ARTISTIC LICENSE OR LICENSE TO KILL?
REINTERPRETATION AS A DIRECTOR’S TOOL

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Theatre has always been a subjective art form. Everyone has his or her own standards for judging and comparing theatre productions, and their own guidelines for what a specific production should accomplish. This subjectivity stems largely from the fact that, by its very nature, theatre cannot be experienced by every audience in the same way. It is ephemeral—live performance is registered and recognized in the moment, after all; nothing can truly capture the essence of a piece once it has ended. Return to watch another performance of the same play another night and you will not, in fact, witness the exact same event. There will be subtle differences, even if only in the minutiae of the experience. A performance also has the potential to be deeply personal, since every participant and audience member brings his or her own life experiences into the event. The task of the creative team then is to work together toward a shared interpretation, to present a cohesive performance narrative. Although every member of a production shares in the common interpretation of the work, the interpretation of a specific performance is ultimately informed by the director. The director’s interpretation will shape all aspects of a production and, in doing so, will also shape the lens through which the audience views the work.

Because of the subjectivity of interpretation, directors will approach the same work in many different ways. Simply by being different human beings with different
life experiences, directors will read different meanings in the same text. This is especially true of classical texts, where the director is far removed from the original writing and production. We can only study the text and produce our own interpretation. One director might see *Hamlet* as an exploration of judicial justice vs. blood justice, another as a play about familial relations, and yet another about the machinations of monarchical politics. These three directors will construct three different interpretations for performance, each with a distinct focus, and this diversity of theme is part of what draws us to the theatre. By allowing artists and audiences alike to project their own interpretations onto the text, theatre has the ability to reach a wide variety of audiences with the same story.

The ability to interpret different meanings from a text is not without dangers. Another person, a playwright, has written the text with which a director is working (unless it is his or her own work). If the playwright is not present for the rehearsal process, a director’s interpretation might be far from what was originally intended by the playwright. It is the task of a director to research, interpret, advocate, and sometimes even edit for the playwright. Arguably, the director’s interpretation of classical works allows for a wider scope of thematic foci simply because the playwright is more removed from the process and the director is responsible for reinterpreting the text. The director must advocate for the playwright and the play. The director has many responsibilities to the playwright, to the audience, and to the production. A director must try to present the playwright intended, while creating a work that audiences will enjoy, and also creating a production that is fulfilling for all involved. Managing all of these responsibilities is a balancing act that can easily leave a director hanging in midair, especially when
reinterpreting a text in a radically different way. Moving a text to a different time period or framing it a new way alters the way the play comes across. Can a director re-invent while still being true to the play? Can balancing the text with new ideas make a piece more accessible and relevant to an audience?

This study approaches these questions in two ways: the first is an analytical look at the director’s function in a production, and his relationship to both playwright and audience. By defining a director’s job, we can illuminate the limits placed on that role when approaching a work. The second approach is a practical examination of the process, documenting my experiences directing a modernized Agamemnon. This documentation consists of a production diary, production photos to illustrate the performance, and a transcript of an actor feedback session which provided more insight into the creative process of remaking a work. Together, these approaches create a way to examine the director’s function in reinterpreting a work and the merits and dangers of that undertaking. Remaking a work can create theatre that is accessible, relevant, and exciting, but only if a director is judicious.
CHAPTER 2

THE DIRECTOR AND THE PLAYWRIGHT

To understand why a director might seek to re-invent a work, we need to fully understand the director’s role in a production. On the most basic level, she is responsible for facilitating the transition from text on a page to a realized live production. But how do we define that work? What critical language can we use since the language delineates levels of freedom, for example, as it reveals perceptions of a director’s position in the creative process.

On the simplest level, one can take the view of a director as translator. This person’s task is to bring the text from a literary language to a performative and visual one. Mark Batty puts it, a director-translator performs “an operation similar to that of a translator bringing a text into a new language. […] A director also works at capturing the crucial something that has been inspired in him or her by the text, rather than verbal accuracy, which is perhaps less essential (Hall 390).” Like a translator, this view of the director makes him or her responsible for preserving a playwright’s message as it moves from one language to another; making sure nothing is ‘lost in translation.’ The director-translator, in this view, serves the text.

The term translator can be problematic, however, downplaying the role of the director as an artist in his own right. The mission of “serving the text” implies the director is subservient to the original author of the piece, a piece that has an “original meaning” which can be determined. Hall, in fact, rejects the notion of what he calls
“director’s theatre—in the sense that what we’re interested in is not what the author meant, not what the audience want to apprehend of what the author meant, what we’re interested in is the director’s subjective response to the material (393).” Hall argues that subjective interpretations by directors should be avoided. In his view, director-translators do not alter the text they are translating; they are there to serve the work itself. When faced with a text by Eugene O’Neill, for example, the director-translator acts as if the directions are a Rosetta stone, inasmuch as it is assumed plays have “original intent” and that those intentions can be determined by subsequent readers. Even a play that does not contain specific notes and instructions from the playwright obliges the director-translator to “serve the play” by assuming it has one, clear meaning or intention. What is unsatisfactory about this model is not just that it restricts the importance of the director to the production process, but that it promotes an erroneous view of plays and playwriting.

A second, more complex approach views the director as an adapter. When one moves a piece from one medium to another, such as when a novel becomes a film, there is great license for change. Film operates within strict temporal limits, for example, whereas novels do not. Novels do not have the visual advantage of performance-based mediums. Dramatic texts can be read, but they are written with performance in mind. Gaps in reading must be filled, design elements must be added, and actors are required to personate the characters. In the novel-to-film example, adaptation forces a collaborative model for creation, acknowledged by the crediting of the original author and the screenwriters, director, and editors. Those who produce theatre can appropriate the more
collaborative language of adaptation as a way to acknowledge and validate the process of making theatre out of drama.

Viewing the director as adapter has another advantage: theories of adaptation contain a vocabulary for the directing process. The language of adaptation provides a way to describe the creative process in theatre that dislodges the notion that texts have “original” and determinable meanings which can be preserved in their “purity,” and to which we must and can be “faithful”; a vocabulary to free theatrical work from limited modes of thinking. As Ludwig Wittgenstein stated, “The limits of my language means the limits of my world.” In the following chapter, I will use adaptation theories to describe reinterpretation.

Not surprisingly, some of the staunchest defenders of textual control and limited meaning are playwrights. Whether living or dead, some playwrights seek to maintain ultimate control over their works, presenting the dramatic text “as a set of instructions given by a writer to actors. Primarily, these instructions tell actors what to say, but also what to do, in the form of implicit or explicit stage directions (Puchner 294).” Martin Puchner also describes the often-turbulent relationship between director and playwright, and the historical power struggles between the two professions. He offers the following critique of the dramatic text as a set of instructions:

It was certainly bad for directors and actors, who carried out instructions without (much) creative freedom of their own. But it was also bad for dramatists. While it may look as if dramatists had all the power, with performance being merely the enactment of their instructions, this model
actually also degraded the dramatic text: drama had all the power, but it was nothing except a means to an end, and that end was performance. In an interesting twist, this meant that the dramatic text, despite its powerful position, could not achieve a literary integrity of its own. It was fully consumed by its functionality with respect to the stage. Put another way, the power of the dramatic text also constrained it, limiting it to a dictatorial role from which there was no escape (Puchner 295).

In the “text-as-instructions” model, the director can make very few decisions. The text and the production are locked together, and are viewed as one piece. According to Puchner, this model led to a rebellion against the dramatic text from directors such as Antonin Artaud. Seeking creative freedom, directors sought work that left room for interpretation and play, or devised works themselves. As an alternative for the director seeking freedom, Artaud’s view of ‘the death of the masterpiece’ eliminated much of the dramatic repertory. Part of what drives our field to continually revive pieces, however, is their ability to speak across time.

The language of adaptation can help reconcile text and production. When adapting across mediums, the source material and the adapted work are viewed as separate entities. We do not experience a film the way we experience a novel. We can hold multiple versions of the story within our heads. The distinction between source and adaptation should be applied to dramatic work as well. The performance is not only the text, and the text is not only the performance. They work together, but they can exist separately. Indeed, Puchner argues: “we can think of performing a text not as a process of
carrying out instructions, nor as one of filling in gaps, but as one of transformation and adaptation. The dramatic text is taken and transposed into a different medium, namely, that of the stage apparatus (296).” Dramatic literature can stand on its own as a field. We can study texts, unaltered, using only what the author provided. On the stage, however, the director should be using the text to craft a performance, not following an instruction manual. Matthew Earnest, a director known for his innovative spins on many classics, views the relationship this way:

Making theater is not a craft of owing anything to another artist. It’s a collaborative craft, and we discover together the best ways to express questions and ideas. Sometimes a key part of a story can be told by a designer, sometimes by a composer, sometimes by me, etc., but we’re a team, and we don’t owe each other anything. That said, if I’m working on a play that’s been written by somebody else, the very reason I’m working on it is because I think the writer’s ideas are important, so naturally I want to work in service of them. But the playwright isn’t a director. His job isn’t staging. He’s looking to me to realize his play in three dimensions and in real time. He doesn’t view me as an employee who works for him, but as another member of an artistic team. (Earnest).

Earnest’s model represents an ideal creative process: everyone is aware of his or her specific roles, and all recognize the limitations of their position.

Separating the directing and playwriting spheres does not imply directors should have carte blanche when dealing with another’s work. If we want to separate the roles
and allow directors more freedom, we cannot tip the scale in the other direction. The playwright’s contribution must be respected as well. Directors have a responsibility to tell the story the playwright set out to tell; if they wish to tell another story, there is an array of dramatic work from which to choose. Since the advent of the copyright, this issue has become even trickier to navigate—an issue to be addressed specifically later in this text. Unfortunately, in a field as subjective as theatre making, no simple rules dictate when a director has obscured the original play. As Puchner sees it, “adaptation occurs within a set of constraints. Some emanate from the (complete) text, others from the context of the adaptation and finally the nature of the two media—text, performance—between which the adaptation occurs. Modifying a famous line from Marx, I might say that it is the adaptors who make the adaptation, but not as they please (296).”

The roles of the director and the playwright do not have to be at odds. By a simple shift in perspective, we can honor both of their contributions simultaneously. Separating the text from the performance allows for both works to be examined independently, on their own merits. Directors then are not bound to a text, and can alter and arrange texts to suit a performance, while, at the same time, they are working within the confines of the playwright’s action and must use it as a guide. This shift in perspective not only allows us to reconcile these two positions in the creative team, but also allows us to find a new vocabulary for our work.
CHAPTER 3
REINTERPRETATION AS ADAPTATION

If we accept adaptation as a way to describe reinterpreting a work, the theories behind adaptation can be appropriated to guide a director in reinterpreting a text for performance. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon discusses the processes, motivations, and effects of adapting a work. Her findings, applied to a director’s process of reinterpretation, provide a vocabulary that allows for a simultaneous respect for the text and creative freedom. We can be resistant to altering a text or performance, and by viewing the work through her lens, we can free ourselves of this limited thinking.

Hutcheon argues adaptations have three characteristics. They are “acknowledged transposition[s] of a recognizable other work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation and/or salvaging, and an extended inter-textual engagement with adapted work (Hutcheon 8).” Similarly, a director takes a text and creates a new work: the live performance. She transposes the work into a new medium: the stage. He appropriates these works to serve to aesthetically round out a season or because the message speaks to him.

The last characteristic, an inter-textual engagement, may be of the most use to directors as a concept. Marianne McDonald states, “A myth consists of all of its versions (141).” Every interpretation is a palimpsest—something reused or altered but still bearing traces of its original form. An audience member coming to see a production of *Hamlet* is holding multiple versions in their head at once: the literary reading they did in class, a
community theatre production, a movie adaptation, *The Lion King*, etc. Of course, as Hutcheon notes, “If we do not know that what we are experiencing actually is an adaptation or if we are not familiar with the particular work that it adapts, we simply experience the adaptation as we would any other work (120).” It is with an unknowing audience that a director takes the most risk with a playwright’s work; they are presenting their version of the piece, colored by their own aesthetics and biases, and an unknowing audience may take the production as canonical. In truth, every production takes such a risk; the only difference is the degree from which the director departs from the text. The palimpsest comes into play the most with a knowing audience, which, hopefully, includes the creative team. The specific production becomes part of a rich history of the work, simultaneously containing all versions of the work that have been read, performed, studied, and even adapted, and these versions are usually plentiful.

Why do we have so many frames of reference for a work, especially those pieces considered iconic or seminal? What is it about these works that draws us to continually restage them and, in the process, reinvent and reinterpret them? On an almost subconscious level, we derive enjoyment from the retelling of known stories. Hutcheon encourages us to remember our time as children, and the joy we experienced in hearing tales told to us again and again, and then appropriating them and retelling them. “Think of a child’s delight in hearing the same nursery rhymes or reading the same books over and over. Like ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next (114).” As directors, we enjoy retelling known works, and we recognize the enjoyment audiences
receive in hearing them. The key to recreating these works is repetition without replication (7). Because we do not seek to retell the exact same way each time, a series of productions are ‘variations on a theme.’

Aside from the pleasure and comfort repetition offers, there is another reason we seek to reengage with some works time and time again. These works can speak across generations and remain relevant. McDonald argues that, “The power of Greek tragedy is that the perception peculiar to these ancient writers can still be shared by modern audiences: it is as close to universal truth as we are likely to get […] I maintain that communication can be established between different peoples and cultures, and certain dramatic performances accomplish this (21).” She is speaking explicitly about ancient dramas of course, but this statement can easily apply to all forms of drama.

Knowing the motivations behind adaptation is useful for a director, because it allows her to examine her own reasons for selecting a work. Is it purely because she enjoys the work, and wishes to retell it? Is she interested in making a splash? Adaptation for adaptation’s sake can quickly run afoul, as evidenced by my practical experience with *Agamemnon*. If a director knows that there are psychological motivations that cause an audience to enjoy an adaptation, however, the prospect of presenting one is less frightening.

With the “why” of adaptation understood, we can explore the “how.” Robert Brustein presents two routes for directing adaptations of a work: “simile” directing and “metaphor” directing (116). Simile directing includes works that are simply transposed to a new place or time. Minor adjustments, or changes that leave the bulk of the text
unaltered, fall in to this category. Brustein refers to this as “a shorthand way of showing how the material of a classical play has topical meaning for modern audiences (118).” He is dismisses simile directing as simplistic, calling it “rarely more than a novelty of surfaces, skin-deep and marred by traces of voguishness (117).” While this technique can be seen as a stunt, transposing only to cause a stir, it can also be used to renew interest in a piece. Simile directing can make a work that has previously seemed dated feel relevant and timely again. The ability to reinvigorate a work with a simple change of time or place can be useful to a director who wants to reinterpet a text without largely altering the text.

Metaphorical directing covers broader changes to a text. This is a more radical approach in which the director is as much the playwright as the original playwright. There may be sweeping changes to the text and to conventional staging techniques. “It is possible to argue that, for all their liberties with texts and deviations from received notions, they come closest to the spiritual core of the plays (119).” Deconstructing a text may help us get to the heart of the piece. Simile and metaphor directing suggest two routes for adapting a piece, both with merits and dangers. The simile model will be most familiar to audiences, since it is extremely popular with Shakespeare’s works, but it can be superficial. Metaphorical directing, on the other hand, can be overwrought or even obtuse, but it can also be extremely revealing and enlightening.

Applying adaptation theory to our directorial work, and adopting Brustein’s vocabulary for its process creates a means whereby a director can examine her work. By using the language of adaptation, she puts herself in a position to both respect the playwright’s original creation and form her own. Brustein’s simile and metaphor
directing offer two paths to approaching a work, allowing a director to choose the level at which they want to alter a text. Adaptation theory puts emphasis on the playwright and the director as separate but equal, while Brustein offers two alternatives for this adaptation. Together they form a loose set of creative limits within which directors can operate, though creative limitations are not the only limitations placed on directors.
CHAPTER 4
CLASSICAL VS. CONTEMPORARY

The most common experience of reinterpretation is a simile performance of Shakespeare. More contemporary works—in this context meaning works published post 1900—do not seem to undergo as much revision as the classics do. Why do directors limit themselves to Shakespeare and other classical works when they think of revision, rather than works from all periods as matters of reinterpretation? If our guidelines for reinterpretation apply to one dramatic period, they should apply to all.

Certainly, adaptations of classical texts have proven popular. Mary Zimmerman’s *Metamorphoses*, created from Ovid’s series of poems, is one famous example. Suzuki Tadashi has also created a number of works that blend Greek texts with both traditional Japanese performance techniques and modern settings, including *The Trojan Woman*, *Clytemnestra*, and *Bacchae*. The Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project is devoted to cataloguing the various ways Shakespeare has been adapted across the country and currently contains information for over 530 productions (Canadian Shakespeare Project).

Of course, contemporary adaptations have had their share of fame as well. Strong examples can be found in revivals of musical theatre, as songs are often cut or added. Sam Mendes’s *Cabaret* cut songs from the original, added songs written for the film adaptation, and reinstated “I Don’t Care Much,” which had been cut from the original production. These kinds of alterations aren’t unusual. As Peter Marks observes:
A museum curator might be drawn and quartered for suggesting the application to a Jackson Pollock of a few more squiggly lines. An architect might have his drafting board confiscated for trying to replace the smoky windows of the Seagram Building with mirrored glass. Even the practice of bowdlerizing Shakespeare and other writers of classic plays and operas, so prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries, seems positively quaint these days. But in musical theater, tinkering with -- even shouting over -- the voices of the originators is not only acceptable, it's expected. In the name of what "works," whether that refers to a musical's structural logic, believability of character, duration of performance or sensitivity to the feelings of audience members of every persuasion, producers and directors, writers and orchestrators are blue-penciling old scripts and scores as never before (Marks).

We expect a revival to be different from the original; it often has to change to reflect the times. “I’m an Indian Too” from Annie Get Your Gun will not please the early twenty-first century, racially sensitive audience. The ability to capture the spirit of the times was part of the wonder of Mendes’s Cabaret. As Michikio Kakutani notes, “The show's evolution serves as a glittering mirror of the theater's changing Zeitgeist -- of how both our esthetic tastes and our attitudes toward sex and history have grown tougher and more explicit over the last half century. Each version of the material was considered startling in its day; each version, in turn, was superseded by one that was more radical and harder edged (Kakutani).” To stay relevant, shows must change and adapt.
Not all changes are acceptable, however. *Cabaret* had to adapt to the times to maintain its original hard edge. Imagine a production of *The Sound of Music*, set on European rubble, with a multiracial cast, where the text has been cut and reordered, including the addition of a scene in which Max Detweiler is shot by a Nazi, as occurred in the production by Kevin Moriarty (Hillman 4). Amanda Dehnert directed a production of *Annie* in which the title character begins the play in an abandoned theatre space and remembers her time in the orphanage. After the happy ending, Annie awakes in the theatre—her rescue was only a dream (5). Radical adaptations of musicals are not attempted nearly as often as a classical works are adapted to modern settings.

The main reason for this difference, of course, is the copyright. Classical works are, on the whole, public domain, and can be cut, revised, and altered at will. Directors need not fear legal action from a playwright or a playwright’s estate. Matthew Earnest endorses this freedom of alteration, saying, “The reason Shakespeare has achieved greatness is because there were no copyright laws in his day, and his works were allowed to fly around the world like rare birds, to be reinterpreted, and to acquire their greatness (Earnest).” Contemporary shows, however, all fall under copyright and royalty issues apply. Works not in the public domain require a license to be performed, and many have safeguards against changes built into their contracts (Scott 1). Directors must clear changes to the script through licensing agencies or face the repercussions. Unfortunately, this can be a situation where it is not what you know, but who you know. “Venue has much to do with whether or not rights-holders grant permission for radical productions […] a high-profile theatre […] brings more focused attention and scrutiny. Thus rights-
holders are more likely to find out about changes, and are more likely to worry about their impact. At the same time, higher-profile artists are more likely to receive permission for daring choices (Hillman 2).” Smaller theatres or newer directors may not be able to receive permission for more radical reinterpretations.

The issue of licensing is another area when directors can benefit from the lessons of adaptation. Instead of seeking the rights to perform an altered version of the texts, we might seek the rights to use the piece as source material. Just as a film studio would purchase the rights to a novel, theatre makers can seek to create their own texts. The original playwright gets credit for his or her work in its original form, the way it was intended. The director becomes the author associated with this version of the text. Perhaps they will devise a work using the text as inspiration, or even write another work using similar plot elements in homage to the original work, such as Shakespeare’s R&J by Joe Calarco. Devising or writing a new text eliminates part of the special relationship between director and playwright, but can offer a welcome compromise when the two visions are set too far against each other.

The playwright’s licensing agreement is not the only obstacle to restaging a contemporary work: the audience can present another challenge. Contemporary pieces, especially those in the musical theatre canon, are well recognized, and the damage a radical piece can do the image of these shows is risky, especially from a financial standpoint. “Audience expectations are valued because they hold the key to profits. Individual production profits are not at stake, but rather the damage to the brand at large
(Hillman 6).” Securing the rights to create an adaptation and advertising it as such can help sidestep these expectations.

Ultimately, however, the degree to which the audience’s expectations factor into decisions will be decided on a case-by-case basis. As Matthew Earnest observes: “Playing to the crowd has nearly killed our craft in America, because you’re playing to only one very specific crowd, essentially excluding all other points of view and ways of thinking, not encouraging original thought, and strangling the life out of the event.” Everyone experiences a work differently and society consists of many different cultures and viewpoints that coexist simultaneously. Our work should reflect this diversity.
CHAPTER 5

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE: AGAMEMNON

Show Diary

11/7/11- It’s been a hard road to get to this point- the first rehearsal. I’ve got a cast of nine, mostly women. I had wanted twelve, split evenly. The School of Theatre and Dance has a rule that freshmen can only be involved in one show per semester, and unfortunately, since this project is coming towards they end they are persona non grata. Most of the upperclassmen have other projects as well. But c’est la vie. Part of directing is making due with what you have. I’ve got nine talented actors who are willing to work around the fifty million other things they’re doing. And I’m extremely thankful for that.

The first read-through serves for us to get comfortable with the language (it’s a fairly modern adaption by Robert Fagles, so this isn’t too steep a challenge), as well as an opportunity to see if cuts need to be made. They do. Because of the difficulties gathering actors and trying to work around their schedules, I’ve got a little over a month to pull this show together. Doable, yes. Intimidating, even more so. Most of the cuts I’m making come from the choral odes- the theatre nerd in me shrieks against the injustice. Now comes the moment for me to get off my high horse about preserving the text. Alright, you win. Sometimes form has to follow function. But that doesn’t mean I don’t feel guilty. This isn’t a five hour production of Hamlet I’m being faced with cutting… this is a barely two hour production of Agamemnon. Lesson #1: Sometimes the changes aren’t about aesthetics: they’re about logistics.
11/8/11- Scratch that. Eight actors. Deep, calming breaths. It’s a challenge, for sure. But we’ve barely started rehearsing. A little reorganization and redistribution of lines and voila! We’re back on track. I only have four actors who could attend rehearsal tonight, so we quickly ran through their lines, had a quick lesson in the background mythology of the play, and parted ways. We won’t meet again until next week—too many of them are involved with Kent State’s *A Chorus Line*. For now, I’m hoping they will spend at least a little time getting familiar with the script. They don’t have an extremely long time to learn the lines, and I need to block quickly. It’s hard to really start working on emotionality and movement when we’re buried in scripts.

I’m worried about my cast. Not the actors themselves- I trust them all completely. But I really hate that there are so few men to work with. How can I highlight the abuses men force on women without any men? In an ideal world I’d do something cool with mask work; females portraying males, and the actions that go along with being a male… But I don’t have the time or the resources for that, and I’m afraid that if I use women as men it will look muddy and confusing. I think I’m going to have to look at shifting my focus, which is disappointing. But hey, if I can read one interpretation about gender relations, I can read another one about gender-neutral politics. Sometimes, subjectivity is a good thing. I can see where this presents a problem, though. If directors always played fast and loose changing themes to fit the resources, we would end up with some pretty wild and ill-fitting interpretations of texts. What? You didn’t know that *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is really about the evils of pharmaceutical companies animal testing?
Because we have some costumes left over from Honk... Lesson #2: Make sure your theories are based on the text, not what’s convenient.

11/14/11- Tonight was supposed to be the first up-on-our-feet rehearsal. I was only working with a small group- Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, and the Chorus Leader. It was made difficult by the fact that they had to keep popping in and out for auditions for Nathan the Wise. The result was only having Agamemnon and Clytemnestra together for about an hour and a half. But we use what we have. We did manage to block Agamemnon’s entrance through his exit into the palace. Little blessings. We had some fun playing with Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s relationship: we’re portraying them as the ultimate political power couple. Michelle and Barack, Hillary and Bill, Jackie and JFK… we played around a lot with that imagery. Agamemnon is turning into a pompous political cartoon, and I like it.

11/15/11- I again only worked with a small group tonight: the actors playing Cassandra, Clytemnestra, Agamemnon/Aegisthus, and the chorus Leader. My goal is to get their blocking roughed out, and we can fill the chorus in around them. Rehearsal was again disrupted by actors going to callbacks for Nathan the Wise. Academic theatre- the land of scheduling conflicts. On the plus side, we did get all of their scenes rough-blocked. Now all I have to do is get the chorus in place and we will be ready to start running the show and tweaking.

There’s been something really interesting happening in our rehearsal. The first section of the show, up to Cassandra’s first lines is... funny. Really funny. Agamemnon has turned into a strutting, primping politician, and the chorus his adoring fans. It wasn’t
how I intended to approach it. My goal was to strip away the boastful, presentational style that we sometimes fall into with classic pieces. But taking that away left a void; the actors didn’t know what to fill the lines with. By adding in modern references—it’s a campaign speech he’s making; you two are a “power couple”—it revealed something innately funny about appearances and political dealings. For me, the reason we keep staging these works is because something in them speaks to us; we want to highlight the themes that still have resonance. In translating these themes into a modern context, some of them managed to become a little ridiculous, and we ran with that. It’s a departure from traditional style, and it kind of bends the genre, but I think there’s something fresh and fun happening here. It’s more than a little freeing to have an anything goes policy on working with the material.

Lesson #3: Sometimes changes happen by accident.

11/16/11- I worked with a small group again tonight—the chorus. In keeping the chorus, the piece retains a lot of its original structure, which provides a nice balance to the fact that we’re playing fast and loose with it stylistically. We have a very small chorus for a Greek tragedy: five, including the chorus leader, the watchman, and the herald. But that’s okay! Because it is such a small group, we were able to spend some time developing a character for each of the chorus members; we discussed how each member felt about Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Cassandra, and how that would shape their reactions to various scenes. I think this gives a really nice depth to the group scenes; the chorus isn’t just background. I also made a change by switching up some dialogue. Often when the chorus speaks, I assigned the lines to one person, as opposed to the group. There are still moments when they all speak together, but those moments are fewer now. The actors are
doing a wonderful job taking this dialogue and making it fit into modern speech patterns, and we’ve been able to find a context for almost every scene. Unfortunately, this caused the moments when the chorus was speaking as one to feel clunky and out-of-place. To keep the conversational tone, I felt I had to break up those voices. More changes! It’s a chain reaction really, once I changed the way we did one scene, other parts didn’t fit together. I had to commit to the style I created, and follow through to make sure I didn’t end up with a disjointed piece. I think I’ll add an addendum on to lesson 3. Lesson #3a: It’s hard to change a piece halfway.

11/17/11- More academic theatre scheduling issues! It’s becoming a pattern. There was a lab show performance of Mr. Marmalade this evening; I want to encourage a supportive audience for all the work done at the school, so we went as a cast. We waited for the show to start by running through lines for about an hour, which is helpful for memorization if nothing else. I know the cast is worried about the lines. I believe part of the problem is their mental approach. “I have to learn all these lines of a Greek tragedy!”

The show right now is about an hour and fifteen minutes—if they approached it without fretting because it’s Greek, they might be more successful. Hopefully running it a few times will reveal that it’s not so scary. The lab show went longer than expected, eating up a large chunk of our rehearsal time. I dismissed the cast instead of trying to force a run through, because we were short on time, and their focus was shot from the show. At least we managed to get the line-through in. No big revelations today- creativity and inspiration are certainly crimped by a ticking clock. It’s strange- the freedom that an academic project provides (especially with no economic pressure) is also hindered by the
academic environment of opportunity, because there’s always another show, another audition, another test. What an interesting paradigm we have for academic theatre.

11/18/11- We almost had a full run with the entire cast today! We were just two actors short. I am excited and scared by the shape it’s taking. It’s different, and a bit quirky, and I’m interested to see how an audience reacts. But that scares me as well. It’s all fun and games when we’re toying with the script in rehearsal, but what happens when everyone else sees it? My biggest fear is that people will think it is a waste of time. Why would you find humor in this? Why would you bother doing it if you’re going to take away the big, dramatic style? I put myself in a tricky situation here: I set out to do something new, and now I’m afraid it’s too different. Getting this show up on its feet is going to take more courage than I thought. But I keep coming back to this question: why am I doing this? Or, better yet, whom am I doing it for? If the answer is for others… I have bigger concerns than my show. But if I’m doing it for myself, it’s right. I’m having a lot of fun abandoning tradition and structure. Our rehearsals are so playful! There’s a freedom to try anything, so much risk-taking. I love it, and I’m going to see it through. I set out to do something different, didn’t I? Well, here it is. Lesson #4: Be prepared to stick to your guns.

11/21/11- I didn’t see my cast today. Why? More school auditions, of course! I’m the assistant director for Ragtime, and was sitting in on the auditions. I left the cast in my capable A.D’s hands. It’s a nerve-wracking thing, putting your trust in someone else like that. But she’s been at every rehearsal, she knows where we’re going, she knows the blocking, and most importantly, she knows me. Besides, worst-case scenario she makes
some changes I don’t like, and I change them back the next time we see each other, right? Unfortunately, I won’t see the cast until after Thanksgiving Break. Between callbacks on Tuesday and classes being dismissed on Wednesday at noon, we’re going to go a long stretch without seeing each other. Let’s hope they study their lines while they’re eating turkey.

11/28/11- We’re into the home stretch! And, of course, we still don’t have everyone. I lost two chorus girls who are working on a dance show, and one to the flu. On the plus side, the actors are really close to being off book. That’s a large stress off my shoulders. Today was mostly a day for catching up and refreshing. Because we’ve had actors in and out with auditions, illness, and our Thanksgiving break, I wanted to make sure everyone was clear on staging, intentions, and the atmospheres we were trying to create. The staging is very simple, but there are a few bits of comic business that are very specific. The timing has to be precise, or the joke won’t read. We also have some stage fighting at the end (pushing and shoving, nothing too extreme), and it really can’t be sloppy. Ironing out these technical issues took most of our time, but it looks much cleaner and more together now.

11/29/11- The flu is ripping through the cast. Tonight, to try to allow for rest, we spent the time running lines. The staging for this show is pretty simple, so I’m not concerned that leaving it for a night will hurt us. Everyone is so run down with those end-of semester blues, I think it was a good choice. When I was getting ready to dismiss my actors, one of them stopped to ask me how I felt about the shape the show was taking. Before rehearsals started, he and I had a discussion about my concept. I had wanted it to
be a stripped down, bare-bones production. Characters would come from the audience, almost manifesting in the space. We keep revisiting these pieces because we can’t let the characters go; they resonate with us even today. So the mere act of being in the space, with some props, could call them forth. He asked me how the new comical spin in the beginning fit into that. I told him part of it was the translation of old ideas into a modern setting. For me, the hero worship and adoration that these people had for their kings doesn’t resonate quite the same with us. Our closest thing to royalty is our politicians, and we are merciless. These grand political figures are comical to us. We view power differently today, so if I truly want this to read with a modern slant, I’m going to spin Agamemnon in that light. I want this piece to feel relevant and real. So now Agamemnon is a political personality, and his followers close to groupies. The entire piece has not turned into a farce; there are moments of pain as well. But I think the balance this creates is intriguing.

11/30/11- A rehearsal with almost everyone, and nobody (besides me) is sick? Has Christmas come early? We were able to run the show once through, and then worked a couple sections to clean up some of the blocking. I’m very pleased with where we are. I’m not biting my nails. I have one actor doubling as both Agamemnon and Aegisthus. I spent a good deal of time with him today working on making sure the two characters are very distinct. Originally, they had been. But over the course of the last few rehearsals they’d been starting to blend together again. We aren’t doing anything with make-up to disguise his face; a costume change is all we’ll have, so the transformation in his personality has to be very clear. We’re working on the idea of Agamemnon being all
flash, and no substance. Aegisthus, on the other hand, is emotional, raw, with no decorum or tact whatsoever. Being able to not worry about text or specifics of movement, and really focus on the characters is excellent. Now that we’re getting down to the wire, I’m hoping this is the type of rehearsal we’ll be able to have from now on. We’re mostly healthy, and the dance show closes this week, so I’ll get my two chorus girls back. I should be out of the woods as far as conflicts go. Full speed ahead!

12/1/11- I spoke too soon. There was one more audition that I lost my Cassandra to. But we were still able to run the show with relatively few snags. Today was the first time I could sit quietly without stopping to correct anything major, and just take notes. We’re in the fine-tuning stage now, which is wonderful. My Agamemnon/Aegisthus took the notes from the other night and the distinction became much more clear. We worked for a while at the end with the final confrontation between Clytemnestra, Aegitshus, and the Chorus. Part of the issue is that I have three men on stage, and I’m looking for massive levels of rage and testosterone. Not that women aren’t capable of rage; my Clytemnestra has plenty. But the three girls in my chorus are quieter women. I only have one of them in rehearsal right now, which is exacerbating the problem. I need the energy to feel like there’s a massive crowd whipped into frenzy. I must have looked insane, because I thought the clearest way to get my point across was to show what I meant. So I hopped up and started yelling with them. Hopefully, they’ve got it… and can do it better than I did!

12/2/11- Another quick run-through for line purposes tonight. I’m fairly confident everyone will be memorized by Monday. I never doubted that they could do it… okay,
maybe I did. I knew I was asking a lot; to see them rise to the challenge without complaint is wonderful. I had to leave them with my assistant director partway through. We touched base later, and apparently the cast did the run almost entirely without scripts, and there were no blocking corrections. I’m really excited about next week; nervous for people to see it, but really excited to have everyone together and put the final pieces in place.

12/5/11- I may have lost my mind today. I decided that we would have a “Greek Travesty” rehearsal where anything was fair game and they could play however they wanted. I thought for sure everything would be taken too far—I only did it because I wanted to try to shake things up and experiment. I’ve been so afraid of pushing too far, and finally it just got exhausting. I decided to just let it go and have fun. And it was great! The actors were surprisingly conservative, so nothing got out of hand. Instead we found some really solid moments, and developed them into some wonderful scenes.

I kept almost everything they came up with. One thing I discovered was that only when the actors weren’t afraid of being judged would they push themselves. Our Cassandra has been very reserved; understandable, considering how intimidating that role can be. It’s over the top and highly dramatic, she wavers between madness and ecstasy. By telling the actress she could not go too far, that if it felt silly that was okay, she removed her self-censorship. I told her to keep everything she did. It feels silly because we don’t do these kinds of scenes as much in contemporary theatre. This lost in madness, calling out to the gods, over-the-top in delirium character is a bit beyond the usual, especially when we’re trying to make Agamemnon fit into a modern context. But by
letting her know she could not go too far, and her attempting to make it silly, we found a really wonderful level. What felt silly to the actress actually played very realistically. Who knew? It felt so freeing to fully take the brakes off. I’m growing more confident with every rehearsal.

12/6/11- The end-of-semester blues have firmly taken root in our rehearsal space. Cues were late, there was no energy; if the evening had a soundtrack, it would have been that “wamp wamp waaaaaaamp” you hear after a bad joke. I believe part of it was that they are trying to not use their scripts for the first time, and that creates some bumps. But I think part of it is just the running down that occurs at the end of the semester. We pushed through the run, and then did notes. I decided that for the second run, we would do a stop-and-go. I would move to sections I thought needed cleaning, and skip over ones that looked solid. Amazingly, the cast got a second wind. Maybe it was the fact that I gave a lecture on the importance of tension… who knows? But the result was great. Blocking looked sharper and more purposeful, and the chorus didn’t look so blah. The danger of the Greek chorus is that they go long periods of time without talking, and their faces can sometimes look bored. But they were so engaging the second time around, really involved in the scene. And they managed to do it all without pulling focus!

12/7/11- Running the show quickly before you go to another rehearsal? Stressful. Forgotten props? Upsetting. Every actor being buried in his or her script? Nerve-wracking. Forgetting to take notes because you’re having so much fun watching? I’ll take it. They integrated all the cleaning notes from last night, and it looked very sharp. I’m still nervous about the bumps that are coming from forgotten lines, but they are handling
them without losing focus or intensity. I’m debating the merits of letting them hold
scripts on Saturday… one actress broke down in tears because she is convinced that she’s
let me down. If they hold scripts, big deal! I set out to see what happens when you play
around with the interpretation and staging of a classical show, not prove an actor can
learn lines in four weeks. It’s an academic project, not a commercial venture. My thesis
topic was not “How fast an actor can memorize lines?”

12/8/11- We had to have another quick rehearsal tonight because three actors and I had to
go to another rehearsal for *Ragtime*. We made a few blocking adjustments, which I hate
doing so close to the performance, but I think they are going to pay off. I also gave them
the go ahead to use scripts on one condition: they put their lines in something their
characters would carry. Our Chorus Leader is putting his in a textbook because he is the
most educated, the Watchman in a newspaper, etc. I think this is a really fun compromise:
the stress is off their shoulders, and we get some fun props.

12/9/11- Our last rehearsal has come and gone! I need to start by saying that the cast
responded to covering their scripts with creativity I LOVE. Two of the girls created
“Argos Girl” magazines, complete with cover shot of Agamemnon. The Watchman
stapled a picture of Agamemnon to the cover of his newspaper, which conceals his script.
The Leader placed his inside a theatre history textbook. Agamemnon has copied his lines
onto his Kindle, which is contained in a sleek leather portfolio. We spent some time
playing with light settings in the black box to find the best level, and then started spacing.
It’s a much wider space than we’ve been in, so we have to adjust. After spacing, we ran
the show.
12/10/11- We have arrived at the end of the line. Both shows have come and gone, and now I can step back and look at the production. I taped both performances, and I feel a bit like a coach looking at game footage. It’s much easier to analyze a production when you’re removed from the chaos and excitement of the performance; I can remove myself from the emotion and look at the production critically. Overall, I was pleased with what we accomplished. Unfortunately, the pleased feeling comes with a caveat. I am happy with the product “all things considered.” We fought against limited time and resources the entire time, and that fight shows in the production. But I admire many of the performances my actors gave, and there were staging elements I will revisit in the future. So the best way to view the project is probably as a blueprint; the groundwork has been laid for a fully realized future production. But I’m reminding myself why I took the project on in the first place- for my thesis. I wanted to see what happened if I played around with standard interpretations of the piece. The end result ended up not being that revolutionary. I preserved the Greek chorus, albeit in slightly modified form: they spoke as individuals very often, with most references to the gods and ancient mythology removed. This resulted in a chorus that seemed very grounded in the moment of the play, and tightened the plot. Our Agamemnon became a strutting rock star, probably more suited to a comedy than a tragedy, but I really enjoyed seeing him this way. We as an audience don’t have the same unified kings and gods that Aeschylus’s audience would have had, and I believe that presenting Agamemnon in this way helped the audience identify his position in society. Our Cassandra was sassier, bolder, less pitiful, and I think that presents a stronger model for the modern woman.
My one true regret was that the themes I really wanted to highlight—those dealing with the subjugation of woman—were eventually abandoned. With a stage full of women, I struggled to showcase man’s dominant influence. Instead, we focused on the image of those in power, and the political aspects of the piece. This position put men again as the focus of the piece; I victimized the female characters myself because of resource constraints. Looking back, I’m sure there was a way to bring those themes to the fore even with a largely female cast, but I was so afraid of the looming deadline that I panicked and went an easier route. My final lesson? Make sure you keep your goal in sight, or your show will drift off course.

At the end of the day, it was an experience I needed. I’ve been blessed enough to have my work produced with relatively few hiccups, and I know that this will not always be the case. To have a performance that was a struggle from start to finish helped me learn to deal with conflict quickly and efficiently, and I’m grateful for that. And I learned some lessons about reinventing a work that can apply to my work as a whole. Let’s sum them up, shall we? Presenting: “Life Lessons from Agamemnon.” Or, “How I Spent My Fall Semester.”

• Lesson #1- Sometimes the changes aren’t about aesthetics: they’re about logistics.
  ○ As a director, you will occasionally have to be the voice of practicality. If you approach Mary Zimmerman’s Metamorphoses, and the space cannot support water, you will be doing a different production. Changes that appear innovative and unique may need to be made for practical reasons—embrace it! What will be, will be, and being able to make those decisions
quickly and decisively will allow you more time to focus on other aspects of the production. Another practical aspect of altering a text can include a shortened runtime. The majority of audiences will lose patience when a production starts to move past two hours. Occasionally, we must cut to keep the work moving at an acceptable pace.

- **Lesson #2** - Make sure your theories are based on the text, not what’s convenient.
  - In an ideal world, you will always be able to do the works you want to do. But in actuality, there may be times where the piece you want to direct is no the piece you have the resources for. We should not try to shoehorn a work into fitting the resources we have. If you are making changes and cuts because you feel it enhances the piece, proceed. If you are doing it because this is the only way you can do the production, it might be time to rethink. Color-blind *Othello* will lose some of its punch.

- **Lesson #3** - Sometimes changes happen by accident.
  - In an environment of free play, which is very important to me as a director, sometimes risky decisions end up working in wonderful ways. It wasn’t what was intended from the start, but now that the choice was made, a new direction can be taken.

- **Lesson #3a** - It’s hard to change a work halfway.
  - Following from Lesson 3, changes have a ripple effect. Once a change has been made in one part of a production, that change is going to affect the way other decisions are made. Re-interpretation isn’t necessarily an all-or-
nothing scenario—there can still be a blending of old and new—but the production is one functioning machine. Change the way one piece is moving, and the others will adjust.

• Lesson #4- Be prepared to stick to your guns.
  o If you are afraid of the presenting the finished product, why did you start the project in the first place? You are your harshest critic. So be brave! Risks are a part of theatre. If you decide to take on a reinterpretation, you will need to be prepared to defend it. Even if the end result wasn’t what you were hoping for, you poured your heart into this work, and hopefully you learned something. You have nothing to be scared of.

• Lesson #5- Make sure you keep your goal in sight, or your show will drift off course.
  o I am always in support of having an environment of play, and being open to suggestions and changes. But you need to remember why you chose a piece in the first place. If you are constantly changing direction and shifting genre and style, the end result could be messy and unfinished. Always keep your over-arching themes in mind. Are your decisions serving that theme? If not, why? Make sure you are constantly evaluating your work as a whole.
Talkback Transcript

The following conversation was recorded on December 10^{th}, 2011. It follows a discussion between myself and the cast about their experience. The goal of this talkback was to gain insight from other opinions within the creative process, in order to compare their perceptions with my own.

SC: This is just for me to get feedback from you guys about the process and what it was like to tackle this in a different way. So, the floor is yours!

RE: As a director, I found the process interesting. Because as an actor I’m accustomed to working scene [by] scene through a process before you get to the runs, and that never happened here. As a director, I found the process interesting, only because of the fact that these days it’s so rare for directors to allow their cast, to have a say in what’s going on onstage. And to actually be willing to listen to what the actors have to say and say, “Hey sure, we’ll try it.” You know? People are so hell bent on this is my vision and we’re not going to stray from it, that it was nice to see that.

ME: Being in a show of yours before, it was new, because this was nothing like Psychosis…Coming into a tragedy and turning it into something else, it was great for me, and I think as well as everybody else to see what you could pull, and where you could pull it from. And then also be able to hear explanations for the shtick, and everything else that you could add in.

TW: We’re talking about classical, when it comes to classical pieces like this and classical characters, as an actor we have that approach that classical characters are all very one-sided, and all represent a very specific train of thought. And when we decided
to change that a little bit, there was a level of honesty that come forth, I think that was
different. Instead of being so upset because I’m a chorus member and my king is dead, I
was upset from a personal standpoint. And I think that what we’ve done with this is, um,
prove that the vehicle is not limited to the time, nor is it limited to the methods of the
time. Just because, um, you can modernize Agamemnon and still keep it very classical in
technique and approach, and we didn’t do that; we modernized it, and we also
modernized it from a creative and internal standpoint, in the realm of character.
SC: I really like what you said about approaching it differently process-wise. Seeing you
guys make three dimensional characters of out of people where you don’t necessarily
have a lot to make characters out of, the chorus. And I think Clytemnestra also came out
very sympathetic, and I think she can occasionally come off flat. As can your two
characters. Oh, I guess I should specify: Agamemnon and Aegisthus, can both read very
flat, because they don’t have very much to do. (Laughs) I think this definitely gave more
roundness to them. Especially seeing how defensive you got of Aegisthus into the
process. “He’s been through so much!”
CH: He has!
SC: I don’t know how people will react to this Cassandra, because she’s not weepy and
crazy and over the top. She had a lot of sass and spunk to her; it was a very modern
Cassandra.
SH: And I liked that I was able to take that approach with her, just because I feel like a
lot of the time when you think of Cassandra you think more of the weepy girl. So I liked
that I was able to kind of… she’s too strong; I feel like if she was this weepy girl she
wouldn’t have deceived Apollo in the first place. You have to look at not only what she says her and what she’s doing here, but what happened that led to this moment. I feel like with the approach that we took I was able to look at that stuff, and not just be the archetypal, weepy I’m-going-to-kill-myself Cassandra. I liked being able to incorporate that, and I think that really helped this modern audience. I think if we didn’t take this modern look at it, I’m not so sure—I mean it’s always hard to apply a Greek tragedy to a modern audience, but I think this helped. I think in this setting it worked.

SC: I know talking to a couple of people they said, “I didn’t understand, but I got it.” There were parts where they couldn’t follow the text, which I think is something we can never eliminate entirely.

TW: There are parts I still struggle with.

SC: And you don’t know if that’s the translation, because I think with this translation we’re not dealing with modern punctuation, which makes it hard…

SH: And so much of it is references to Greek…

SC: Yeah, you better know your Greek when you come in! Granted, the original audience would have, which is why we cut so much of it, which is unfortunate because it’s part of the text, but it is going to largely be lost on a modern audience, because they don’t have that Greek mythology stored in their head. So they won’t be able to follow the text completely, but if they can follow the story… Somebody, I think it was my mother, said she couldn’t always understand [Clytemnestra and Aegisthus], but she got your relationship loud and clear. And part of that was what we did with that physically.
VE: When you were like, I’m doing *Agamemnon*, and I was saying I’d love to help out…

Chorus Leader. Okay, so I’m just going to be standing there, saying these monotone-y things, and then we get into rehearsal, and there’s all this room. And I’m able to find a person in the chorus leader.

SC: Yeah! I wanted to talk about that next. I don’t think any characters shifted as much as the chorus did.

VE: I think we each have found specific characters to embody: things affect us all differently, and we have a great relationship.

TW: When I was reading the script, and I was trying to… we hadn’t been explicit yet about how we were using the chorus. And I was wondering how to assimilate myself into this nameless horde, that groupthink mentality. The thing is, there’s a distinct element of that there still, especially as the play goes on and we’ve been through so much. There’s an arc to the chorus.

SC: That’s one of the things we talked about in rehearsal—how great it is when you all come together in the end. And when you adapt Greek into a modern setting, how do you incorporate the chorus in a realistic way? We don’t necessarily have a modern equivalent. I think Julie Taymor learned the hard way what happens when you try to bring it back.

RE: I think in actuality what helped was dividing the chorus into individuals, so they weren’t speaking as one group; they were individuals within the group sharing thoughts.

SH: And I think you usually think of the chorus as one group, one mind, one voice. And here you actually had the chorus being split on issues. And I think that was much more interesting for the audience.
TW: One of my favorite moments in the show is the first time we speak as a group, and when we come into the triangle. When we say the line, “Old men are children once again,” and here we’ve taken this group of old Greek magistrates and turned them into a bunch of young people. That was a very transformative moment for me.

CH: And how they come together… in the very beginning, but I’m speaking to them individually. I know what Tim wants, I know what Vinnie wants, and I obviously know what the girls want. But when I come back as Aegisthus, I’m addressing them as a group.

EC: Something else that was interesting was having Cody double as Agamemnon and Aegisthus. With the audience not knowing that we were the only ones able to do the project, I feel like it reads to them as “Oh, he’s the next person in Clytemnestra’s life, but he’s still the same person.”

SC: What’s hilarious to me is that, I’m sure there were people who were confused or wondered why I would double that, and actually that’s probably the one element that is the purest, the tie to classical performance. That part would have been doubled.

TW: And that’s interesting, because I think many people would think that’s a modern twist on it.

SC: Oh that’s clever, that’s interesting. What is she trying to say? (Laughs). Going back to the chorus, do you think we would have gotten as much as out of these minor roles in a more… I know traditional is a relative word in our field… but a more traditional approach?
SH: I don’t think so, because in my understanding that in ancient times the chorus was made up of people in training. So they could be put in this group and kind of learn the ropes; they weren’t meant to stand out.

SC: One of the other things I had talked about with Eric, and to myself, was the decision to put you guys in your modern clothes and not to mess around with lighting, sound, etc. Which I think also today is seen as a choice, when again it’s a traditional element in Greek theatre. I don’t know…

RE: Being a teacher, we start with Greek. And we hammer into their heads that Greek had doubled characters, no lights, no sounds… I think someone who doesn’t have that knowledge would be surprised by it.

MW: I really liked the choices that were made for the production as a whole. Because there were “traditional” elements, like the doubling, no technical elements, the idea of a chorus at all…

CH: It makes the modern stuff stand out more.

SC: Just a few more questions. These are questions I’m looking at for my thesis as a whole. Do you think what we did was in some way disrespectful to the original playwright?

CH: I think when an author writes something, I’m sure it’s meant to be a certain way in their eyes, but after they release it to the public, it becomes the public’s. Art becomes public domain; it’s up for interpretation. Especially theatre; it’s an art that can always be changed. With a painting, you can’t really walk up to it and paint new things in it. Theatre, you can do that, and it’s still the same painting, just a different interpretation.
KR: You’re keeping it alive. I think a playwright wants their work to keep going. And if they don’t, then I don’t think it was an artistic thing for them, it was a “this is mine.”

MW: It’s transcending time and the world is changing. So to think that things will always be the way they are when they write it…

TW: Theatre is not a creative art form; it’s an interpretive one. What we do is reorganization. I think it would be disrespectful to attempt to do it exactly the way the time in which it was written demands, because we do not understand them. We weren’t there, and mimicking that is more disrespectful in my mind.

ME: It’s the playwright’s job to supply the ingredients, but it’s the director’s job to breathe the life into it, and keep the writer’s intentions going. If they ignore the writer’s intentions, that’s where it gets disrespectful.

SC: Do you think we treat classical pieces differently than contemporary ones?

RE: If the story gets told, it’s not disrespectful. But yes, we do treat these classical pieces that are public domain, where the author has no say, differently. We take a lot more license with that than we do with playwrights who are alive, or whose estate have dictated no changes. Things that are in public domain… there’s no one to “protect” it. You can be more creative.

SC: Last question, then you can take a break. Can a director go too far?

ALL: Yes.

TW: I think there is a lot of frivolous theatre around, nowadays. And when you set out to do a revamping like this, it is so important to have—you mentioned that you were worried about losing your vision, and from my understanding you intended to see what
happens when we do this, so I never felt like you lost it, I never felt baseless. As long as the choices that are made are honest and justified... It’s when you start changing things for the sake of change you insult the text.

RE: And the audience. If you just want to do something different, I think you’re losing part of why the show was created.

CH: I think what you said before... there is a reason we still do these, they still speak to us. I think it’s the opposite of disrespectful, because it makes them even more relevant.

SH: If you can’t justify it, you’ve gone too far.

ME: Or when you use it as a form of plagiarism. If you make it something entirely new, and only use it as a source... taking advantage of a script.

SC: Yeah, I mean we could twist *Agamemnon* and get a whole bunch of different readings. If we tweaked it so it didn’t have anything to do with power or justice, it was about... um...

VE: Love.

SC: Love! It’s a love story. Clytemnestra is actually deeply in love with Aegisthus, and Iphigenia was actually Aegisthus’s baby, and that’s why she’s so angry. And I cut the chorus out entirely so they can’t reference anything that happened before the Trojan War. That would probably be an issue. With that being said, thank you! Your call is 6:15.
Production Photos

Fig. 1

Fig. 2
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

A director is put in a difficult spot when attempting to reinterpret a piece. There is a balance that needs to be maintained between respecting the playwright’s text, while still allowing your own creative freedom. The key to this balance is to constantly be self-aware. Question yourself. What do I believe is the central theme of this piece? Is that coming across? How will altering this text affect that message? Employing the theories expressed by Hutcheon and Brustein, a director is given a vocabulary they can use to analyze their process.

In many ways, my production of *Agamemnon* was a successful failure. The production that was presented was nowhere near what I intended to create, but the process was an enlightening one. In Brustein’s vocabulary, my production was a “simile production”. The text remained largely unaltered, except for cuts made to shorten the runtime. The piece was transposed to the early twenty-first century, and the chorus spoke largely as individuals, but these were the most drastic changes. These changes resulted in a change in tone that was far from why I originally chose the piece. I regret that the themes I wanted to highlight were sacrificed to the need to make sure the show could be presented on time.

Despite the fact that it was not an artistic success, it was certainly an educational experience. I walked away with a series of lessons that will be invaluable to both myself, and to other young directors. Your motivations for reinterpreting a piece are just as
important as your methods, and they will shape the outcome of your work. Commitment is key to a reinterpretation as well. You must not only be committed to both a vision for your piece, but to defend your work against the inevitable critics. You must also be committed to the process itself and to question your work along the way.

Freedom and artistic license are part of the joy of the theatre. Play and innovation are encouraged and enjoyed, but we still hold a responsibility to our audiences and to our art to produce a product that is worth viewing. Updating and adapting works is important to our field, as it presents stagnation. Theatre is a living art form, and we cannot treat a work as a museum piece to be archived and preserved in one form forever. We have a responsibility, however, to honor the work that we chose. We cannot pervert the original message and bend it to suit any whim. Running throughout this thesis is the assertion that theatre is inherently subjective, and that each director will approach a work differently, but subjectivity is not an excuse for ‘free rein’. Reinterpreting a work is a challenge that should not be taken lightly or on a whim: it requires a willingness to humble yourself. We must work to put other needs on an equal footing with our own: the playwright’s, the audience’s, and the production’s needs. If we are reinterpreting to serve our ego, the product will certainly fail. We must show the respect and humility with which we would want our work to be treated. After all, theatre is subjective. Someone else will come along to reinterpret our work eventually.
Works Cited


Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare Project.


