I'm Gonna be a Producer!

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

The title of my thesis stems from a line in the hit musical *The Producers*. While this musical depicts the lives of Broadway producers in a glamorous and comedic way, I wanted to find out what exactly a producer does. As a theatre major, I have been fortunate to learn about many aspects of theatre. However, producing was something that I found interesting, but still did not know much about as I began approaching the end of my college career. As a stage manager, I find it important to know about all aspects of theatre so I can communicate with people in varying positions easily. It was this desire that led me on this journey to produce a performance. In the simplest terms, a producer chooses a script that they want to produce, they find a director, they collect money from investors, they find a location, they help cast the show, and they supervise the production to make sure that things are progressing the way that they should be (Conte and Langley 11). The men in *The Producers* follow all of these steps, and with a couple minor alterations, so did I. This process led to the production of *An Afternoon of -isms*, which was performed on April 19, 2014.
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Author’s Statement

Section 1- Why Producing?

Although I am focusing on stage management, I believe that it is important for theatre artists of every area to have a working understanding of all aspects of theatre since it is such a collaborative process. By having an understanding of what other people do, we not only know what exactly it is that they do for us, but we can also help them in their process. It is especially important for me as a stage manager because stage managers are the “middlemen” of the theatre world; all information passes through the stage manager and is then distributed to the rest of the team. Ball State’s Department of Theatre and Dance is great about offering a diverse curriculum to give its students experience in a large range of theatrical duties, but producing is unfortunately not one of them. Faculty members handle the financial and selective processes of our department, which assures the highest quality of our season and budget handling. Therefore, in order to learn about the art of producing in a first-hand way, I needed do it myself.

In addition to gaining this additional experience in an untouched area of theatre, I also wanted to gain leadership skills through this process. As a stage manager, I will often be in charge of people that are my peers, and in some circumstances, my elders. Producers are most often the “top dog,” and so this process put me in a position of authority I had never been before. In all shows at Ball State, while I have been a leading member, there have always been faculty members that are ultimately higher up on the leadership ladder. In this process, I was in a leadership position that I had never held before, which helped my confidence as a leader.
Section 2- Choosing the Plays

When I first thought about this project, it was overwhelming to think about what play to do. There are thousands and thousands of plays, and I did not know where to begin. However, I knew that I wanted to do a one-act play, and that helped me narrow my search enough to begin looking. I first started thinking about all of the one-act plays I knew. Most of the one-acts that I had seen were performed at Ball State within the past few years, so I did not want to produce one of those since they had just been produced. I started to think about what one-acts I had read but that I had not seen. I had done a project on *Trifles* for a class, and I really enjoyed the play. I also felt like it was a play that many people read but one that rarely gets produced. After I had made up my mind on *Trifles*, I knew I needed to choose at least one other short play, as *Trifles* was too short to do on its own. While I was going through the process of choosing plays, I was taking a modern theatre history course and was in the process of learning about different theatrical -isms. This was a topic that I was really interested in, so I decided to explore it further and see if there were any other short plays from different -isms that I could produce. I thought that three plays would both provide an appropriate performance time and accurately show the differences between -isms. After doing research, I decided on *Murderer, the Hope of Women* to represent Expressionism, and *The Gas-Burning Heart* to represent Dadaism. I thought that both of these plays represented their -ism very well, and I wanted to see what they would turn into onstage. All three plays were short plays to begin with, so I did not have to do any cutting and tamper with the stories at all. While I did not originally plan it this way, it was also a nice added bonus that each of these plays was in the public domain, so it did not cost me anything to get the rights to perform them.
Section 3- Assembling an Artistic Team

A few different factors went into choosing the artistic team of directors. Scheduling was one of these factors; many people were still working on shows for the Department of Theatre and Dance, and so they were not eligible to work on this project. I also wanted to find three different directors so it would allow them to use their time most effectively. I also thought that it would make the different -isms more distinct if a different director did each play. I chose directors that I knew and whose work I was familiar with. I also picked what play I thought each director would be best for and would enjoy doing. I asked Emily Kipp to direct Trifles, Brent Eickhoff to direct Murderer, the Hope of Women, and Luke McLaughlin to direct The Gas-Burning Heart. Each director agreed and became excited about the project, and we were ready to move forward.

Section 4- Choosing Spaces

I next had to acquire spaces for the rehearsals and performances. The Department of Theatre and Dance uses a room reservation system for all of its spaces that are available for students to use, so I used the system to see what spaces were available. I decided to use room AC 314 for most of our rehearsals, as it is a flexible and adaptable space. I then decided to have our last rehearsals and performances in Carmichael Hall room 202. This space is used for many theatre events and classes, and I knew that it had all of the resources that we would need for the project. I reserved these rooms for our rehearsals and performance, and I let the directors know which space the pieces would be in so they could keep the space in mind as they began blocking.
Section 5 - Casting

I knew going into the process that I wanted to have a company of actors to perform in all three pieces. Each piece needed at least five characters, and trying to find fifteen or sixteen people to perform would have been extremely difficult. I also thought that having the same actors in each piece would help show the differences in each play and -ism since the audience could see the different ways that the same actors portrayed each character that they had. Since many people were still involved with shows within the Department of Theatre and Dance, and since many people were also doing extra projects, I thought that it would be best to ask actors to do the project instead of holding auditions. I thought that by asking, the actors would be more inclined to want to do the project. I also knew that I would be able to work with the people that I really wanted to work with by asking individually. I collaborated with Karen for some ideas on who to ask, and then collaborated with the directors on who they recommended as well.

Eventually, I asked several people to work on the project. Some of the actors already had other obligations, while others agreed at first and later realized that they had too much work to take on another project. However, we eventually found five actors that were all talented and great to work with. Since The Gas-Burning Heart needed six actors, we all decided that since I would be there and knew the play, I would play the role of Mr. Eyebrow. As it turned out, this was very fitting; Tristan Tzara, the playwright and producer of the original production, also played Mr. Eyebrow (Tzara, The Gas-Burning Heart 2). Everyone became excited about the project and there was a very good working environment between the actors, directors, and myself.
Section 6- Creating a Schedule

Once the entire team was assembled, we arranged a meeting to go over scheduling and find the times that worked with everyone. Since the actors were to read from scripts and each play was fairly short, our rehearsal process was able to be much shorter than the typical rehearsal processes in the Department of Theatre and Dance. We collaborated on how many rehearsals we would need, what would be accomplished in each rehearsal, and when the rehearsals would take place. Everybody discussed their individual conflicts, and we developed the schedule that would work best for everyone. After this was decided, I created a document of the schedule and sent it out to everyone.

Section 7- Acquiring Artistic Elements

Another duty that I took on as the producer of this project was acquiring the artistic elements that we needed, such as props and sound effects. First, I spoke to the directors and asked them what they needed in their productions. We then assembled a list and I began to look for the items that were needed. The space that we would be using already contained the black blocks used for two of the pieces, and it also contained a table and chairs. For the rest of the props that were needed, I looked in my own home for things that could be used. The towels, clothes, lamp, and some other props came directly from my apartment. After that, I consulted my parents to see if there were things that they had that they would be willing to let us use. They were gracious enough to lend me the things that they had, including the sewing basket, apron, and fabric. For the remainder of the props that we needed, I contacted John Sadler, who is in charge of the props in the Department of Theatre and Dance. He took me through the prop storage area and we
were able to find the remainder of the things that we needed, including the rocking chair, birdcage, and box. After using these three resources, I had found all of the props I needed and did not need to spend any money buying them. with the exception of the jar of preserves.

The directors all decided that they wanted the actors to wear acting blacks, which all of the actors had. For *The Gas-Burning Heart*, Luke wanted the actors to all wear a small piece of color, but all of the actors had these things as well so we did not need to buy any costume pieces. We also found the sound effect from a free sound website. I had originally planned to ask for donations or to fundraise for this production, but it worked in such a way that I had to spend very little money in order to produce the project.

**Section 8- Overseeing the Rehearsals**

Since I was stage-managing the plays, I was always in the rehearsal room and was able to see what the process was like all the way through. Normally, a producer would not be at every rehearsal, but would occasionally check in and make sure that things are running smoothly. Because of this, I tried to separate my duties and only step in as the producer role when I needed to maintain the integrity of the production. This was normally not a major discussion, and usually consisted of me reminding others in the room of the tenants of each -ism so they could keep up the things we were trying to express. An example of this occurred when we were rehearsing *Trifles*; one of the actors began to act their role farcically. I had to remind the actor that one of the tenants of Realism is for the actors to portray the characters like real people. It was a short conversation, but it solved the problem and kept up the integrity of the piece.
Section 9- Presentations

I wrote the following presentations to introduce each -ism to the audience so they could follow along and have a better understanding of how each piece came to be.

Realism first started in France in the mid-19th century. It first came about in literature, but gradually made its way into other art forms, including theatre. Realism's main goal was to give a more accurate portrayal of life than the melodramatic and artificial theatre that was popular at the time. Because it was such a radical change, Realism was unpopular with critics for quite a while, but it eventually caught on and became a dominant form of theatre for over thirty years. Some of the main tenants of Realism include middle-class, domestic, complex characters, dialogue and acting that reflects everyday life, realistic settings, and little-to-no visual violence or spectacle. It also put up the "fourth wall," meaning that there was no acknowledgement of the audience. Instead, it was supposed to appear that the audience was looking through the fourth wall of the characters' home and observing these moments of their lives. Realism was also used to show the political struggles of the every-day people. If one word could describe Realism, it would probably be the word ordinary. They are ordinary people living their ordinary lives in their ordinary homes (Brockett 369-376).

Trifles was written by American playwright Susan Glaspell in 1916. Realism was beginning to fade from its reign and other theatrical forms were beginning to take over, but it was still a popular form. Glaspell uses the middle-class, complex characters, the realistic settings, no visual violence, and the fourth wall in her play (Greenwald, Schultz, and Pomo 1056-1057). Trifles also shows the political struggles of the women in the play, and is considered by many to be one of the first feminist plays. While it does not directly
say what these problems are, it shows its women being controlled by the men in their lives. As it was written in a time where women were fighting for the right to vote, this male dominance was a problem that women in America faced in all aspects of their lives (Gainor 44-45).

Expressionism first started in Germany in the early 20th century. It began as a rebellion against Realism and Naturalism, which had become very dominant. Because of this, Expressionism does many things opposite of Realism. While Realism sought to be realistic, expressionism sought to be theatrical. Expressionism used strong emotional displays coupled with generalized, often nameless characters to reflect humanity itself and not individual people. Expressionism also used deliberate distortion with its design and characters. Details, which had become important in Realism, were often rejected, and things like props and set dressings were rarely used. The sets were simple but visually striking, and were distorted symbols of the settings they were supposed to reflect. The language used in Expressionism was often very staccato and abbreviated, and the plot structure was highly episodic (Brockett 415-418).

*Murderer, the Hope of Women* was actually written nine years before *Trifles* in 1907, which shows the overlap of when Realism was going out and Expressionism was coming in. *Murderer* is actually considered by many to be the first Expressionist play because it embodies so many Expressionist ideals, but Expressionism had not been officially developed yet. It uses quick, staccato speech, an episodic plot structure, nameless characters and distorted circumstances (Pam 5-12). In our production, we also attempted to reflect the scenic elements of distorted, simple reflections of a tower, and few props.
Dada began in Zurich, Switzerland during the First World War and later flourished in Paris. Also known as “anti-art,” Dada was not only a rebellion against the ism that came before it, it was a rebellion against all art forms that came before it (Brockett 421). Dada sought to mean nothing. Dadaists wanted the freedom to do whatever they wanted to without the restrictions and rules of the other isms that came before it (Tzara, The Dada Manifesto 1-4). However, Dada became its own form with its own rules, which was exactly what they did not want. This led to a fairly short time period in which Dada actually existed. Dada was generally quite unpopular with audiences, but it was not done for its audience, it was done as a form of protest. World War One created a large sense of confusion in Europe, and Dada sought to reflect this confusion (Europe After the Rain).

*The Gas-Burning Heart* was written by one of Dada’s founders, Tristan Tzara. It was written after World War One in 1921, but the confusion left from the war was still enveloping Europe (Garner Jr. 2). *The Gas-Burning Heart* is made up of three tableaus with a dance interlude (Tzara, The Gas-Burning Heart 2). There is no better way to describe this play than with Tzara’s own words which forward the play:

*Note:* This play is the biggest sham in three scenes. The play will amuse no one except the industrialized imbeciles who believe in the existence of genius. The actors are requested to give this work the same attention as they would give a masterpiece of the order of *Macbeth* or *Chantecler*. However, the author, who is not a genius, should be treated lightly because nothing he says is meant to be taken seriously. Needless to say, the play is completely naturalistic. (*The Gas-Burning Heart* 2)
Section 10- Why it is Important

This project was very important to me as a student simply because of the amount that I learned. I was able to combine my love of theatre, academia, and history, which made this project a learning experience while also being fun. First and foremost, I learned that being a producer is hard. It takes a tremendous amount of work to produce a play, and I cannot imagine what Broadway producers have to do in order to get shows of that caliber together. Because of this new-found information, I know that when I work with producers in the future I will be more sympathetic with them since I know what amount of stress they are under. I also learned more about what exactly a producer does. While I had some form of an idea before this project, I am confident now that I could talk to a producer about their work and not only understand what they are saying, but also contribute to the conversation.

While it was definitely hard work, I am glad that I had my stage management experience while working on this project. Being a producer takes a great amount of time management skills, which is something that I also need to be a stage manager. If I did not already have these skills, this project would not have come to fruition. Even with this skill already in place, there were times that it tested my abilities. I also learned that producers must be flexible. While it was frustrating when I had actors drop the project, I needed to be flexible and think of what to do next instead of dwelling on what had happened. Producers also need to be flexible because there is no one set way to do things. While there are typical duties of a producer, they may change depending on the project. This applied to me during the process as well. While a producer normally collects money from investors who then make their investment back from the profits of the show, this
was not the case with our production. As mentioned earlier, it turns out that we did not need to spend much money with the production, so I did not need to raise money. However, even if I had needed money, it would not have been with investments but with donations, as we would not be making a profit off of the performance. I also had to be flexible and take on the duty of collecting props, which would not normally be the producer's job. However, since we had such a small team and I was in charge of the project, I took on the extra duty. Being flexible is also something that I will need as a stage manager, so this added skill set will help me in the future. Producing is challenging, but it is also extremely rewarding to be part of a show's process from the very beginning to the very end.

While this project was important to me, I also think that it was important to theatre itself. While I do not think that this project will make a dent in theatre history or even that anyone outside of Ball State will ever know that it happened, I still believe that it was important. These pieces were written for performance, and even this one performance at this one school makes a difference. While it is great to learn about the different -isms and read these plays, they are rarely performed. I believe that it is important for these plays to continue to be performed so they do not become museum pieces. Theatre is all about the performance, and if these plays are never performed they will no longer really be theatre. It is my hope that if I had the thought to produce these plays here, somebody else somewhere else is also thinking of producing these plays. Even if they are produced in small spaces with small audiences, they are still being produced. That is why I think that this project was important to theatre. While it may not make an impact on the history of theatre, it is keeping these pieces alive.
Works Cited


