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Costume Designing for Theatre of the Absurd - Come and Go, Footfalls, and The Dumb Waiter.

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Table of Contents

Costume Design for Theatre of the Absurd—*Come and Go*, *Footfalls*, and *The Dumb Waiter*

In Fall of 2010, The Division of Theatre and Dance at East Tennessee State University staged three one act plays by the absurdist playwrights, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, and I was given the opportunity to costume design for all three plays. This was a unique and exciting experience for me because of the genre, Theatre of the Absurd, and because I was able to work with such a diversely experienced production team. The show had three directors. Dr. Katherine Weiss, Associate Professor of the Department of Literature and Language and a noted Beckett scholar, made her directing debut with Beckett's *Come and Go* and *Footfalls*; while Professor Patrick Cronin, head of The Division of Theatre and Dance and Director of the Fine and Performing Arts Honors College, and Jodi Nelson, adjunct faculty and professional filmmaker, co-directed Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*. Professor Karen Brewster, ETSU Division of Theatre and Dance Costume Designer, was my mentor throughout the project. Being that this was my first venture in costume design, she guided me through every step of the process. The set was designed by Professor Delbert Hall; the sound was designed by Scott A. Koenig, and the lighting was designed by Professor Melissa Shafer—all of whom are experienced theatre professionals. William Cate, a fellow student, stage managed the show. These were the people that I discussed ideas with at production meetings, rehearsals, and the performances, and it is through them that I learned the communication and collaboration skills that I will use throughout the rest of my career.

Working with Theatre of the Absurd requires a different approach than working with traditional theatrical forms for the actors, directors, and designers. As a first-time costume designer working on these plays, I learned that the most important aspect of theatrical design is collaboration—everyone involved must come together to tell one collective story; to make every

aspect of the show appear as though it is a part of the same world. This is a particularly difficult challenge when working with absurdist writers like Beckett and Pinter. Both writers have specific ideas about the design elements in their plays, even though the design objectives are not as clearly defined as they are in more realistic plays. The design team must both adhere to the writers' requirements, and come to some sort of agreement about the aspects that are unclear in the text.

The term "Theatre of the Absurd" was first coined by Martin Esslin in his 1961 book by that title. Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet, and Pinter had already established themselves as important and influential playwrights—their personal styles had already been recognized—but if it were not for Esslin's book, the works of these writers may never have been realized as part of a single movement in drama. Esslin drew the word "absurd" from the philosopher Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*, which he refers to as "one of the great, seminal heart-searchings of our time" (Esslin xix). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus attempts to answer the question why, since life is absurd and has no meaning, should we not seek relief in suicide? (Camus 3).

There is no real, clear definition of Theatre of the Absurd. Absurd, in a musical context, means "out of harmony." In the common English-speaking world, the word absurd is generally synonymous with ridiculous, and a lot of sources—such as *Living Theatre: A History*, the standard theatre history textbook by Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb—misleadingly use the word ridiculous to describe the Theatre of the Absurd. However, Esslin clearly states that this word is not appropriate: "This is not the sense in which Camus uses the word, and in which it is used when we speak of the Theatre of the Absurd" (Esslin xix). These writers are not trying to argue that our place in the world we live in is ridiculous, but that it is "out of harmony with

reason"—we will never find out what the purpose of life is or whether life even has a purpose. We are alone, lost, and confused, and so long as we are living, that will never change.

Using the word ridiculous to describe the Theatre of the Absurd gives the impression that absurdist works are meaningless; this has become a common misconception. Absurdist writers argue that life seems to have no meaning, but the plays themselves are certainly not meaningless. Matthew Roudané explains that Theatre of the Absurd is "Characterized by a politicized sense of futility and meaninglessness in a world constantly under the threat of war and nuclear annihilation" (12). His use of the word "politicized" is fitting as it strongly points away from the belief that absurdist plays are meaningless. Moreover, Roudané's definition is suitable because it includes World War II as an influence on Theatre of the Absurd. Jan Culík explains that the atrocities seen in the Second World War rattled traditional beliefs and highlighted the unsteadiness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and uncertainty. Absurdist playwrights believed that in this period of despair, traditional art forms had lost their validity and ceased to be convincing. The Theatre of the Absurd was an attempt to make people aware of the absurdities of their condition and shock them out of a life that had become stale, mechanical, and monotonous (Culík par. 2).

All absurdist playwrights have their own unique writing styles, but there are a few common characteristics that link them together and classify them as "absurd." They all hold the basic belief that life holds no meaning or at least none which can be explained or understood. Life is absurd, and as such, absurdist dramatists try to reflect this absurdity in the dramatic action of their plays. Esslin states that "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being—that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence" (xx). Absurdist writers attempt to shock or rattle

rather than to lecture the viewer. The plays do not have concrete themes or meanings; they often have no plot or clearly defined characters. The dialogue seems "total gobbledygook" (Culík par. 4)—the plays attempt to show language as an insufficient means of communication. They have almost none of the conventions of traditional theatre. Esslin explains that these plays cannot be critiqued or analyzed by the conventions of traditional theatre:

> If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end…They can be judged only by the standards of the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin xvii).

It is not possible for one to watch an absurdist play in the same way that one would watch Shakespeare or Ibsen or Rogers and Hammerstein. It is necessary to go into it knowing that it will be different.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1949) can be credited with starting the absurdist movement. It revolutionized the stage and encouraged other writers, like Harold Pinter, to experiment with non-traditional forms of theatre. Beckett and Pinter each have a distinctive writing style, but there are a few similarities in their works. Both playwrights rebel against the conventions of traditional drama, distrust language as a means of human communication, and each has a habit of letting audiences observe their characters' situations without ever explaining exactly what their situations actually are. In an article in *The Beckett Circle*, titled "In Memoriam: Harold Pinter (1930 – 2008)," Francis Gillen explains first that

Samuel Beckett opened up a sense of possibility, a different sensibility in both the

novel and the play, a new relationship to the audience, theatre not as 'about' but

as a ritual celebration of the finally unknowable and maybe unsayable human

mystery (1).

Gillen goes on to show that Harold Pinter was able to carry Beckett's insight into more

recognizable social situations, bringing about more immediate audience identification.

ETSU's evening of absurdist one-acts started (as the absurdist movement started) with

Samuel Beckett. He was born in 1906 in Dublin to a prosperous protestant family, and earned a

B.A. from Trinity College in Dublin in 1927, having specialized in French and Italian. He

received his M.A. in 1931 and taught French at Trinity college until 1932 when he resigned to

focus full-time on writing (Esslin 1-3). In 1930, he published *Whoroscope*, a 98-line poem in

which the narrator, René Descartes, contemplates the passage of time and the approach of death--

two themes which Beckett remained obsessed with throughout the rest of his writing career

(Knowlson 116). When World War II broke out, Beckett, because of his participation in the

Resistance movement, was sought out by the Nazis, and fled to Southern France with Suzanne

Dechevaux-Dumesnil where he remained in hiding for two-and-a-half years. After the war, he

was overcome by "a frenzy of writing" (Knowlson 325), completing four stories, four novels,

and two plays. During this "frenzy," Beckett came to the realization that there is no escape from

the compulsion to think—to try to solve unsolvable mysteries. He waged a lifelong war on

words, trying to yield to the silence that underlines them. It was *Waiting for Godot*, written in

1949 and first performed at the Théâtre de Babylone in 1953, which brought Beckett

international fame and established him as a leading absurdist writer (Knowlson 339-342).

Twelve years after *Waiting for Godot* was published, *Come and Go* premiered at the Schillertheater in Berlin on January 14, 1966. In October 2010, *Come and Go* was the first play presented in ETSU's evening with Beckett and Pinter. It is an eight minute, 125-word play for three women (although it was the shortest of the three plays, the costumes for *Come and Go* required the most time, money, and labor). Ellen Mease, in her study guide for Grinnell College, explains that *Come and Go* "dramatizes human life as a coming and a going hence, from birth to death, from the light into the final dark" (Mease 1). The three characters, Flo, Vi, and Ru sit on a bench in that order from left to right, center stage, softly lit by a single overhead light. Vi has the first line—"When did we three last meet," to which Ru replies, "Let us not speak" (194). After a silence, Vi stands up and walks upstage until she is out of sight; hidden in the darkness, and leaving an empty space between Flo and Ru. When Vi is no longer visible, Flo asks Ru, "What do you think of Vi?" Ru answers, "I see little change" (194). Flo then moves to the center to whisper in Ru's ear. What she whispers goes unheard by the audience, but shocks Ru. "Does she not realize?" Ru asks. Flo replies, "God grant not" (194). Vi then re-enters and sits on the left side of the bench, where Flo was before. This routine is then repeated twice more with each character playing the part of the one who exits, the one who whispers, and the one who is shocked at the secret. In the end, Vi is again in the center, but Flo and Ru have switched places with Flo now on the right and Ru on the left. Vi poses three questions: "May we not speak of the old days?...Of what came after?...Shall we hold hands in the old way?" (195). The first two receive no response, but after the third, the three women hold hands in a daisy chain pattern, forming the mathematical sign for infinity, and Flo delivers the last line, "I can feel the rings" (195), but the women wear none.

Beckett's plays have many unanswered questions. Sidney Homan explains in an essay titled "*Come and Go*: Samuel Beckett's Play for Women," that

> At first glance, the picture of the three women sitting together, then the two chatting about the one who has just left, might call up the male stereotype of "gossips." But this is also a play where three women try to come to grips with their past, from the idyllic period on the playground, where they dreamed of love, to whatever happened between then and now (305).

The question of what happened between then and now is something that is never answered. The only thing that is actually revealed to the audience is that they were childhood friends who used to sit together on the playground, dreaming of love. We are not told "what came after," what is whispered, or why Flo refers to "rings." Beckett left these answers out of the play in order to let the audience come up with their own answers based on their own experiences.

Beckett also left these questions unanswered for the directors, designers, and actors. In order to come up with a clear and cohesive concept, they all must discuss and eventually agree upon the answers to these questions. The Beckett Estate requires the artistic directors of theatres to sign a legal document specifying that no changes in the written text will be made. Beckett gives some very specific guidelines for costumes in the text, and the costume designer is legally required to adhere to them. Beckett's notes for *Come and Go* call for:

> Full-length coats, buttoned high, dull violet, dull red, and dull yellow. Drab nondescript hats with enough brim to shade faces. Apart from color differentiation three figures as alike as possible. Light shoes with rubber soles. Hands made up to be as visible as possible. No rings apparent (196).

Originally, upon reading these notes, I was under the impression that developing my own answers to the questions posed in the script would be unnecessary—I thought I had all the information I would need and that I had very little room for creativity. However, as I became more involved in the design process, I began to realize that I had the opportunity to create costumes that had never been seen in any production of *Come and Go* prior.

Designers are usually discouraged from researching past productions of plays in order to avoid comparing their designs to others' or copying other ideas unintentionally. However, when considering abstract and unfamiliar image possibilities for *Come and Go*, I found it helpful to look at what other designers had created. The research helped me realize that even though Beckett provided strict guidelines for the play, I still had plenty of room for originality. In each production that I researched, the characters were, of course, wearing long coats in red, violet, and yellow, but the styles of the coats were varied. In some interpretations, such as the University of Denver's 2007 production (See Figure 1A) and Peter Brook's 2007 production (See Figure 2A) at the Theatre Des Bouffes Du Nord in Paris, the coats were loose and bulky. In others, such as the "Beckett on Film" production (See Figure 3A), the coats were structured and form-fitting. Some of the coats were made of fleece, some of cotton, and some of wool. Some had belts, some had buttons, some had big collars—it became clear that there were endless possibilities for these costumes.

We knew almost immediately that the coats for *Come and Go* would have to be made from scratch, and this gave me even more freedom to choose. Beckett indicates (both in the play's action and in the pattern of the hands in the end) the sign for infinity, giving the impression that these three women will be sitting in this place, repeating these same actions forever. Therefore, I wanted the characters to seem timeless—I did not want the style of the coats

to be specific to any certain era. I began by gathering several images of women's coats from every decade since the 1920s—the fashions of any time earlier than that were too unlike the current styles to be able to achieve the timeless look that I was going for. I also kept in mind, while gathering these images, something that Beckett had written in a letter to Alan Schneider. Schneider asked Beckett if he had any recommendations for directing *Come and Go*, and Beckett replied, "I see *Come and Go* very formal. Strictly identical attitudes and movements…Stiff, slow, puppet-like" (Harmon 417). Beckett's letter reveals that the loose, bulky coats that I had seen in other productions of this play were not appropriate. The coats should be stiff and fitted.

The director, Katherine Weiss, and I both responded to two styles of coats found in my research (See Figures 4A & 5A)—both of which were simple, structured, and left the time period somewhat vague. One of them was double-breasted and buttoned down the center, and the other had a single row of buttons along the right side. Through our discussions we realized that we could have one that buttoned down the center, one that buttoned on the right, and one that buttoned on the left (See Figure 6A). Vi, who starts off in the middle would be wearing a double-breasted coat; Ru, who starts off stage left, would have a coat that buttoned on the left, and Flo, who starts off stage right, would have a coat that buttoned on the right, creating symmetry, and making the three women look more like one unified image rather than three separate people. Samantha Cook, the actor playing Ru, explained in the first rehearsal for *Come and Go* that she viewed the three women as three separate parts of the same person. The director and I liked her perception, and tried to use the pattern of the buttons to reflect it. As the characters changed positions, the pattern of the buttons changed as well, but the play ends with Vi, again in the center, Ru on the right, and Flo on the left (See Figure 7A). The buttons created a look of

symmetry both in the beginning and the end of the play. When Ru and Flo's positions switched in the end, making the buttons closer together, this created an even stronger image of unity.

After coming to a decision about the style of the coats, it was time to make a decision about color. The text requires that the coats are red, violet, and yellow, but I still had to decide on the exact shade of each. It was during this process that I learned an extremely useful technique in theatrical design--the use of a visual metaphor. I began to wonder why Beckett had chosen those three colors for the coats and concluded, based on Vi's final line, "May we not speak of the old days…of what came after?" (195), that there was some kind of painful event in these characters' pasts. They have suffered some kind of trauma, and because of it they are now stuck in this purgatory having the same conversation over and over again. I remembered from my stage makeup class with Karen Brewster a few years back that the three colors—red, violet, and yellow—are three colors that a makeup artist uses to create a bruise, or physical evidence of trauma. Gathering images of bruises, I tried to match the red, violet, and yellow of the characters' coats to the dull reds, bluish violets, and greenish yellows, found in a bruise. (See Figures 8A & 9A).

The most important lesson I learned in this process was that of communication and collaboration with the actors, directors, and other designers. While working on *Come and Go*, I found collaboration with the lighting designer, Melissa Shafer, to be particularly helpful. The women's coats ended up being made of thick cotton. The violet and yellow fabrics were purchased in those colors, but there was no red available, so a white cotton fabric had to be dyed. Once dyed, the coat was too bright to look like the shade of red found in a bruise, and I was afraid that it would upstage the other coats. New dye would have to be purchased, and the entire dyeing process would have to be redone until Professor Shafer suggested a using a green gel in

the overhead light. Since green and red are complimentary colors, when the green gel was added, the bright red of the coat was toned down enough without having to dye it again.

On May 20, 1976—ten years after the premiere of *Come and Go*—Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls* premiered at The Royal Court Theatre. *Footfalls* focuses on one character, May, who spends the majority of the play pacing back and forth (nine steps every time) across a single beam of light on the stage. While there are two characters in this play—May and the mother— May is "the soul physical image of the play" (Wilch 7). She is the only character visible to the audience, and in our production, the mother's voice was prerecorded by the same actor playing May, Bethany Stokes, to reinforce the idea that the mother's voice exists solely in May's head. The play is divided into four scenes, each separated by a blackout and a chime. In the first scene, May and the mother converse, and the audience learns that May is in her forties and the mother, age ninety, is ill and requires May's attention at fixed times. In the second scene, the mother addresses the audience. She asks them to observe her daughter's strange life. The audience learns that May has "not been out since girlhood" (241)—she was born late in the mother's life and has spent the greater part of her childhood caring for her. In the third scene, May speaks to herself about her life as though it were the life of someone else and even refers to this person as "Amy," an anagram of May. In the fourth scene, when the lights come up, May is gone, suggesting that she has disappeared or perhaps that she was never really existed to begin with. In every scene but the fourth, the mother asks May or May asks herself, "Will you never have done revolving it all?" (240, 243). The audience becomes aware that May, like the women in *Come and Go*, has suffered some kind of trauma in her life—something that she cannot stop revolving over and over again in her mind—but, also, as seen in *Come and Go*, the audience is never told exactly what "it," this traumatic event, is.

Xerxes Mehta explores the spiral structure of Beckett's theatre, explaining that "The deeper the director, designers, and performers venture into [*Footfalls*] the more they realize that almost everything is unknown, and perhaps unknowable" (170). *Footfalls* has layers upon layers of unanswered questions, but Beckett does, in his notes, and in the dialogue, give a firm foundation for the way May's costume should look. The notes call for "disheveled grey hair," and a "worn grey wrap hiding [her] feet, trailing" (239). The most powerful images that describe how May should look, however, are given as clues within the dialogue. In the first scene, May asks the mother:

> M: What age am I now?
>
> V: In your forties.
>
> M: So little?
>
> V: I'm afraid so (240).

This exchange led me to realize that even though May is in her forties, she should appear much older, as though the trauma she has suffered in her life has caused her to age more rapidly. To achieve this, Stokes applied old age makeup and used a white spray on her hair (See Figure 1B). Also in the dialogue, May describes herself as "tattered…a tangle of tatters" (242). This was the core image that I kept in mind when designing her costume. Her skirt and shawls were "tattered"—I had the edges ripped and torn to shreds. I then tied knots in some of the shreds that hung from her skirt and shawls to add the "tangled" element (See Figure 2B).

In the second scene, the mother tells a story about May demanding that she "must hear the feet, however faint they fall" (241). May spends much of the play pacing, and the notes specifically call for nine steps before each turn. In *Beckett in Performance*, the author, Jonathan Kalb, describes a conversation between Beckett and Hildegard Schmahl, the actor playing May

in the German premiere of *Footfalls*. On the first day of rehearsals, Schmahl told Beckett that she

did not understand the play. His response was that she should emphasize her footsteps. "The play

originated in his mind with the idea of pacing, he said, and the text only built up around this

picture" (Kalb 62). May's footsteps needed to stand out above everything else happening in the

play—and after a discussion with the director and the sound designer, I decided that this effect

would be best accomplished in the same way that it was accomplished in the Royal Court

Theatre premiere—by attaching sandpaper to the bottom of the actor's shoes.

Kalb goes on to explain that Hildegard Shmahl had trouble with the role of May

throughout the entire rehearsal process. Walter Asmus, the director of the German premiere, in

an interview with Kalb, told him that

> [Shmahl] wanted to fulfill all the things that she sensed [Beckett] wanted, but up
>
> to the very last rehearsal she used to break down, to give up. And in the end, she
>
> found, yes, a bit more and more, in layers (qtd. in Kalb 182).

It is best to approach *Footfalls* this way—in layers. The amount of holes in the plot has the

potential to frustrate any designer unless he/she approaches solutions one layer at a time. As

such, I included several layers in May's costume to represent the many layers she has added to

her story over the years of "revolving it all," and also to give the impression that May was being

bogged down by an inexplicable burden.

The layers were also inspired by the visual metaphor I chose. May is not a real person—

she is the trace of a real person, and she has been pacing this same length of floor for what could

be centuries. My initial idea for her costume was to dress her head to toe in gray and to make her

costume dusty enough so the audience would see dust coming off of her as she walked. I then

started thinking about what would actually happen to a living organism that had been stuck in

one place for years and years and concluded that things would probably start to grow out of it, like moss on a tree—specifically Spanish moss, which hangs down in layers (See Figures 3B & 4B). This is where the use of a visual metaphor was helpful, once again. I collected and studied images of Spanish moss and attempted to make May's costume appear as though it had been developing layers over time.

Moss grows in various shades of green and gray. I found an old white skirt in ETSU Theatre's costume storage. It was perfect for May because it had volume, layers, and was already tattered. First, I dyed it gray. Then, to achieve the mossy effect, I tied rubber bands in various places along the back of the skirt and dipped that area in a moss green dye. I repeated that process a total of ten times with four different shades of green, and then went over the whole skirt once more with gray. The last gray dip left the skirt with unintentional shades of purple, creating a beautiful and appropriate effect. The colors were stunning and made the skirt look like it was molding. May's top was cut out of an old gray nightgown found in storage, dyed that same gray / purple color, and layered with three shawls. The bottom shawl layer was a white, silk scarf that I tied up with rubber bands and dipped in a moss green dye. The second layer was a translucent beige scarf, and the top shawl layer was a smaller white silk scarf that I dyed several different shades of green using rubber bands.

Collaboration with the lighting designer was, once again, an important part of this process. The script calls for "dim light, strongest at floor level" (239) along the path where May walks. During the first night of dress rehearsal, three concerns about May's costume were brought to attention. Dr. Weiss was concerned that one of her shawls (the bottom green layer) was too bright. Everyone in the audience that night noticed that Stokes's makeup was too shiny and made her look a little washed out, and that the purples in the skirt, which had looked so

beautiful in the costume shop, had fallen flat on stage. All of these problems were solved by a lighting adjustment. The next night, the lighting designer, Melissa Shafer, focused the light more on Bethany's feet and less on her face, solving the problem of the makeup being too shiny. She also added a purple gel, which made both the bottom shawl look less bright and the purples in the skirt stand out. After each blackout, Shafer progressively shifted the lighting slightly from a purple to a more greenish hue. This way, the purples in the skirt would stand out in the beginning and the greens would stand out in the end—drawing attention to every detail that had been put into the costume. This shift, or "layering," in lighting reinforced the idea I was trying to put into the costume that there are many layers to May's character, life story, and to the play itself.

Good communication with the production team is imperative for any designer. While working on *Footfalls*, I found that good communication with the actor is equally important for the costume designer. Stokes, while playing May, has to remain hunched over throughout the performance, hunching a bit lower after each blackout—this is extremely painful. Billie Whitelaw, for whom the play was written and who originated the character, May, explains:

> I experience pain in all these roles. With *Footfalls*, it was physically excruciating
> to maintain the posture required for the part. As one gets lower and lower, to
> stand in that position becomes almost intolerable; it is almost as if one is curling
> round slowly within, into oneself, until finally one disappears, spiraling inward,
> inward" (qtd. in Ben-Zvi, 9).

During the three blackouts of the play, Stokes needed to be able to stretch to relieve the pain. It was important for the costume to allow room for her to stretch between scenes. I sewed the three layers of the shawls together in two places, allowing Stokes to stretch without losing any of her

shawls or causing them to slip out of place. Additionally, I had to consider her lowest position when trimming the bottom of her skirt so she would not trip over it in the third scene.

Come and Go and *Footfalls* have themes such as death, the monotony of daily routine, and the frustrated hopes of youth. The mood of these two plays is altogether dark and gloomy. Charles A. Carpenter, in an article titled "The Absurdity of Dread," comments that "it has gotten so that no one can speak of absurdity anymore without forcing the corners of his mouth to stay down" (279). However, Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, while still harboring themes of a dark and serious nature, is speckled with moments of laugh out loud comedy. Designing for this play provided me with entirely different challenges than designing for the Beckett plays. Harold Pinter was an admirer of Beckett and as such his writing is heavily influenced by Beckett's work. Pinter, however, brings Beckett's use of language, circular plots, character dynamics, and themes of time and waiting into a still absurd but more realistic world.

Pinter was born in 1930—24 years after Beckett. His writing career began in his teens with poetry published in little magazines. He attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1948 and the Central School of Speech and Drama in 1951, and under the stage name, David Baron, he attempted an acting career that led him around Ireland in a Shakespearian company. His career as a playwright began in 1957 when he mentioned an idea for a play to a friend who worked in the drama department at Bristol University. The friend was ecstatic about the idea and told Pinter that if it were to be performed, he would need the script within one week. "So I wrote back and told him to forget about the whole thing," Pinter explains, "And then I sat down and wrote it in four days. I don't quite know how it happened, but it did" (qtd. in Esslin 199). This first play was called *The Room*, and in it, we can see many of the same themes and stylistic choices found in his later, more successful work—" the suspense created by the elementary

ingredients of pure, pre-literary theatre: a stage, two people, a door; a poetic image of an undefined fear and expectation" (Esslin 199).

The Dumb Waiter, also written in 1957, was Pinter's second one-act play. Like *The Room*, it is a play about two people, a door, and a menacing and mysterious outside force. The two characters in this play, Ben and Gus, are hired assassins who travel around the country together performing jobs for their boss, Wilson, who is never seen in the play. In this particular part of Ben and Gus's life, they are sitting in a room in the basement of what used to be a café, waiting for their next target to be sent through the door. What the audience sees is forty-five minutes of the two characters trying to pass the time. Ben reads a newspaper. Gus asks questions about everything—the toilet, soccer, the sheets, the job, the meaning of life—everything. He complains about Wilson, the place where they are staying, and the work they do. Ben usually ignores him or changes the subject. They continue to pass time with mostly small talk and bickering until mysterious orders for complicated dishes start arriving through the old café's dumb waiter. These messages create even more tension and confusion for Ben and Gus. As time passes, the characters grow more impatient and their bickering becomes more hostile. After a violent confrontation in which Ben back-hands Gus across the chest, Gus excuses himself to the restroom. While Gus is out of the room, Ben receives a call telling him that the person they are to kill will be entering shortly. Ben prepares himself for the job, only to find that the person who is shoved through the door—the victim—is Gus. The play ends with a long pause of Ben holding his gun on Gus, and the lights go down before we ever know whether he actually kills him.

While the design choices for *Come and Go* and *Footfalls* were based heavily on visual metaphors drawn from clues in the text, the design choices for *The Dumb Waiter* were based on requirements that were much more tangible. It is an absurdist play, but it is set in a much more

realistic and recognizable world. The directors, Pat Cronin and Jodi Nelson, decided to set the play in the time that it was written—1957. Thus, the first requirement that needed to be considered was the time period. Pinter wrote the men in suits with jackets, vests, suspenders, and lace-up shoes. They also needed holsters for their guns. Although there are few obvious differences between men's suits of the 1950's and men's suits from any other decade, there were a few trends to note: thinner lapels, single breasted with two or three buttons, thin, simple patterned ties, and pants that sat high on the waist (See Figures 1C & 2C).

Because the style of *The Dumb Waiter* is closer to realism, it was most important to find pieces that fit the requirements of the time period. However, *The Dumb Waiter* is still an absurdist play, and after I pulled all 1950s-appropriate jackets, pants, ties, shirts, vests, shoes, and suspenders from costume storage, I began to consider the absurdist aspects of the play—the menacing outside force who is never seen, the mysterious messages that arrive under the door and through the dumb waiter, and, most of all, the characters. Ben and Gus are hired assassins; they murder other people as part of their professional career. One would expect two professional killers to be fearless, and coldblooded. Ben and Gus, however, are jumpy, childish, and they spend the entire play bickering over nonsense such as the proper way to say "light the kettle" (84): "Their edginess is much more directly concerned with tea kettles than with potential victims" (Kerr 17). In addition, their individual personalities are distinctly different and echo the differences between Vladimir and Estragon's personalities in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

> Estragon dreams, Vladimir cannot stand hearing about dreams… Estragon likes telling funny stories, Vladimir is upset by them. It is mainly Vladimir who voices the hope that Godot will come and that his coming will change their situation, while Estragon remains skeptical throughout and at times even forgets the name

of Godot…The opposition of their temperaments is the cause of endless bickering

between them and often leads to the suggestion that they should part. Yet, being

complementary natures, they also are dependent on each other and have to stay

together (Esslin 15).

If Wilson is Godot, then Ben is Vladimir. Ben trusts Wilson and does exactly as he says without

question. Gus, like Estragon, is skeptical of Wilson—"He might not come…he doesn't always

come" (86). The differences in Ben and Gus's personalities cause them to bicker throughout the

play, but the differences are complimentary and give them reason to stay together. Even after

Ben loses his temper with Gus, back-handing him across the chest, he quickly tries to reengage

Gus in small-talk, trying to pretend the violent episode never happened.

After assembling a collection of all the necessary costume pieces that were both

appropriate for the time period and fit the actors playing Ben (Samuel Floyd) and Gus (Josh

Holley), my next step was to choose, from that collection, pieces that emphasized the absurdist

elements of Ben and Gus's personalities. Ben is the more straight-laced of the two characters. He

passes his time with wood-work and model boats, and he is ready when the call for a job comes.

He does what Wilson tells him without asking questions. He bosses Gus around—he tells him

repeatedly to make tea, to start getting dressed, and at one point, scolds him for never polishing

his gun. This line revealed that Ben cares about his appearance, so he was put in a nicer, dark

colored suit that was neatly pressed. He wore his hair slicked back, and his face was clean

shaven. There are also violent aspects of Ben's personality—he gets angry with Gus quickly and,

a few times in the play, he even gets physically violent with him. I put Ben in a dark red shirt to

make him appear menacing (See Figure 3C).

Gus, on the other hand, has no hobbies—nothing to pass the time but his own thoughts. He asks questions about everything Wilson tells him. By the end of the play, when it is revealed that Gus is the victim, it is implied that the order to kill Gus was made because he was asking too many questions. Pat Cronin said in one production meeting that "*The Dumb Waiter* is about Gus 'unraveling.'" This was the visual metaphor I used when planning Gus's costume. I chose to make him look as though he had not given much thought to his appearance—his hair was messy and long and he grew his facial hair out into a five-o'clock shadow. His clothes, in contrast to Ben's, were wrinkled and baggy. He wore a cheaper, lighter-colored suit, and a cream colored shirt to make him appear more vulnerable in comparison to Ben's dark suit and dark red shirt (See Figures 4C & 5C).

While *The Dumb Waiter* has serious themes and ends with the possibility of tragedy, it is still fused with bits of comedy. Cronin chose to emphasize the comedic elements of the play through blocking choices. I chose to emphasize it, also, with a costume choice. I gave Ben a green striped tie to match his suit, and I gave Gus a light blue clip-on tie. This costuming choice led to a humorous moment on stage when Ben and Gus are getting dressed. Ben stands up and ties his tie, facing the audience. He does it meticulously and with great care. When Gus stands up to put his tie on, he turns his back to Ben, and clips it quickly and clumsily, being careful not to let Ben see that he is wearing a clip-on. This moment both drew laughs from the audience and emphasized Gus's childlike qualities. Being able to make costume choices based on what would be humorous and what would fit the time period in *The Dumb Waiter* provided me with a distinctly different experience than designing for Beckett's plays.

Working on these three one act plays—Beckett's *Come and Go* and *Footfalls*, and Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*—was my first venture in costume design, and also my first deep

exploration of Theatre of the Absurd. I had read plays by Beckett and Pinter before, but had been so caught up in the unusual form of the plays that I had failed to give the content much thought. Martin Esslin quotes Beckett in *Theatre of the Absurd*:

> Here is direct expression—pages and pages of it. And if you don't understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it. You are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one almost without bothering with the other (Beckett qtd. in Esslin 2)

Absurdist playwrights attempt to create a form that matches the content of their writing. The major theme that appears in all absurdist work is the absurdity of human existence. Because the content is absurd, the form of the plays is absurd as well. Working with Theatre of the Absurd as a first-time costume designer forced me to examine and pick apart the content of these plays in ways that I had never considered before. Through this process, I learned several valuable techniques such as image research, collaboration with the design team, and the use of a visual metaphor. Designing for *Come and Go*, *Footfalls*, and *The Dumb Waiter* gave me an eclectic experience and taught me many lessons and techniques that will be invaluable when designing for other shows in the future.

Come and Go: Figures 1A – 8A

Figure 1A

Davis, William Temple. *Come and Go* – I Can Feel the Rings. February, 2007. University of Denver.
<http://www.du.edu/thea/designs/Design-Nothing.htm> September 14, 2010.

Figure 2A

Muir, Alastair. Come and Go. August 29, 2008. Theatre Review: Fragments.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2008/aug/29/theatre.beckett.fragments> September 14, 2010.

Figure 3A

Come and Go. Beckett on Film. <http://www.beckettonfilm.com/plays/comeandgo/index.html> September 14,
2010.

Figure 4A

1960's Mod Coat. Lulu's Vintage. < http://blog.lulusvintage.com/2008/01/1960s-mod-coats.html> September 17, 2010.

Figure 5A

Tulle Double Breasted Peacoat in Red. This Next. < http://www.thisnext.com/tag/boyfriend-peacoat> September 17, 2010. /

Figure 6A

Leslie Epling – *Come and Go* sketch

Figure 7A

Smith, Larry. *Come and Go*. October 7, 2010. ETSU Photo Lab.
<http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/TheatreBeckettPinter/1LS_8812.JPG>

Figure 8A

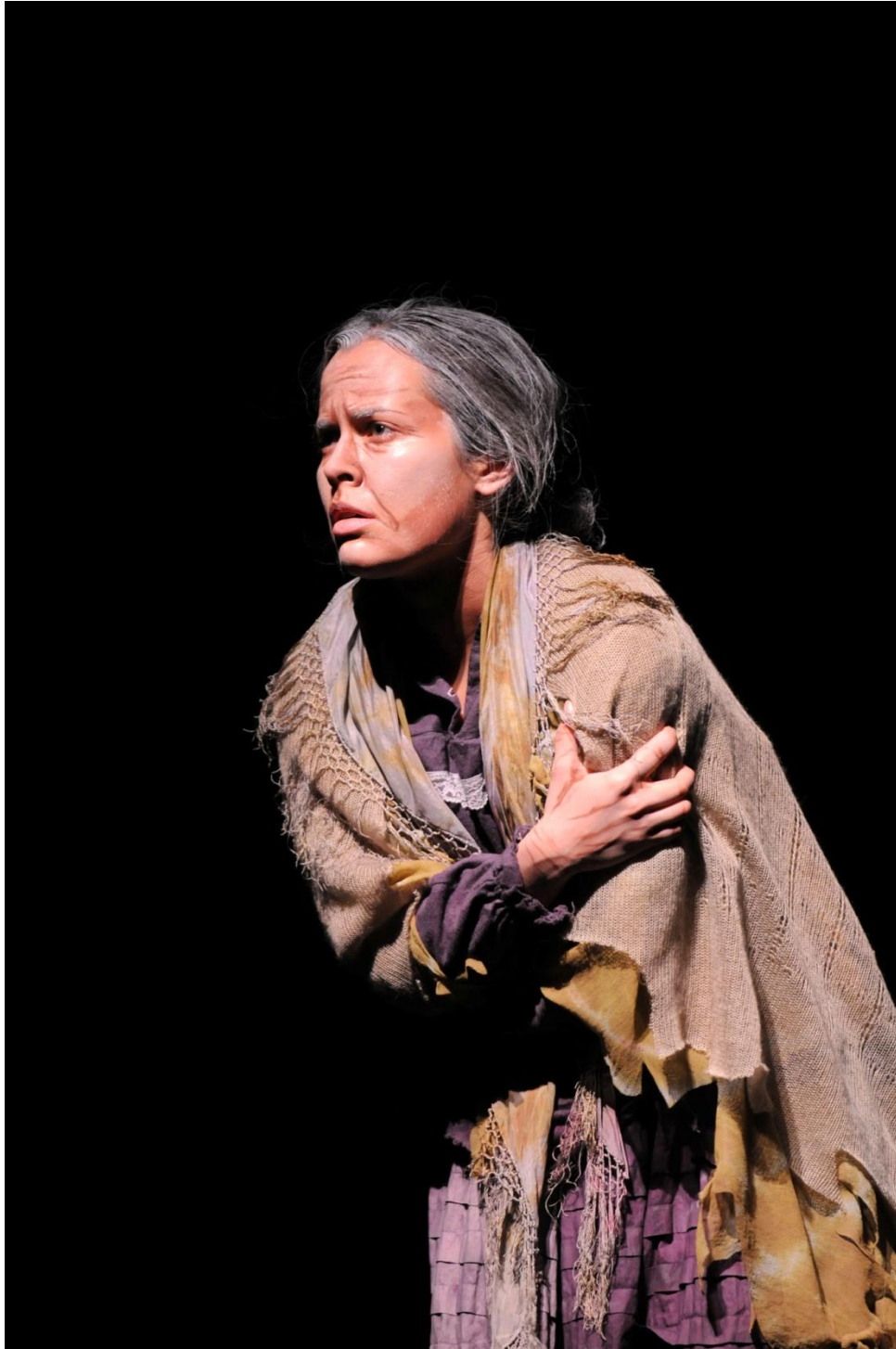Goldfarb, Benjamin P. Bruise Healing. September 10, 2009. Altuse.
<http://blog.altuse.com/2009_09_01_archive.html> September 24, 2010.

Figure 9A

Bruise Update. August 24, 2009. K and D Cross Country. <http://kanddcrosscountry.net/?p=1067> September 24, 2010.

*Footfalls***: Figures 1B – 5B**

Figure 1B

Smith, Larry. *Footfalls*. October 7, 2010. ETSU Photo Lab.
<http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/TheatreBeckettPinter/1LS_8820.jpg>

Figure 2B

Smith, Larry. *Footfalls*. October 7, 2010. ETSU Photo Lab.
<http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/TheatreBeckettPinter/1LS_8816.JPG>

Figure 3B

Spanish Moss. Ceredigion Growers Association. <http://www.ceredigiongrowers.co.uk/page001.html> September 20, 2010.

Figure 4B

Spanish Moss. Conservatory Photos. <http://wedding.november-fifth.com/conservatoryphoto.html> September 20, 2010.

Figure 5B

Leslie Epling – *Footfalls* sketch

The Dumb Waiter: Figures 1C – 5C

Figure 1C

Vintage 1950s Men's Suit. Vintage Fashion Library. <http://www.vintagefashionlibrary.com/men_s?start=15>
September 22, 2010.

Figure 2C

October 1950. August 14, 2008. Esquire. <http://www.esquire.com/style/style-evolution-0908> September 22, 2010.

Figure 3C

Smith, Larry. *The Dumb Waiter*. October 7, 2010. ETSU Photo Lab.
<http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/TheatreBeckettPinter/1LS_8926.JPG>

Figure 4C

Smith, Larry. *The Dumb Waiter*. October 7, 2010. ETSU Photo Lab.
<http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/TheatreBeckettPinter/1LS_8909.JPG>

Figure 5C

Smith, Larry. *The Dumb Waiter*. October 7, 2010. ETSU Photo Lab.
<http://photolab.etsu.edu/images/TheatreBeckettPinter/1LS_8841.JPG>

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