Mary Rodriguez

Arsenic and Old Lace Thesis Paper

At this time last year, I embarked upon my thesis project, directing Arsenic and Old Lace. At the time that I began, I do not think that I knew about all of the challenges and the rewards that lay ahead of me, but looking back upon the process shows that the best way to learn to direct is to actually begin to do so.

The first step that I had to complete was the choosing of the play which would become my thesis project for the next year and a half. I was doing an independent study at the time, directing Two Rooms by Lee Blessing, and another part of the project was to read dozens of full-length plays to try to choose mine. Just reading all of the plays opened up new worlds of possibilities for me; most of those I read I had never seen performed. Seeing the huge range of comedy, tragedy, and drama that these talented playwrights had to offer, as well as discerning those styles and types of plays to which I was personally drawn, led me to narrow down my options to three: Proof, by David Auburn; The Nerd, by Larry Shue; and, of course, Arsenic and Old Lace, by Joseph Kesselring. I submitted these plays to the theatre department for them to choose which show would best fit in the season and in budget.

I chose to short-list these plays because I was confident that I could successfully direct any of the three. My least favorite was Proof because, while still and excellent play, it is an opened-ended drama. I thought that it would present a real challenge to me because all of the shows that I had directed thus far had been fairly straightforward, if a little odd in their conventions. Two Rooms fit into this category of being somewhat off-beat, but by the time the show had ended the audience was clear about exactly what had taken place in the world of the
In *Proof*, that would not have been the case and I would have had to make some decisions that would directly affect the audience’s perception in a very profound way. Though I could have made those choices successfully, I wanted to do my thesis on a show that would allow me to concentrate on strengthening other areas of my directing. The second show, *The Nerd*, was actually my favorite of the three options. It was the show that made me want to do theatre in high school, and once I started I never stopped. Because it is a very funny show, moreover, it would be different from those shows that I had directed. Comedy, as I have learned, has a pace and style completely different from drama. I thought that I would be able to accept the challenge of bringing *The Nerd* onto the stage and breathing life into the world of the characters. *Arsenic and Old Lace* is a charming and hilarious show, and so I was partial to it from the beginning. I had seen the show when I was about twelve or so. I remembered enjoying it, so I was drawn back to it. I chose it for the short list because I loved the slightly unrealistic, dark nature of the comedy. Whereas *The Nerd* showed fairly realistic characters reacting to just one very strange person, there is hardly enough sanity between the characters of *Arsenic and Old Lace* to fill a thimble. I thought that the show would be both fun and challenging for me, because it would be tricky to get the audience to accept the world of the characters in all its strangeness. Also, the sheer amount of characters to be cast and corralled in the show would offer me a very different experience, as the largest show that I had done at the time only had four characters. Ultimately, *Arsenic and Old Lace* was chosen.

Once I was sure of my project, the next step that I had to conquer was doing my research. *Arsenic and Old Lace* is an interesting show because, even though it takes place during September 1941, the aunts and their house are very much of the Victorian Era. I needed to make sure that I was not confused about the various time periods so that I would not lead the audience
astray or make them think that we had been careless in the production design. Even though it was written after the Victorian period, moreover, characters still might not have been as culturally up-to-date as others. This led me to my preparatory work with the designers.

The lighting design was a fairly straightforward process from my point of view. Anne Courtney, the lighting designer, and I had a meeting in which I told her that I wanted to make sure that the audience believed the world of the play. Because there is only a universal light switch, therefore, the lighting could not fade in and out on just one particular area of the stage to focus attention on the actors, unless it was extremely subtle. We opted to have the universal lighting remain unchanged, and varied the mood and time of night with the light that seeped in through the windows from outside. We had to make sure that the audience would be able to see enough of the action in the “dark” scenes when the bodies were being moved, but still retain the air of mystery and understand that the characters could not see. Ultimately, this desire was helped along because another window gobo was added to imply that there was light coming through the fourth wall. The characters would be in enough light to see by, but the audience would still understand that it was supposed to be dark. There was a stage in the design when we considered creating wall sconces and lamps to have extra sources of light, but I wanted to have the switch from light to “dark” be simple and instantaneous with the pushing of the light switch.

I could have concentrated more upon the sound design than I did. However, the music and sounds that were actually in the show were good. On the advice of Professor Martinez, I asked that music be added between scenes, before the show, and during intermission. I think that he was right to suggest it because the transitions were not holding the energy that they should have in order to carry the comedy of the piece. Adding music helped the audience to keep the thread of the time period and the action, as well as keep their interest in watching this very
Another sound design element that I thought was good was the aunts’ “murder song” played on the gramophone. As part of their *modus operandi*, the aunts play a particular song when serving the poisonous wine to “their gentlemen.” I thought that this quirk, though it might not read at first, would be endearing and take away from the horror of the fact that the aunts actually are murderers. It also helped, I thought, to heighten the tension of those moments with anticipation as the audience wondered if the man would actually die that time. The song that John Lindberg chose for these moments spoke of two sisters and their antics together, so even if the audience could not understand the lyrics, they did work thematically. In a way I am glad that I made a few mistakes with sound because it allowed me to see how instantaneously music could bring the energy of the show up.

Costumes were a great deal of fun to choose on this show. The aunts were very Victorian, and this actually becomes a gag in the show as they change into ridiculously old-fashioned mourning clothes for Mr. Hoskins’s funeral. The audience always particularly enjoyed that part. The rest of the characters had to be dressed in a way that conveyed important aspects of their personalities clearly. I wanted to make sure that the young people (Mortimer and Elaine) were more fashionable and attractive-looking, to make sure to contrast the other brothers and the rest of the characters. Having them be attractive also helped to set up Mortimer as a foil to Jonathan when he entered, because Jonathan was dressed in a very Boris Karloff-esque way, complete with platform shoes. I found that the older men were especially helped by their costumes because it made them more obvious as bachelors who very conspicuously lack a woman’s touch, which in turn makes them targets for the aunts. Though Dr. Einstein is never actually in any danger from the aunts, I wanted him to look disheveled so as to make sure that the audience understood that he was not nearly as put-together as Jonathan, and to remind them
of his age and drinking problem. He also had to look very harmless next to Jonathan, and I think that Jessica Miller, the costumer, intuitively understood most of these things that I wanted from the costumes and made my job much easier.

In the end, I think that the set was my favorite piece of design. Shawn Paul Evans and I sat down very early on to make sure that his design of the set would give me all that I needed. I had thought through the playing areas that I would need already, as well as where I would want to have the window seat and entrances so as to have them be relatively powerful as needed. I had also done research on how the house should actually look, as it should be as Victorian as the aunts, according to the script. Together, Professor Evans and I decided that the look of the house should be beautiful and well-kept to reflect the aunts’ upbringing in the past period. I thought that the idea of the dark wood would nicely indicate their wealth, and also that the green on the walls would look very classy. I think that the set looked gorgeous, though I thought that perhaps the hardwood floors were strangely pink. I had a special advantage in being able to help with the painting of the set as part of my scene painting class, and through the very involved process I watched the set transform into a place that it actually looked like the aunts could have inhabited for eighty years. The fact that the staircase was at an angle to the audience is a testament to Professor Evans’s brilliant design; I had not thought of that but it opened up the space in an incredible way and allowed me to have the characters interact with one another and use the staircase as a playing area.

Props were a little weaker on the show than the other areas of design, partly because Professor Evans was also in charge of those and he was very busy with the set. I did not know to insist on props as early as I should have in order to help the actors to adapt to them and perhaps even make the props funny. However, I thought that the job was ultimately done because the
story of the props was told in a coherent way. It would have been nice to have had more time with them, however. In the future, I will be able to experiment with props earlier and perhaps do more with them.

Publicity was an interesting arena. Susan Wager’s team made a great-looking poster for the first look and auditions, which I liked very much. However, she would sometimes make rather large mistakes, such as omitting the existence of one of the nights that the show would run in the first batch of posters and several thereafter. I think we eventually caught all of the errors, and I liked her publicity Valentine’s Day cards because I thought that they were memorable and would make those who received them curious about the show. Another publicity aspect was that a student wrote an article about the show in order to publish it and make the community of Lexington interested, and it was clear that she had not read the play. This was somewhat annoying because I had to correct several rather glaring errors in her drafts and eventually write some of the sentences myself, but ultimately the article was solid and correct. The experience of publicity therefore gave me a sense of not only having to attend to the big picture as a director, but also occasionally having to delve into some details in order to make the overall production successful, all without becoming a micromanager or making yourself go completely insane.

During this preliminary part of the process, I also had to do paperwork that was preparatory to creating my vision of the show and casting the characters. The first of these paperwork projects was the plot one. I went through the show, separated out the beats, and decided how each of them individually should play, how the changes affected each character, and how the action should make the audience feel. I learned the progression of the show’s rising and falling actions, and decided where many of the most important events took place.
This helped me to make the conflict plot of the show. I identified not only what happened during each beat, but why it happened. This involved deciding around which character each section centered, and who drove the action of each part. This made the major dramatic question clear. “Will Mortimer be able to protect the members of his family from their own insanities?” Once I knew that the conflict of the show centered upon Mortimer, I knew that he was the protagonist.

This led me to confirm what I had initially thought about the roles of the protagonist and the antagonist and each of their goals, which helped me, in turn, answer questions about character. The protagonist, Mortimer, has a goal which is the same as the major dramatic question, again, “To protect the members of his family from their own insanities.” The character who was directly threatening the family’s safety was Jonathan, which made him the antagonist because he was trying to thwart Mortimer. The rest of the characters raised the stakes on this conflict. I went through each of them and decided how they felt at every moment in the show and what qualities the actors who played them should be able to portray.

Finally, I was ready to do the meaning analysis for the show, which was actually surprisingly difficult in that it was not easy to extract meaning from such apparent chaos. I finally came to the conclusion that the show mused primarily upon family relationships and the protagonist’s attempts to reconcile his sense of right and wrong with his feelings of familial duty. Once I came to that conclusion, I knew that my vision for the show had to be one that never lost sight of the fact that the core characters are related by bonds that none of them can truly break, as much as they might like to. While this could have become a very dark subject, the show was so funny that I knew that I had to make it clear that even murderers can love their families and have good intentions.
With all of my research and thought projects in mind, it was time to hold auditions. Those took place on November 11 and 12. I had cast plays before, and so I was used to the idea of casting for qualities rather than for the specifics shown during auditions. As I watched auditions, I tried to think about the actors in each role, not only just the one for which they were reading at the time. I had to do this for *Arsenic and Old Lace* especially because there were so many roles to be cast. The most difficult decision that I had to make, by far, was the decision of which actor would be cast as Jonathan. Nick Lehotsky eventually got the part, but Keaton Fletcher also gave a good reading. I had worked with both before, and Nick especially is a very talented and hardworking actor. Nick also read better than any actor for Mortimer, and so I was faced with a serious dilemma. While Keaton could have eventually played the role of Jonathan, it would have taken a great deal of one-on-one time and effort to bring him up to the level that was needed for such a hugely complicated role. Nick, on the other hand, started from a higher place had enough training behind him to do much of that work on his own, and Jay Stephens was perfectly capable of playing Mortimer. Therefore, although Nick read slightly better than Jay for the lead, I cast him as the antagonist because I really needed a strong actor in that role. I struggled with this decision because the play is so manifestly Mortimer’s story, but I thought that the show would not have made as much sense or been nearly so effective if I had chosen the alternative (i.e. Nick as Mortimer and Keaton as Jonathan.)

The show was cast and I went home for Christmas break with a floor plan for the set provided by Professor Evans in order to do my blocking. This was one of my least favorite parts of the process because it was very difficult for me to visualize the blocking on a stage thousands of miles away while my mom was cooking things that smelled like Christmas and my brother was blowing things up, but I managed to focus enough to get preliminary blocking onto a page.
This was useful because I had the bones of the show blocked and visualized and therefore I had a starting point from which to work when I returned to start rehearsals. Within the first few minutes of rehearsal, the blocking changed drastically. For example, I had forgotten how tall Levi Throckmorton (who was triple-cast as the Reverend, Gibbs, and Witherspoon) was. I had to make sure that he did not steal focus from or block the more important people onstage. It was a large exercise in flexibility for me to throw out much of the blocking on which I had planned, but I think that ultimately the show was infinitely better for it.

Once the whole show was blocked with people, the set started to really appear and the blocking changed again. Having a staircase with multiple landings, five doors, and a window through which people enter has the effect of drastically changing the timing and look of the blocking. Also, the actors were starting to make strides in their character work, and so they had very useful, character-driven suggestions to make as well. The blocking never quite got up to the level that I would have liked, partly because we just ran out of time. There were many moments when the actors upstaged each other because the first blocking that I had given them was awkward or inadequate, and there were some areas on the stage (like the chair on far stage left) that were left conspicuously underused. However, I think that it was a very good experience for me to have a large set and many actors to work with, because I had the opportunity to play with levels and groups of people. Together, the actors and I came up with amusing sight gags and bits with the blocking. I was a little sad that we did run out of time, because I think with a week or two more I could have fixed many more of the blocking problems; I was learning more about myself and directing every day and I could have thought of ways to improve. However, now I will start my next show at a much higher level of preliminary blocking.
Once the bones of the play were set, the actors started to really develop their characters. Unfortunately, the day that I set aside for character work and cast bonding flopped. However, I learned that I should be very specific in my instructions on the exercises that I wanted the actors to try. When I was more specific, the actors enjoyed the activity and could see how it might help them with their characters. Also, I think that I could have scheduled the fun run later in the rehearsal process, because the idea was to get the actors to freshen up their roles and see them from a new perspective, but unfortunately having the fun run so early did not even give them time to see the characters in their main traits. If I were to redo the schedule, I would have made the fun run several weeks later. However, I was proud of the fact that the whole cast felt like they were part of the creative process. They felt like they were free to articulate their ideas, while all the time knowing that (even though I was and am their peer) I had final say in the decisions. I was glad that the environment that I maintained was creative and efficient.

The lesson that I had already learned in directing “DUMBO” and Two Rooms was once again driven home to me: a director is part of a collaborative group, and although I should get the final decision over what goes on onstage, the actors are incredibly important to the creative process of the show. Ultimately, they are the ones who choose to follow their notes (or not) and who create a character from the ground up. During the rehearsal process I was continually delighted to see their characters grow and become extremely funny. Something that I might have changed, though, would be to make the characterization more consistent in the world of the play. While I allowed some actors (like Lauren – “Martha”) to be outlandish, some actors (like Sara – “Abby”) chose to be much more down-to-earth, and the contrast was slightly odd. While I think that all of them grew and did very superb jobs, I think that perhaps on this point I could have slightly improved.
Technical rehearsals began, and I found, to my astonishment, that I was not as busy as I expected to be. I took notes on every aspect of the show, but, ultimately, the performance was now in the hands of the cast and crew. I continued to give notes and everyone responded to them. However, the show was mostly the one that would go on to be shown to the audience. I think that this was a good thing, because the actors and the crew would have had trouble adjusting so quickly to any dramatic changes that I might have chosen to make at the very end.

All things considered, tech went smoothly, and although I was still helping to paint the set at four o’clock the day of the show, everything was done and mostly dry by the time I arrived at 7:10.

Watching the show as it took place in front of an audience was rather nerve-wracking. Though I trusted my cast and crew, the realization that the show was no longer in my hands was very strong as the lights went down on opening night. For the most part the actors followed my notes and did as was expected, but there were a couple of things that noticeably changed. For example, Jay (“Mortimer”) never did the same thing with his costume two nights in a row. The last night of dress rehearsal he had gotten into a groove about where and when he should take off his suit jacket and where he should place it, but he kept changing that every night and he occasionally confused some of the actors who were expecting the costume to be in places where it was not. Levi also deliberately rejected a note that I had specifically given him by breaking the fourth wall on the last night, which made me rather upset. However, as I say, it was all out of my control at that point and, for the most part, everyone performed admirably. They did well also at pausing for laughter, which they did not have very much opportunity to practice before the audience arrived. I saw very clearly why directors tend to have previews at the professional level; they can watch the audience and make adjustments and the actors can get used to the rhythm, rising, and falling of the show.
Though I did not realize it at the time, I should have sat in the back of the audience and watched their reactions, rather than watching the action onstage. I could have seen how they took each and every joke or conflict and modified my directing accordingly. However, I did not do this except for a little opening night. I saw that the audience was reacting extremely well for the most part. They did not get many of the outdated jokes, but I had not expected them to because I had to look them all up to understand them. Everyone that I spoke to after they saw the show said that they enjoyed it greatly, and their main criticism was the length of the show. I did not think about cutting it until it was mentioned to me afterward, but in retrospect I am glad that I had the opportunity to work with the whole show as the playwright wished it to be performed; I got to experiment with keeping energy high and making choices that the audience could endure for such a lengthy span of time. However, if I were to do the show again I would have tried to cut out at least thirty minutes before I even held auditions.

From the process as a whole, I feel like I have come light years of experience away from where I was. Seeing the evolution of the show from selection of the play through strike was enlightening and helped me to understand just how much time and effort goes into making a show happen. From a personal standpoint, I learned that it always helps to retain a sense of humor. Though you should not be unprofessional or wishy-washy, being serious all the time does not help the actors or the crew to listen to you; it is essential not to lose perspective and treat someone as inferior; every part in the show is important. I also could have taken many more risks in this production, because Sunny and I worked so well as a team in organizing the cast. I might have had time to make music more prevalent and props funnier, and so I will take that into consideration the next time I direct a show. I learned also that, if I have good people around me to support my effort, then the show will be a million times better than it would be if I
had to do it all on my own. If I am lucky enough to have these people, I should make an effort at communicating as clearly as I possibly can in order to be efficient and artful. I think that I did well on the communication front and that I was on the same page with my production team, cast, and crew for the vast majority of the process. I learned that I should be open to taking ideas as well as giving them; no matter how talented a director might be he or she is still human and therefore unable to think of absolutely every good idea. Listening to designers and those who have more experience was invaluable in making the show work.

At this point, I am not exactly sure what my future holds, but it promises to be bright and full of theatre. I do not know if I will make directing my number one career choice, but I think that this experience will give me a great deal of help as I am working in professional theaters in and around Fort Worth, Texas. They have great programs there on which I hope to make my mark in the years to come, and I will always look back upon Arsenic and Old Lace with fondness as my first major directing experience.