

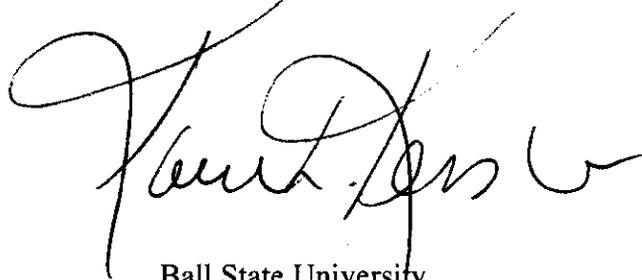
Directing *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe* by Christopher Durang

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Karen Kessler', written in a cursive style.

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Abstract

Producing a piece of theatre is a collaborative effort on the part of every single individual associated with the production. Directors, actors, designers, and crew all play integral rolls in developing and showing a piece of drama. Christopher Durang's *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe* is the piece of theatre I decided to direct, after having been given the opportunity to do so through the Ball State Theatre Department. The show touched on specific issues I felt were relevant in the modern day Midwest. These issues were predominantly over-zealous religion and societal norms. Throughout the process, both the actors and I learned valuable lessons in comedy as well as developed a healthy working relationship congruent to producing an effective piece of satirical comedic theatre. Provided is a recording of our best performance (April 24, 2005) as well as photographs of the show and backstage. These are all captured in DVD format and are enclosed at the back of the thesis. Additionally, I have written commentary on the production process and what I learned by mounting this intense and hilarious production.

Acknowledgements

--I would like to thank Karen Kessler, my advisor, for taking the care and time to help me develop my skills as a theatre director. She was extremely helpful in teaching me effective ways to communicate with my actors so we could have a better show. Additional thanks go to Karen for inspiring me to follow my aspirations to become a director.

--I would like to thank department chair Bill Jenkins for his time spent advising me in an effort to better stage the show. He made it possible for me to get much more across to the audience by using staging techniques I was unaware of and was, in general, a great help.

--Special thanks go to Abby Lynn for proof checking my paper for grammatical errors, run-on sentences, and for filling in for the part of "Eleanor" at the last moment.

--Thanks to my parents and my brother (Larry, Kathy, Matt) for letting me be who I am today and for pushing me to follow my dreams, no matter where they may take me.

--Special thanks to the 2004-2005 Management team including Jen Blackmer, Demarée Dufour, Kyle Fisher, Ginger Holcomb, Riley Kimsey, Abby Lynn, Meaghan Molsberry, and Tom Murray. Thanks go to you all for helping me along with the project, even if it was just a pat on the back or some thoughtful words of encouragement. Thank you for keeping me sane.

--I would like to thank, most of all, the extremely talented and influential cast and crew for all of their hours of support and artistic collaboration throughout the entire five-week rehearsal process. It is without a doubt that without you this project would never have come to fruition. Thank you!

During the spring semester of every academic year, the Ball State Theatre Department allows students the opportunity to apply to direct shows in the Cave, a small theatre in the basement of the Arts and Communications building. The directors are chosen after they submit an application accompanied by a basic play analysis and directorial statement about each show they are interested in directing. In the spring of 2004 I applied with a series of comedies and surreal plays in a hope that I would get the opportunity to direct one of these shows. As this project attests, I won one of these coveted “Cave slots” with Christopher Durang’s *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe*.

I chose Durang as one of the playwrights I was interested in directing because I enjoyed his style. Durang, having been raised in a firm religious environment much like my own, writes with a very satirical and dark style wrought with his own perspective and ideas concerning religion and society. Commenting upon these subjects, Durang makes very poignant statements about the hypocrisy and over-zealous attitudes behind the characters’ beliefs. I feel that Durang is making these statements as a direct criticism of the Roman Catholic Church as well as society in general. These are issues that I have considered important for years, especially living in the Midwest; where religious zealots and strict societal norms are commonplace. It was my hope throughout the production to show to the audience that there are alternatives to these things and that no one person or idea is necessarily right—especially when it comes to these issues.

As I began the artistic direction of this production, I was acutely aware that the potential for societal discussion was a prominent feature of the play. I decided that the whole show would focus on the stigma associated with norms that people force onto

others, especially focusing on the stigma associated with the “model household” and of people’s obsession with religion. After analyzing this perspective, I found that the entire show was congruent with my vision and the direction of the show was set—to follow the story of Eleanor, one of the lead characters in the play. I chose this option because all of the primary motion and activity for nearly every scene focuses on Eleanor and how she struggles to maintain some sort of stability and/or clarity in her otherwise chaotic world. In essence, deciding to focus on Eleanor was a given—it was in what manner I was going to focus on her that was the problem. This issue was solved by the end of the rehearsal/performance process. By focusing on Eleanor and the horrible things that her family and society do to her throughout the duration of the show, I hoped to instill upon the audience the idea that they are in fact free to make their own decisions regarding their lives and don’t have to be trapped like Eleanor—whether it be by religious or by social norms.

Tackling these various issues was no easy task. Though my audience was going to primarily consist of educated people, I still had to take into consideration the violence and blasphemy that constantly occurred throughout the show. This problem was compounded when I realized that many of the audience members would be family or friends of the actors. After spending several weeks of our rehearsal process nurturing individual character development, I found that the overall tone the cast was bringing to the rehearsal was a bit darker than needed. If one reads the script they will see that, although wacky and over-the-top, the writing is actually quite dark and rather disturbing. This was an edge I had to remove so as to make the production palatable and not utterly disgusting to watch. I enlisted the help of a fight choreographer, Chris Wathen, to assist

the cast with broad, cartoon-like physical action. We then spent many rehearsals working scenes in a manner that highlighted the storyline of Eleanor but did not focus at all on the bad things that happened to her. Instead of assisting the dark tone of the play, we tried to let it happen naturally. We told a funny story—the darkness of it all was inherent.

Working with actors has always been a struggle for me. On one hand, I enjoy a very natural and organic rehearsal process. I enjoy being able to spend time building characters as opposed to defining them from the start and then working from that position; however, in practice I do not operate like that. Oftentimes I will go into a rehearsal with a given set of ideas that I must get across to the actors in order to have them play the characters as I see them in my mind. This was my biggest challenge throughout the entire rehearsal process. The Ball State Theatre Department chairperson, Bill Jenkins, and my advisor and directing professor, Karen Kessler, were integral in helping me to formulate ways to speak to the actors. I wanted them to feel free to experiment and let the characters grow organically, but I also needed them to follow my vision. Phrases such as, “I really loved that, but what if we added...” and “Would you like to try this here...” became integrated into my everyday rehearsal dialogue and thus a precious collaboration between director and actors was formed. I attribute the hilarity of the performance captured on the DVD to this collaboration. We told the story in a fashion that I, as a director, wanted to tell the story in while allowing the actors to use their own comedic ideas within the confines of a written text.

I had a very special opportunity while directing this show that many directors are not afforded. I had the opportunity to work with relatively young actors who had fervor for the comedy of the show as well as a natural talent for understanding complex themes

and utilizing them in their performances. Additionally, a few of the actors had some training in improvisation and in comedy in general. This proved to be quite beneficial in helping me achieve my vision. Within our rehearsals, an open forum for experimentation and collaboration existed. We combined our styles of comedy and various theatrical backgrounds, and helped those that were unsure or unsteady, to develop their own comedic voice. Towards the end of the rehearsal process this was much more evident—as nearly all the actors were taking huge risks by trying completely new and off the wall ideas. This provided the show with a wonderful sort of spontaneous energy that is evident in the performance on the DVD.

One of the greatest things I learned from mounting this production was that, especially when it comes to Christopher Durang shows, you must rely on the text to provide the humor. At the start of the production, I came into the process with a few pages of notebook paper littered with small ideas I had of things we might be able to add to the show (in specific moments throughout the show) that might have made the characters a bit funnier. After implementing but a few of these ideas, I quickly came to the realization that the show was becoming muddled and hard to understand. Karen Kessler helped me fix this potentially disastrous problem and taught me a lesson about directing, especially directing comedy. She said that when directing comedy it is important to always allow the script, the literal text, to “be funny.” She stressed the idea that comedy, when “made funny” comes across wrong—especially when it comes to Durang’s comedies. I, being an improvisational comedian, immediately thought of a book called *Truth In Comedy*, by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson. This book is oftentimes hailed as the handbook for improvisational comedy and its lessons are

widely used within the improvisation and theatre worlds. The book stresses the idea that what audiences find honestly funny are real-life situations. If an actor/improviser on stage creates a scene, or in my case acts out a written scene, and tries to make it funny by utilizing multiple comic asides, the end product is that of a moron on stage trying to get cheap laughs. *Truth In Comedy* says the funniest things—the moments that have you laughing so hard your sides hurt—come from placing huge, hyperbolic moments and actions into a realistic scene base. *The Nature and Purpose of the Universe* utilized this style of comedy throughout the entire production. I spoke with my actors about this concept and worked with them in our rehearsals to find the “real” aspects of their characters. Once we had this established, we left the action and madness to Christopher Durang’s writing.

Directing this production has been one of my favorite projects completed here at Ball State University. I learned that to be a director I have to have a completely established vision of where I want to take a show, but must also keep in mind that the whole production process is indeed collaborative. If even one of these two elements is out of proportion with the other, a bad product results—intentions are lost and the show loses meaning. Directing an intense comedy, such as this, takes a tremendous amount of effort on behalf of everyone involved with the production. I made bold choices to help my actors make bold choices. I followed the story of Eleanor to help the audience see that they themselves don’t have to be trapped in a fabricated reality. I embarked upon this project in an effort to spread to the Ball State theatre community Christopher Durang’s statement about the real nature and purpose of the universe. The joy of it all is that you get to make your own decision about it.

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