Inquiry on Production and Performance: *Collected Stories* by Donald Margulies

An Honors Thesis (HONOR 499)

by

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Abstract
As an actor about to enter the professional world, it is important for me to understand all of the workings of a theatrical production. It is imperative for an artist to tell a story through his or her work that is applicable and relevant to their target audience. Therefore, I produced and acted in a full length, two-person play, *Collected Stories* by Donald Margulies. The story focuses on the relationship between a student and a professor in a college campus setting. As it unfolds, the themes of loyalty, ethics and friendship are dissected and the characters values are brought into question. With the assistance of a small, talented group of people, I am delighted to have brought this brilliant script to life.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Karen Kessler, Kelsey Kramer, Hannah Hoopingarner, Joel Kirk and many others for their hard work and support on this project. A lengthier mention of contributors can be found within the program on page 7.
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Author's Statement

All artists strive to tell stories that will change the lives of those who experience their work. Theatre artists create a world in which the characters live and breathe, bringing their stories to life. Filling the roles of producer, actor, and storyteller in the production of Collected Stories by Donald Margulies, was a daunting task, but one of the most fulfilling projects I have worked on to date.

As a musical theatre major, producing a play was much more demanding than I had anticipated. However, I use the term producer lightly. The producer of a play is responsible for acquiring the necessary funds for the play to take place. In the professional world, this implies the producer will be paying a ton of money for the show to take place, sometimes millions of dollars if it is a large budget musical on Broadway, in the hope that they will earn the money back with profit through ticket sales. In that sense, I was not a “producer” per se, as all of the money for the project did not come out of my pocket and it was not my intent to earn a profit as a result of producing this artistic work. However, I am pleased to report that I did obtain all the money necessary by applying for sponsorship and partnering with multiple student organizations on the Ball State University campus. In colligate theatre, it is usually the director who is responsible for a student run performance, so in a college program the line of director would also imply some of the producing tasks, without implying that they paid for the production themselves. In this case, I was the one filling the role of the producer, but I did not want to take claim of providing all funds. Therefore, in the program and on the poster, I listed “an honors thesis by Allyssa O’Donnell”. This allowed me to take credit for making the production possible and performing the logistical duties of a producer, while not taking undo credit for being the sole financial backer. However, for the simplicity of this paper, I will continue to refer to myself as the producer, with that distinction being made clear.

In my role as producer, my additional responsibilities were to acquire the performance rights and assemble the team. The performance rights were easier to obtain than I had expected. A simple web form and an online payment later, I had the performance agreement from the publisher.
Assembling the team was a much more difficult task than I initially guessed. Though many theatre majors are usually chomping at the bit for a project to work on, the heavy demands of the departmental performances and numerous other student projects made assembling the final team a definite challenge. That being said, the group ended up being a wonderful team and a great group of collaborators.

Within my capacity as producer, I also had many logistical duties including space requisition, acquiring scripts, overseeing the creation of the posters, designing the programs, and making sure all the props and costumes were found, purchased and organized for the show. These tasks were not unmanageable, but they did take more time and effort than I expected. On the shows I have worked on in the past, the producers have worked behind the scenes, accomplishing these tasks without the actors realizing the countless hours and effort spent on them. This process gave me a new appreciation for all of the team members who work on any given production. Producers do as much work outside of the rehearsal room as the actors do within it.

The role of acting the part of Lisa in this play was also an initially intimidating, but ultimately fulfilling process. As a musical theatre major, acting is a part of my curriculum every semester. It is my specialty, and where I feel most comfortable. However, this particular play was challenging in many regards. My work began much before the rehearsal process started; I needed an idea of who Lisa was before I could begin to work with another actor or a director. Granted, I knew my thoughts on her would change, mold and shape as I went through the rehearsal process, but I entered the process with some solid ideas on whom she is as a person and why she does and says what Margulies wrote on the page. For me, I dove in with research. This play is set in the 1990’s, and though I had already been born, I was unfamiliar with many of the pop culture references that Lisa and Ruth discuss within the play. It was very important that I do my research on those events, because if they were mentioned in the play, they always had a very poignant application to the characters. I did not know anything about the Woody Allen and Mia Farrow
scandal, for example, and it was a very important discussion surrounding the scandal that led to
important insights about my character, her view of family and the world around her. There were
also many other references to literary figures, as Lisa is a writer. From subtle references such as
calling something "Joycean" to actually including Delmore Schwartz as offstage character, a huge
player in the story of Ruth’s life and Ruth’s past. Margulies set the play in a specific time period, and
he committed to it. These two women live and breathe in New York City in the 1990s, and speak
with all of the cultural contexts and life that go along with being in that location. Margulies took two
fictional women, and set them in the middle of a very real and very active world. This both helped
and lengthened my research process. The world was so rich and so much was given to me, so I had
a wonderful springboard to begin digging into the character. At the same time there was a lot of
information to keep straight and to continue to dig into to find the significance for the story I
wanted to tell. On my first few readings of the play, one thing that kept grabbing my attention was
Lisa’s incredible intelligence. That also kept me in the dictionary, because her vocabulary was
extensive. It was one of the primary pulls that drew me do select this piece in the first place. Lisa is
a strong, successful intelligent woman, but she also has insecurities, baggage, and drama that she
brings into her work. This initial draw fueled me into the next step of the process.

Once I finished the initial research and understood all of the aspects of the play, I began
with text analysis. Though the process is sometimes tedious, it is important to pick the play apart.
The decision to act is as important for the actor to take note of as the action itself. I began by
reading the play and highlighting, in different colors, everything I said about myself, everything that
others said about me, and the rules and world of the play. This was very informative for many
reasons. It gave me the first concrete visual of my character’s arc. Where Lisa was self-deprecating
and very hard on herself at the beginning, she was very strong and stood her ground at the end of
the play. It was very helpful to see how this shifted through the play. It was also very helpful to take
note of the way Ruth changed the way she would talk about and address Lisa as their relationship
developed and as time passed. In the beginning, it was very clear that Ruth looked down on Lisa and imagined herself superior, but through the course of time it becomes evident that the relationship shifts into a very different, personal friendship and support system. This journey was very important for me to note before I even entered the rehearsal room. All my research and text analysis gave me the skeleton of the play. When I entered the rehearsal process, I was prepared to continue digging, but in a more physical and in the moment way, rather than the intellectual side that I had already fleshed out.

The rehearsal process is designed to be an open space to try different things and to flesh out the relationships between the characters. My motivation every day in rehearsal was to continue to ask myself questions, as well as asking the director and my fellow actor. Those questions kept me moving forward, and were my method to avoid reaching a plateau within the confines of the development stages. We had a four week production plan from start to finish, including technical rehearsals, and so it was very important to take advantage of what rehearsal time we had. The questions I would ask myself to give direction to my character development were extremely varied. One day, it would be physical. I would think about the frustrated, jolting, and bubbling energy happening inside Lisa’s body when she felt lost and didn’t know what way to go. In another rehearsal, I still kept that energy underneath, but sat still and didn’t move. The weight of that burden was enough to keep her still and at a loss. I went with the second choice, but it was so much more powerful and poignant because I had experienced the first one and could keep all that underneath the stillness. Luckily for me, I had a very collaborative team to work with. Blocking was not so rigid that we could not explore other options for our characters. I asked myself questions about physical movement, but I also questioned myself about thoughts I had about the play, and what direction I should go. I played a lot with the balance of strength verses insecurity. Lisa begins the play in a stage of self-doubt. She knows she is talented, but is waiting for someone else to give her that affirmation. As the story progresses, she almost becomes the opposite, ruthless to the
thoughts and feelings of others in order to experience success in her field. I had to fully understand
the source of Lisa’s strength, when she had an internal locus of control and when she had an
external one. The subtle shifts of her confidence, insecurity, strength and eventual pride were
extremely important to keep track of as an actor. I had to understand the world of experience
underneath her thoughts in order to fully embody her actions.

Another very important investigation into Lisa, as well as the message and themes of the
play, was the idea of storytelling. Lisa begins the play only able to communicate her experiences to
others through her chosen art form, writing. Eventually she is able to write a novel about the life
and experiences of her beloved mentor, Ruth. This was a very important insight for me into the
depth of the relationship between these two women. Lisa feels that she understands Ruth’s
experience as well as she understands her own life, if not better, because she is able to transform
Ruth’s story into a novel. Previously, she could only transform her own life into short stories. This
shows an understanding and a great empathy for Ruth that could only come out of a deep relational
bond. At the beginning of the play, Lisa is a huge fan of Ruth and is completely awestruck in Ruth’s
presence. By the end of the first act, Ruth is Lisa’s trusted mentor, and by the beginning of the
second act, Ruth is Lisa’s dear friend. How does such an unlikely friendship cultivate over the span
of six years? I had to face that task, that depth of relationship in the span of two hours. Finding the
comfort between the two women and the importance to each other was built in the rehearsal room.
As Kelsey and I worked together, we strengthened the friendship that we enjoy outside of the
process, and that was a wonderful beginning to the relationship we created. We did have the
obstacle of the mentor/mentee relationship because we are peers, but that didn’t seem to cause
much of a problem throughout the development and culmination of this work in the room. We
spent the four weeks getting to know each other not only as ourselves, but as our characters. That
building time gave us the understanding and the total trust in each other we needed to tackle the
giant undertaking of this play.
A two person play is very demanding on the two actors. The sheer number of lines and the lack of breaks make it a challenging task. But the wonderful part of the experience is the complete and total trust within the partnership. To rely completely on another person and to relate to them in such a personal way is a situation that most actors crave. Yet, the stamina required to remain invested in the character, present, and engaged for an hour and a half was something I needed to work up to. This production has helped me solidify my process as an actor, and has also helped me grow tremendously on a professional level.

This project not only helped me to expand my skills as a producer and an actor, but also as a theatre artist. In selecting a show, I wanted to make sure I was choosing a show that is applicable to the target audience: Ball State University. I chose a play about the student-faculty relationship, because it is so important on the university level. This play tackles questions about integrity, art, academia, success, recognition, and ruthlessness, all within a mentor-mentee relationship. As I prepare to face the real world, I look back on all the important contacts and relationships I have formed with faculty members at Ball State University, and I hope to carry on those relationships into the next chapter of my life. There comes a point when faculty members stop being teachers, and they become friends, peers and confidants. This relationship was a joy for me to explore in the context of the play, especially since it applies so much to my target audience. This play was important for the Ball State University population to experience, and I am so honored that I was able to share this story with the campus community.
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Patrice & Bill O'Donnell
Rebecca Hoopingarner
Marcki Johnson

Busted Space and
Ball State University Student Government Association
present

Collected
Stories
A play by Donald Margulies

Directed by Hannah Hoopingarner
An Honors Thesis by Allyssa O'Donnell

North Quad Room 160
April 6 and 7 at 7:30pm

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Cast

Ruth | Kelsey Kramer
Lisa | Allyssa O'Donnell

Production Staff

Director | Hannah Hoopingarner
Assistant Director | Joel Kirk
Stage Manager | Joel Kirk
Lighting | Kevin Lauerman
Run Crew | David Rolando

Poster Photography | Tyler Sarkis
Poster Design | Bridget Funk

Thesis Advisor | Karen Kessler
Busted Space Advisor | Tyler Smith

A Note About This Production

As Lisa says, a good writer “captures the essence of relationships.” In his play Collected Stories, Donald Margulies does just that. Whether we are theatre artists, writers, or painters, all artists tell stories. As we tell these stories we cultivate relationships, both personal and professional, that will inevitably change and deepen the stories we tell. At what point is telling the story at odds with maintaining the relationship? Should we open ourselves to relationships in the first place?

Those of us in the university setting understand the complex relationship between professor and student. There is a fine line between the professional and the personal, and figuring out those boundaries can be a complicated matter. As we approach graduation, suddenly we are colleagues and artists ourselves, thrown into a world where our opinions matter and where we are expected to be independent and find our path without the help of others. Though this may seem intimidating, there is incredible freedom to experience new things, which will allow us to express ourselves creatively in new ways. I am so happy to share my culminating project of my college career with all of you. Thank you for all the love and support.

Allyssa O'Donnell

Scenes

Act 1

Scene 1: September 1990.
Scene 2: May 1991. Eight months later.

Act 2

Scene 1: December 1994. Nearly two and a half years later.
Scene 2: October 1996. Almost two years later.
Scene 3: Later that night.

There will be one 10 minute intermission.
Busted Space Theatre Company & SGA
Present

Collected Stories
By Donald Margulies

Saturday April 6
Sunday April 7
7:30 PM
North Quad, Room 160
Free Admission

Directed by Hannah Hoopingarner
An Honors Thesis by Allyssa O’Donnell