The Shape of Things: A Director's Voice on Theatrical Process, Production, and Performance

Sheldon Carpenter

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Jeffrey Lentz, M.F.A.

Julia Matthews, Ph.D.

John Pankratz, Ph.D.

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Title: The Shape of Things: A Director's Voice on Theatrical Process, Production, and Performance

Signature of Author:  Date: April 22, 2014

Printed Name of Author: Sheldon Carpenter

Street Address: 3 Avenue A

City, State, Zip Code: Coudersport, PA 16915

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Honors Thesis Project Reflection

"Violence for a painter is the very first brush stroke on a canvas. Everything after that in the work on the painting … is about correcting that initial action." (Bogart, 54). The same can be said for a director of a play – Every choice made after the initial concept is about validating or authenticating the vision. This authentication has been the task on my journey as director of Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things*.

In a world where everything is constantly changing and scrutinized by hundreds if not thousands of eyes, illuminating a truth in art is an extremely difficult thing to accomplish as a director. However, after molding LaBute's script to my vision, I have realized that the truth is that nothing is constant. Our lives and the world we live in will always be in flux and there is nothing we can do to stop it. Surely we can manipulate the things and people around us, but those alterations are merely ephemeral. Similarly, theatre is an ephemeral art form but in the moment in which it exists, it has the potential to challenge all things constant and create a different yet memorable experience for each member of the audience.

The Shape of Things follows disheveled college student Adam, who meets an art student named Evelyn who is pursuing her senior thesis. As Evelyn suggests Adam change himself, their relationship grows. These changes were not only internal, but external as well. Adam willingly alters everything from his mannerisms to his interactions and even his appearance beyond the point of recognition throughout the play. Rejuvenation in self-esteem and a personal makeover including a nose job lead him to engage in unfaithful activities with his best friend's fiancé. After proposing to Evelyn, Adam attends her thesis presentation where Evelyn reveals that she has been manipulating him as a human sculpture, as he has been the base material for her

thesis project all along. The play comes to a close with Adam engulfed by the past semester of his time with Evelyn in a gallery filled with his belongings and evidence of his transformation.

LaBute's work calls into question how far someone is willing to go in the name of art as well as in the name of love. It scrutinizes truth, beauty, love, art and subjectivity in a way that seizes the mind of the reader or audience and forces each person to question elements of his or her own life. The story digs deep into moral ethics and asks, "are we justified in manipulating people, even for their own apparent good? Are artists, by the nature of their vocation, privileged people who are allowed to exploit those around them for higher, creative purposes?" (French).

In order to explain my journey as the director of this show, I have elected to break my reflection into three separate sections: pre-production, production and post-production. The division of my reflection will also provide a linear view that correlates with the timeline of my thesis project.

PRE-PRODUCTION

To begin work on a show, I needed to understand the world of the play and the playwright's perspective in order to build a foundation for my understanding and also the success of the production. There is a darker disposition to this show not only through themes and actions, but through words as well. When asked in an interview about the sinister elements in his work, LaBute stated, "It's probably because of my father… He taught me the value of hard work, and the power of words to hurt." He went on to say, "I write things on a page I don't want to have to deal with in life.

Writing is a safe vacuum for me because I'm not saying those horrible things to someone's face. On the page, I can always find the greater retort that doesn't come to me at the right moment in life. I feel I have a kind of bravado in my writing I don't have in life" (Jordan).

Neil LaBute wrote *The Shape of Things* in 2001. LaBute adapted it for the silver screen in 2003, and directed as well. The cast featured Paul Rudd, Rachel Weisz, Gretchen Mol and Frederick Weller in both the film as well as the live premiere in both London on May 24, 2001 at the Almeida Theatre and later that year on October 10 in New York at the Promenade Theatre. It was interesting to find that the show's premiere in London was better received than the premiere in New York. Although London's reception of the show surpassed New York's, the show still received lackluster reviews on both ends. The Guardian's Michael Billington believed that, "LaBute's play feels as if he is vamping till he gets to the climax" (Billington). Ben Brantley of the New York Times offered, "almost nothing about '*The Shape of Things*,' from its costumes to its dialogue, feels authentic… The reason is largely that the characters seem artificially manufactured from outdated molds; even the social details used to define them ring false" (Brantley).

Despite its sobering reviews, I fell in love with the play immediately. I knew that I would love to sink my teeth into this show and explore all that it had to offer. This show also presented me a chance to work with more dialogue-driven scenes and deeper characters than the monologue-heavy pieces I had directed previously. Soon to be venturing out into the world unknown, I knew that I wanted to broaden my horizons before I was out on my own and work with as many types of plays as I could

while I was still at Albright. So, being a goal-oriented person, that is what I set out to do. I approached the theatre faculty with my interest in directing a show for Albright's main stage season. I offered *The Shape of Things* as my top choice but had a couple of other titles up my sleeve just in case. I was granted the opportunity to direct the show and went right back to the play to begin thinking of concepts and angles from which I could view this production.

After reading this play and then re-reading it as a director, it didn't take long for me to begin forming conceptual ideas, images and tableaux that I could visualize on stage. I quickly began to see the world from Evelyn's point of view. After all, had she not entered this world, everything would have remained unchanged.

Deciding that I would approach this production from Evelyn's perspective was my first move as a director. I brought this idea before my production team and explained that to convey this concept to the audience I wanted to implement three ladies, separated from the world of the play, who would facilitate the changes between scenes and work as a cohesive unit. They would be referred to as sculptresses and ideally they would be dressed similarly to each other and also to Evelyn's final look as she unveils the details of her efforts, exposing that she (represented as a collective whole through the sculptresses) was manipulating the world of the play from the moment she appeared on stage.

Everyone seemed to be on board with the proposal and the discussion quickly evoked ideas all-around of different possibilities and limitations that the sculptresses could create. During production meetings, members of the team would bring up thoughts and ideas that had germinated since our last meeting to propose or share

with the group for further exploration and approval. As one might expect with any group of people, the multitude of opinions did not always mesh.

"Americans are plagued with the disease of agreement. In the theater, we often presume that collaboration means agreement. I believe that too much agreement creates productions with no vitality, no dialect, no truth… Without resistance there is no fire" (Bogart, 88). There were instances throughout the process where members of my team chose to agree in order to avoid discussion or disagreement. However, I feel that disagreement doesn't have to be a negative thing.

Disagreement opens a window to exploring someone else's point of view or examining a new angle on a situation. As ideas were discussed and the creative team saw that progress was being made and we were collectively coming closer to a mutual understanding, the resistance faded. Choices were made and design elements became concrete. Our weekly production meetings soon shifted from conceptual meetings to updates of the on-stage journey of the production and the needs of the creative team.

PRODUCTION

As I continued to collaborate with my creative team, challenges arose within rehearsals. Having worked on shows in the past where actor-director relationships had gone a bit sour, I wanted to do all I could to ensure that it would not happen again. My proposed method was to cater to the needs and wishes of the actors to the best of my ability.

After trying this out for a couple weeks, I realized the result I was getting was a "safe" production. What I mean by that is that there was no risk. The stakes between

my actors were not high enough. Each one of them became complacent with his or her own performance as well as each other and therefore, the possibility of moving forward was inhibited. This was not entirely their fault as they were following the parameters that I set in place. "Risk is a key ingredient in the act of violence and articulation. Without embracing the risk, there can be no progress and no adventure… To be silent, to avoid the violence of articulation alleviates the risk of failure but at the same time there is also no possibility of advancement" (Bogart, 48 & 49). I needed to come to a solution, and fast!

In mid-January, I as well as my cast attended the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival where we were given the opportunity to attend a multitude of invited productions as well as workshops to gain more insight into the theatrical world from professors of other colleges and universities as well as professionals in the working world. My stage manager and I attended a workshop in which we learned of a technique referred to as under-reading. Under-reading implements the use of bodies as shadows to the actors that record their blocking. The under-readers also utilize a call-and-response method with their respective actor's lines to both get the actor's nose out of his or her script to allow for a presence in the moment with other actors and also aide in the learning of lines.

Upon our return from festival, I decided to implement this new technique to hopefully get the actors off-book and allow them to connect more with their scene partners. Again, I saw initial resistance, but it appeared that as we continued rehearsals the resistance faded, that is, until I was informed that some members of the cast felt that things were going sour. I wanted this production to run as smoothly as

possible, so I decided to sit the members of the cast and crew down and discuss in a roundtable format what was working and what wasn't for each person. Some believed that the implementation of under-readers was not advantageous to the process, others felt that their work was going unnoticed and some were just not used to working under a different director or the process with which I was working. Wanting to dissolve and issues or complications that prevented my team from doing their best, I asked for suggestions of what could be done to make the process more fruitful.

The majority of the cast thought it would be beneficial to engage in table work, or extensive exploration and analysis of an actor's character, which would then be shared with the rest of the cast. As a director, I feel that it is the actor's responsibility to research and understand his or her own character outside of rehearsal. I agree with director Bartlett Sher when he says, "I find that table work becomes a lot of conversations with people telling other people what they know about something that nobody needs to hear about" (Loewith, 349). However, given the large number of requests, I decided it would be best for the overall success of the show to entertain the idea. The discussion proved to be very insightful, allowed some of my actors to understand where others were coming from and use that information in furthering their own character work.

A crucial element that I felt that I was lacking from members of my cast in rehearsal was eroticism. For a show that revolves around sexual tension and makes numerous sexual references, this one was shaping up to be quite flaccid. Working with students and peers on the college level, I could not publicly point out, "I need you to be sexier in

this scene," or "I want this moment between you to be more of a tease." Our culture has been taught to view sexual topics as taboo and only up for discussion behind closed doors. Even though this show strives to challenge art and illuminate subjectivity, I still had to respect the dignity and hubris of my actors.

Playwright and director Emily Mann believes these conversations need to be had in private, "when discussion has something to do with technique, when the actor may feel it puts her down in the eyes of the rest of the cast. Or if it's something sexual, 'I'm losing the eroticism of the scene,' for example" (Loewith, 249). This private discussion allowed me to set up a very open and honest connection with my actor and check-in each night after rehearsal, to make sure she felt comfortable and confident with the effort she was putting forth.

Listening to the actors and crew, and respecting their needs, while ensuring I was obtaining what I needed was the solution to making the rehearsal process run smoothly. This also made me very aware of the way I interacted with members of my production team and handled their needs. Collaboration was key to creating a well-oiled machine. Before long, we were running out of rehearsals and tech week was upon us.

Tech week, although the shortest portion of our rehearsal process, seemed to produce the most change and was when everything fell into place. The compilation of a completed set, scenic elements, lights and costumes permitted the characters to perform at full throttle and groom themselves for opening night! It also began to pressure everyone to ensure that everything was as close to perfect as we could make

it. The best part was that everyone was all on the same page and geared toward making this production a success!

Opening night was filled with high spirits and a general excitement to present all of our hard work to the public. The actors brought great energy and each element of the production was on point and went exactly as planned. The performances following were next-to-flawless and as a director, I couldn't have been more proud of the work that my cast and crew had put forth on this journey with me. "Now, my work will fade, to be sure. like chipping marble or crazing paint… to time itself. but for [that] one glorious moment, it [was] perfect. as perfect as I made it…" (LaBute, 122).

POST PRODUCTION

After each show, I stood outside the theatre, just to observe the general reaction of the audience and possibly catch any snippets of dialogue between peers about the show. Understanding that each person that viewed the show comes from a different background and set of experiential circumstances, I wanted to absorb all I could in that initial moment after the play ended. Of course I was recognized by some and received obligatory congratulations on my work, but I was fascinated to overhear things like, "I can't believe she did that to him," or, "I had no idea that was coming – I'm in total shock," and even, "That was beautiful! This is possibly one of the best shows I have seen at Albright!"

These comments informed me that my job as a director was done properly. I told a compelling story to an audience who willingly listened, absorbed and digested the material. Having worked with Domino Players Theatre Company for the past four

years, I have found that a good chunk of the student body isn't completely engrossed in any given production for the entirety of its duration. Director Bartlett Sher refers to this predicament as "continual partial awareness."

"I divide and evening into parts. The first 20 minutes are unbelievably critical to an audience. Especially now, with people subject what's referred to as 'continual partial awareness.' They're completely absorbed by technology. That first 20 minutes is transition to the only time there in a space of reflection, where they don't have electronic information, when they're not splitting their concentration and adjusting the room. What's liable to happen in the first 20 minutes is like a breathing and deprogramming. That's a critical little period of adjustment" (Loewith, 340). In my production of *The Shape of Things*, the audience came into the theatre before curtain and was exposed to the architecture of the scenic design, the conventions of projections and the intensity of the color palette we would be using through lighting, all accompanied by an ambient score of singer-songwriter artists that would illustrate the show's soundtrack. This gave the audience time to absorb the spectacle before the show began, allowing them the opportunity to concentrate on the content of the show.

Sher goes on to say, "the middle of the play is when they fall into the story, things began to shift and they are released into the poetics of the piece. And the last 15 to 20 minutes is a *really* golden time when they may be open enough to experience a deeply poetic idea, one they would never have been prepared to experience in the first 20 minutes. It can return them to a state of connection to language, emotional truth, visual magic… to a lot of things" (Loewith, 340-341). These moments seemed to occur in the final third of the show when Evelyn asks Adam to give up his friends, reveals

her thesis, and speaks with Adam following the presentation about the subjectivity of her project. Sitting in the audience, you could hear audible gasps, whispers to peers about the revelation and even a few impulsive statements like, "Oh my God!" and, "How could she!?" It was clear to me I had arrested the audience's attention and some people were in the moment so deeply that they could not help but respond.

"It also served as a reminder of the fact that the play itself is no less a construction in the project at that Evelyn undertook, that it invites a moral collusion which is on a par with that invited by Evelyn as she turns private experience into public art. But if the audience is collusive it is also deceived. It effectively reenacted the process which Adam undergoes. As LaBute has said, 'I… wanted it to be a painful thing, because I want you to like Adam. Yeah, he makes some bad choices along the way, but I still want you to like him, because that makes it more painful for the audience when you find out what's happening to him. At the same time it's happening to him, it's happening to you. You've been lied to the whole [play] as well. It's not as if she's let you in on it. Somebody may guess it, but for the most part she's lying to everybody including the audience'" (Bisgby, 99).

Another key component of this project was evoking a discussion on the show and its process. Feedback only makes you and your work stronger. I was also very anxious to hear what other theatre professionals had to say about my work. Two respondents from the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival attended the Sunday matinee of the run and offered a talkback with the cast and crew to share their thoughts on the production. Professor of theater, Naomi Baker and Marketing and

Development Director, Andrew Truscott were the respondents selected to attend our performance.

The respondents were very intrigued by the show, having only ever read it before. They stated that they enjoyed and fully understood my angle with the concept, however thought at times that the implementation of the sculptresses on stage between each scene slowed down the overall pace of the show. They countered by saying that it was nice in a way, because it allowed time for the audience to process what was happening throughout the production.

I felt that the use of the sculptresses in the transitions allowed the show to develop a pattern and provide a constant for the audience in the production's ever-changing status. The audience could always count on those three girls to appear and shift the world. My intention was for the audience to connect the sculptresses to Evelyn in the end of the play. Hopefully that connection was clarified with the use of solely female artists in the soundtrack for the show. If I could change one thing about the production, I would have quickened the pace of the transitions and added more of a storyline for the girls that would have further accentuated Evelyn's manipulation of Adam.

Naomi and Andrew were extremely pleased with my choice to utilize projections and multi-media in the show as it brought the show into the realm of contemporary theatre. The two praised me for reprising the filmed scene in the end of the show that played in scene four of Adam and Evelyn in bed whispering to each other. They felt that it brought the audience in on Evelyn's plan even more and provided a voyeuristic

aspect which added an interesting layer to the value of the production. Andrew and Naomi interviewed the cast on some of their choices and processes as well.

The respondents thoroughly enjoyed the production so much, in fact, that they awarded me a certificate of merit in directing as well as nominated the show as a contender for the 2015 Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival! Although I wish they would have had more constructive things to say, I was thrilled to have received both the recognition and the nomination. I view this recognition as a testament to my dedication and artistry that I have developed and honed here at Albright College.

"Violence for a painter is the very first brush stroke on a canvas. Everything after that in the work on the painting … is about correcting that initial action." (Bogart, 54). I believe that my production of Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* has found an equilibrium and has illuminated a truth that nothing is constant and will forever be changing. Albright's artistic tapestry can be viewed in the same light. My work has woven itself into the repertoire of the Domino Players Theatre Company and offered the student body an opportunity to examine their own views on truth, beauty, love, art and subjectivity.

I can only hope that my work on this production will allow for future Albright College main stage productions to be directed at the undergraduate level. *The Shape of Things* explores a variety of topics from a liberal arts college perspective. This provides an extremely rewarding experience for me as a senior who has completed my coursework and was able to combine numerous elements of my education into a project that I was extremely passionate about and a craft through which I thrive and

triumph. This journey has been extremely challenging, but I have no regrets and loved every minute of it! After all, it is my task as a director to, "strive to make art, but change the world" (LaBute, 94).

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