

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

“Fill in the blank space, please. Jack blank space Smith.” – First Interviewer

When I entered Allegheny as a first-year student, I never imagined that I would end up directing a play for my senior comprehensive project. But then again, I also was absolutely not going to be a theatre major. I had done theatre in high school and figured that I might stay involved on the periphery by helping with costumes, but I wanted to focus on something else academically. Then a show called *The Pillowman* happened. I had no intention of trying out for the play because I was not going to be a theatre major, and who would even think of casting an inexperienced, first-year, non-theatre major? Eventually, after nudging from a certain redheaded roommate and a stubborn dance instructor, I auditioned. And I got a part. I was thrown headfirst into college theatre, and I never looked back.

Sophomore year was truly a year of theatre. Because I had declared a theatre major but had taken no theatre classes, I immediately signed up for whichever ones were available. One of those classes was a directing class with Professor Watkins. In that class I first experienced the play that would lead me to a directing comp. The play, *The Exonerated* by Jessica Blank and Eric Jensen, is about wrongly convicted people on death row. It is a verbatim play which means that the text is taken from interviews with the actual people. I chose to do a scene from this play for my final directing scene and focused on the portrayal of memory onstage. My narrator was looking back on the events in her life that led up to her conviction. She was literally watching a younger version of herself experience her memories. The scene was abstract, visually, and the only set pieces were black boxes that were arranged to create different stage pictures. I enjoyed

the challenge of directing the scene from *The Exonerated*, and the experience stuck with me over the next couple of years.

My junior year I was planning to go abroad in the spring which meant that I had to take my Comp Seminar at the same time as my Junior Seminar. I had no idea what I wanted to do for my Senior Comp Project. In my time at Allegheny I had done everything from costuming to acting to directing to collaborating, so there were many directions I could go. I ended up proposing a devising comp based on the poetry and life of Sara Teasdale. I still liked the idea of something abstract and thought it would be fun to collaborate with my peers to create an original work that created stage pictures out of poetry. Then I went to England. In England, I took a devising class in which seven of us had to create a 45-minute piece of theatre in ten weeks. While I do not regret the experience, I decided that devising was not for me. I needed a theatrical form where one person was clearly in charge and the script was already set. This led me to directing.

Initially, I wanted to direct a show like *The Exonerated*. I had enjoyed the non-realistic blocking despite the realistic subject matter. I thought that playing with memory onstage would be an interesting comp topic. I was interested in the way that people view their past and in turn how both the past and the telling of the past in the present could be portrayed through theatre. However, after reading a number of other verbatim plays, the only one I could really see myself directing was *The Exonerated*, and I was not sure I liked the play enough to spend a whole semester writing about and directing it. So I started branching out and looking at other forms of theatre.

My process for finding a play consisted of going to talk to professors, mostly Professor Watkins, and asking them if they had any plays to recommend. Then I would take home the

stack of plays, read them, and bring them back for more suggestions. Eventually this process led Professor Watkins to suggest absurdist theatre because I wanted the freedom for creative blocking and something that was not necessarily realistic. I first read a few plays by Harold Pinter, but found his style to be too foreboding and bleak. I wanted something exciting with the potential for movement. Professor Watkins suggested a play called *Interview* which had leap-frogging and piggy-back riding in the midst of a professional interview. I was immediately intrigued, and once I read the play I was convinced.

Though written in 1966, I felt that Jean-Claude van Itallie's *Interview* was still relevant to audiences today. I could immediately connect with the difficulties of job searching, feeling helpless in a world of corporate power, and wanting something to change, but not knowing how to do it. All I knew about absurdism as a genre was Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. I decided to write about absurdism with a focus on physical theatre and its relevance to *Interview*. While I knew basically nothing on the research side of my comp project, I was excited about the play itself and could not wait to direct it.

In my enthusiasm, I decided to have a table reading of *Interview*. Though the script called for four males and four females, I was considering updating the play and changing some of the male characters to females. This was a purely practical thought since Allegheny has a limited number of actors and generally more women than men audition for shows. I wanted to see which male characters could work as females in case not enough men showed up to audition. The table read was successful because I found that two characters could be made female if need be. Another interesting idea that came out of the table read was to have the play in a different theatre space. The actors who helped me with the table read mentioned how claustrophobic the play felt and one of them suggested having the play in the blackbox space in Vukovich 107. Ultimately,

this is what ended up happening, and I feel that it made the play more effective than if it had been performed in a traditional proscenium-arch stage space. Hearing the play read aloud also opened up new aspect of the show that I had not thought about when I was reading it: sound. The play was full of noises and rhythms and the words themselves had a pattern to them. Of course, this is stated rather blatantly in the full title of the play, *Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors*. However it was helpful to have that realization before going into research mode over Winter Break.

I knew that in order to write about and direct *Interview* I would have to do a lot of research. My knowledge of absurdism, the 1960s, and Jean-Claude van Itallie were slim to none so I started there. I read Martin Esslin's definitive work on absurdist theatre, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. I also read a few books on physical theatre before deciding that that was not the direction I wanted to pursue as far as writing went. I was much more interested in absurdism and its relevance both in 1960s America as well as in today's society and the undergraduate audience here at Allegheny.

As I began directing *Interview*, again the rhythm and innate patterns within the piece stood out to me. I started to look more closely at the idea of the fugue and its place within the play and also with respect to absurdism. The Theatre of the Absurd generally focuses on the senselessness of life. This and other existential thoughts are explored through a form that is equally unstructured and illogical. I will discuss these concepts more in depth later. On the other hand, a fugue is a very specific type of musical structure which starts with a main theme that is then repeated in variation throughout the rest of the piece. This, too, will be discussed later. At first glance, it seems that these two forms contradict one another. How can an absurdist play fall within such an orderly structure?

I propose that, because Jean-Claude van Itallie is not of the first wave of absurdist playwrights, he took the form and made it his own. *Interview* is an absurdist play, and the rhythms and patterns of the fugue further enhance the feeling of senseless repetition and the devolution of language. We, as humans, must figure out how to negotiate our way around this innate structure lest we find ourselves confused and lost with nowhere to turn for help like the characters in *Interview*. However, as demonstrated by the conformist characters in the play, the way to achieve satisfaction within the system is not to blindly obey the system. We must find the balance between hopelessness and total conformity to make our own melody within the fugue. This is the message I wished to portray with my direction of *Interview*. The following paper will outline some of the research, analysis and process I used to hopefully get the message across.

In this paper, I will first discuss the ideas of absurdism and fugue. Both are the structural components of *Interview* which must be understood in order to understand the rest of my process. In the first chapter I will outline a brief history of the Theatre of the Absurd from the end of the Second World War to Jean-Claude van Itallie's work in New York City during the 1960s. The purpose of this history is not to provide an in-depth understanding of the Theatre of the Absurd, but rather to trace the components later used by Jean-Claude van Itallie in *Interview*. I will discuss the development of *Interview* in its early stages and its place within the *America Hurrah* trilogy. Finally, I will explore *Interview*'s relevance to 1960s America and its relevance to today's primarily undergraduate audience here at Allegheny College.

My second chapter will focus on my analysis of *Interview* as a director. I will discuss the set, blocking, and design elements as well as my understanding of the characters and scenes in the context of absurdist theatre. I will pay special attention to the patterns and rhythms which not only contribute to the fugue idea, but also enhance the patterns and structures against which the

characters are struggling. I will connect the themes and ideas in *Interview* to the Theatre of the Absurd concepts discussed in Chapter One. Finally, I will discuss the message I believe *Interview* promotes.

In the third chapter, I will take you through my rehearsal process from auditions to the final dress rehearsal. I will address the struggles I encountered as well as the breakthroughs from both a directing and acting point of view. I will provide insight into my process as a director and what I did to keep myself and the cast motivated. I will discuss our exploration of the rhythms, patterns, and characters of *Interview* through various improvisation games and exercises. I will explain the challenges of working in a non-traditional space and preparing for an intense level of audience interaction without an audience on which to practice. Finally, I will discuss the readiness of the performance and the success of the final dress rehearsal.

My final chapter will reflect on the performance weekend itself. I will discuss the differences among the three different performances and the three audiences. I will explore the level of success of audience interaction. I will describe the audience reaction including the review published in *The Campus* newspaper. I will consider whether or not the performance succeeded in getting the message across to the audience. Finally, I will reflect on my role as a director and consider what I did that was successful and what was perhaps not so successful so that I am better prepared for the next time I take this role.

Chapter One: Understanding Absurdism and the Fugue

“Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, hostile.”-Fourth Interviewer

Jean-Claude van Itallie's *Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors* takes us into the metropolis of 1960s America. Workers and leaders alike are trapped in the monotony and repetition of life in the city. Mindlessly, people go about their business while simultaneously they are forced into patterns of walking, talking and moving that must be followed lest the system break down. This hopeless setting is as familiar to us today as it was to people in the 1960s. Despite some large cultural revolutions, the average day of the middle-class worker has not changed a lot. Therefore we can still relate to the feelings of oppression, being trapped, and wondering about the point of it all that are so salient in *Interview* and other absurdist plays.

In order to truly understand *Interview* and its place in 1960s theatre as well as in theatre today, we must first understand where it came from. The genre of Theatre of the Absurd came out of the absurdist philosophical movement in France in the 1950s. First-generation Theatre of the Absurd playwrights such as Beckett and Ionesco did not initially know that they were writing absurdist theatre, but ended up being categorized as such by the late 1950s. These early absurdist writers inspired fellow playwrights across the Atlantic to develop their own brand of Theatre of the Absurd in America. While the themes of absurdist theatre up through the 1960s remained true to those early playwrights and philosophers, the form changed over time. By the time van Itallie was writing *Interview* in the 1960s, a new wave of absurdist playwrights had come along. Playwrights such as van Itallie were cognizant of the fact that they were writing absurdist theatre. It is easy to spot the influence of Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter and Albee in van Itallie's work which

is why I have chosen to use them as examples. By tracing the line of influence from Camus and Sartre, through the early absurdist playwrights up to van Itallie, I hope that you will understand how each of these artists influenced van Itallie's work, specifically *Interview*.

Absurdism as a philosophical movement came out of France after World War II. As a reaction to the atrocities of the war, people were questioning human existence, human purpose. How could we live in a world where genocide, war, and atomic bombs could kill millions of people? In this kind of world, people found it difficult to believe in God or find purpose in humanity's existence. If life had no meaning and we were indeed alone in a meaningless universe, how could we make sense of the world? These questions were the backdrop to existential thoughts articulated by philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus in France immediately following the end of the war (Goldfarb 405). Both philosophers wrote plays attempting to express their ideas about life in the face of a post-war world. Sartre argued that "existence comes before essence and... human personality can be reduced to pure potentiality and the freedom to choose itself anew at any moment" and Camus that "in our disillusioned age the world has ceased to make sense" (Esslin 24). However, these revolutionary arguments about life's lack of sense and order took place within logical and orderly structures. The plays' themselves were very traditional with cause-and-effect plots, fully developed characters, and realistic dialogue (Goldfarb 405). The disconnect between structure and content in the plays of Camus and Sartre left an opening for the playwrights who are now considered to be the founders of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd was not a unified movement of playwrights deciding that theatre needed a change. In fact, the term "Theatre of the Absurd" did not exist until 1961 when Martin Esslin wrote a book of the same title describing a new wave of playwrights and plays that

he felt could be defined in this way. The subject matter of these plays was not new to its time but rather reflected the general sentiment and philosophies being discussed by writers such as Camus and Sartre. Camus specifically defined the idea of the “absurd” in his *Myth of Sisyphus*:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity (qtd. in Esslin 23).

Absurd, therefore, was not “ridiculous” as we may think of it today, but instead meant “out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical” (Esslin 23). While writers such as Camus and Sartre had addressed man’s struggle with finding his purpose in an illogical world at length in their writings and plays, they had done so with logical, constructed, cause-to-effect arguments (Esslin 24). Their works read like an essay on absurdist philosophy, with characters who discussed their existential crises back and forth in a logical, realistic manner. What made the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd different was that they took the existential ideas and presented them in a way that was just as illogical as the subject matter itself.

The primary way in which absurdist playwrights demonstrate the loss of meaning in life is through the devolution of language. Rather than being logical and well-constructed, the language in plays of Theatre of the Absurd breaks down through endless repetition or in phrases that make sense on their own, but when paired up randomly lead to confusion (Goldfarb 405). When words have no meaning, we cannot communicate, which leads to a deeper desperation and reflects the purposelessness of life.

The structure of absurdist plays is also often illogical. Rather than flowing from exposition to build up to climax to denouement like the “well-made play” absurdist plays often jump around in time and place without explanation. Many times the audience is thrown into the

story with no hint about who the characters are or what they are doing there and often by the end, they still do not know. Plots are more often themes with scenes that surround a particular theme rather than one singular line of action which builds to a climax.

In the same way that plots in the Theatre of the Absurd diverge from traditional plot structure, characters diverge away from the realistic characters that were popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rather than being fully-developed, three-dimensional characters, the characters in Theatre of the Absurd are often two-dimensional and almost caricature-like. They are shells of human beings or drones blindly marching toward destruction. These characters are representative of types of people rather than seeming like actual people. Yet we can still see ourselves in parts of them.

The above generalities do not necessarily apply to all of the plays of all of the absurdist playwrights. As mentioned before, these writers did not all cohesively decide to start up a new type of theatre and make rules for it. Rather, the above characteristics are common threads among various Theatre of the Absurd plays. Each of the following playwrights goes about presenting absurdist ideas in slightly different, but still absurd ways that may or may not adhere to the above broad statements.

Perhaps the best-known early playwright of Theatre of the Absurd is Samuel Beckett. Though born and raised in Ireland, he spent most of his play-writing career in France. His early and most famous plays were written in French and performed in Paris. *Waiting for Godot* is the most recognizable of these early plays. It also demonstrates clearly many hallmarks of Theatre of the Absurd such as the dullness that comes out of a strict routine, the “futility of human action,” and an inability to communicate (Goldfarb 408). Beckett’s futility of action is made clear in *Waiting for Godot*, the two main characters spend the entirety of the play waiting for Godot, who

may or may not ever come. They repeat this day after day though they do not expect anything to change. At many points throughout the play, they say that they should go, but they never do.

The language Beckett uses is stichomythic (brief alternating lines) and in true absurdist fashion does not necessarily make sense at all (410). The following is an example of stichomythic dialogue from *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON: Then adieu.
 POZZO: Adieu.
 VLADIMIR: Adieu.
 POZZO: Adieu.
Silence. No one moves.
 VLADIMIR: Adieu.
 POZZO: Adieu.
 ESTRAGON: Adieu.
Silence.
 POZZO: And thank you.
 VLADIMIR: Thank *you*.
 POZZO: Not at all.
 ESTRAGON: Yes yes.
 POZZO: No no.
 VLADIMIR: Yes yes.
 ESTRAGON: No no.
Silence.
 (Beckett 50)

The above dialogue demonstrates not only stichomythic dialogue, but also the futility of action and the inability to communicate even simple concepts such as saying goodbye to someone.

Eugène Ionesco provides us with a prime example of the fact that even when English is supposed to make sense, it often does not. His first play, *The Bald Soprano*, is based on the nonsensical phrases in an English Primer (Esslin 137-8). In *The Bald Soprano*, characters state facts about their lives that presumably everyone in the scene already knows. For example, when the maid, Mary enters the following exchange occurs:

MARY: I'm the maid. I have spent a very pleasant afternoon. I've been to the cinema with a man and I've seen a film with some women. After the cinema, we went to drink some brandy and milk and then read the newspaper.

MRS. SMITH: I hope that you've spent a pleasant afternoon, that you went to the cinema with a man and that you drank some brandy and milk.

MR. SMITH: And the newspaper.

(Ionesco 14)

In a way, the characters are narrating their own lives, but for the benefit of no one. Presumably Mr. and Mrs. Smith know that Mary is their maid without her telling them. However, the content of the play is not Ionesco's focus, rather the pointlessness of language is. Ionesco also explores broader themes such as the danger of conformity. His play, *Rhinoceros*, is about people turning into rhinoceroses for no reason except that everyone else is doing so. Ionesco despised blind conformity, believing it would lead to society's downfall (Esslin 182-3). Despite serious thoughts behind his plays, they tend to be rather comic and entertaining while still making the audience think.

Harold Pinter was the first notable playwright of Theatre of the Absurd to write in English and spent his career in and around London. His plays tend to throw the audience headfirst into the action without explaining what is happening, why it is happening, or even who the characters are. He also uses a more menacing tone than Beckett or Ionesco, which is captured in his early plays in the form of an outside force that is unseen but affects the environment of the play in usually negative ways (Goldfarb 412). For example, in *The Dumb Waiter*, Gus and Ben await instructions from an unseen employer. It becomes clear throughout the course of the dialogue that they are awaiting instructions to kill someone. Despite the underlying menace, his plays are still funny and combine humor and danger effectively.

The Theatre of the Absurd was initially a European movement, as evidenced by the above playwrights. It took a little longer to get to the United States. Esslin reasons that this is because "The convention of the absurd springs from a feeling of deep disillusionment, the draining away of the sense of meaning and purpose in life" which was especially true in Europe

after the death and destruction of the World Wars (Esslin 311). The United States, on the other hand, was in an economic boom because of war and did not feel the same sense of loss immediately following the Second World War. The Theatre of the Absurd first took hold in America with audiences through a performance of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1956 (Weiner 273). However, American playwrights did not feel the same personal loss of faith and lack of purpose which is characteristic of absurdism until the discord surrounding America's presence in Vietnam (Esslin 311). A notable exception to this rule is Edward Albee.

Edward Albee attacks the very "foundations of American optimism" that resulted in so few early American absurdist playwrights (Esslin 312). While others were celebrating American life, Albee saw the destruction caused by impersonal corporations and dehumanization of those who do not fit into the "American Dream." For example, in his play *Zoo Story*, Albee depicts a conversation between Peter, an average, working-class, everyday man and Jerry, a man who is on the verge of homelessness and does not adhere to normal social boundaries. Jerry has a more significant connection with a dog than with any human because society has become so impersonal that he cannot connect with anyone. In the end, he is so desperate for a human connection that he forces Peter to kill him. With *Zoo Story*, Albee clearly represents the dangers of dehumanization in an increasingly corporate world. His plays also bridge the gap between absurdism and realism, meaning that often the situations and settings are realistic while the characters and some of the occurrences are absurd.

Many playwrights in America were experimenting with the idea of combining genres or at least not strictly adhering to one genre of play. Off-Off Broadway theatre was thriving in the early 1960s and many avant-garde theatre groups were being formed to take advantage of this new "downtown" atmosphere for experimental theatre. One such group was the Open Theatre

which began to experiment with form and train actors to act in non-realistic performances (Plunka 64). In 1963, Jean-Claude van Itallie joined the Open Theatre group as a playwright. He was interested in both the content that the Open Theatre was exploring (myth, dream, ritual, social commentary) as well as the improvisations through which the group was exploring this content (65). The Open Theatre stressed the idea of ensemble performances in which no one actor had a leading role and everyone from the playwright to the actors to the designers was in full collaboration with one another (66). Many of van Itallie's early plays came out of the Open Theatre improvisations. Sometimes the exercises and games would lead to an idea for a play and other times van Itallie would write exercises for the actors to focus on different parts of acting. The latter situation was the case for *Interview* which came out of an exercise called "Breathing and Talking Together" (85). Initially, the play was only a further development of the exercise, which the actors were struggling to achieve. Van Itallie hoped that the play would solve the problem the actors were having with speaking simultaneously to unvoiced questions (85).

Interview was originally titled *Pavane* because Jean-Claude van Itallie was amused at the idea of a formal interview acting like a formal social dance, a pavane (85). However when he showed the play to Marianne de Pury, who was a composer and general manager for the Open Theatre, she pointed out that his play was structured more like a fugue than a pavane (85). Eventually the title was changed to *Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors* to better reflect the rhythms and content (85). It premiered Off-Broadway along with van Itallie's plays *T.V.* and *Motel* as part of the series *America Hurrah* in 1966. Overall, the trilogy attempted to show a picture of current American life, protesting Vietnam, corporate America, and the control of advertising and marketing over the general American public. Ultimately, despite mixed reviews, the show was successful and ran for two years Off-Broadway.

In the early reviews of *America Hurrah* and, more specifically, *Interview*, critics compared van Itallie to Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter (88). When asked about the influence of absurdist drama on his work, van Itallie responded with “I think all of us writing at that time had to be influenced by Beckett and Ionesco. I don’t know how it would be possible not to be” (91). Beckett’s futility of action is evident in the repetitive motions and words throughout *Interview* as the characters repeat the same tasks to no avail time after time and day after day. The pointlessness of communication as demonstrated in Ionesco’s works is also evident in *Interview* through the repetition of phrases that no one is listening to and the complete devolution of language to nonsensical “blah blah blah’s” spouted by the Psychiatrist (van Itallie 30). The danger of conformity suggested in *Interview* also goes back to Ionesco’s fears of blind conformity in *Rhinoceros*. The menace of an anonymous higher power controlling situations within the play is a direct homage to Pinter. Like Albee, van Itallie satirizes American society and its optimism in believing that the worst cannot happen “here.” These are just brief highlights of the influence of early absurdist on van Itallie’s writing. I will discuss more examples in Chapter Two, but it is clear that much of *Interview* was inspired by the Theatre of the Absurd.

While the themes and some of the structural elements of *Interview* very clearly stem from absurdist roots, the overall structure of the play does not. Van Itallie uses the example of music and dance to further construct the patterns and social expectations in *Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors*. A fugue, in music, is a composition in which a short theme or phrase is introduced by one voice and subsequently taken up and varied by other voices overlapping. Interestingly, the term “fugue” is also used in psychology. A dissociative fugue is a type of amnesia in which the subject finds himself in a new town with no recollection of where he was before or how he got there. The word “fugue” derives from the Latin word “fuga” which means “flight” or “flee”

(“Fugue”). This etymology applies to the musical definition because the variations flee from the original phrase, but are still related to it. It also applies to the psychological phrase because the subject flees from his situation and goes to a new place.

It would seem, at first glance, that the ideas of absurdism and a fugue are inherently at odds with one another. A fugue is a specific type of musical structure with a strict pattern of theme and variation. On the other hand, absurdism speaks to the senselessness of the universe and humanity’s lack of purpose. Nothing is logical and nothing can be explained. However, if you think of the fugue as Pinter’s unseen menace which controls the action of the play, then it makes perfect sense. The characters are constrained by the fugue’s structure and must adhere to its patterns. The musical rhythms push the action forward and both the actors and the audience must keep pace lest they be left behind.

The repeated words and phrases throughout *Interview* have a musical quality about them, as was intended by van Itallie. He consciously made the piece musical and was very aware of its rhythms and structure (Plunka 86). The sounds in the subway scene and the operating table scene create distinct rhythms that contribute to the actors’ movements onstage in those scenes (van Itallie 27-28). The words themselves also are often spoken in a repetitive rhythm. For example, when the gym instructor is teaching the patrons of his gym to be like the guys in the movies, he is also counting “And one and two and three and four...” (van Itallie Coward-McCann 42). These innate rhythms, while provided by the actors, also evoke a sense of overwhelming outside control. It is almost as if the characters are controlled by an unseen conductor who is controlling the tempo of their lives. However these innate musical qualities do not in and of themselves dictate any reason to call *Interview* a “fugue.”

What does make *Interview* a fugue is the theme and variation on “Can you help me?” which occurs throughout the play and is varied not only in content, but also in rhythm as mentioned above. Variations of that particular text include the Fourth Applicant asking “Can you direct me...?” to various passers-by (van Itallie 26). Both the First and Third applicants ask “Can you help me?” of their psychiatrist and priest, respectively (van Itallie 30-31). By the end of the play, the line is divided up word by word and repeated infinitely as the lights go down:

SECOND INTERVIEWER: My
 FOURTH APPLICANT: fault.
 SECOND APPLICANT: Excuse
 FOURTH INTERVIEWER: me.
 FIRST INTERVIEWER: Can you
 SECOND APPLICANT: help
 FIRST APPLICANT: me?
 FOURTH INTERVIEWER: Next.
 (van Itallie 35)

This same piece of dialogue first appeared immediately before the politician scene and the individual words in it appear all over the entire play as mentioned above. The repetition of these words highlights them to the audience as it strips them of all meaning. None of the characters ever get the help they request because the request has been repeated so often that no one in the world of the play pays any attention to it. In fact, the way that “my fault” and “excuse me” are paired with this refrain makes it sound as though the characters are apologizing for asking for help. As Plunka notes in his analysis of *Interview*, “Language is devalued because we no longer say what we mean... language [is] repetitive and circular” (92). The repeated requests perhaps only get through to the audience, who cannot do anything to change the system within the play.

Fugue is also applicable to *Interview* in the psychological sense. Though not physically lost (except the girl looking for 14th Street), the characters are lost within the confines of their own world. They are searching for an identity with no careers. They are struggling to get anyone

to notice that they exist. Some, like the Interviewers, have lost all sense of self and have become automatons reciting a series of questions. While all the characters are psychologically lost, the girl looking for Fourteenth Street is physically lost as well. As she is asking for directions, she becomes confused about where she wants to go and why she wants to go there. “My purpose for today is to get to—and I couldn’t remember, I’ve set myself the task of—I’ve got to have—it’s that I can save—” (van Itallie 25). The more physically lost she gets, the more she loses her mind, until she is no longer an individual but is sucked up by the passers-by on the street.

In 1966, audiences could relate to being lost in a cacophony of noise and disillusionment. As the European absurdist had a decade before, Americans were starting to wonder whether life had sense and purpose or whether there was a just God. The Vietnam War was in full swing with nearly 500,000 troops overseas, with anti-war protests occurring throughout the country. Race riots big enough to warrant National Guard intervention occurred in multiple cities. The 60’s hippie counter-culture was not yet at its biggest point, but was gaining popularity as the United States became more involved in Vietnam. Large corporations were depersonalizing business and had one goal: to make money. Average Americans were not content with the status quo, but had not yet figured out how to change it. The middle-class people, especially young people were crying out for help but no one was listening. *Interview* reflects these insecurities as everyday people attempt to find a place for themselves in a society dominated by rules and regulations that do not necessarily make sense.

While 2013 is obviously not 1966, I feel that the general social climate is not so different. We have been engaged in an unwinnable war in Iraq and Afghanistan for the past decade. Because of that war we are constantly on “High Alert” for terrorists and potential security threats. However, these threats also threaten our personal right to privacy as airport checks

become more and more invasive and anyone who is not a natural-born white American is regarded with suspicion. Gay rights and gay marriage are constantly being discussed and debated, as are abortion and Plan B and national health care. The United States has its first black president who has promised “change” but many people are protesting that he has not really changed anything. It is hard to know exactly in which direction to go, which things to follow and which to leave behind, where to turn for help. It is easy to get lost in the whirl of society much like the characters in *Interview* who turn to all the wrong places for help.

It is for this reason that I have decided to direct this play at this time. We, as a society, are living on the brink of change, a time when we must look around at the patterns in which we are stuck and decide what to do next. As a graduating senior, I know that the idea of interviews and job hunting and going out into the “real world” is a little terrifying. The absurdist nature of the scenes puts them into a different perspective than would a realistic depiction of the same characters and scenes. The show is fast-paced and somewhat confusing. Viewers must pay attention constantly to avoid missing out. I know that there have been times at school when my life has felt like that, and I am sure that interviewing for jobs will not be any less challenging and tumultuous. Allegheny students will be able to relate as well because we are champions of doing too many things at once and never taking the time to break out of our busy, scheduled lives. As we approach the end of the year, seniors especially can relate to the idea of the social dance that is a formal interview. We are being forced into the world beyond college and must be prepared. We must decide when to stick to the patterns and rules dictated by society and when to break free of them. Both have their merits and both have their dangers as shown in *Interview*. At the very least we must understand what the overlying structures and patterns are in order to have any hope of surviving them.

Chapter Two: Finding a Place in the System

“My fault. Excuse me. Can you help me please? Next.” - All

As I first began researching *Interview*, I noticed that Jean-Claude van Itallie had a website containing a link to his email. I knew that a connection to the playwright could be a valuable source of information assuming that he actually responded to emails from random undergraduates. So I sent him a test email which mentioned that I was directing his play for my senior project and asked if he had any advice about directing *Interview* today even though it is set in 1966. He responded with the following:

I'm glad you're directing *Interview*. It easily stands on its own, without the other two plays of *America Hurrah* and has been performed alone many many times. I don't think its relevance is less today than when it premiered. We are ever more threatened with worker exploitation by the corporate world. *Interview* is almost director-proof if you respect its rhythms, get the actors to express them (van Itallie “Directing”).

His comments confirmed what I had already thought about the relevance of the play in today's society. However, his note about respecting the rhythms of *Interview* inspired me to really focus on them in my analysis and research in order to understand the play.

Once I had established a connection with Jean-Claude van Itallie, it was easy to contact him with other questions and concerns. One that came up when I started directing was the fact that the two different versions of the script I had each contained a different Gym Instructor monologue. The Coward McCann version, which was the first one published in 1966 let the audience in on the Gym Instructor's feelings regarding his cigarette cravings as well as the rhythmic counting that leads into the following subway scene. The Dramatists Play Service version, which was the acting version for which I had purchased rights, had a different

monologue that cut out most of the personal commentary and focused solely on the rhythms. When I contacted van Itallie about the difference, he said that the Dramatists version was probably in response to an early director who wanted that section to have stronger rhythmic pulse and that I was free to use whichever one I wanted or pick and choose from both (van Itallie “Directing”). I chose to use the originally published version because I felt that the Gym Instructor’s personal conflict was important to the show and it also added some humor. The version of the Gym Instructor monologue that I used can be found on page 42 of the Coward-McCann version of *America Hurrah*. When I cite the Coward-McCann version in the text I will denote it with a footnote. Any other time I cite *America Hurrah*, it is the Dramatists Play Service version.

After my conversations with van Itallie, I was ready to delve into the script. One of the stylistic choices that most struck me in *Interview* was the use of repetition. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the subtitle for *Interview* is *A Fugue for 8 Actors*. This idea of a fugue strongly influenced my directorial choices. Throughout the play, everything from dialogue to movement to the physical appearance of the characters and set is repeated. Each variation on the refrain “Can you help me?” is lost in an uncaring, cold world where individuals are only trying to find a place of belonging and someone who cares (Plunka 94). The repetition and inability to break out of a pattern result in a feeling of claustrophobia. The characters are trapped in the repetition of daily life. Each time they try to break out of the system, they are pulled back in and no one responds to their cries for help.

The world of Jean-Claude van Itallie’s *Interview* is sterile, unfeeling, impersonal. Though set in New York City, the actual location is less important than the feeling of being alone among millions. In order to realize this feeling in my production, I chose to set the play in a smaller

space, that of Room 107 in the Vukovich Center for Communication Arts—a blackbox theatre space (hereafter Vuk. 107). In this space, the audience and performers are right next to each other and on the same level. I also chose to utilize alley seating so that the audience is facing each other with a small performing space in the middle. Because of this setup, the audience members are close to each other and can see each other, but do not acknowledge each other—much in the same way that New Yorkers do not acknowledge one another in day-to-day life even if there is no physical space between them while walking down the street or crammed on a subway.

The space and setup also contributes to the feeling of claustrophobia for both the audience and the performers. Within the play, each individual character is struggling to break free of society's constraints. Yet this is a futile attempt, and each time the individual is pulled back in to become part of the anonymous crowd. I want the audience to feel some of that lack of freedom. In a small, confined space, the audience cannot back away or escape from the performers who look at and speak directly to them throughout the play.

The only set pieces/props used in the show are eight black cubes (four large and four small). As the only set pieces/props, the boxes themselves are variations on a theme. They are placed in various configurations to become everything from chairs and podiums to an operating table and a telephone operator console as dictated by the script. Each setup and even the transitions between setups suggest even more patterns to which the characters in the show are confined. At all times there are eight actors and eight cubes onstage. For each scene, the boxes must end up in a particular place. The actors, therefore, must move the boxes at exactly the right time to exactly the right place in order for the show to move forward. These patterns reflect the fugue structure of the show in general and help to accent the strict rhythms of each scene.

Though the boxes have distinct places in each scene, the patterns vary from strictly symmetrical and linear to a seemingly more casual layout. In some scenes, such as the Interview scene, the boxes are in a symmetrical formation suggesting the highly organized, formal setting of the Employment Agency. The larger square made of boxes on the diagonal from the beginning of the show squeezes into a smaller square as the pressure builds within the interview (Fig. 1-2¹). The transitions within this scene are strictly choreographed, reflecting the choreographed movements of the square dance, which also happens in this scene. Everyone must pick up and set down their box at the same time or the system will fall apart.

After the Interview portion, the organization breaks down slightly. The boxes now represent the various settings of the next eight monologues. During the Fourteenth Street scene, the boxes are stacked on top of each other like skyscrapers amongst which the Fourth Applicant is lost (Fig. 3). Each set of cubes serves as a home base for one or two actors. In order to switch characters, they must go back to their home base. To an outside viewer, this scene is nonsensical and they feel just as lost and confused as the girl looking for Fourteenth Street. However, in reality there is a deeper rhythm and pattern driving the action of the miscellaneous characters on the street.

The boxes create a more obvious visual pattern in the Gym Instructor and Subway scenes (Fig. 4). In both of these scenes the dialogue itself is very rhythmic. While the Gym Instructor is counting “and one and two and three and four” the viewer’s eyes can follow the boxes in a line that creates a visual pattern of small big small big small big small big, mimicking the rhythm of the Gym Instructor’s words (van Itallie 42²). These rhythms carry through to the Subway scene as do the boxes. The Gym Instructor’s counting turns into the sounds of a subway car as the

¹ Figures 1-7 can be found in Appendix A.

² Coward-McCann version of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude van Itallie

tempo increases and the actors push the boxes closer together without breaking the rhythm.

When the rhythm does finally stop, immediately the actors dismantle the “subway car” and move the boxes into the next formation.

While the set is comprised of actors manipulating the boxes, they themselves are being manipulated by unseen outside forces. In a world devoid of color, the characters struggle to express themselves as individuals. They all look the same; they are variations on the same monochromatic theme as suggested by van Itallie (11). Each of the eight actors wears a variation on the business suit in white, black, and grey. However, the actual articles of clothing worn are dependent on the individual characters of each actor when he or she is not part of the anonymous group. For example, Applicant Four, who is a lady’s maid, wears a black and white skirt suit with a big collar and cuffs while Applicant Two, who is a floor washer, wears a black skirt and off-white, unbuttoned blouse with a frumpy-looking black cardigan on top. Each actor also wears a color accent piece such as a tie or headband that expresses their character’s individual spirit, which was not suggested in the script. When the actor is portraying an individual character such as a monologue character, he or she “plays” with the accent piece by adjusting a tie or nervously pulling at a scarf. When the actor is portraying an impersonal, robotic character such as the Interviewers or the mindless “blah blah blah” mob after the psychiatry scene, they ignore their accent piece (van Itallie 31). Other than attention to certain costume pieces, the various characters throughout the play are in no way differentiated by costume. Each actor must create unique characters based on voice and physicality.

Despite the attempts of certain characters to break free from the restraints of society, they remain interchangeable cogs to the view of the anonymous larger system (Plunka 95). In the interview portion of the play, the applicants, though they have individual stories and names and

reasons for applying for a job, are treated as equal, insignificant scum by the interviewers. Each time the interviewers repeat a question, they become more judgmental, more suspicious towards the applicants. The interviewers only want black and white answers to their questions; they do not care at all about the personal situations of each applicant:

FIRST INTERVIEWER: How many years' experience have you had?

THIRD APPLICANT: Three years, four months and nine days not counting vacations and sick leave and the time both my daughters and my wife had the whooping cough.

FIRST INTERVIEWER: Just answer the questions please.

(van Itallie 14)

Personal feeling and emotion is irrelevant in the cold business world—all that matters is whether or not the Applicant can do the job. At one point the Interviewers even inspect the Applicants physically to check for any possible damage to the “product.”

The script for *Interview* suggests that the Interviewers wear “translucent plastic masks” but in our version no one ever goes offstage so I knew that something actors had to take off was not a possibility (van Itallie 11). While the Interviewers did not wear physical masks, they were “masked” in a way. Masks are used to cover up one’s identity, to literally “put on a face” of a certain emotion or characteristic to the outside world. The Interviewers put on the distant, impersonal masks of the Employment Agency while they are acting as interviewers, but metaphorically take them off when they are not actively working. The way in which I achieved this difference was through physicality. We tried variations of robotic/mechanized movement for the Interviewers and ultimately ended up with a movement that was not as robotic and square as during the “Blah blah blah” transition, but was more doll-like. The actors walked with stiff, but not completely straight legs, and gestured with their arms from the elbows always keeping their fingers closed and stiff. This way they could still move easily but in a very different style from the Applicants. This stiff, regimented demeanor, however, was only for when they were actively

Interviewing. Before they came onstage, they stood in line waiting just like the Applicants and during the Smoke Break, they collapsed into their natural form, relaxing from the rigid mechanization of the Interview, taking off the mask. This reinforced the idea that they were being forced by the higher institution to behave in this manner.

Throughout the play, this robotic movement came back whenever the characters were acting as the mindless mob, which was usually tied to devolution of language through either repetition or pure nonsense words. This easily ties into Ionesco's fear of conformity. When the characters conform to the mob, they lose their individuality and their ability to effectively express themselves.

As the interview progresses, the action and dialogue speed up. The questions and answers of the interviewers and applicants become hard to follow and increasingly meaningless, yet are still threatening. The actors all begin to speak on top of each other while lining up for a square dance. Both the moves in the square dance and the speeches recited are repeated in a round endlessly, which is an example of the futility of action Beckett explored in his plays. There is no reason to be square dancing other than the music which dictates the moves the characters make. The speeches recited during the square dance are personal details about the applicants' lives and work experience. Because these speeches are set to the mechanized moves of a square dance, they become mechanized as well, repeated in a round when a particular applicant reaches the end of his or her line. Repeating the personal appeals devalues them and when one is spoken on top of the next, no one can understand what the words are, much less sympathize with the situations of the characters.

Square dancing, which occurs in multiple places throughout the action, is all about patterns and repetition, fitting in with the idea of the fugue. In order to square dance, one must

know the basic moves and a caller calls out those moves and everyone does them. Each dance then consists of different combinations of these moves. The caller is in charge of the moves that everyone makes, and if an individual dancer were to choose not to follow the caller's instructions, the whole dance would fall apart. Other physical moments in the piece such as leap-frogging and the operation scene are equally dependant on precise patterns and rules that, if broken, could lead to dire consequences. Though the consequences are never spoken aloud, there is an underlying menace, as in Pinter's plays, which drives the characters to stick to the rhythms and patterns. The characters must conform to these patterns lest they destroy the system. For this reason, whenever a character does attempt to break out of the pattern, the other characters force that character back into conformity. The most obvious example of this occurs as the Fourth Applicant is trying to get directions to Fourteenth Street. She appeals to the various passers-by around her but no one is listening. She is increasingly jostled and bumped into by the other characters who continue to ignore her pleas for help. By the end of her monologue, "the passers-by have covered the Fourth Applicant" sucking her back into their uncaring mass (van Itallie 26).

At the end of the interview portion, the original eight characters (four Interviewers, four Applicants) break into an indistinct crowd on the streets of New York City. As soon as they are out of their role as either an interviewer or applicant they are just part of the crowd. The power of the Interviewers is stripped away as soon as they leave, which means that the power was never in their hands in the first place but rather in the hands of the corporation. So, too, is the power always in the hands of the males. Though two of the Interviewers are female, they are only addressed as "sir" by the Applicants. Later, the only figures in power are male: the Politician, the Priest, the Psychiatrist, and the Gym Instructor. The female characters, on the other hand, are either lost, crazy or dead. The two male characters who are not ever in a position of power are

the Third Applicant and the First Applicant. However, the Third Applicant is gay and the First Applicant is Italian-American. Because they break out of the heterosexual, white, male norm, they do not get to be in a position of power. This representation of power holds true for America from the 1960s through today. Corporations, government, and the upper class are all predominantly run by heterosexual, white males. It is no wonder that those who do not fit into that narrow category are forever struggling, both in American society and in the world of *Interview*.

The struggle for help continues for the next eight monologues. Each of the characters in his or her own way is asking for help from an uncaring mass. The fugal structure maintains the rhythm behind each variation, which drives the piece forward. However, each monologue demonstrates Beckett's futility of action as the cries for help are ignored and the character is pulled back into the mob of conformity.

The first of these monologues is the Fourth Applicant lost and trying to find her way to Fourteenth Street but no one will give her directions, not even the guy with the "Jesus Saves" sign (van Itallie 25-26). Eventually she is covered by and lost in the crowd having never found her way to Fourteenth Street. This monologue demonstrates both the devolution/pointlessness of language and the fugue pattern. The Fourth Applicant is lost and is politely trying to ask for directions, but as she becomes more physically lost, her words are also lost in the street noise. Her pleas have devolved into parts of sentences begging for help to everyone around her without specifically addressing anyone because no one is listening anyway. At the same time the other seven actors have broken into street characters such as performers, salespeople, lovey-dovey couples, drug addicts/dealers, and a lady feeding the pigeons. Each actor plays three distinct characters which they cycle through for eight counts each, starting again at the beginning when

they have portrayed all three. Each person on the street is too preoccupied about his or her own motive to pay any attention to a random lost girl. This pattern of the Fourth Applicant pleading for help mixed with a chorus of passersby on the street continues until the Fourth Applicant is completely covered by the mob, still crying out for help.

In a similar situation a few monologues later the Girl at the Party (First Interviewer) has witnessed an accident and is trying to tell everyone at the party about what she saw. The other guests at the party, however, are stuck in the routine of the party drink, shake hands, make small talk, move to the next person and repeat ad infinitum. When the Girl interrupts this pattern with her tragic story, the guests ignore her because she does not fit into their concept of a good party. Because they are ignoring her, she keeps changing the story to make it more dramatic until it climaxes to a point where she is screaming “I’m dead!” and pushing them to get them to pay attention (van Itallie 29-30). The only attention they pay her is to escort her out of the party which in this case means to the floor. She has broken the rules to the point where no one can function so everyone instead collapses to the floor, dragging her down with them.

In the Gym Instructor (Second Interviewer) monologue, people are so desperate to learn the rules of beauty and excellent physique that they have paid someone to teach them. They want to become the people they see in the movies and in advertisements because they believe that those kinds of people are the epitome of society. Rather than selling health and exercise for the purpose of well-being, the Gym Instructor (a parody of the Jack LaLanne type) instead tells girls to “stick ‘em out, that’s what you got ‘em for” and everyone to “tuck in your butts” (van Itallie 42³). He is selling a cheap, easy way to cookie-cutter beauty where everyone looks like the movie stars who are so impersonal that the Gym Instructor cannot even remember their names. While the Gym Instructor appears to be the expert on the subject, he wants nothing more than a

³ Coward-McCann version of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude van Itallie

cigarette—which does not conform to the standard of health he is selling. Though cigarette smoking was more popular in the 1960s than it is today, people were still aware of the health risks, but chose to ignore them (van Itallie “Directing”). The Gym Instructor is aware that his smoking habit is contradictory to everything he is trying to teach, but he cannot quit. It is just another pattern to confine him in the world of *Interview* at the same time that he is forcing others into a pattern. His repetitive “and one and two and three and four” inspires the people at the gym to break into a routine that he has clearly taught them, but as soon as he stops counting they go back to their vague stretching and breathing and smiling because they have no idea how to be beautiful without someone’s instruction (van Itallie 41-42⁴). At the end of the monologue, the Gym Instructor’s “and one and two and three and four” speeds up and morphs from clear counting to the rhythmic clicks and hisses of a subway train. Two actors pose off to the side like the advertisements they were practicing to be in the gym. The rest of the actors all file onto the newly created subway car, squeezing past the crowd in a futile attempt to find a small bubble of their own.

While squeezed into a crowded subway car, the Second Applicant completely contradicts the conformity of the previous monologue. She jumps from subway seat to subway seat while cursing her dead lover for leaving her with nothing and asks that God forgive both him and her (van Itallie 27). She is the definition of absurdism: remembering a past time when everything made sense and trying to make sense of now but failing both in her ability to express her thoughts through words and in finding a meaning for being alive. However, she is leaping almost gleefully and laughing about her situation. Her absurd crisis gives her a freedom that the other people who are crammed and ignoring her on the subway cannot achieve in their conformity.

⁴ Coward-McCann version of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude van Itallie

In the same way that the Second Applicant's pleas to God fall on deaf ears, the people calling the Telephone Operator (Third Interviewer) are systematically ignored as she deals with her own problems. She mechanically answers the requests of others and redirects their failed attempts to reach them after while switching lines to talk to her friend Roberta about a "terrible cramp" (van Itallie 28). The vocal change between the two sides of her character highlights the scripted, non-caring way she responds to everyone but her friend. In this world, she does not have to care about unknown voices on the other end of the line, especially when she has something so important to discuss with Roberta. Eventually, her stomach cramp wins out and she falls in pain to the floor. When she falls out of her chair, she is "helped" to the operating table, but then dies, which is of no help to anyone.

The Third Applicant is also asking help from a medical professional, a psychiatrist. The ads on television are making him sick and he has lost his job. This is a direct jab at both Freudian psychoanalysis and advertising. In a crazy, busy world television is supposed to be a way to relax, not something to make one feel worse. Because the advertising agencies are throwing so many products at you in so many cheesy, exaggerated ways, it makes one feel sick instead. The psychiatrist is part of this corrupt corporate world and makes his opinion very clear by offering canned Freudian advice about hostility, mothers, and penises before quite clearly asking for money—the only thing in which he has any interest. After spouting his advice which comes down to "blah blah blah's" the Third Applicant repeats the advice as he helps others up, resulting in a chain of useless information being given to everyone, including the audience. These blah-blah's transition into a "Kyrie Eleison" making the clear connection that the church's advice is not worth any more than the advice of a psychiatrist which points back to the existential ideas of Camus and Sartre.

The First Applicant's appeal to his priest is no more successful than the Third Applicant's appeal to his psychiatrist. The priest does not say a single word despite the more and more radical statements made by the Third Applicant, which he admits to the audience he is saying only to get attention. His futile pleas are a reoccurring event, yet he keeps going back even though the priest never says anything or offers advice. Despite the fact that the Third Applicant is threatening to go out and paint barn doors red or join a monastery, we know that he has just been to the job agency for an interview and will not likely be doing either of those things. His threats are meaningless as are his cyclical visits to the priest which will probably keep on happening and will never change.

In the final scene with the Politician, many people are appealing to him for help in fixing various problems within the town. While polite, he does not offer any help other than to say that the other politician will make things much worse (van Itallie 33-35). Many of these characters are repeats from earlier in the play, but with a different attitude which brings us back to the idea of a fugue. The culmination of all the interviews and monologues have led to this final scene where everyone gives one last appeal for help. At this point, though the audience recognizes the characters, the language has devolved into a cacophony of noise. Everyone is crying out for help, but no one is listening and no one is helping. When, at last, the politician topples into the crowd, the simple theme of "My fault. Excuse me. Can you help me? Next." is repeated ad infinitum as the actors walk out the same way they walked in. In true absurdist fashion, nothing has been resolved.

Chapter 3: Rehearsing the Absurd

“You’re selling, selling all the time.”-Second Interviewer

I knew from the beginning that rehearsal for this show was going to be an intensive process. Because it is an ensemble piece, I needed a cast who could work together and who could also be present at every rehearsal. Each actor must also be able to portray multiple characters convincingly. I knew that I was going to have to ask them to suspend their idea of theatre and be able to talk directly to the audience while doing sometimes ridiculous activities at the same time. I took all of the above into consideration both in casting the show and throughout the rehearsal process.

Because of the intensity and ensemble nature of *Interview*, I wanted to have as long a rehearsal process as possible. Through collaboration with Allegheny’s Student Experimental Theatre (S.E.T.), I knew that my show was going to go up on the last weekend of March, the 29th-31st. I wanted to have three performances because Vuk. 107 is such a small space and can only hold about fifty audience members at a time. I therefore held auditions January 20-21 with callbacks on January 22 meaning that we would have about two months of rehearsal time.

In December, I had had a table reading of *Interview* with a group of theatre peers so that I could get a sense of the rhythm of the show and also think about what to consider for auditions. I knew that auditions had to consist of actors portraying multiple characters and that they needed to do some of the beginning dialogue which is broken up, repetitive, and choppy to see how they would handle those things. I also needed an improvisation component, not necessarily because the actors would be improvising in my show, but because I might ask them to do things that were

uncomfortable or weird (like leapfrogging and making subway noises vocally) and I needed to know that they were willing to do the absurd things that absurdist theatre asks of actors. During the auditions on January 20-21, I had actors read in pairs the first section of lines from the Interview section (van Itallie 11-12). I provided two black cubes for them to use if they so chose and most pairs did so, following the sitting/standing stage directions in the script. I then asked each individual to come back with a monologue. I used the Telephone Operator (28) for women and the Gym Instructor (van Itallie 41-42⁵) for men. I chose these monologues because I felt that they allowed me to see the actor switch characters rapidly as well as make strong character choices. I only had thirteen individuals audition, but luckily they were all fantastic so I was happy to ask them all to callbacks on January 22.

Callbacks were a chance for me to see how the actors worked in ensemble situations, and how well they could do improvisation and take direction. Twelve people showed up to callbacks and I started them off with some basic stretching and energizing to get them warmed up. From there we moved into walking around the room behaving as different characters i.e. old man, on a sugar high, two-year-old, pretentious and even some non-human characters i.e. farm animals, dinosaurs, etc. just to see how far they would take it. At this point I had them play leapfrog and make siren noises and subway noises mostly just to make sure that no one was uncomfortable with any of that. I also used the Fourteenth Street scene (van Itallie 25) and had the actors come forward in groups of three acting out different characters as I called them out to see how effective each person was at quickly and decisively switching characters. I moved from there to another improv game called “Freeze” where two actors start a scene and at any point anyone else can call out “Freeze!” and the actors have to freeze and the third person takes the place of either of the first two. The two basic rules of the game are to not negate anything the other person is

⁵ Coward-McCann version of *America Hurrah* by Jean-Claude van Itallie

doing so that the scene can proceed and to try to do interesting movements rather than just standing there so that other actors can call out “Freeze!” at an interesting point. This game was very telling in who was willing to do ridiculous things and who was not willing to even call out “freeze” to participate. After everyone had had their turn at Freeze, I split them into groups of four and told them to come up with a scene that could be done using only actions and noises, no dialogue because scenes in *Interview* such as the subway and the operating room are done in that fashion and it also gave me a chance to see how everyone worked together in an ensemble. The scenes were all great and one was even a gym scene, which was fitting! The last exercise I had them do was to stay in their groups and sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” in a round by group just to make sure that they were all capable of singing in a group for parts like the “Kyrie Eleison” between the Psychiatrist scene and the Confessional scene. Between the monologues and the callback exercises, it was not terribly difficult to decide which eight people I wanted, but it was more difficult to decide which characters I wanted them to play since they all play multiple roles. A final cast list can be found in Appendix B.

At the beginning of the rehearsal process we were still trying to find a production team. The individual who had originally said she would be stage manager had backed out and I had an assistant stage manager, Julie Copenhaver, but she did not feel she could step up to be stage manager. S.E.T. during this semester was putting on five shows, so most people who were comfortable stage managing were already involved in something else. Eventually, after some shuffling and begging, Hannah Cross was moved to *Interview* as stage manager with Jessica Chase as assistant stage manager and Julie Copenhaver moved to a smaller show to stage manage. After sending out a few emails we eventually found Katie Corneille to be sound designer. Due to the lack of set and props, the only other designer needed was a costume

designer which I took on because of my experience in that area and the fact that it is not a costume-heavy show. Colleen McCaughey was assigned as our S.E.T. Liaison and we had our production team! We met weekly to discuss scheduling and how the show was going and what was needed for the next week's rehearsals. We were all very efficient and the meetings were always short, quick and to the point.

Throughout February the whole cast rehearsed for an hour and a half three times per week. During the read-through we collaboratively created a schedule that worked for everyone and altered it slightly on a weekly basis if conflicts arose. In March we added two more rehearsals so that we were rehearsing five times a week up until the week of the show when we rehearsed every night. I was very lucky in that my cast was dedicated and prompt. The only times people missed rehearsal were because they were sick, which was not a frequent occurrence. There were a few other times where we knew in advance that someone was going to be late, but everyone was good about keeping the stage managers informed and rehearsals were not affected by absences because we could plan around them.

My basic rehearsal plan was to work the second half of the play, the monologues, first then go back and work on the Interview portion in the beginning. We set an off-book goal of February 17 for the monologue sections and February 24 for the whole play. I wanted early off-book goals because of the amount of movement involved in the show. It is difficult to carry boxes and leapfrog while holding a script. My actors stepped up to the challenge and were off-book by the scheduled deadlines which I think ultimately helped the show to be very crisp and exact. As many rehearsals as possible were held in Vuk. 107 with the alley seating in place. My stage managers and I took turns sitting in different places in the audience so that the actors would not get used to addressing one particular location and forget about everyone else.

Every rehearsal began with basic warm-ups and some sort of game to get everyone involved and energized. As actors were arriving to rehearsal I would remind them to stretch and once everyone arrived we did group stretches. Because of the physical components to the show, I wanted each person to be properly warmed up so they would not injure themselves. After everyone was warmed up we would play a game of some sort. Some days it related to what I wanted to accomplish in rehearsal, and other days it was something fun and silly just to get everyone in a moving and performing mindset. By establishing this routine early on, the actors were comfortable doing what they needed to do for themselves to be warmed up and ready for performances without my guidance.

In order to ease my actors into the idea of absurdist theatre, we spent a lot of time during the first week of rehearsal playing various improv games to get used to the abrupt changes in character and language as sometimes nonsensical phrases strung together rather than logically ordered and structured thoughts. These exercises helped them much in the same way I imagine exercises at the Open Theatre in New York City helped actors to learn how to act in early absurdist plays. I had them talk to each other about their days while leapfrogging and piggy backing to see how the rhythms of their bodies affected their speech. They used phrases out the monologues to practice addressing the audience when saying things like “I said” or “I asked her.” We played around coming up with the most interesting and crazy Fourteenth Street characters. One of the best moments in that practice was when we were stretching at the beginning of rehearsal and Luke Davis (Fourth Interviewer) put his feet behind his head. We knew we had to use it somewhere and ended up putting it in the Fourteenth Street Scene. During this time we also worked on the idea of rhythm and sounds for scenes like the Subway Car and the Gym Instructor and the Operating Room.

Many practical applications ended up coming out of these early improv sessions. We established leapfrog partners and piggyback partners that did not end up changing. The actors decided fully on their three Fourteenth Street characters and we spent a lot of time working on how to integrate them with the Fourth Applicant monologue without the seven other characters completely overpowering her. Though not everything came out of improv sessions, later in the process when I was having an issue with blocking it was easy to stop and come up with an improvisation exercise that would help to create blocking and movement. Because the actors were used to the improv and games from earlier rehearsals they did not think this was weird and were primed to participate fully.

One of the improv games resulted in very intricate blocking that would have been nearly impossible to plan in advance. It inspired the guests' movement for the Party scene. The blocks were still in their setup from the Operating Table scene so I established eight "stations" and put a piece of paper at each one. I then told each actor to come up with two simple movements that one would likely be doing at a party i.e. sipping a drink or shaking hands with someone. Once they had figured their two movements out, I told them to write down what they had done on the paper. Everyone demonstrated his or her actions for the rest of the group then they switched stations and did the action on the paper. After a few variations of this and having people move at different times we ended up with the pattern used in the performance. At the beginning of the party scene the actors would move to their respective stations (which were narrowed to seven instead of eight) and begin doing the action assigned to that station. Nate Freed (Third Applicant) would start off the rotation by going up to someone and imitating their action. Once he had imitated both actions for that station, the original person at that station would "bump" someone else and so on for the duration of the party scene. Both Nate and Luke had to end up at specific

stations by the end of the piece, so if they were not there, they were allowed to get the attention of the person bumping in order to be bumped so they could go to the correct station. The game worked very well and we did not have to spend a lot of time memorizing and going over the blocking for that scene because they had created it so they remembered it.

Another important activity we pursued in the first few weeks of rehearsal was that of square dancing. Neither I nor any of the actors had had experience square dancing except in elementary school gym class. The script calls for square dancing and I wanted to do it properly. I emailed the dance department who directed me to Rachel O'Brien, the Contra Dance instructor here at Allegheny. She invited us to attend the Community Contra class on Wednesday nights because Contra is similar to Square Dance, except that it is done in a line rather than a square. We went to the class for a couple weeks and learned most of the basic moves and rhythms in Contra which could be effectively translated to Square Dance for the play. Because of our previous Contra experience, when we got to the Square Dance portion of the show, I simply watched a few videos on YouTube and picked out the moves that I thought best fit the space and were not too strenuous because dialogue had to happen over the dancing. Though it took a lot of practice to get the rhythms of the dance while speaking in a different rhythm, by tech week the dance was consistent.

The second and third weeks of rehearsal mostly consisted of working through each of the monologues and coming up with blocking. I almost always came to rehearsal with an idea of the setup of the blocks for each monologue but had to play around with the actors in the space in order to figure out exact blocking. I also had to make sure that the transitions between monologues were possible and would not be too chaotic or slow down the rhythm of the show as a whole. We spent a significant amount of time throughout the rehearsal process working on the

transitions of the blocks and making sure that they ended up in the right place with the handles facing the audience.

After the basic blocking was set for each monologue, we worked on characterization for both the speaker in the monologue and the other characters. One of the biggest character traits that everyone had to work on was smoking cigarettes. People do not smoke as much now as they did in the 1960s and smoking is something that comes up quite a few times in the show. None of my actors had smoked a cigarette more than once if at all and neither had I, so they had a lot of practicing to do. Of course, I was not going to make them smoke, but I did tell them to pay attention to people outside of their dorms or between classes who were smoking to see how they held their cigarettes and how they smoked them. I also advised watching *Mad Men* which is set in the 1960s because everyone on that show smokes all the time. Every once in a while in rehearsal we would have a smoking discussion where people demonstrated cigarette-related nuances they had picked up through observation.

After the monologues were solidly in place we backed up to block the Interview section. In order to get into the mindset of Interviewers versus Applicants, we played a version of tag that I called “Shark and Fish Tag.” In this version, the actors playing the Interviewers were “it” and could only walk while the Applicants could run to get away from them. Even so it took less than thirty seconds for the Interviewers to catch all of the Applicants. We varied the game a few times changing the rules about which Interviewers could catch which Applicants but every time they were all tagged within less than a minute. When we had played a few different versions I asked my actors what they had noticed about the game. Someone pointed out that there was no way for the Applicants to win, which is exactly the point. The Interviewers have the control and no

matter how hard the Applicants try, they cannot win. I told everyone to keep that in mind throughout the Interview portion.

One of the most difficult parts of the Interview to figure out was the balance between rigid mechanization and not letting the action and dialogue fall into one sing-song-y tempo. One exercise we used to avoid this was to actually do the whole show to the beat of a metronome so that there would be no rhythmic variations. While the exercise ended up devolving into a hilarious 90s-style rap, it did make everyone realize that rhythmic variations in both action and speech were necessary for the flow of the show.

Once we had established a comfortable tempo for the whole show, I knew that we needed to break it up and make the sections more distinct from one another. The idea of the fugue emphasizes the variation in each section of the piece. Though the words were varied, the pace was not. In the transitions with a lot of movement, we played with the dialogue moving at a different pace from the movements. The most notable change, however, was in the Politician scene. We had already established a “musical chairs” sort of transition between the Politician scene and the end in which the actors all walked around stage repeating their monologues to the Square Dance music until the music paused; at that point, the actors would pause until the music started up again. I decided to bring the pauses in earlier, during the Politician scene. After a few rounds of canned speech, the Politician would suddenly pause for a fraction of a second, as would the crowd around him. The longer he went on, the longer the pauses would get and they would flow into the “musical chair” pauses of the next transition. This, of course, took a lot of practicing to get exactly right, but in the end the effect was worth all the practice time spent on it. The pattern of the fugue had devolved into a broken record, the beats of silence growing longer and longer and fading out until nothing was left. For when language is pointless, silence is the

only answer. The gradual buildup of silence at the end of the piece made the end feel more like an end, implying a potential end of the system rather than simply beginning the cycle all over again.

During the last week of rehearsal before tech week, the main focus was on characterization. Though we had developed basic characters from the beginning, they were not yet stretched to their full absurd potential. Using the idea of caricatures from Ionesco's work, I pushed the actors to find the most absurd, cartoon-like version of their character that they possibly could. I had them act out each other's characters to bring out nuances that they might not have thought of and challenged them to try ridiculous things and that I would tell them if it was too much. It was not. Out of this week of rehearsal, the characters all multiplied to truly absurd extremes. The First Applicant became a stereotypical, hardworking Italian-American complete with the accent who is just an average guy looking for a job. The Second Applicant became a full-on crazy lady, singing and dancing on the subway and trying to get a job by convincing everyone that she is not crazy and will be no trouble at all. The Third Applicant became a closeted gay man and his wife Katherine and children were perhaps not really real, but rather the family he told others about to avoid being out-ed. The Fourth Applicant became the overly precise, pretentious, almost British maid with her nose literally in the air. The First Interviewer as the Girl at the Party became that girl who is always trying to be the center of attention by telling blatant lies. The Second Interviewer as the Gym Instructor became the fitness instructor on T.V. who looks amazing and makes everything look so easy when it is actually very difficult. The Third Interviewer went over the top with her Brooklyn accent and her complaints to her friend Roberta. The Fourth Interviewer became the sleazy politician who will look and do and say anything that will get people to vote for him, even when he is outright lying.

Once the characterizations were in place, the show really came together. It was energetic and crisp, the actors moved along at a pace that kept things interesting without going too fast. However, I was still worried about the fact that the show required so much audience interaction and thus far the actors had only talked to me, the stage managers, or empty chairs. I asked the actors to invite their friends who perhaps could not make it to the show that weekend and I brought some friends of my own. I also collected all the stuffed animals I could find in our house and brought them to rehearsals so that the actors would at least be talking to something with eyes. They agreed that it helped because eye contact with a stuffed animal is almost as ridiculous as eye contact with an awkward audience member.

The final test of the actors' readiness came at dress rehearsal. We had a small audience of ten or so real people plus the stuffed animals. I encouraged the actors to go as full-out as they ever would because this was the last night to try something new. Their over-the-top portrayals of all the characters and real audience members brought a new energy to the show to the point that I finally had to tell them to tone it down. At that point I knew they were ready to perform.

Chapter Four: Performing *Interview*

“Good luck to you too, I said cheerfully, and turned my smile to the next one.”- Politician

The three performances of *Interview* were Friday March 29, Saturday March 30, and Sunday March 31. The Friday and Saturday performances were in the evening and the Sunday performance was a matinee. Because it was Easter weekend, I had no idea what to expect in terms of audience. We had planned on enough seating for approximately 40 patrons, but so many people showed up on Friday night that we had to add more chairs which we left up for the subsequent performances. Though I did not count, I estimate that approximately 50 people attended each performance.

The Friday crowd consisted mostly of theatre students and friends of the actors. They were immediately into the action and laughed at the jokes despite the non-traditional way in which the dialogue was presented. They laughed the hardest at the Third Applicant’s flamboyant-ness and the Third Interviewer’s Brooklyn accent. I experienced a moment of panic during the piggy-back portion of the Interview scene when Annie and Stephanie slipped and fell. In all of the rehearsals and practices, that had never happened to anyone. However, they handled it very professionally and kept going, so the audience had no idea that it was not supposed to happen. Luckily neither of them was injured. The cast responded well to their first night with a full audience, engaging fully and making eye contact with various audience members.

Saturday night went more smoothly than Friday night though neither the audience nor the performers were quite as energetic as on Friday. It took the audience longer to understand what was going on, and they did not fully engage with the characters until after the Interview scene. I

think that the audience makeup consisted of more people who did not know exactly what was going on or what to make of this non-realistic type of theatre. At first many people seemed startled by the audience interaction and some people even responded when the actors asked them a question directly. For example, when all of the characters break out to talk to the audience right before the Fourteenth Street scene, I heard the Third Interviewer ask “Do you like me?” to a young woman in the front row who responded with a startled “Yes!” After the show the audience still seemed a little bewildered but pleased. A number of people came up to me and said things along the lines of “I didn’t know what to expect, that was really...different. I liked it.” I think that in general people have a tendency to not like things that confuse them, but this audience seemed to handle their confusion well and enjoy the show despite that.

The Sunday afternoon performance had the smallest crowd, but only by about five or six people, which I thought was impressive considering it was Easter Sunday. Many of my actors’ parents attended the show, so they were particularly excited. Because the audience consisted of more adults, they responded to different characters than the previous two nights. While the students loved the Third Applicant’s closeted homosexuality and the Third Interviewer’s Brooklyn accent, the Sunday crowd really seemed to enjoy the First Applicant and his middle-class work ethic. I personally enjoyed the Sunday show immensely because I felt like I could just sit back and take it all in. I had been progressively letting go of my worries for the past two nights and by Sunday afternoon I was ready to enjoy the show. Somehow I felt that the show on Sunday was more hopeful. I do not know whether that was due to the fact that it was light outside, or that it was Easter, or that I personally was not worried about it, or that everyone was excited to be done, but somehow the ending seemed less bleak to me.

In general, the audience was very responsive to *Interview*. Though they were initially startled by the audience interaction, they got more and more into it as the play went on. They all loved the part in the Fourteenth Street scene where Luke (Fourth Interviewer) put his feet behind his head. By the end of the piece, the audience was always so engaged that during the pauses in the Politician scene through to the end, they would pause along with the actors. This was impressive to me because the actors knew exactly where the pauses were going to happen, whereas the audience did not, yet the audience paused just as completely as the actors.

At the end of each performance it always took the audience a minute to regain their composure. Despite the bows which clearly signaled the end of the play, everyone would sit in silence for a short while before eventually getting up or starting to talk to their neighbor. I like to think that this is because the piece had such an impact on them, and they were so drawn in, that they needed time to remember where they were and process their thoughts and feelings about the performance.

Most of the comments I heard after the performance (other than the obligatory “great show” ones) were either about the clear rhythmic qualities and sharpness of the piece or the appropriateness of the space to the subject matter. Many people were completely blown away by how clean and crisp the action and dialogue were and made a point to tell me how impressed they were. The audience also appreciated the space of Vuk. 107. They said that the intimacy of the space and the close proximity to the actors really helped them to engage with the characters and the piece as a whole. One parent even told me that the Interview portion of the show should be used to educate young people going out into the workforce because it was more effective at portraying the feelings and pressure of interviewing for a job than anything else except an actual job interview.

While the initial thoughts and comments of the audience were certainly appreciated, the ones since the performances are even better. I still have people coming up to me in the Campus Center to tell me how much they enjoyed my show even if it was weird. The simple fact that people are still talking about a show that happened almost two weeks ago speaks to its resonance within the student body. Though I do not know exactly what they got out of the show, clearly they were impacted in some way. Most of these later comments also are accompanied by a mention of the space and how great the intimacy was. Future directors may want to seriously consider Vuk. 107 as a potential space, especially for smaller shows or ones that would benefit from audience interaction. This fact as well as the show's relevance to a student population is described in a very flattering review that was published in *The Campus* a week after opening night.⁶

Overall, I must say that *Interview* was a success. I could not have been happier with the performances of my cast and crew or with the response of the audience. I think that what I have learned from this directing experience is to be prepared, start rehearsals early, be strict with deadlines for both yourself and your cast and crew, and to not be afraid to just go for it. If I ever have the chance to direct again, I hope that the process and the shows go just as well as this one.

⁶ The full review can be found in Appendix C.

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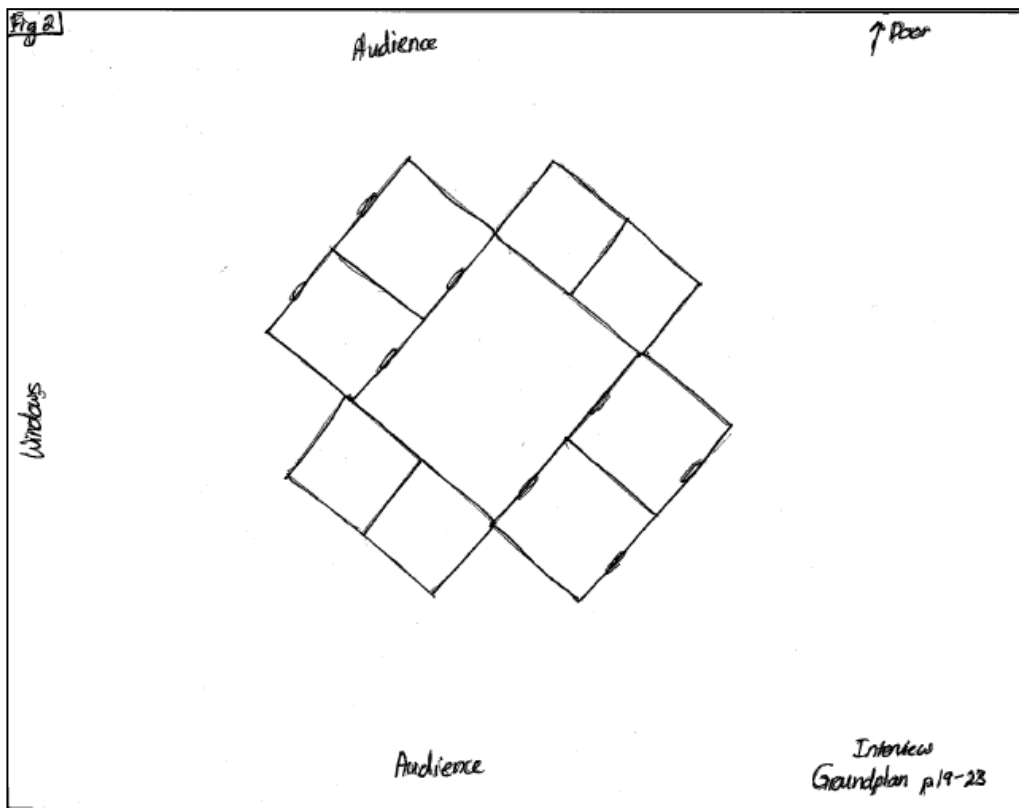
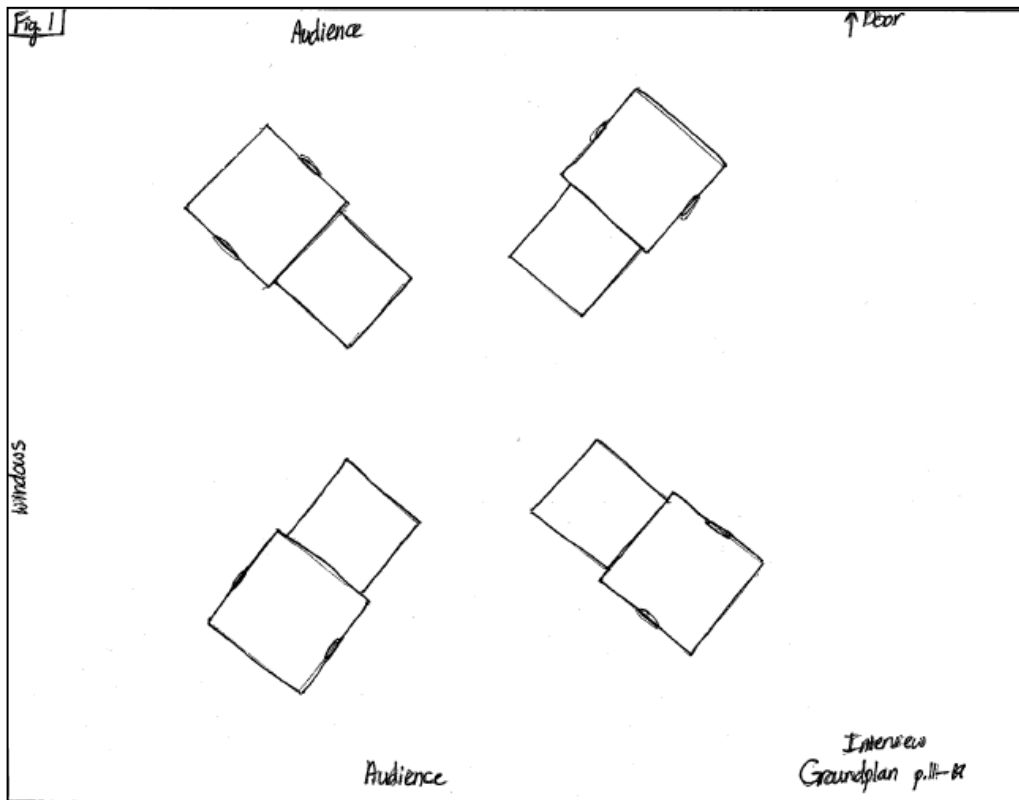
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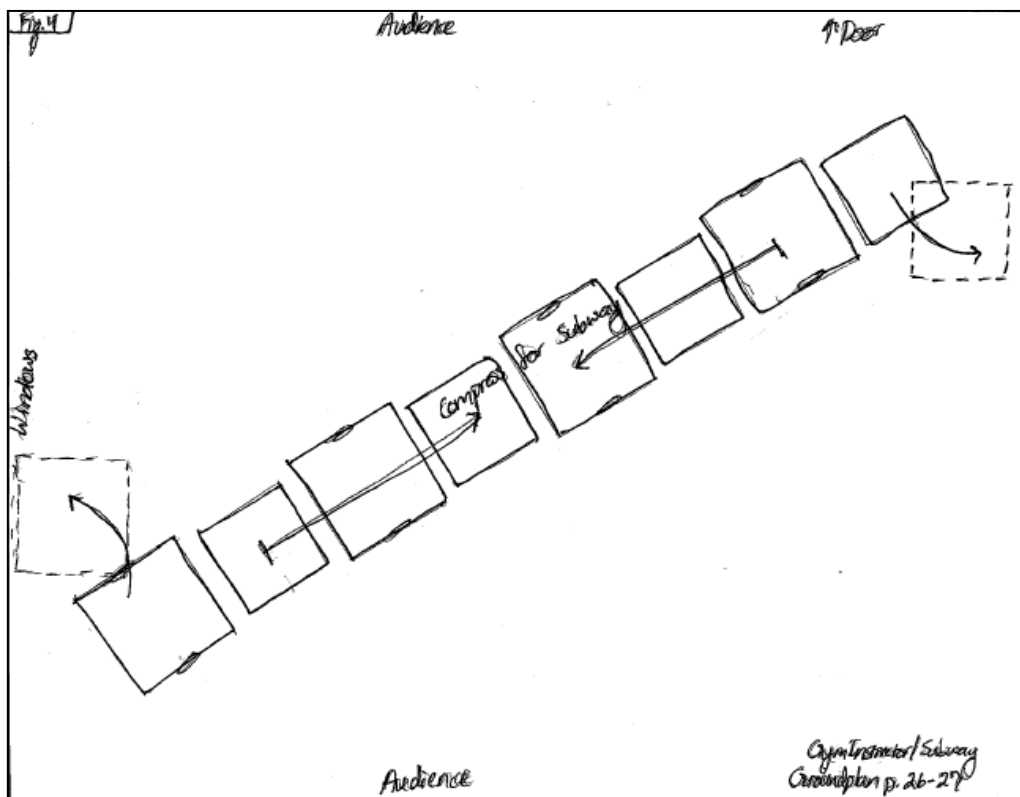
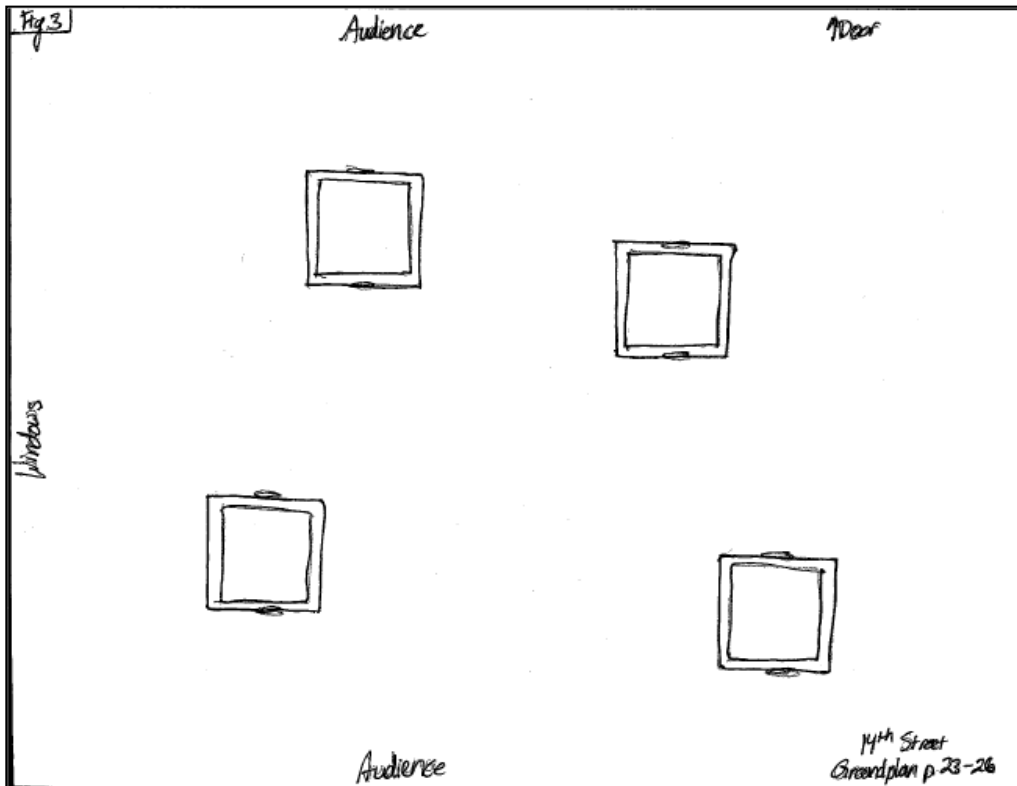
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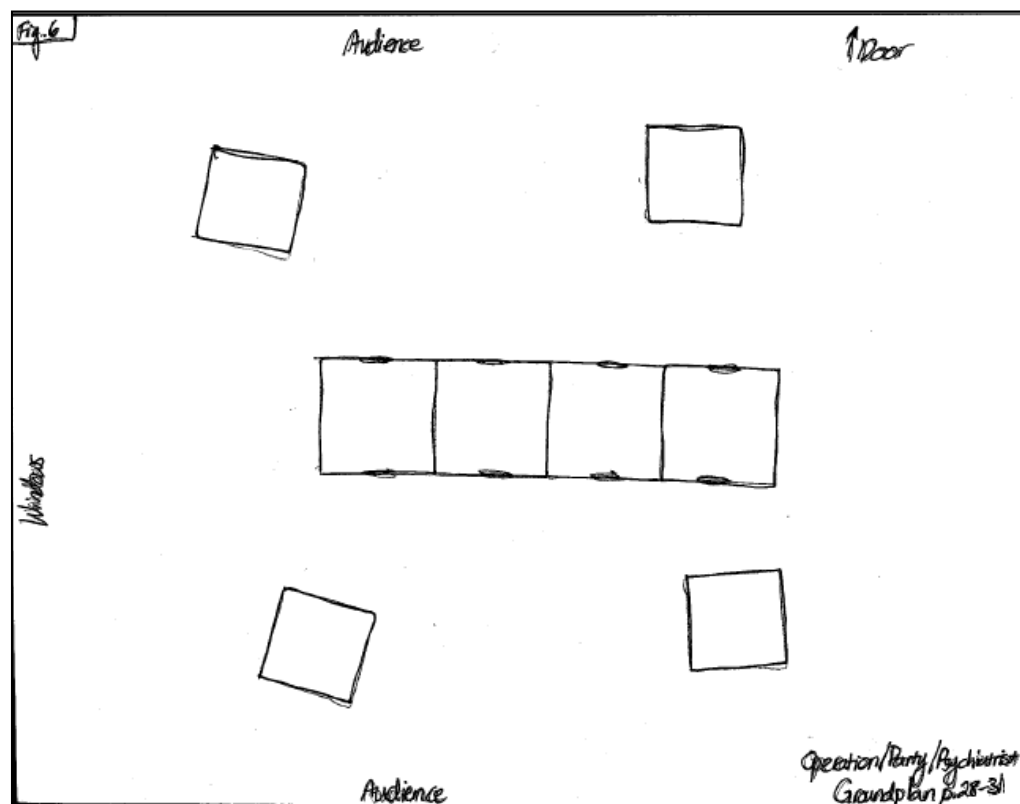
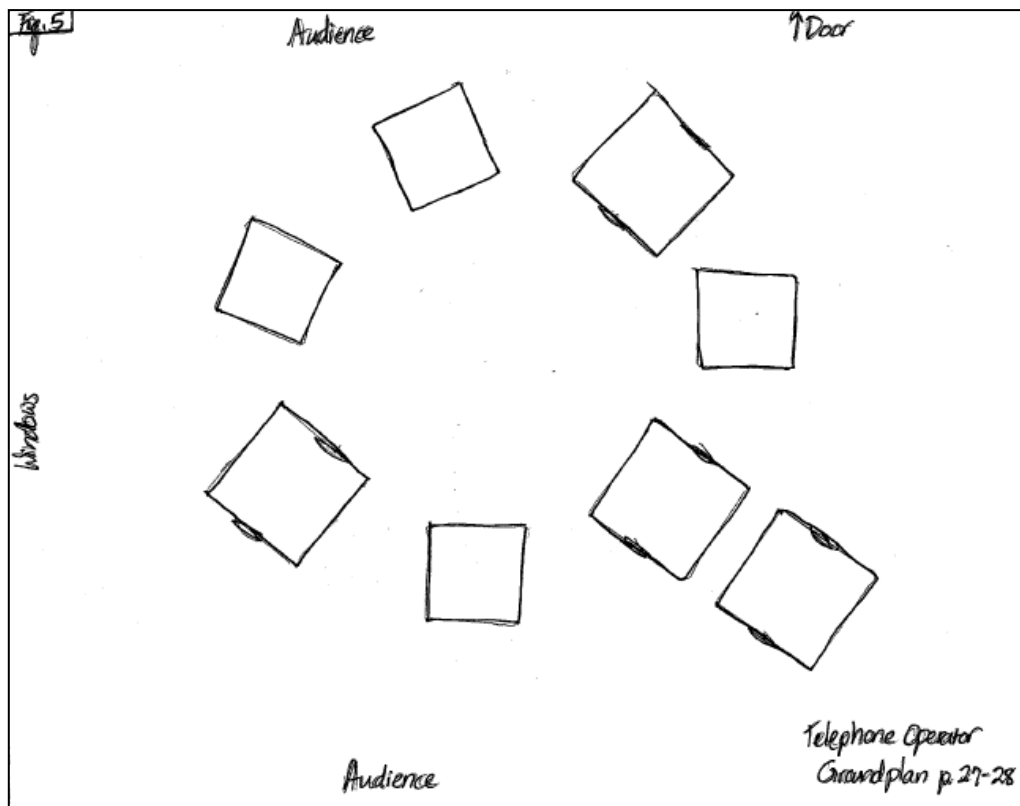
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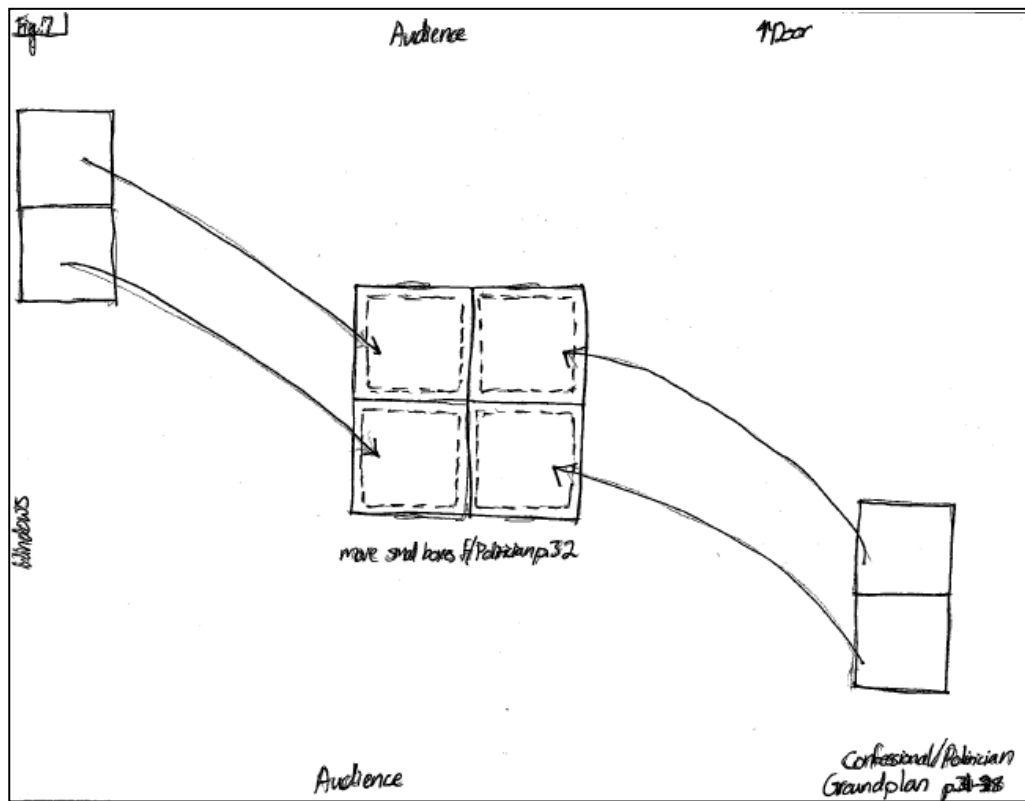
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Appendix A









Appendix B

CAST LIST

First Interviewer-Rachel DuChateau

First Applicant-Jordan Gaston

Second Interviewer-Sean Gannon

Second Applicant-Kaelyn Conley

Third Interviewer-Annie Utterback

Third Applicant-Nate Freed

Fourth Interviewer-Luke Davis

Fourth Applicant-Stephanie Engel

Appendix C

Interview was 'jarring' and 'dynamic'

Columnist reviews *Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors*

By ERIN DAKAS
Staff Writer
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With the semester coming to a rapid end, graduating seniors are faced with identifying their next big step into the world. For some, that next step is graduate school and for others the future lies in wading into the workforce. And that means employment interviews — countless employment interviews. With that reality in mind, comping Theatre major Zoe Aaron, '13, could not have directed and shared a more timely play than Jean-Claude van Itallie's *Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors* this past weekend.

Yet, to strictly label *Interview* as a play does not entirely do it justice. *Interview* was not a typical production built around a core narrative. Instead it was a jarring piece framed more by ideas and movement that took the audience for a ride through the satiric, chaotic worlds of employment interviews, stressors, consumerism and war set in 1960's metropolitan America, topics that are still relevant today.

From the moment the actors appeared on stage in single-file to the moment when they filed back out, *Interview* was a non-stop rush. The action was sparked by a series of simultaneous interviews, featuring four actors as prospective employers and four as prospective employees, including a scrubwoman, a house-painter, a banker, and a lady's maid. As the impersonal interviews overlapped and interwove one another, the cast soon took the action out of the office and into the bustling streets. The initial characters dissolved into a collage of various personas, ranging from a woman asking for directions to the subway to a candidate running for political office, all embroiled in the frustrations of contemporary city life.

In the span of its 35 minute run-time, there was little to no rest for the actors who were constantly on the move, taking the audience from interviews, to a therapy session, to witnessing a switchboard operator's heart-attack, to a swanky party. Regardless of the fact that this was a high-energy show, all of the actors' performances remained strong, energetic, and engaging with few stumbles along the way. Undoubtedly, the cast's enthusiasm and energy were contagious. Indeed, this was not a show intended for the audience to sit and absorb, but meant to throw the viewers into some sort of awareness.

One of the more striking elements of the production that helped it to stand apart from other Allegheny productions was its strong focus on alienation, for the audience as well as the characters. There are countless moments depicting the

characters unable to effectively communicate with one another. *Interview* exhibited this characteristic time and again, particularly within moments when the actors broke from the present scene and dispersed, wandered the space and directly addressed audience members.

While the performance as a whole was dynamic on its own

merit, it was undoubtedly bolstered by Aaron's use of an enclosed performance space, Vukovich 107, and minimal use of props rather than the open, expansive stage. Audience members lined opposite sides of the space, manipulating an intimate atmosphere juxtaposed with the vulnerable and stifling realms of both the interview and the cityscape. Needless to say, the set was smartly tailored to the show.

Interview proved itself to be a unique and alluring, if not a challenging, production and provided space for the cast and director to reveal commendable talent. For such a short production, it certainly packed a punch.

“ *Interview* proved itself to be a unique and alluring, if not a challenging, production and provided space for the cast and director to reveal commendable talent

”