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# Freedom in Structure: Life Inside The House of Bernarda Alba

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FREEDOM IN STRUCTURE:  
LIFE INSIDE THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

A Thesis Presented

by

TOBY VERA BERCOVICI

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

MAY 2011

Department of Theater

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LIFE INSIDE THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

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## ABSTRACT

FREEDOM IN STRUCTURE:

LIFE INSIDE THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA ALBA

May 2011

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In this thesis, I take the reader through the process and particular challenges of directing *The House of Bernarda Alba*, from choosing a translation, to casting from a pool of mostly undergraduate actors, to staging a show in-the-round. More particularly, I compare my previous work with adaptation to this process of treating the script as a fixed entity.

I also offer a detailed explanation of the exploratory work I did with the actors in building the physicality of the play-world and exploring the relationships of the characters. For this, I drew heavily on Anne Bogart's composition exercises, found in *The Viewpoints Book*. In this thesis, I transcribe and analyze some of the material generated through these exercises.

Finally, I endeavor to prove that a certain freedom can be found through structure, and that the challenge of this production - which was assigned to me rather than a personal choice - helped me develop a more subtle creative voice than I had previously possessed.

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## INTRODUCTION

For the past nine years - since directing my first play at the age of 18 - a relentlessly timed, dancelike physicality has been of the utmost importance to me. When I watched a play, if the performers were not comfortable in their bodies, and if the staging did not constantly move, I lost interest. I rarely listened to the dialogue or gleaned the story from the language. For me, the staging was everything. In the rehearsal room, if my actors sat for longer than a few moments, I'd grow restless, run down to the space and move them around. I fixated on the body's relationship to other bodies in space. As my obsession with staging grew, I developed a desire for the text to support the movement, rather than the other way around.

Unsurprisingly, then, my directing work in the past has been tied to adaptation. I took *Hedda Gabler*, *A Doll's House*, and *Spring's Awakening*, and reworked the fabric of the texts to tell new and different stories. I cut whole scenes and replaced them with dance numbers; I rearranged dialogue, cut and combined characters, and - if I didn't understand a line - just like that, it was gone. I streamlined the texts until they were mere skeletons on which to hang the physicality. I was enamored of this process and saw no value in letting it go, even for a single production. Thus, in my final year of graduate school - the culmination of my studies - when I was assigned *The House of Bernarda Alba*, told I could not adapt it, warned (jokingly, to be sure) not to add any dance numbers, and essentially handed an already completed set, I felt angry, hurt, and stifled, as though my entire creative vision was being dismissed, as though I was being told I was not good enough.

Little did I know that this challenge would open me up in a variety of new ways and become the most important theatrical learning experience I've had to date. Within the strictures of the assignment came an exhilarating sense of freedom, as I - out of my element, traditional tools taken away - was forced to find new solutions, to trust my actors more fully, to dive each night into what felt like shark-infested waters and fight like hell to stay afloat. I discovered that for a director, all sorts of freedom lies in looking at the text as a fixed entity, and that this structure can help to develop a far subtler creative voice.

# CHAPTER I

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

### Why Historical Research?

Graduate school has introduced me to one of the most important relationships in the theatrical process, that is, the one between the director and the dramaturg. It is with a dramaturg that the director has those important initial creative discussions, and through this relationship that she first discovers the world of the play. For this process, my dramaturg was MFA candidate Jason Lites. While we had very different aesthetics and understandings of the creative process, our discussions - and arguments - helped deepen my understanding of the play. And, upon being assigned to this piece, Jason immediately provided me with numerous articles and chapters on Lorca's life and work, which I read avidly and discussed with him.

Historical research is, for me, one of the most exciting parts of the directing process. I have directed plays from Canada, Poland, Norway, Germany, England, Japan, and, of course, Spain, and each time around, I welcome the opportunity to immerse myself in the new culture, time period, and language. Never having read Lorca before being assigned *The House of Bernarda Alba*, I wanted to know as much as possible about him before the first rehearsal. Ultimately, this information helped me get a grip on what was important about the piece at the time it was written, as well as what was important for me, now. It also influenced my understanding of the motivating forces at work on Bernarda and her daughters - religion, gender, isolation, and small-town gossip, amongst

others.

Hearing about Lorca's life and work through conversations with a Spanish professor and several Spanish speakers - his loves, politics, outsider-ness - was what first sparked my interest, and eventually led to a deeper understanding, and even love for, the play.

### Federico Garcia Lorca

Federico Garcia Lorca was born on June 5, 1898 in Fuente Vaqueros, a village just outside of Granada in Andalucia, Spain. Raised by wealthy landowners, he led a charmed and creative early life, spending much of his time playing with puppets, dressing up the servants, and staging religious masses. In fact, Lorca's brother Francisco remembers Federico breaking into his savings bank and using the money to purchase a miniature theatre, for which he subsequently made up many plays (Three Tragedies 1).

In 1909, Lorca's family moved to Granada, where Lorca fostered a love and talent for music. In addition, his association in Granada with a variety of talented artists and thinkers facilitated his development as a poet. In 1919, perhaps encouraged by the recent departure of many in this circle of artists, Lorca relocated to Madrid, where he was to spend the majority of the rest of his life.

In Madrid, Lorca's activities centered around the Residencia de Estudiantes, a cultural center which attracted many highly progressive intellectuals. There, Lorca met Salvador Dali, and their relationship "was to prove...seminal to the genesis and evolution of their artistic vocabularies" (Delgado 22). Dali frequently painted Lorca; Lorca himself

did drawings inspired by those of Dali; Dali designed the set for Lorca's *Mariana Pineda*, produced in 1927 (Delgado 24). Their friendship was intense, particularly so for the homosexual Lorca, who was by many accounts in love with Dali.

This relationship immediately sparked my interest. I was told by a graduate student in the Spanish Department at the University of Massachusetts that the two men were undeniably lovers, a "fact" she discovered upon visiting Spain and reading the letters they wrote to one another (Martinez). This information, as well as the aforementioned description of their artistic collaborations, made me want to stage the play on a Dali-inspired set, paintings melting into the walls, chairs melting into the floor, everything strange and stuck. However, I had a gut feeling (and reminders from faculty members) that my challenge for this play was to tell the story as simply and truthfully as I could, and that those theatrics could wait until later in my career.

Although Lorca was prolific during his years at the Residencia, giving lectures and publishing books of poetry and plays, he was overwhelmed by a growing depression. There is much speculation about why Lorca departed in 1929 for the United States. Many scholars believe it had something to do with a sense of isolation brought about by his homosexuality, and some go so far as to say it was unrequited love for Dali. Whatever the reason, he spent time in Vermont and New York, lecturing, writing, and seeing extraordinary amounts of theatre; and he came back to Spain with "a sense of urgency and perspective, and the feeling that he himself could help to revitalize the Spanish stage" (Three Plays x).

In 1931, elections in Spain brought about the liberal Second Republic, which prized intellect and culture. Lorca became artistic director of the government-funded La Barraca, a student theatre company that toured the Spanish countryside with modern interpretations of classical Spanish works intended to educate and engage the Spanish people. He spent the next few years balancing writing and directing. While La Barraca mounted productions of *Life is a Dream* and *Fuenteovejuna*, Lorca wrote some of the most important plays of his career, namely *Blood Wedding* (1932) and *Yerma* (1934). Being at heart most interested in deconstructing or reinterpreting the classics, I was excited to learn that Lorca the Director was not afraid to play with the scripts of other playwrights, did not see them as sacred, fixed entities, even though he was himself a playwright.

The 1933 elections ushered in a largely conservative government. La Barraca's funding was halved and then, in 1936, cut off completely. Lorca's place in the growing climate of political unrest remained firmly to the left, and his identity as a homosexual, an artist, and a member of La Barraca helped pick him out as a target for the conservatives. Lorca completed *The House of Bernarda Alba* on June 19, 1936, and shortly thereafter left Madrid, which was becoming an increasingly dangerous place. He went into hiding at the home of a friend, fellow poet Luis Rosales, and from there was kidnapped and assassinated on the 18th or 19th of August, 1936.

## The House of Bernarda Alba

*The House of Bernarda Alba* is often referenced as being the third in a trilogy, the “Rural Trilogy,” which includes also *Blood Wedding* and *Yerma*. However, this grouping has been done posthumously by scholars, rather than by Lorca himself, who intended the first two plays to be part of a “Trilogy of the Spanish Earth,” but never wrote the third play in that trilogy. Lorca’s intention with *The House of Bernarda Alba* is thought to have been to move away from the highly poetic and surreal, into pure realism. To emphasize this desired goal, Lorca’s subtitle for *The House of Bernarda Alba* is “A Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain” (Three Plays 189). Turn the page to the “Cast of Characters,” and you will see an additional note, “The poet advises that these three acts are intended as a photographic documentary” (Three Plays 191).

*The House of Bernarda Alba* presents a portrait of Bernarda Alba and the very specific, almost tyrannical, restrictions under which she raises her five daughters. The play starts on the morning of the funeral of Bernarda’s husband, Antonio Maria Benavides - father to four of her five daughters - and takes place over the course of a couple of weeks, during which time the daughters mourn, but also obsess over Pepe el Romano, a handsome young man from the village. Over time, it is revealed that Pepe is conducting an affair with Adela, the youngest daughter, while at the same time intending to marry Angustias, the eldest, who has inherited money from both her father and Antonio. In one of the final scenes of the play, Adela consummates her relationship with Pepe in the corral. Adela’s sister Martirio discovers this and wakes Bernarda, who shoots at Pepe. Adela, believing Pepe to be dead, runs from the room. After she is gone, Martirio

admits that Pepe has simply run off on his horse. A thud comes from Adela's room; she is discovered to have hanged herself; Bernarda insists she has died a virgin and commands silence.

Despite Lorca's insistence that *The House of Bernarda Alba* is pure realism, stunning and unusual imagery saturates the text, and poetic metaphor - the moon foretelling death, the stallion as unrestrained masculinity, Adela's green dress in a world of black and white - abounds. Lorca's interest and talent in multiple artistic genres - music, painting, poetry - invariably creep into his writing. Lorca wrote, "Theater is poetry that rises from the book and becomes human enough to talk and shout, weep and despair" (Three Plays xiii). We see that particularly with the character of Maria Josefa, Bernarda's aged mother, whose lines possess a heightened rhythm and musicality:

Just because I have white hair you think I can't have babies. And - yes!  
Babies and babies and babies! This child will have white hair, and have  
another child, and that one, another, and all of us with hair of snow will be  
like the waves, one after another after another. Then we'll all settle down,  
and we'll all have white hair, and we'll be foam on the sea. Why isn't  
there any white foam here? Here there's nothing but black mourning  
shawls. (Three Plays 280)

The politics of the piece also help call into question its "realism." During our early conversations about the piece - long before auditions - Jason Lites and I debated



whether the play was personal and real, broadly political, symbolist poetry, or a combination of all three. At one of the first production meetings, Jason asked set designer Miguel Romero - a native Spanish speaker and long-time admirer of both *The House of Bernarda Alba* and Lorca himself - if he took seriously Lorca's description of the play as a "photographic documentary." Miguel laughed and said that he absolutely did not. He posed that the line served as a smoke screen to mask the obvious allegory of fascism contained within the play. In the piece, "the home functions...as a social microcosm representative of a wider body politic" (Delgado 105).

I heard what Miguel had to say, and I heard Jason's passionate rebuttal. In my mind, the play is simultaneously domestic drama and political allegory, and to play it solely as either one would cut off the depth of possibilities inherent in the text. Bernarda could rule her house as Franco would soon rule Spain, with an iron fist, as impenetrable at the end of the play as she is at the beginning; but, while there is a certain tragedy in this idea, it is also a foregone conclusion, and leaves nothing to be discovered, either in the rehearsal room or by the audience. I preferred to keep options open, to see what my particular Bernarda would feel toward her particular daughters, and to explore throughout the process all of the factors that bring her to the end of the play; and, once there, to discover how she feels, how she is changed or unchanged.

## CHAPTER II

### WORKING WITH THE TEXT

#### Initial Impressions

I read *The House of Bernarda Alba* for the first time in April 2010, directly after being assigned the play. The translation I picked up was by James Graham-Lujan and Richard L. O'Connell, and I chose it at random after being confronted by the enormous selection at the W.E.B. Du Bois Library. Hate is a strong word, and I use it in all its glory of passionate dislike, when I say that I hated this play. It felt simultaneously comically fast and tragically slow, skipping over moments that begged for time while going on irrelevantly for pages about the neighbors. I developed an argument for why I should be allowed to adapt: Lorca was killed two months after completing the play, yet was an obsessive rewriter and surely would have written many more drafts before publication. This request, which I made at the first production meeting, was immediately denied. However, I was given the choice of translation.

After doing some research on line and soliciting faculty opinion, I gathered together five versions of the play from which to make my choice. These included two adaptations, one by Chay Yew and the other by Emily Mann, and three more-or-less literal translations - the Lujan/O'Connell, another by Caridad Svich, and a third by Michael Dewell and Carmen Zapata. I am not a Spanish speaker, and so I could not compare these translations to the original. Rather, I compared them to one another, looking for clarity of images and rhythms, as well as for emotional power.

### Choosing the Translation

Since I now knew I would not be allowed to adapt, I took a second and more thoughtful look at the James Graham-Lujan and Richard O'Connell translation. However, I still found it prosaic and dry. An excellent example of their uninspired, almost academic phrasing can be found in one of Bernarda's final speeches of the play. Adela has just hanged herself, and Poncia has warned Bernarda not to go in to see her daughter. In the Graham-Lujan/O'Connell, Bernarda's response reads as follows:

No, not I! Pepe, you're running now, alive, in the darkness, under the trees, but another day you'll fall. Cut her down! My daughter has died a virgin. Take her to another room and dress her as though she were a virgin. No one will say anything about this! She died a virgin. Tell them, so that at dawn, the bells will ring twice. (Three Tragedies 211)

To me, "another day" sounds frighteningly out-of-place, almost casual; and chosen at random from a thesaurus, rather than carefully crafted to fit with the rhythms and intentions of the moment. "Dress her as though she were a virgin" sounds like Bernarda is admitting that Adela is not, in fact, a virgin - something which is not done in any of the other translations. "No one will say anything about this!" hasn't made up its mind whether it's a question or a command, and "Tell them, so that at dawn, the bells will ring twice" sounds like a computer program attempting to speak English.

Clearly, I had a lot of animosity toward the Graham-Lujan/O'Connell. And so, a

professor turned me onto Chay Yew's unpublished adaptation of the play, which seemed the polar opposite - elegant, sleek, and full of striking visual images. However, Yew made significant changes to the text, and the resulting script is as much his work as Lorca's. It is beautiful, but it's Chay Yew's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and as a result, could never have been mine. For instance, his version featured an on-stage Greek-style chorus, a red dress for Adela instead of Lorca's green, and quite a few alterations to the passage quoted above:

Pepe,  
you run now,  
alive,  
in the darkness,  
under the thick embrace of trees.  
But,  
one day,  
you will fall,  
and I'll be there and--  
Carry my angel.  
Carry her  
gently  
to her room  
and dress her in nothing

but white.  
My daughter died a virgin.  
No one in this house  
will say anything.  
Not a word.  
Run to the church!  
Tell them  
to toll the bells  
at dawn. (Yew 130-31)

The differences between this and the Graham-Lujan/O'Connell are significant, including the addition of line breaks to make the text more like poetry and the softening of "Cut her down" to "Carry my angel." Also, not cited here is the interruption of Bernarda's speech after "I'll be there and--" by Magdalena, who warns Bernarda not to cry in public. And so, Bernarda is pulling herself together with "Carry my angel," and appears frail, sympathetic - a strong directorial choice, but probably not Lorca's original intention.

The next translation I read, by Caridad Svich, at first seemed bland and inoffensive. But, after I had read the Michael Dewell and Carmen Zapata translation and compared the two, Svich's lines seemed to fall clumsily off the tongue, and her apparent striving for accessibility yield a sacrificed poetry. For instance, her version of that fateful passage:

No. I will not! Pepe: you may run free through the dark tress [sic], but on another day you will fall. Cut her down! My daughter has died a virgin! Take her to her room and dress her like a pure maiden. No one will say anything! She has died a virgin! Tell them the bells should ring twice at dawn. (Svich 67)

“I will not!” and “No one will say anything!” to me sound like the exclamations of a petulant child, not an imposing 60 year old. And, although I remember lighting designer Thad Kramer speaking positively of “pure maiden” because the phrase cleared things up for him, to me it’s lacking a necessary subtlety.

In the end, the only real contest was between the Michael Dewell and Carmen Zapata translation and the Emily Mann adaptation. Mann’s text was quick and punchy, and she had eliminated most of the repetition and irrelevancies I had originally hated. For instance, a reading of that same passage shows that Mann has cut Bernarda’s repeated assertion of Adela’s virginity, streamlining the speech to convey only the necessary information:

No...Pepe - you run, alive, in the darkness under the poplar trees, but, one day, you’ll fall. Cut her down! Carry her to her room and dress her in white. No one is to say anything. Send word to toll the bells twice at dawn. (Mann 47)

Although as previously mentioned I am a streamliner at heart, I feel here that the eradication of the repetition of “virgin” takes away from the power of the speech. And, although set designer Miguel Romero fought hard for the Mann adaptation, in the end I felt that too often did she sacrifice complexity for a fast-paced, palatable playtext.

The Dewell/Zapata, on the other hand, had a good sense of poetry, and an honoring of the unusual metaphor for which I’d heard Lorca was famous. For instance:

No. Not me! Pepe, you may go running off alive, through the shadows of the poplars, but one day you will fall. Cut her down. My daughter has died a virgin. Carry her to her room and dress her in white. No one is to say a thing. She died a virgin. Send word for the bells to toll twice at dawn.

(Three Plays 288)

This version of the speech is, to me, perfect. “Dress her in white” has a lovely, natural simplicity to it; “No one is to say a thing” is a direct command, rather than a petulant demand.

In the end, I decided that a translation, rather than an adaptation, would be more along the lines of the challenge intended for me; that is, to take the play, in all its imperfection, with its loose ends and apparent abstruseness, and unravel it, make sense of it, and tell its story. And so, I chose the Dewell/Zapata, with no regret.

### A Fixed Entity

While on the whole I was beginning to enjoy the play, and felt particularly satisfied with my choice of translation, there were a few sections of the text which I had an urgent desire to cut. For instance, the scene in Act I between Martirio and Amelia stood out to me as unnecessary exposition, confusing and dry. In it, the sisters discuss Adelaida, a young woman of the village whose name is confusingly (though probably purposefully) close to Adela's and who is never again mentioned in the play. The scene is also a meditation on men, or at least, on the sisters' alleged opinions about men. The scene's crowning atrocity is for me the following speech of Martirio's, in which awkward exposition rubs up against excessive use of pronouns:

She's afraid of Mother. She's the only one who knows the true story of her father and how he got his land. Every time she comes here, Mother needles her about it. Her father killed his first wife's husband in Cuba so he could marry her himself. Then, here, he deserted her and ran off with another woman, who had a daughter. And then he had an affair with this girl, Adelaida's mother, and he married her after his second wife went mad and died. (Three Plays 213)

I wanted to cut the entire scene, and most particularly the above passage. However, a reminder that the text was a fixed entity led to an examination of the scene in minute detail. I discovered an interesting dynamic between the sisters, as Amelia, older by three



years, plays low-status to Martirio, solicits her opinions, and remains intensely focused on her answers. Amelia's lines are blandly ambivalent, tactics to suss out what her sister is thinking. Martirio's delivery of the above passage represents an unusual instance of self-expression. When Magdalena enters, Martirio is suddenly relegated to lowest on the totem pole, and Amelia takes greater charge of the scene.

Taking a long, hard look at this scene, which was in the beginning particularly frightening to me, led to an increased understanding of Amelia, of her intense love for Martirio and her role as caretaker. Cutting the scene would have seriously affected her trajectory in the play. In the end, looking at the text as a fixed, rather than a malleable, entity, was a wonderful and transformative challenge.

## CHAPTER III

### WORKING WITH THE ACTORS

#### Developing New Strategies

Previous to *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and post-high school, I had directed only two full-length shows, *A Doll House* and *Spring Awakening: A Sin of Omission*, both of which were my own adaptations. I had been able to structure the performance texts exactly as I wanted them. Into the fabric of the scripts I wove both stage picture and emotional suggestions, so that my work in the rehearsal room was quick and decisive, and consisted of shaping the elements into a production I'd long imagined. I still had great reverence for the actors' creative input, but not nearly as much as I would develop over the course of directing *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

Because this time I did not go through the process of adaptation, nor was I at first inspired by the script, I went into auditions with no preconception of how the characters or the piece should feel or look. My one exception here was knowing that I wanted to cast Jeannine Haas, an older Equity Actor, in the role of Bernarda. I'd known from my first reading of the text that an undergraduate would not have the depth of understanding to play the title role, so I sought out Jeannine, with whom I'd long wanted to work. Having her present during call-backs, and hearing certain actors read certain parts, I began to have an idea of who this family was. In addition to Jeannine, I ended up casting thirteen female students and one male student (in the role of Maria Josefa).

From the first rehearsal, I decided to treat this group of extraordinary actors as

true collaborators, in a more richly trustful way than ever before, hoping that they would understand the script as much if not more than I. During our first week, dramaturg Jason Lites and I guided in-depth discussions on each act of the play. We offered insight where there was some but mostly asked questions and explored, as all of us simultaneously put together the pieces of the story. I felt, and still feel, that I cast the play very well, and that each actor had immediate, articulate, thoughtful insights into her own character. We debated why certain words or images were used, discussed what religion meant to each member of the family, wondered which family members loved one another the most, and discussed more generally the historical context of the play and where its importance lay for us. During that first week, we spent half of each day engaged in such collaborative conversations and the remainder of the time doing creative composition work.

### Composition and the Play World

I was introduced to “Viewpoints” in a vague way at the age of 15. I can’t say that I enjoyed or even understood them, but I did them dutifully, assuming that “kinesthetic response,” or the “spontaneous physical reaction to movement outside [one]self” (Bogart 42), was just a myth, and that pretending to have it was as close as one could get to it. It was not until I received *The Viewpoints Book*, by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, as a college graduation present that I began to understand the truth, the importance of the work. I devoured the book but let it sit with me for a long time before working up the courage to use any of its exercises. Particularly appealing to me were the composition exercises, that is, “the act of writing as a group, in time and space, using the language of

the theatre” (Bogart 137). These required actors to make immediate and rash, almost violent decisions about character and circumstance; and to make these decisions kinesthetically, with the body, rather than with the intellect. In January 2010, I began incorporating composition work into the *Spring Awakening* rehearsal process, and it was so shockingly successful that I wanted to keep on exploring it.

I was, however, concerned that composition work would not be useful for this play, which seemed more grounded in reality than was *Spring Awakening*, with its nonlinearity, its headless ghost, and its opportunities for dance and farce. I decided to try a couple of exercises and see if they yielded any useful results; and, if they did not, I intended to move pretty quickly on from composition. In the end, the exercises were so fruitful that I allowed myself to go much further with them in this rehearsal process than I had in *Spring Awakening*. Of the composition work, Jeannine said that

We really created this lab where we were working and making these family connections and this connection as an ensemble but also us as a cast. Through the exercises, we were really exploring and moving quickly in a lot of nonverbal ways, which was so much greater than sitting around talking about it. (Haas Interview)

The first exercise I gave to the cast, directly after our read-through on the first day of rehearsal, was to tell the story of the play, whatever and however that meant to them. I broke the actors up into three groups and gave them the following list of ingredients to

incorporate into their pieces:

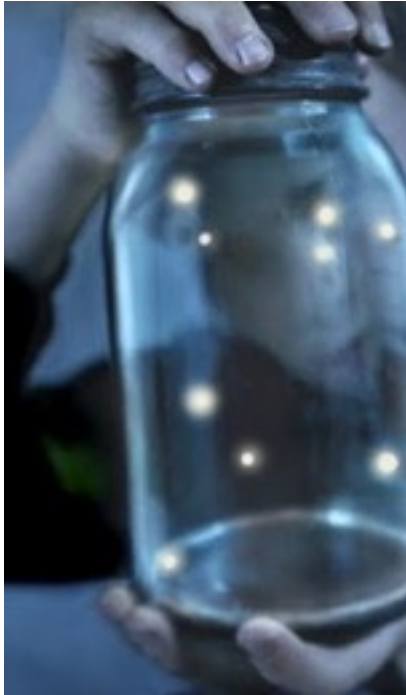
1. Three acts corresponding to the acts of the play, each with a title (ie, Mourning, Sewing, Eating), as well as a clear beginning, middle, and end
2. Creative, multiple uses of six chairs, six fans, and Bernarda's cane
3. An invented song using text from the play, sung by different characters at different times with different moods/intentions
4. An invented game using the chairs, fans, and/or the cane
5. An invented mourning ritual
6. An invented religious ritual using the religious text from Act I
7. An unlikely prison
8. A close-up of a private moment
9. A "daily life" montage
10. Violent closeness
11. Tender distance
12. A metaphorical image/gesture of vitality being repressed

I then gave them approximately 45 minutes to create, after which we came together again to share and discuss. The work was breathtaking, especially considering that some of these actors had heard the play for the first time that evening. Images from these compositions stuck with me and, no doubt, infiltrated the staging process. There was one sequence in which the actors carried the six tall chairs heavily on their backs, and another

in which women used their fans for self-flagellation. Then, there were some images and ideas that arose in all three of the compositions: moments where one person was alone in the middle of the stage, surrounded by the others; a stark contrast between solemnity and ecstatic outbursts; the sense that the women played with the chairs because they were the closest thing to toys in their desolate household.

At the end of the first night, I gave the actors two homework assignments: one was to develop, over the next few days, a brief composition that expressed what the play sounded, looked, and felt like to them; the other was to dance their characters' life stories from birth to death, concentrating on ten to fifteen formative experiences, and to narrate these "topographies."

For the first assignment, there was overlap in what people brought in, namely, rosaries, bibles, classical music, candles, and jewelry. Annelise Nielsen, who played Adela, created a brief movement piece: she shook her hands, contained in prayer, until the shaking enveloped her entire body, after which she opened her mouth in a silent scream and brought her hands to circle her throat. One of the mourners, Corinne Huschle, brought in an image to which I kept coming back as acutely illustrative of the play and its themes: a hand covering a jar of fireflies. Her brief explanation was that Bernarda's desire to contain her daughters' beauty suffocates them in the end.



**Figure One: Hand Over Fireflies**

The character topographies were extraordinarily thoughtful, moving pieces of theatre. Even the mourners became fully realized human beings with rich, complex life stories. Although I wish I could describe them all here, I'll focus on those of Amelia, Angustias, Poncia, and Bernarda, which I found particularly thought-provoking. I took extensive notes but was not able to transcribe the pieces word for word, so there are some gaps (illustrated with ellipses), and the text is partially my own; however, the essence belongs to the actors who created the pieces. Accompanying the narratives were precise, expressive movements, some of which I was able to notate and have included in brackets:

Amelia: I am born. The first thing I see is a little girl with big brown eyes, Magdalena. I want to be friends. There is not much to do around here. One day there is a lot of noise, then someone says “Would you like to see your sister?” “*My* sister?” White lace folds surround a tiny soft sister with dark brown eyes and she is mine! When Martirio is two, she gets to play. She sneaks into bed with me and we hold hands under the covers and tell stories. At fourteen, I can’t sleep with her anymore, so we make a hole in the wall behind the picture of Mary to tell stories through. Prayers. Corsets. Being a lady. Sleep, eat, pray. Sleep, eat, pray. [Accompanying movements.] And then, when I am a woman, love comes to the house. I become the caretaker. [Frenzied movement.] I help all of my sisters except that young one. [She collapses, hand to her heart. Adela’s death.] But it is all my fault, you know. ...Bernarda dies. I realize I don’t need to just sit there. I grow my hair out and pick flowers. We all fight. I move to the ocean with Martirio. Marti gets married and has five children! I help raise them. At age 70, Marti and I walk into the ocean, swim far out and never come back. (Albion-Wright)

Angustias: Mama, Papa, up, up. [She stretches her arms upward. She is a joyful, trusting little girl.] ...One day, I think Papa is hiding from me. Papa, up! [She stretches her arms upward. Beat.] He’s gone. ...I play outside with my friend Maria all the time. One day, she doesn’t come. I’m told



she's sick. Mama makes me wash the mud out of my dress all by myself. Then I am sent to my room. [She coughs until she collapses in a small heap against the wall.] I stay in bed for a long time. Mother tells my favorite stories. I need her. [She twirls, laughing until she coughs.] Mother is getting married? We're moving? Our new house is very big. The ceilings are very high. I get lost in it. I am afraid of Poncia, the new maid. ...What is the baby doing to mother? I am not allowed to hold Magdalena because I am too sick. She isn't allowed to play outside either. Sick. Stuck. ...Pepe wants to marry me. I have perfume, make up, and new sheets. [She moves frenetically, chaotically, running from place to place.] Adela! [She stops.] We mourn for her. Mother forces me to marry Pepe anyway. I am pregnant. Everybody looks at me like I'm going to die but I know that I'm not. I have a boy. I never get sick again. My son is three. Pepe dies in a fight at the tavern. ...In my old age, I go to live with my son and his wife. [She returns to the corner onstage where she went when sick as a little girl. She collapses against the wall.] (Hare)

Poncia: I am born. I live with my sister Claudia. [She places her arm around an invisible sister and moves like that.] We have a big house. I am eight. I explore on my own and listen. [She puts her hand to her ear and moves like that.] I am fifteen. I am still listening. I hear my mother and Claudia talking. Someone is crying. I am eighteen. Mother says I'll never

understand the sacrifice a parent makes for a child. ...[She holds her hands as though they are clutching the bars of a window.] I am 25. I wait for my husband Evaristo to come home. [There is silence. She moves her head slowly back and forth, waiting.] He says, “You don’t look the same as you did when you were young.” [Her hands shake until they grasp an invisible mortar and pestle, which she grinds together, destroying the finches.] I am 29 and very alone. [She runs her fingers over everything to make sure it is clean. She sweeps, listens. Cleans, looks. Time passes.] I am 60 and the youngest has died. My heart is broken. I feel like I’ve lost one of my own children. I am 67. I don’t feel that guilty about opening up jars in the kitchen. [Invisible jar in hand, she starts shaking, her breathing slows, she clutches her heart and collapses onto one knee.] (Tardif)

Bernarda: I am born a girl. ...I am five. My sister is born. Another girl. Mother slaps me and father stops playing with me. I am ten. I see father coupling with the maid. It is nasty, bad. Ugly. I feel shame. [She makes a gesture.] I am twelve. I get to crown the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. I cry when I crown her. I am strong and beautiful. I am fourteen. My best friend Magdalena and I make a blood pact - we will never marry. I love her. I am sixteen. It is very hot; I am taking a nap. Father gets into bed with me. Then mother calls his name and he leaves. I am 20. Father wagers me in a bet and loses, and so I marry

Henry. [She puts her hand to her forehead and leaves it there.] I am 21. I have a baby, Angustias. It is the most painful experience I've ever had. [She makes the same gesture as "shame."] But it is the happiest I've been in my life. Henry falls off his horse and dies. I get to mourn for eight years. I am glad. I am 29. I marry Antonio. I choose him. He's alright. I have many babies, all girls. When we have sex, it's quick and he passes out. Thank God. I get to do a lot around the house myself. Thank God. I am 40. A stallion kicks me in the knee. [She falls down.] I lie for three hours alone in the corral. [She gets up; from now on, she walks with a limp.] I am 60. Adela is dead. I am 65. My well is poisoned. I die a slow, horrible, suffering death - and I think of Magdalena.

(Haas Topography)

Transcribing the above topographies, I am reminded of how transformed I was by the actors' work during that first week of rehearsal. They taught me how much there was to love about this play. And there were moments of staging developed in the topographies that we incorporated into the final product, for instance, Poncia's shaking hands becoming the mortar and pestle. There were also certain actor-created ideas that we began to treat as givens. Jeannine reflected that

Writing our backstories, our topographies, having moments, that was great, because I was able to use some of the images that came up as I was

reading it. And where my imagination came up with these moments, god knows, but the moments made the text make more sense. If I remembered my father out in the corral with some maid, perhaps looking at me in a certain leering way while he was kissing her, it really justified my protection of my daughters. If Bernarda had some history of sexual inappropriateness by men. (Haas Interview)

The topographies became the basis for a second play world that lived underneath and supported the text. When we had questions about relationships or motivations, we returned to these for answers. In this way, even with this dense and fairly realistic script, I was able to do the work I loved - physical, actor-driven, exploratory work - and have it influence the production by generating beautiful staging and developing strong, specific relationships.

One drawback of focusing so heavily on composition work during these early stages of the rehearsal process was that I completely left out any discussion of objectives. The physicality was there, the relationships were there, but a specific, moment-to-moment analysis of what the characters needed from one another was missing. Once I got into the third week of rehearsal, I became obsessed with staging the show and abandoned all text work. If I had brought an exploration of objectives into the first couple of weeks, the storytelling would ultimately have been clearer and more palatable. However, I'll discuss this more in my post-show reflections.

Bernarda Alba

September 28, 2010, The Sixth Rehearsal: Tonight after rehearsal, Bernarda and I sit in her car talking for three hours. Though the conversation is disjointed and wide-ranging, barely sensical to an impartial observer, we understand each other's chaotic late-night thoughts and arrive at a thesis: that an actor's job must be to break herself apart into a million bright molecular specks which journey out, away from the self, to embrace the similarly bright and searching particles of the playtext. Only thus is a character created which is expansive, infinitely complex, forever open to possibility, not shut down or made small by one's own tiny framework.

(Bercovici)

I have been watching Jeannine Haas perform, in both improv comedy and straight plays, for the past fifteen years. Her acting has been consistently impressive, and I've always wanted to work with her. *The House of Bernarda Alba* was a blessing, in that it provided the perfect role for her at this stage in her career, challenging, sublimely well-written, and demanding of virtuosity. I asked the theatre department for \$1500 to pay her, she obtained an Equity waiver, and we were in business. That said, we were both terrified of Bernarda. It's one of those iconic roles that every great actress aspires to play, and to which no one ever does justice.

Jeannine came into rehearsal with an idea of who she thought Bernarda was -

direct, tough, masculine - and a studied way of conveying this. While her instincts were appropriate, I encouraged her to let them go. I shared with her an insight from Anne Bogart that had been tremendously inspiring to me as I embarked upon the journey of this play, that

I can choose to approach a play either with the attitude that it is a small controllable canvas or a huge canvas, brimming with untapped potential. If I choose to possess a superior attitude to the material, it will conform, remain safe and unthreatening. It will stay smaller than me. If I adopt the attitude that the project is an adventure larger than anything I might imagine, an entity that will challenge me to find an instinctual path through it, the project will be allowed its proper magnitude.

*(A Director Prepares 116-17)*

At her best, I'd seen Jeannine be truly responsive, unpredictable, and in-the-moment; and I wanted her to work from this place, rather than from a place of smart, insightful analysis that would, ultimately, shut off possibilities for greatness. Bernarda is too human to be boxed in, especially so early in the process. Also, Jeannine's talent is such that, if her process were not organically linked to the growth of the ensemble, she would have risked outshining the other actors in a way unproductive to the whole.

Jeannine agreed with these thoughts and remained open and reflexive to her fellow actors, and she had some wonderful instances of discovery in the rehearsal room.

Once, we were at work on the moment where Bernarda discovers that Martirio has stolen Angustias' photo of Pepe el Romano. She strikes Martirio twice with her cane before Martirio, full of enraged courage, shouts, "Don't you hit me, mother!" Bernarda responds, "As much as I want" and Martirio counters, "If I let you" (Three Plays 248-9). Bernarda, looking into her daughter's indignant face, started laughing and could not stop.

Jeannine said later that it had struck her, very much in the moment as Bernarda, how much her daughter looked like her when angry. We kept that moment, and it was always one of our favorites.

To balance and support Jeannine's continued openness with the other actors, we engaged constantly in analytical conversation outside of the rehearsal room. We discussed Bernarda's fanatical need for cleanliness, and decided that it came from a fear of being out-of-control. She operates like someone with obsessive compulsive disorder, needing daughters as well as furniture to be in their place in order to feel safe. Her aversion to the people of the village, with their dirty feet and gossipy mouths, is rooted in that same fear of powerlessness. Part of the motivation behind her proposed eight years of mourning is to keep herself and her daughters safely inside the four sterile, whitewashed walls of her fortress. It is the hand over the jar of fireflies again, or the moment of relief Bernarda felt in her topography after the death of her first husband.

Toward the end of the process, during an interview with dramaturg Jason Lites for his blog, Jeannine said, "I wouldn't want to be in her head when she goes to sleep. And, actually, I have been" (Lites). Later, in an interview with me, she said

I used to always talk about characters as “she,” like the character was over here, and I’m not wanting to do that anymore, because it was my Bernarda, so it was I. But, I think Bernarda and the Bernarda in me, the me that came to Bernarda, that role brings out judgementalness. My subtext or the thoughts I’d have onstage were judgements of how things should be, ought to be, and I think when I was coming off that character, I noticed that my judgement was really up, so I don’t think that I was living her all during the time that we were working on it...but in letting it go, I realized that had been sort of up with me. (Haas Interview)

The way Jeannine immersed herself in Bernarda’s thoughts, motivations, fears, and nightmares helped her make impulsive, instinctual choices in the rehearsal room; and, in the resultant performances, the character of Bernarda fit her like a glove. Len Berkman, professor of playwriting at Smith College, wrote of Jeannine’s performance that

she embodied a rigid and oppressive ‘guard’ of a woman, yes, but she also conveyed a palpable vulnerability, a yearning to express more warmth at times than she felt comfortable doing, a genuine concern for the religiosity and morality of the young and impressionable women in her charge. Mean streaks, yes, she had indeed, to a degree of outright ugliness. In Jeannine’s hands, the characterization of Bernarda Alba could afford that extremity - sometimes uglier than any Bernarda Alba I’ve ever seen,



verging on the rapacious, even carnivorous - because she had so many other colors as well. (Berkman)



**Figure Two: Bernarda in Repose**

Maria Josefa

In the months leading up to auditions, I had organized three readings of *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and each time, I'd cast a young man in the role of Maria Josefa. I didn't have a well-articulated reason for doing this, but I'd been thinking about men in drag, of how men seem to possess this innate ability to ape femininity. Now, I'm not talking respectfully, always, or even accurately; but the ability is there. Maria Josefa seemed like such a caricature, and I thought perhaps a young man, harboring this innate

ability, might be more able than a young woman to develop the externals. Also, it seems to me that one has greater flexibility with gender when casting prophets. Tiresias is frequently cast as a woman; Stina Ekblad as Ismael in *Fanny and Alexander* gives a chillingly androgynous performance; Leslie Feinberg writes of the hermaphrodite prophets in her book *Transgender Warriors*. Maria Josefa has many of the characteristics of a prophet - she appears mad, she spouts riddles, she is not taken seriously, and her predictions are frighteningly accurate. In any case, although all three men who read the part over the summer did so fairly well, I was still hoping that some older female actors would audition. However, they did not.

After call-backs, I had only one actor - male - whom I believed could play the part; but unfortunately, he was cast as the lead in a conflicting production. I had a second round of call-backs and, to be honest, was not impressed with anyone. I cast Troy Pepicelli without having seen that he could do it, but knowing he was a good, strong actor, and still somehow convinced that Maria Josefa would be best played by a man. Dramaturg Jason Lites voiced a concern that casting a young man would yield a two-dimensional, cartoonish performance, but I did it anyway.

My work with Troy was a juggling act between the internal and the external. We began by talking a lot about what Maria Josefa's place in the household was, and how long she'd been in her current position, that is, isolated, ignored. We did a careful once-or-twice-over of the lines, parsing out specificity of meaning in each wild metaphor. We listened to a CD of Lorca poems put to music and sung by Paco Ibanez, and from them we culled a melody for Maria Josefa's "Ovejita" song. I brought in a character walk

which came from Helene Weigel's *Mother Courage* - an insect-like scuttle - and Troy adapted it to fit his body. Troy played with voices. I made suggestions: perhaps she might sing a certain line, whisper another; perhaps this one makes her laugh and that one, weep. Then, when Troy began working with Brittany Costa, the actor playing Martirio, we put all that external work aside and concentrated on the relationship of grandmother and grandchild. The three of us asked (and occasionally answered) questions: why does Martirio stop to speak with Maria Josefa instead of running into the corral after Adela? Why does Maria Josefa go so willingly back to bed at the end of the scene? We discovered a connection between the two through their spinal cords, the grandmother's bent from old age, the granddaughter's twisted from scoliosis. One day in rehearsal, Brittany placed her hands at the base of Troy's spine and walked them up it, one over the other. We held onto this image, and eventually placed it at the very end of their scene together.

We talked about Maria Josefa's mental health. We decided that she was not in fact mad, but that she used insanity as a mask to enable truth-telling. We found that while certain lines were pointedly wandering and dotty, others were incisive and cutting, for instance, "Why isn't there any white foam here? Here there's nothing but black mourning shawls" (*Three Plays* 280). Troy ended up snarling that line.

Finally, we explored Maria Josefa's complicated relationship with her daughter. Troy discovered a lot about Maria Josefa from working on her topography, which covered the birth of Bernarda, the intense love between them, and the tragedy of gradually being shut out. Here, Troy referenced a memory from Bernarda's topography, that is, the

moment when her father climbed into bed with her. In Troy's mind, this became the unspeakable event that drove a wedge between Maria Josefa and her daughter, the moment after which they could not communicate. We developed for Maria Josefa a gesture, a grabbing desperately at her womb, that occurred each time she cried "Bernarda, face of a leopard" (Three Plays 278-9). The lamb Maria Josefa carried became a manifestation of Bernarda as a child, innocent, pure, loving - and the leopard, the cold hard fact of her, impenetrable, austere.

By performance time, Troy had blossomed into a believable octogenarian. He managed to maintain the externals of character while at the same time delivering a nuanced reading of the text. Many audience members initially thought Maria Josefa was played by a woman, even a few who knew Troy; and almost everyone who saw the play commented positively on his performance. Professor Len Berkman wrote that

Troy's cross-gender performance was another spectacular aspect of [the] production... He sought to embody a distinctive person, not a 'gender-stereotype' nor an 'age-stereotype.' From the outset, I *felt* for what his character was going through. The play fuses societal imprisonment with personal self-imprisonment (at least as [the] phenomenal layering of each character evoked) and Troy was every inch [as] able to activate this complexity as (shall we say) the natural-born actresses were. (Berkman)



**Figure Three: Maria Josefa and “Ovejita”**

### Creating Family

An important challenge we faced with this production was that of creating a believable family out of seven unrelated actors, (or, indeed, nine, since Poncia and the Maid are also part of the family). The costumes helped, as all the women were dressed in the narrow black skirts and black veils of mourning, and designer Erin White also dyed the sisters’ hair so that they were all brunettes. But, there is so much more that defines a family - shared experience, gesture, habit, history.

During the first week of rehearsals, I broke the actors up into trios and pairs and asked them to dance the essence and/or progression of their relationships. They were to

mine the text for clues into the relationships between their characters and then find physical metaphors to represent these. I encouraged them to bring in music, too, that would somehow illuminate these relationships.

Annelise Nielsen, Eva Claire Albion-Wright, and Emily Brown created an eye-opening piece about the relationship between Adela, Amelia, and Magdalena. It began with Magdalena alone onstage, hands folded in prayer. Amelia entered (was born), hands also in prayer, and joined Magdalena. Their hands wove back and forth like fish, in graceful, pious repetition. Adela entered and bounded all over the space, uncontrollable. Her two sisters tried to control her, pushing her hands together in prayer. She escaped and continued to explore. It wasn't until Adela's death that her sisters were able to force her hands into prayer, and then they seemed relieved, almost satisfied, that she was finally safe.



**Figure Four: Adela in Prayer**

The relationship dance between Poncia and Bernarda was another that really got at the heart of the matter. While “Home on the Range” played in the background, the women entered, aping Western gun-toting cowboys. After slapping Poncia, Bernarda ordered her servant to at first make her laugh and then comfort her while she cried. Poncia stood behind Bernarda’s chair and drew her hand across the horizon while wiggling her fingers, in an expressive gesture of tale-spinning. Eventually, Bernarda made Poncia a gift of her socks which, when left alone onstage, Poncia placed in an invisible cupboard and patted lovingly. The piece elegantly expressed the dual nature of their relationship, which is sometimes maid and master, other times old friends or lovers.

Other moments from these dances stuck with us and added to our increasing understanding of these women and their dark, symbiotic, almost incestuous relationships: Bernarda locking Maria Josefa in a room and turning away, breathing a slow sigh of relief as her mother dies; Magdalena starting out as a daughter to Poncia but, over time, becoming her employer; Amelia awakening Martirio’s senses and introducing her to the world. Jeannine said that, in leading this work, I

really trusted the actors to find those relationships, and it wasn’t all in our heads, it was already in our bodies, it was more in the way that people really form relationships, like nonverbal things we notice about each other, smells, gestures, how you looked at me, what came out of your imagination. I think that it...helped me trust that [the other actors] were coming from some place that they’d really explored, and then when we

would play with each other in terms of our characters playing with each other, that gave so much juicy nonintellectual stuff to work with that was just great. (Haas Interview)

Another exercise I did with the actors was to have them write letters to other characters either in the play or mentioned but unseen. I hoped this would encourage them to think more deeply and specifically about these familial bonds. The actor playing Magdalena wrote a letter to her father Antonio. We know from Poncia's line that "She's the only one who loved her father" (Three Tragedies 157), and in the funeral scene, she is the only family member who audibly expresses her grief. Thus, I wanted her to know exactly why she had loved her father so much, so that her grief could become specific, rather than general. In her letter, she wrote, "I think about you all the time, Papa, but I can't feel you here anymore." She went on to describe hiding Antonio's books to keep them safe, and her attempts to protect her sisters from their mother. "Now I am one of them," she concluded, "engulfed by their fears, afflicted by their hatred, enthralled by their passions" (Brown). When we started work on the funeral scene, Emily knew why Magdalena went against Bernarda's wishes - something the daughters only did out of necessity, when their passions were truly aroused - by breaking the silence and wailing audibly out of grief and respect for her father. Her emotional outpouring was then truthful and rich, and came from a place of real understanding.

One night a couple of weeks into the process, we worked on the family arc by running in succession all the scenes featuring Bernarda and her daughters. A specificity



and complexity of interaction seemed to be missing from these scenes, but I had never dealt with so many actors onstage at once, and I was overwhelmed by the thought of working each moment with each character, not to mention, there simply wasn't time. I asked the actors to play the scenes with their appropriate lines and blocking but to allow themselves to speak freely anything which came into their heads in-the-moment.

Suddenly, the scenes were full and fraught with little familial jabs. In the scene where Bernarda calls Angustias onstage to ask why she has been looking at the men after the funeral, Angustias entered, looked directly at Adela, and said something along the lines of, "I knew you'd tell." That night, the actors had dozens of such revelations, as their focus was expanded to include an awareness of all their scene partners, of all the thoughts and feelings they were having about one another.

Toward the end of the process, when I wanted to return to a place of simple honesty and connection, I did an exercise called "First Crossing." In it, I asked the actors to move toward or away from one another, and to respond rather than to make something happen. Once they were truly connecting and responding, I had them bring an awareness of character and relationship into the exercise, and gradually gestures and sound, and even dialogue, emerged. I had done this exercise previously only as a warm up, and never involving character. However, it ended up working beautifully and was particularly fruitful for the relationship between Bernarda and Maria Josefa. They had not yet worked one-on-one, as they shared the stage for only half of a page, and then with the rest of the family, and in chaos. During this exercise, they explored Bernarda's fear of and disgust for Maria Josefa, and the idea that she shrunk from her mother's touch. Bernarda started

blowing in Maria Josefa's face whenever she got too close, and stamping her feet like a petulant child. Even though Jeannine was in her 50s and Troy was 30 years her junior, there began to emerge in this exercise a mother-daughter relationship that would continue to deepen throughout the process.

During the brush-up rehearsal in between the two weeks of performance, I asked the nine main actors to improvise their scenes, focusing on relationships and the pursuit of objectives. Again, Bernarda and Maria Josefa worked together. The dialogue that developed was simple and repetitive, with Maria Josefa saying, "Look at me, look at me, look at me," and Bernarda refusing. Maria Josefa - a young man in jeans and hooded sweatshirt - grew in status during this exercises, as she heatedly demanded her daughter's compliance. And, when Bernarda finally gave in and looked, her mother briefly touched her cheek and then exited, leaving her dangling and alone.

## CHAPTER IV

### WORKING WITH THE SET

#### The Design

Designer Miguel Romero came into the first or second production meeting with a set. It was a raised white platform surrounded by audience on four sides and featuring tall black chairs with prison-like bars running the length of their backs. At first I loved the flexibility and possibility of the design, but as I read and reread the play, coming to know and understand *The House of Bernarda Alba* more deeply, I started questioning whether or not the set was right for it. However, Miguel was certain that it was, and the design became a fixed entity, like the text. I did eventually convince him that having high chairs with barred backs in the round would make for difficult visibility; and, I pushed to have the chairs painted white. In the end, we had the raised platform in-the-round, and on it, six tall white chairs with empty frames for backs. Very simple, very versatile.

My challenge became to utilize the chairs in such a way that they supported the story, rather than overshadowing it. Also, I'd never directed anything in-the-round, and developing effective staging in this complicated way became an obsession of mine throughout the rehearsal process.

#### Using the Chairs

I knew that if the chairs weren't part of the rehearsal process from the very beginning, they would seem like an alien entity in the production, giant, unwieldy. Actors

began their experimentation with the chairs during the first rehearsal, not only with the composition exercises but also during breaks, sitting or standing on them, jumping from chair to chair, turning them on their sides, climbing through their tall backs, slamming them to the floor. Anything we could possibly have done with the chairs, we did.

Inspired by this work, I developed a look for the top of each act: Act I would begin with the chairs on their sides, in a formation resembling a cross; for Act II, the chairs would be in a circle center stage, back-to-back; and for Act III, they would again be on their sides, but this time overlapping one another in a position reminiscent of a dinner table. These three looks corresponded to the pet titles I'd given the acts - the cross for "Mourning," the "Sewing" circle, and the table for "Eating." Not realizing quite how ambitious an idea it was, I proposed that the actors would move the chairs from one formation to the next over the course of each act.



**Figure Five: "Eating"**

There were times when these chair movements felt very natural and even helped to further the storytelling. A particularly successful sequence, in my view, took place after Prudencia's exit in Act III, when Angustias asks for her mother's advice and reassurance. We used the chairs here as a physical manifestation of what is happening emotionally between mother and daughter. Each time Angustias appealed to her mother, Bernarda placed a chair between the two of them, as if to say, "Don't ask me that." This also served to take the chairs from their "Eating" position into the end-of-play look.

At other times, the actors and the text were upstaged by the imposing size and weight of the chairs. And, when I failed to find exactly the right moment for an actor to move a chair, the movement took focus and distracted from the storytelling.

Ultimately, the chairs helped to develop and support character. Each actor had a unique way of moving with them and inhabiting the space. For instance, Adela alone of all the daughters had the freedom to jump up on the chairs and slam them down. She moved freely in and among them; to her, they were stepping stones. She stood on top of them in her green dress like a small plant, reaching upwards. For Martirio, on the other hand, they were manifestations of her scoliosis; she picked them up heavily and dragged them on her back. Amelia moved dancelike among the chairs, as though they were her partners in a duet; Magdalena was resigned to them, treating them wearily as the given context of her life.

The chairs also became part of the aural world of the play. Characters threw them down to illustrate a point, or dragged them slowly across the space like chains. Sound designer Thad Kramer mic'ed the stage to emphasize these moments.

And so, just as the daughters, caught within the stifling prison of the house, find freedom of self-expression in small but vital ways, so too did the actors and I find freedom within the strictures of the set. Jeannine, when she wasn't onstage, had ample time to observe the show from the house, and said, "It was like a sculpture, it was like a chess game. It was really fascinating because it looked different depending on where I'd sit to watch, even the same scenes" (Haas Interview). And Len Berkman wrote that

The use of the chairs I found ingenious. In a confined environment, objects require multiple (versatile) use. That's exactly how one makes constant claustrophobia other than artistically static. I found the reconfigurations of the chairs fascinating. Harsh, hard, prisoner-reinforcing, even bony they were...and gripping. (Berkman)

After all, structure leads to freedom, or so they say.

## CHAPTER V

### POST-PRODUCTION REFLECTIONS

The rehearsal period for this show, at just under five weeks, was the shortest I've ever had, and for probably the most complex script. It felt so quick and dirty, so frightening, that I barely breathed or stepped back to reflect before the production opened. The process was electric and rewarding, certainly, but it felt like free-falling without a net. I saw everything very up-close - the text, the actors, the moments - and, for the first time in my life as a director, did not have a vision toward which I was working. On opening night, I was as surprised as anyone else to see what the piece had become.

I had mixed feelings about the production. I was mostly happy with the staging, feeling that after hard work and great attention to detail, I'd finally created successful stage pictures for all four sides of the audience. And the relationships were strong; the women onstage felt like a family.

The production's major flaw was that it was ripe to bursting with emotion. The actors (not all of them, to be sure) screamed and wept as if they had to show, with each line, everything of which they were capable. At times, it was exhausting to watch, and it threw up an impenetrable wall between the actors and the audience, as well as between the actors themselves. Anne Bogart writes that

It is actually not difficult to make everyone in any audience feel and think the same thing at the same time. It is not difficult to lock down meaning

and manipulate response. What is trickier is to generate an event or a moment which will trigger many different possible meanings and associations. It takes craft to set up the circumstances that are simple and yet contain the ambiguities and the incongruity of human experience. (*A Director Prepares* 106)

Upon opening the play, I realized that I had done very much the former with this piece, forced the audience to feel a certain way through the relentless emotion of the actors. Of course I had not intended to do so, but my early neglect of objective work had led to isolated and heavily emotional acting.

I attempted to remedy this through nightly notes, and with the aforementioned objective-based improvisations during the brush-up rehearsal. Things improved, and the audience response throughout the second week of performances was considerably more positive. However, the problem was rooted too deeply to be fixed entirely. If I had initially approached these overly emotional scenes with objective-based work, the actors would have been focused on the effects their words were having on one another, rather than on expressing themselves to the hilt. I greatly regret this oversight of mine, however, I learned a valuable lesson for the future.

Also, there were a considerable number of audience members who felt frustrated by the set, by its seeming alien contrast to the rich detailed life of the play, and by its loud, large chairs and impossible-to-ignore whiteness. In retrospect, I should have questioned Miguel Romero more thoroughly at that early production meeting, asking him



first and foremost how the set would help to tell the story. Such a question would at the very least have helped me understand how better to use the set, but might also have led to deeper discussion and perhaps a change in the design. It was a highly conceptual set, which I - and many others - found beautiful and inspiring, but there were times when it inhibited the storytelling.

And, finally, the overall pace of the show was measured and slow but with a constant peppering of explosive outbursts. It was heavy, dark, and difficult to take. While the play has some of those same qualities, I wish I had been able to make the piece more palatable. I heard many comments that it was relentless and exhausting. I believe this could have been remedied by the aforementioned objective-based work, but also by a deeper trust of the text itself. My actors and I didn't trust the text enough to let it do the storytelling. We should have kept our work light and exploratory, rather than demanding and heavy-handed.

There were many positive reactions to the piece as well, particularly, as I said, from those who saw it the second weekend. Professor Len Berkman wrote that

I have long held doubts about the magnitude of this play's significance, its reliance upon a reductive view of personal tyranny and repression, its simplicity of character differentiation, its sustained (little-evolving) claustrophobic atmosphere with its predictable delayed 'revolt' and its disastrous consequence. Your production enabled me to re-invision this play and to see, at last (after decades) its genuine claim to a stature beyond

what I had perceived... Honestly, if there were imperfections in your production - and how can there not be in everything human that we do? - what you achieved was so magnificent I was not aware I harbored a single quibble. (Berkman)

Many people were drawn-in and moved by the performances, Jeannine Haas' in particular. Her final speeches - one of which was quoted in my section on translation - moved many to tears, and to a deeper understanding of Bernarda's journey and behavior. I consider this a great success, a sign that the production transcended political allegory. We were able to highlight the complex humanity of the piece, and to make the play relevant to ourselves and our community.

## CONCLUSION

*The House of Bernarda Alba* feels like an end-of-life work. In fact it was, but unwittingly so, as Lorca was killed in the early months of the Spanish Civil War, two months after the completion of *The House of Bernarda Alba*. At only 38 years old, Lorca was able to reach down into the depths of human understanding, perhaps going deeper than he'd ever been; and the resulting play reaches out to those who work on it, and makes us better - better people, better artists.

Through the rehearsal process, I came to unite my particular, physically-based aesthetic with a growing interest in complex, messy humanity. This process changed me. I feel differently now when I go to the theatre than I ever did before. Even with the most gorgeous externals of staging and design, if there isn't truth and complexity and struggle, I am no longer interested. Through working on this play, I have been *expanded* - broken open, exploded apart. I tried and failed at making the piece small and understandable, and so, I had myself to become bigger, to meet it half way to infinity.

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