Michael is left at the end of the play, still in captivity but with his friendships to sustain him. Choosing music for performances is one of my favorite parts of directing, because it helps me to communicate the emotional state of a piece.

Finally, it was February 4th. Our first two performances were at 2:30 and 7:30pm. We had a small audience for the first performance, roughly 15 people, but they were a generous and attentive audience. My fondest memory of the first performance is seeing tears in the eyes of Ben’s father as he watched his son onstage. Two of my best friends, also men, were similarly moved by the themes of friendship, brotherhood, and hope in the play. It was thrilling to see people affected by the work we were doing, and I felt more relaxed as a director than I ever had before, confident that what I had worked to achieve onstage was effective. The 7:30 performance was much better attended, with at least 30 people, and they were similarly generous. The associate dean of the Fine Arts College deemed it a “moving night of theatre,” and through Facebook, I saw people who had attended the show advertising it to the Sunday crowd. I recorded the Feb. 5, Sunday, performance at 2:30pm, which attracted perhaps 30 more people. Since I took no archival photos of the show, this remains my only record of the performance. I am glad to have the recording, but nothing will ever quite capture the live event that was this production of Someone Who'll Watch Over Me. I am so proud of the work my team did, and this experience will likely be on my list of favorite directing experiences for years to come.
Works Cited & Consulted*


*See Appendix D for music citations.
Appendix A:
Text of Original Program for Someone Who'll Watch Over Me

Page 1:

Someone Who'll Watch Over Me
by Frank McGuinness

directed by Laura Pittenger

Adam Nathan Stark
Edward Ben Summers
Michael Bradford Reilly

stage manager: Shannon Golden

February 4, 2012 2:30 & 7:30PM
February 5, 2012, 2:30PM

Setting: A cell, Lebanon
Time: 1992

There will be one ten-minute intermission.

A Senior Honors Thesis & Capstone
by Laura Pittenger
Faculty Advisors: Karen Kessler & John Emert
Funded in part by ASPIRE Creative Grants

Produced by special arrangement with Samuel French Inc.
"Hostage is a crucifying aloneness. It is a silent, screaming slide into the bowels of ultimate despair. Hostage is a man hanging by his fingernails over the edge of chaos, feeling his fingers slowly straightening. Hostage is the humiliating stripping away of every sense and fibre of body and mind and spirit that make us what we are. Hostage is a mutant creation filled with fear, self-loathing, guilt and death-wishing. But he is a man, a rare, unique and beautiful creation of which these things are no part."

– Brian Keenan

For most of us, war is a distant phenomenon, easily forgotten in our comfortable lives. But while we might never see battle, the effects of war are widespread and damaging. Innocents are pulled into the struggle, infected by the chaos of complex political squabbles. Global alliances have shifted since this play’s original production in 1992, twenty years ago, but the political climate of divisiveness, prejudice, and fear is right where we left it.

The U.S.-led Gulf War in the Middle East ended in 1991, setting the stage for the 2003 Iraq War. The Lebanon hostage crisis (‘82-’92) resulted in 96 kidnappings and 8 casualties, mostly of Americans and West Europeans. Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, many citizens protested violently against British rule, demanding the freedom to rejoin the independent Ireland.

These are just miniscule threads of the intricate web of international politics threatening to rob these three men of their freedom, sanity, and human dignity. How can they fight to survive and find hope in the darkness of their world?

Special Thanks
Cameron Berne, Mike Daehn, Ken Dingledine, John Emert, Karen Kessler, Wendy Mortimer, Heather Myers, Charles Scofield, Justin Swader, Melissa Tinsley
I’ve been blessed with some terrific mentors at Ball State, and without their tireless guidance I could never have made it this far. Thank you. Pax tecum.

## SOMEONE WHO'LL WATCH OVER ME

### Rehearsal Schedule

January 2012

*SUBJECT TO CHANGE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUNDAY</th>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
<th>THURSDAY</th>
<th>FRIDAY</th>
<th>SATURDAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>2.</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>4.</td>
<td>5.</td>
<td>6.</td>
<td>7.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>16.</td>
<td>17.</td>
<td>18.</td>
<td>19.</td>
<td>20.</td>
<td>21.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>23.</td>
<td>24.</td>
<td>25.</td>
<td>26.</td>
<td>27.</td>
<td>28.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>30.</td>
<td>31.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **9.** 7:00 pm Read Through/ Pre-production Meeting
- **10.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Block Scenes 1 - 2
- **11.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Block Scene 3 - 4
- **12.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Block Scene 5
- **13.** Rehearsal 12 - 5 pm Block Scenes 6 - 7
- **14.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Scene Work/ Moment to Moment Scenes 1 - 4
- **15.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through / Review of Blocking Whole Show
- **16.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Scene Work/ Moment to Moment Scenes 5 - 6
- **17.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Scene Work/ Moment to Moment Scenes 1 - 4
- **18.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
- **19.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
- **20.** Rehearsal 12 - 5 pm Scene Work/ Moment to Moment Scene 7 - 9
- **21.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Scene Work/ Moment to Moment Scene 7 - 9
- **22.** Rehearsal 1:00 - 2:15 - Nathan 2:20 - 3:35 - Ben 3:40 - 4:55 Bradford
- **23.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
- **24.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
- **25.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
- **26.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
- **27.** TBA
- **28.** Technical Rehearsal 12 - 4 pm
- **29.** Technical Rehearsal/ Scene Work 11 am - 8 pm
- **30.** TBA
- **31.** Rehearsal 7:15 - 11 pm Run Through
## February 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUNDAY</th>
<th>MONDAY</th>
<th>TUESDAY</th>
<th>WEDNESDAY</th>
<th>THURSDAY</th>
<th>FRIDAY</th>
<th>SATURDAY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1. Dress Rehearsal 7:00 – Call time 7:30 – Start of Run</td>
<td>2. Dress Rehearsal 7:00 – Call time 7:30 – Start of Run</td>
<td>3. Final Dress Rehearsal 7:00 – Call time 7:30 – Start of Run</td>
<td>4. Performance #1 2:30 pm Performance #2 7:30 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Performance #3 2:30 pm</td>
<td>6.</td>
<td>7.</td>
<td>8.</td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>10.</td>
<td>11.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>27.</td>
<td>28.</td>
<td>29.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C:
Promotional Poster (Rendered to Grayscale)

Someone Who’ll Watch Over Me
a play by Frank McGuinness

February 4 @ 2:30pm & 7:30pm
February 5 @ 2:30pm
directed by Laura Pittenger
featuring Bradford Reilly
Ben Summers
Nathan Stark

Performances in AJ225
Tickets $1 in advance/at door
Reserve by email: LAPittenger@bsu.edu
Mature audiences only
Produced by special arrangement with Samuel French Inc.

Original printed on 11x17 poster paper, with blue backdrop, yellow moon, and brown sand. Text in white. I designed the poster to communicate the desolation and loneliness of the Lebanese prison in the middle of the desert, as well as a certain magic with the blue sky and prominent moon. The cutout nature of the text and sand illustrates the manner in which the prisoners have had to use their own creativity to construct a bearable reality. The poster’s design is minimal, just like the production itself.
Appendix D:
Musical Track Listing for Production


Star Galaxy Orchestra. 2010. MP3.