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A Director's Approach to Annie Baker's *The Aliens*

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A Director's Approach to Annie Baker's *The Aliens*

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Research on *The Aliens*

My first exposure to any sort of critical thinking of Annie Baker's *The Aliens* was the synopsis printed on the back of the Dramatists Play Service's paperback script. It promised a story of two angsty rebels and the coming of age of a young and disenfranchised student. Upon finishing the play, I was struck with none of that. *The Aliens* was not the preachy, self-aggrandizing, and self-important piece hopped up on its own philosophical brilliance and difference as the summary on the back of the script led me to believe. It was a deceptively simple meditation on three equally unremarkable and remarkable young men who hung out beside a dumpster in Vermont.

Annie Baker wrote *The Aliens* in conjunction with the play that it shares the 2010 Obie Award for Best New American Play with, *Circle Mirror Transformation*. In the author's note of *Circle Mirror Transformation*, she remarks that she saw that play as "hopefully, a strange little naturalistic meditation on theatre and life and death and the passing of time" (Baker 5). This note could have just as easily been about its sister play, *The Aliens*. The only difference being that Baker's interest in Theatre community is swapped out for the isolation and introspection of poets who struggle with their need of companionship. The key word of Baker's quote when it comes to understanding her intention with *The Aliens* and the theatrical genre it falls into is her choice to use the word "naturalistic." Naturalistic implies something far more specific than a word like "realistic." Naturalistic harkens back to the late nineteenth century when the aim was to replicate life down to the most sensory detail and put it on stage. There are no grand poetic soliloquies in a naturalistic play, especially not in what we see to be Baker's definition of one. In *The Aliens*, self-described poets ramble and repeat themselves as they get choked up by their own ineptitude

to express real human emotion on the fly. This is because Baker really does write in a naturalistic style, complete with all the “Ums” and “I means” you could ever ask for from a seventeen-year-old who gets put in the emotional spotlight the way *Aliens*’ Evan does.

Naturalism is art’s attempt to be completely truthful and honest down to every detail of life. There is no embellishment or polish beyond what a naturalist would consider to be the “real” and everyday experience of a human being. It was an approach that was born in reaction to Europe’s Age of Enlightenment, the same time the scientific method came into popularity. To be rational and detail oriented was of the utmost importance to the subscribers of this philosophy. A piece like *The Aliens* could hardly be called rational or detail oriented beyond Baker’s fascination with the banality of Jasper and KJ’s ritualistic existence. *Aliens* do not fit in the Naturalist mold as it is not really “about” something in the same way a classic Naturalistic piece is. The Naturalists would focus on “real and gritty” details to hold up a magnifying glass to some sort of societal evil. Therefore, so many Naturalist plays focus on poverty or corruption. They were trying to say something about the society they were produced in. *The Aliens* does not do this. It is a subtextual commentary on isolation among three young men taking place in the twenty-first century. If Baker had been interested in being more moralizing with her play she could have slid in a topical reference to social media or the increase of depression in youth over recent years. Instead, Baker is much more invested in the idea of “genius” and what that means to a trio of outcasts.

Naturalism did not ultimately win the battle for the soul of popular theatre. That prize went to the less detail-oriented school of Realism and by extension, Selective Realism. Jean Benedetti wrote this about the famous theatre theorist, Konstantin Stanislavski’s view of Realism and its cousin, Naturalism: “Naturalism, for him, implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the

surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, while taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the relationships and tendencies under the surface. The rest was discarded” (Benedetti 17). By Stanislavski’s definition, Realism in and of itself is selective. Celebrated filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock said something similar with “what is drama but life with the dull bits cut out” (Hitchcock). While *The Aliens* may give the appearance of moving at a slow and meandering pace, there is no scene in the play that exists without purpose of highlighting character dynamics or hidden turmoil. The shortest scene is one and a half pages and is included to provide insight into Evan’s relationships outside of Jasper and KJ. It’s a brief scene that Baker chose to put in over lengthening another one or including a scene that the audience does not see but knows must have happened, like when KJ drink himself into a stupor after Jasper’s death. Baker “selected only those elements which revealed the relationships and tendencies under the surface” to provide for the most effective drama an old picnic table behind a Vermont coffee house could afford.

When talking about her approach to scriptwriting, Baker has said “I start with setting. An idea for a kind of space onstage that might be something people haven't seen before. Often, it's an “unlikely” place: a windowless room in a community center, the rows of a movie theater, the garbage area behind a coffee house. I start thinking about the theatrical possibilities inside that space, and then usually the characters start coming to me after that. Plot is usually the last thing I think about, or, in some cases, the thing I never think about” (Baker). *The Aliens*’ setting is indeed in the forefront of the action of the play. It serves as unorthodox meeting space, workplace, and lounge for the patrons of The Green Sheep, a coffeehouse somewhere in Vermont. *Aliens* makes up one of Baker’s four “Vermont Plays,” along with *Circle Mirror Transformation*, the unperformed *Nocturama*, and *Body Awareness*. These are all plays written

earlier in Baker's career, taking place in (as the title would suggest) Vermont. While the state is constant between these works, the far more important thing is the single space that the entire action of the play will take place in. *Aliens* never leaves that coffee house. The Green Sheep may try to kick the play's title slackers off the premises, but they always come back like a pair of meandering bad pennies. It's a joke and quirk and we almost endear them for it. So, when Jasper doesn't come back anymore it's a problem. He couldn't have gone anywhere else because as the audience has taken to appreciate from *Aliens'* setting, there's nowhere else to go. The back of The Green Sheep is the entire world of this play. Things may happen off-stage, but they will be reiterated or implied back at the dumpsters by the coffee house. Having these two men as perpetual residents of the lawn chairs propped up outside makes them almost feel like part of the set. Taking Jasper away in Act Two creates an emptiness.

While this method of placing setting first can certainly underline Naturalistic tendencies of a play, I am not convinced that *The Aliens* benefits much from a Naturalistic staging. The smell of coffee being brewed or of Ani DiFranco playing through muffled speakers would flavor the playgoing experience but there's too much emphasis on silence, subtext, and character for there to be too much room for that kind of "spectacle." It's important to listen and really listen to what these characters are saying and not saying to one another for the audience to be marveling at something like how realistic the mud spatters on KJ's sweatpants look. The script doesn't even go into extreme detail on the set to begin with. It's mentioned there should be a couple bins, a "PLEASE USE THE FRONT ENTRANCE" sign, a picnic table, and some plastic chairs. The Green Sheep might be in Vermont, but it could really be anywhere which guides me toward a Selective Realist approach to the play. Taking out extraneous detail and letting the audience fill in gaps for themselves allows them to color a production in a more personal way that befits

something as intimate as *Aliens*. So, when I looked at research for this play I wasn't as interested in fully understanding the operating logistics of a café in Vermont as the topics Jasper, KJ, and Evan talked about.

The Aliens finds an interesting patron saint in the notably brooding and gritty American poet, Charles Bukowski. Bukowski and *The Aliens* both share a focus on the feeling of personal isolation. Bukowski's "The Aliens" (from which the play is named) is a description of people who go about their time being productive members of society and overall being quite satisfied by the lives they live. It ends with the simple observation that "they are there and I am here" (Bukowski 232). After reading, the poem raises the question of who the aliens in the poem are: the people who live those "normal" and happy lives free of anguish or those like the speaker, the unhappy and disenfranchised. It suggests that to have a pleasant and smooth life is just as foreign as any extraterrestrial. The deep inner lives of Jasper, KJ, and Evan underline Bukowski's idea of alienation. None of these men are "people who go through life with very little friction or distress," (Bukowski 231) as Bukowski puts it. They are people in emotional discomfort suffering quietly.

Charles Bukowski himself holds an outsider's place in the world of poetry. He is influential and often read but not quite revered at a critical standpoint. As a literary descendant of Ernest Hemingway and Henry Miller (another of Jasper's favorite writers), Bukowski was focused on the explicit, sexual or otherwise, and the introspective. He practiced everything that he preached. He wrote about hard drinking, antisocial men and their messy relationships with women and by most accounts he was a hard drinking, antisocial man with his fair share of romantic entanglements. *Time* magazine called him a "laurite of American lowlife," (Iyer). as much of a symbol for a lifestyle as he was a poet. Bukowski as a symbol is what is understood

by *The Aliens*. The most insightful thing said about his work is Jasper's line, "you gotta read Bukowski... He cuts away all the bullshit," and in the context of the audience needing to know about these characters and just what they want and stand for, that's all Baker needed to explain about Charles Bukowski.

The Aliens is a script written for silence and therefore partly about the failure of communication between a circle of individuals, a lack of connection. Baker writes in her author's note for *The Aliens*, "this is important: at least a third – if not half – of this play is silence." When these emotional connections do happen between the characters they happen through shared and communal experiences: watching a fireworks display, singing a song about ridiculous frog people, and listening to each other's music and writing. They do not happen through dialogue, at least not dialogue that's about the problems each character is facing. *Aliens* approaches those problems through subtext in a way a poet like Bukowski would use metaphor.

Research on Annie Baker

Annie Baker was born in Boston, Massachusetts in April 1981 to a psychologist and a college administrator. She grew up in Amherst before moving on to New York to study playwriting at New York University. Her first play to be produced Off-Broadway was the one-act, *Body Awareness*. It premiered the Summer of 2008 at the Atlantic Theater Company and was directed by Karen Kohlhaas. It received warm reviews and managed a nomination for the 2009 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play. Even at the outset, Annie Baker's purposely mundane dialogue and everyday characters were the most striking and fresh part of her approach to the stage. Theatre critic for the Washington Post, Nelson Pressley noted this after seeing a 2012 production, "Baker's dialogue is tart and personable, with just enough unexpected twists in the characterizations to keep you leaning forward... Baker is fast becoming one of the

country's more popular playwrights... and it may be because she has a lovely ability to comically mock types and trends while exposing the raw seams in her characters" (Pressley).

The year following *Body Awareness* saw Baker premier *Circle Mirror Transformation* in October 2009 at the Playwrights Horizons. *Circle Mirror Transformation* was the first of Baker's plays that would be directed by Sam Gold. He would go on to helm five more of her works, including *The Aliens*, which was produced at the Rattlestick Playwright's Theater only a few months later in April 2010.

This play, along with beginning Baker's playwriting career in earnest, also starts the trend of Baker setting her plays in the fictional town of Shirley, Vermont; a town that holds a passing resemblance to Amherst, Massachusetts. Baker's upbringing bears a stark mark on her work. She has said in the past that if it had not been for her mother and her psychology training, she would have never become a playwright. She chalks this up to her constant goal of "empathy." Annie Baker's philosophy when it comes to her sympathy with her characters can ultimately summed up in an interview she did with *VICE*'s April Ayers Lawson. "I do believe that everyone is a genius. Or you could say it the other way: No one is a genius. Every single person on this planet is a genius and an idiot. So maybe those characters (of KJ in *The Aliens* and Jared in *Body Awareness*) are a way of trying to explore all the different ways any given person you walk by on the street could be brilliant and also deluded and insane" (Baker).

This fascination with the inner world of her characters has brought on comparisons of Annie Baker and a certain father of theatrical modernism: Anton Chekov. Chekov and Baker have had clear mentor-disciple relationship since Soho Repertory Theatre's 2012 production of *Uncle Vanya*, a play written by Chekov and newly adapted by Baker. *Uncle Vanya* includes some of Baker's favorite themes like unrequited love (major plot points in *The Flick* and *Circle*

Mirror Transformation) and the loss of an important location (like the coffeeshop of *The Aliens* or the theater of *The Flick*). While Chekov's script included a few different rooms in one large estate for the action of the play to occur in, the Soho production (directed again by Sam Gold) in typical Baker fashion puts all the action in one room: the living room. The similarities between the two are most striking in how they choose – or *don't* choose – to reveal a character's thoughts through lines. Chekov had an admirer in the afore mentioned Konstantin Stanislavski who noted that "Chekhov often expressed his thought not in speeches, but in pauses or between the lines or in replies consisting of a single word ... the characters often feel and think things not expressed in the lines they speak" (Stanislavski). Martin Esslin of Absurdist Theatre fame agreed with Stanislavski's observation of Chekov and his unusual approach to late nineteenth century playwrighting. He wrote "it was Chekhov who first deliberately wrote dialogue in which the mainstream of emotional action ran underneath the surface. It was he who articulated the notion that human beings hardly ever speak in explicit terms among each other about their deepest emotions, that the great, tragic, climactic moments are often happening beneath outwardly trivial conversation" (Esslin). Both of these quotes have their echoes in reviews of Baker's work and her focus on the deeply introspective. Baker seems the happiest with her work when it is less superficial with its character's psyche. Of her plays, her least favorite is *Body Awareness* for that very reason. In her *VICE* interview she explains, "It uses what is now my least favorite device in theater and film ... A character is making a speech in front of an audience and then in the middle of the speech the character realizes that everything they've thought up until this point is totally wrong, and he or she starts breaking down and saying things like 'I'm sorry, I can't do this' and then in front of the audience begins to stumblyingly articulate his or her new more enlightened vision, which is also the vision of the author of the movie or play" (Baker).

Directorial Analysis and Approach

When talking about *The Aliens* after its initial run at the Rattlestick Playwrights Theatre, Annie Baker described that the play “was about the relationship between these two men who don’t have jobs and spend all day hanging out together. And, for me, that play—more than any of my plays—entailed a lot of stillness, and revolved around the music of these people talking, and singing.” Baker backs this sentiment up in her brief note at the front of the script for *The Aliens*: “this is important: at least a third – if not half – of this play is silence” (Baker). When I approached directing *The Aliens*, I knew that silence was a major fascination of the playwright and therefore a huge bullet point for me to understand. After my initial reading of the script I felt I could see what Baker was trying to do with all the silences between lines, at the very least I had a theory. This idea I had was ultimately colored in by my reading of Charles Bukowski, specially his poems “The Aliens” and “The Bluebird.” Both works focus on isolation and the commitment of keeping quiet and hidden what might be vulnerable about ourselves. Ultimately, this lead me to the fact that *The Aliens* is about three men uncomfortably failing to verbally express themselves to one another. It is a play about people with rich inner lives that will eventually turn in and eat themselves alive without help, support, and understanding from others. From Baker’s (and Chekov’s before her) fascination with the unspoken emotional life of their characters, Jasper, KJ, and Evan each have been endowed with many unspoken insecurities that are not voiced but are addressed in every scene. My job as a director is to show the loneliness of these three people and contrast that with the unity of music, to explore the difference between uncomfortable silence and unspoken understanding.

In casting the play, I think it is rather important to get a good base of chemistry between the actors playing Jasper and KJ. I need them to appear older than Evan but not necessarily act

any more mature. I'm looking for a raw and touchy anger from Jasper that can be balanced by the meandering musings of KJ. For Evan, the script puts it best when it says he "is seventeen and in a constant state of humiliation." Fortunately, with the college-aged pool of actors I have to work from, the casting will be within a believable margin of age and type. The date of these auditions is February 2nd of 2017 in East Tennessee State University's Bud Frank Theatre.

The performance space available to me is Studio 205 of the Campus Center Building on the campus of East Tennessee State University. It is a black box style theater that can accommodate about seventy people. This is an intimate space that works well for a nuanced play like *The Aliens*. It also has a door to a small hallway that leads back to the light and sound booth that makes it a logistical ideal for entrances and exits Evan has for *The Green Sheep*. This would put the blocking in one corner of the room with the audience seated in a semi-thrust fashion facing the playing area on two sides. Thankfully, due to the single-set style of Annie Baker's work and the low demands of the setting, I will work out a simple set design on my own with some advice from a classmate of mine with experience in set design, Grace Arrowood. So long as there is a picnic table with some chairs and a couple trash cans, the set will have everything the stage directions call for.

Studio 205 also gives me access to an array of LED lighting instruments. As I am not comfortably competent in either lighting design or operation in lighting hardware outside of hitting cues on a light board, I have talked to my classmate, Levi Bradford about serving as lighting designer. I have the utmost confidence in his abilities from working next to him at Parkway Playhouse in Burnsville, North Carolina over the summer of 2016 on their season's technical needs. We will meet a few times over the course of rehearsals to talk about the mood

and circumstances of each scene to develop a look that's practically possible and satisfying to the feel of the play.

Rehearsals for *The Aliens* will begin in mid-March of 2017, meeting in the evenings, and continue until our opening on April 22nd of 2017. This is a good amount of time and will mostly be dedicated to acting work due to the stripped down technical approach I'm taking out of necessity and the heavy subtext of the script. We will rehearse in Studio 205 for the most part and then in the basement room of Yoakley Hall when the studio is reserved for other activities.

While the budget of the student theatre organization, The Patchwork Players, is available to me, I am not interested in spending any more than what it would take to purchase a lawn chair or two and borrow anything else from East Tennessee State University's prop and furniture storage. Deciding to stage this play with Selective Realism is a thriftier choice logistically on that point to say nothing of artistically.

CHAPTER TWO

Rehearsal Journal

Every rehearsal process, in my experience, is ultimately broken into four phases. It begins with the table read when the cast comes together for the first time to sit down and read through the script. This is informative for the cast and the director to understand how the voices of each actor will fit together and to get an early idea of dynamics between characters. It is the chance to get everyone on the same page before entering the next phase.

After the table read is usually the blocking phase. As the table read typically only takes one rehearsal, blocking is a longer process. Blocking is the process of staging actors through the action of the play. This can range from the broad strokes of just asking an actor to “cross stage right in the lower half of page nine,” to as specific as “halfway through your line take two steps downstage right and turn threequarters in, raising your upstage hand to your head.” It can be a rather tedious process with little actor involvement or a very vague and rambling time while actors roam around the playing area, trying to understand what to do with little guidance. Clearly, my preference is for a balance between the director who moves their actors around like chess pieces and the one who has little vision for the play at all.

Following blocking is “working” the play. This is the opportunity to address interpretation and problems that the scenes may be presenting. This is where the bulk of progress occurs in the quality of a show. It is when actors really get the chance to “find” their role and make discoveries pertaining to the dynamics of their characters. This phase can happen after all the blocking has been completed or sometimes be interspersed with the blocking process with one rehearsal being the blocking of a scene and the next being the working of that scene and so on until the end of the script.

The last phase involves the technical aspects of the play. This often falls in the week before the first performance, leading this time to be called “tech week.” In this week things like lighting, sound, costumes, makeup, and crew are all added into the mix culminating in the dress rehearsals before the opening night.

Prior to the first entry of this journal I had the table read. The journal begins with the first blocking rehearsal.

March 13th, 2017 Act One, Scene One blocking.

I made advanced blocking notes in my script prior to the rehearsal. I'd like to think I wasn't very rigid with them and allowed their creative energy to work through whatever direction I gave them. I could tell I didn't sound incredibly authoritative, but the work got done and my actors responded with respect to the direction.

March 15th, 2017 Act One, Scene Two blocking.

I did much the same as I did the first rehearsal. I left a few of the more complicated parts for me to figure out in the moment, like when KJ must address Evan about the band names. We played around with it a few times and found a good time for KJ to start standing and then where to stand once he stood up. Instead of down stage left it moved more upstage left to give KJ a corner to work with and more of a "balladeer" look. Keith seemed more comfortable with it as well.

March 16th, 2017 Act One, Scene Three blocking.

My notes seemed to fall apart somewhere in the middle of this scene. I overlooked something and the rest of the movement just stopped making sense from Evan's entrance onward. Ryan L. did a great job (and has been doing a great job) of following an instinct without me needing to tell him. It lets me see what he naturally wants to do and helps me see it visually onstage immediately. Really, I messed up the blocking and the actors worked with me to save it and made something that looks quite natural for the characters onstage. I think the balance between actor instinct and stage picture is one of the hardest tightropes to walk in the blocking process. Act One is now blocked.

March 18th, 2017 Worked Act One.

We reviewed the first two scenes and I gave specific notes on acting and performance as we move forward. Keith has given a great deal of thought to his portrayal of KJ already, Ryan L. is rather open to new ideas for Evan, and Ryan S. just needs to be shaken out of his go-to comedic habits for Jasper. We looked a lot at pacing. This show is all about silence but the actors seem to have some difficulty with picking up speed when the script calls for it and not being tethered to the meandering pace of the more silent bits. If I can get Ryan S. to understand the place I'd like Jasper to come from in an emotional context, we're golden. I suppose that's the trick though.

March 20th, 2017 Worked Act One.

We focused on the last scene of the Act, the party with fireworks. I focused a lot on Ryan S.'s Jasper. This is the last scene we see Jasper and he needs to make an impact. I have confidence in Ryan S. and he responded well to direction (to pour more excitement into Jasper and not just focus on the angst). The song in the scene, "Frogmen" took a bit of work. I found myself standing up and getting on stage to physically connect with the actors and express the energy of the song. I suggested a few exercises for them to get into the mindset like finishing every verse with a random exuberant sound. It was the kind of thing Herb Parker would have done and I've found I channel him from time to time when trying to get my actors to experiment more and channel Bobby Funk when I need a result from them and know they can give it to me. By the end of the rehearsal they reached a good level of energy and Keith even called it "the most fun he has in the show." That's a good sign, that's what "Frogmen" needs.

March 22nd, 2017 Act Two, Scene One and Two blocking.

We began blocking the second act with just Evan and KJ. It was a slightly different energy with one less member of the cast. The blocking was simple and we moved through it quickly. Ryan L.

continues to work well without me having to do too much to physically block him. He sits naturally around the times I was going to have him sit anyway so that's nice affirmation that my instinct is at least shared by one of my actors who is actually doing the blocking on his feet. We shifted the end blocking around a bit after I saw what it looked like. KJ stays standing at the end of scene two to bring across the devastation of his loneliness.

March 23rd, 2017 Act Two, Scene Three and Four blocking.

Keith and Ryan L.'s work in scene three was outstanding. I wasn't even asking for anything remarkable on an acting front and they both turned in some of the best performance's I've seen from either of them. The emotion they delivered informed the blocking afterwards as I had Evan move away from KJ to cry and take his anguish upstage so he could try to hide it and therefore be consumed by it on a different plane than KJ. Both actors were emotionally drained after doing it once so I only had them work the scene twice and do specific parts of the scene for clarity of blocking. We changed the suggested blocking of the end of scene three to be about the chair Jasper sat in rather than be about the recycling bin. For our production it holds more meaning and makes more sense as that is simply Jasper's spot and he doesn't do anything with the bin in Act One like the script suggests. I released Keith afterward to block scene four with Ryan L. It was a straightforward scene to block but Ryan L. delivered some nice touches I hadn't considered to flesh out the emotions of it.

March 24th, 2017 Act Two, Scene Five blocking.

Of all our blocking rehearsals, I'm the least satisfied with this one. The failure is on myself and not either of the actors. I just can't get the show to close on an image I want. The blocking is functional and will get the job done but I'm concerned that the message of the play won't read to

the audience. I asked Ashton about what she would do differently to move the actor's around in a more meaningful way but she was at the same loss as I was. Ryan L. suggested moving to the downstage side of the table for his dialogue with KJ which did indeed help, so we kept it. The actors are just so close to the audience it is difficult to make sure they can see both the actors and get a full experience from the image.

March 25th, 2017 Work Act Two.

We worked the first two scenes of the act and scene four. I've been working with Ryan L. to find more dimensions to Evan's character so he isn't just playing "awkward" all the time. He's responded to it well and I think he likes playing it that way so he isn't stuck on one note. The line "did you finger her pussy" is causing some trouble with how the pauses are laid out and there is still the habit the actors have of not going fast when the script needs it and still having the meandering pace of the pauses. Keith has a good handle on KJ but we did need to talk about what thoughts he is having at what points in the show. "If P then Q" sets up the next scene and therefore we needed to look at what kind of thought that is (happy, sad, intriguing etc.). As an intellectual actor, Keith follows reasoning well if you state it in terms of narrative and playwright's intent. I released Keith early to work with Ryan L. on scene four. We talked about intention for every started sentence Evan has. I say "started sentence" because the scene involves Evan beginning many thoughts and then trailing off before completing them. The sentences are started, but never completed. This led us to talking about what Evan needed in this scene.

March 27th, 2017 Work Act Two.

We looked at scenes three and five. Three went just as good as I remembered. There wasn't much I could give Keith other than affirmation for his work. With Ryan L. I talked to him about

the coping mechanisms Evan is putting up immediately in response to finding out that Jasper has died. I argued that Evan is trying to deny it and sort out how the world works in his own head by finding out exactly how it happened after denial doesn't work. The final scene is still weird looking but after changing the blocking to be upstage of the table and not forcing any movement it at least looks a bit better.

March 29th, 2017 Review Act One.

With the off-book date looming in the distance I decided the actors would be best served to have an evening to run lines with each other. They all knew more than they thought they did and are just rusty or clunky on a few specific pages. The experience of just being able to sit down and work on lines seemed to help bond them together as well.

March 30th, 2017 Review Act One.

The actor's got on their feet today for the first two scenes of the act. We were unable to use the Black Box so we set up shop in the basement of Yoakley Hall. It wasn't ideal, but it was good enough. Ashton and I were not able to do any sort of checking for sightlines but oh well, we focused on performance. Ryan S. has stepped in the role of Jasper more since we worked Act One, being more familiar with the lines has also helped. We talked about making sure he wasn't combative with KJ in the opening scene, so the audience doesn't get the wrong impression of their relationship.

March 31st, 2017 Review Act One Off-Book.

Still out of the Black Box, we did the rest of the act. The actors did pretty well without scripts. Keith is finding more fun with KJ, Ryan L. has an easier time acting different types of discomfort and Ryan S. is finding the Jasper that I wanted from him. Each of the actors remarked

how they feel they are really finding their characters now and it shows in the work they're doing. "Frogmen" was the most fun it's ever been and I'm able to use some of the natural chemistry between actors to sell the friendship between the characters.

April 1st, 2017 Run Act.

We did the entirety of the first act without stopping. We ended up with about 44 minutes. This isn't bad, the script suggests it run 50 to 55 minutes so I paid attention to the pauses and silences and how we were implementing them so far. *Aliens* is a show about silence and we need to be giving that all the love and care we can. We can be stretching them out a bit more. There was no large stumbling block or anything that forced us to stop so it went as smoothly as I could have asked or wanted.

April 3rd, 2017 Review Act Two.

I repeated what I did for Act One and had the actors run lines for Act Two. They were a bit rusty and certainly seemed to need the time. The actors enjoy being around each other but still get to work when they need to so I'm rather proud of them.

April 5th, 2016 Review Act Two.

We were out of the Black Box again, I allowed the first half hour for the actors to run lines. We did the first two scenes of the act. Keith brought up a point I hadn't considered for KJ's motivation and how he sees Evan as a potential student and not a replacement brother. I encouraged him to follow this idea and am very interested to see where it goes. I was surprised I had not considered it myself and think it has room to be played with as it gives Keith more to play with and does not compromise what the play is about as a whole.

April 6th, 2017 Review Act Two.

Ran the rest of the scenes in Act 2 outside of the Black Box, so in Yoakley Hall. We started with scene three, it is still in good shape. I talked to Ryan L. about the trajectory Evan is going through in the scene. So, when he's defiant, when he's calm, and when he's explosive. It went very well and continues to improv every time we do it. The fun thing is I feel like I have very little to do with it. Ryan L. suggested kicking Jasper's chair over instead of knocking a trash bin over and I told him to go with that impulse. It's a thought I had had as well and the image of KJ picking it up at the end of the scene works better. I had been afraid that the moment would look too heavy handed with making the chair a symbol for Jasper and then having KJ replace it in mourning. The only reason I hadn't been doing that all along was because the script said "recycling bin" and that doesn't make sense with our blocking so far. Scene five was next. It felt less odd this time. The actors seem to be improving on it despite the blocking I gave them and ended the show sitting down. That looked better. I gave Keith some direction for his Zhoop moment which made it feel like something we hit emotionally more this time. Scene four was last and Ryan L. has remembered all I asked him to keep in mind. He dropped a line but that's not too concerning at this point.

April 7th, 2017 Off book for Act Two out of Black Box.

We ran the act. Keith and Ryan L. both are either confident in their lines or able to move forward in the scene without too much awkwardness. Whenever Ashton or I give them a note on it they are already very much aware of what they need to work on.

April 8th, 2017 Run-through.

We're back in the Black Box and doing our first run-through. Ryan S. is still on top of lines even after having a slight amount of time off. It has a real shape to it now. I'm most worried about what will be "quick changes" for lack of a better phrase. We'll rely on sweatshirts for the most part, I think. It makes sense for the slacker vibe of Jasper and KJ anyway.

April 10th, 2017 Work scenes.

We focused on chemistry between Jasper, KJ, and Evan. This is really the last day I want to hammer it in specifically. Ryan S. has come a long way in the role. It's very different from what he usually plays: fatherly roles. Jasper is a brooding and almost immature young adult and Ryan S. has been stepping into that more and more recently. The connection I asked him to explore specifically is rather than see Jasper and Evan's relationship as father and son, see it as older brother and younger brother. Brotherhood is a concept I asked all three of them to think about.

April 12th, 2017 Work scenes.

One last swing at the "ladder" scene in act two. I don't have any concerns about it, Keith has impressed me with it since the first time we ran it. Keith had the idea to play the scene with him sitting cross-legged on top of the table. It gave him a very child-like picture. I juggled some blocking around to incorporate it in. I like the image, but the tradeoff is that I feel I might be losing some things Evan is doing upstage from the table. Ryan L. and I adjusted his blocking more to stage right of the table to make something everyone on stage felt was natural and comfortable and that I was mentally pleased with from a stage picture perspective.

April 13th, 2017 Run-through.

I've been able to add more props including Jasper's novel for the scene that closes out the first act. There's some awkwardness that the actors had using the props. After the run (it was solid as

last time, they're still shaking things up here and there which is more than welcome) I went back to see what we could do to make everything more natural. For the Jasper book it was just a matter of holding it differently. KJ has an array of tea supplies that he mixes together to make mushroom tea. Timing that out is the annoying part of that bit of business but Keith's doing alright with it.

April 14th, 2017 Run-through.

After a sweep through large prop storage I've secured almost everything I need from this point. I borrowed a blue picnic table from outside of the scene shop across the quad at the permission of Zach Olsen and lugged it over to the Black Box with the assistance of my cast. It was not the lightest thing in the world. From large props I found a lawn chair for KJ's spot and the trash bins I need. I'll pick up another chair tomorrow for Jasper's chair. Weirdness with the props has eased up this run-through and the actors did reasonably well with the new furniture considering it forces them to move their bodies much differently from the chairs we had been using.

April 15th, 2017 Run-through.

Finally have all the props and furniture together. I had to drive out of town a little ways to pick up some sparklers for the end of act one and picked up another type of lawn chair for Jasper in a Wal-Mart run. It looks cleaner than I would like but it'll work. It has a kind of stand-out stark contrast with the black of the floor and walls that I think could really work in favor with the absence of Jasper in the second act.

April 17th, 2017 Run-through.

I had intended to have lighting worked out by this point but I have faith in Levi being able to work out the lighting in the time we have. We are stopping rehearsals after tomorrow night until

opening to make room for the Pinter readings and Julian Sands' performance of Pinter works this week. If I am honest, I am disappointed not to be able to work in the meantime, especially as the only time we will have all technical aspects in place will be opening day. I've already talked to Levi about meeting early on that day to assist him. From our time working together at Parkway, I think that will be sufficient. Keith mentioned after this run how he was annoyed with himself in being unable to get to the point of crying on stage anymore. It seems like this should be the exact thing I can coach him to do but I also have difficulty crying on stage. The closest I ever get is when I'm genuinely surprised by a discovery I make in character and that surprise leads to vulnerability. I told him that the adrenaline of having an audience around will help him significantly as well. An audience is the only thing missing now from an acting standpoint.

April 18th, 2017 Dress Rehearsal.

Went smoothly. I took some photos for possible publicity but otherwise there's little I can do with the actor's now.

April 22nd, 2017 Pre-show dress, opening.

Went into the Black Box earlier in the morning with Levi B. The audience seating is already set from an arraignment for readings of Harold Pinter plays earlier in the week. I assisted Levi the best I could to make the process safe and efficient. I also used the time before the actors arrived to set up sound and finalize pre-show, intermission, and curtain call music. Fortunately, there were no hiccups on the technical aspect. The dress went well and I think the show is as prepared as I can hope for it to be. I am immensely proud of my cast and crew for the work they've done in less than ideal circumstances.

Opening went better than I really could have expected. I think I forgot to take into account what an incredible boon an audience that wants to see a show and is absolutely supportive can be.

They were certainly one of the more responsive audiences I've ever seen. I told my cast and crew how it has been one of the singularly great experiences of my time at East Tennessee State University to work with them on *The Aliens*. The response we got from the audience tonight only confirmed that sentiment. Even if it had gone terribly, our collected efforts and passion for the play made it worthwhile no matter the outcome from a personally-enriching aspect. We just have to do it two more times and hope the energy doesn't drop.

April 23rd, 2017 Matinee, closing performance.

The matinee went absolutely okay, certainly not as overwhelming an experience as last night's opening was, but I could hardly have expected that much energy from an audience at every go. We had about fifteen in the crowd which was a decent crowd. I think the cast took that as more disheartening than they should have. I was just glad to have people who wanted to see our work, but I understand that the actors spend the bulk of their time and energy trying to connect with that crowd. In the future, however, I don't think it's necessary for Patchwork to invest energy in matinee performances.

Closing night was very similar in energy to opening. I was told by a few audience members that they were profoundly moved by the play and I personally would be willing to go through any amount of hell I dealt with in putting *Aliens* up if that's honestly the cast. I, and everyone involved, put a lot of personal demons and passion into this. To see that connect with people is exactly why I do Theatre. It's about not being alone and communicating an experience to each other that connects us all. That's what the point of *The Aliens* is as a play. We strike the set the best we could and hulled the old picnic table as far as we could with just the handful of us. I'm

sure we did something wrong with striking the tech, but we did our best with the few of us left. But as of now, I don't know what I'm going to be doing with my evenings anymore.

CHAPTER THREE

Summary of Experience

My experience of working on *The Aliens* was a mixture of feeling dwarfed by responsibility and being impressed with the work and passion of those around me as they rose to those challenges we faced. It was my first step into the world of directing from an almost exclusive background as an actor. I made plenty of mistakes and was off the mark more than once. To say that there was one large thing I did wrong feels like a simplification of what I've learned to be the directing process. Play direction is born out of the performing arts and therefore can be judged in a similar way as any performance.

I directed the way I had noticed that I had been directed myself. I began with the table read. I made a schedule for blocking and I stuck to it. I asked questions to try and coax discoveries out of my cast. I did my best to listen and tried to remain open when I could. Ultimately, I found I had to direct my own way. I could paraphrase directors in my past like a series of limericks for my actors to nod along to, but something had to come from my own sensibilities and instincts.

Like acting, directing falls into a series of choices that must be made. Sometimes these choices work and sometimes they do not, but they are not ever completely wrong. There are, of course, inefficient and ill-conceived ways to approach directing just like there are with acting or composing music or anything else that exercises creativity. Learning as a director is an

exploration of growth and a meditation on amendments to style rather than a mechanical correction of anything sharply wrong.

Part of my inexperience as a director came out in my biggest regret: the amount of rehearsal time I put my actors through. We rehearsed far more than was necessary or needed. I do not think this came from a place of not trusting my actors so much as one of not trusting my abilities and wanted all the time I could to course correct myself and learn in the process. *The Aliens* had about two weeks of rehearsal that were probably unnecessary. My actors never mentioned any annoyance or anger with the rehearsal schedule but in reflection I feel it is my responsibility to be much more efficient and less demanding of my actor's time. It's something I should have realized much sooner due to my background as an actor. Rehearsing too much can easily lead to a performance going stale before it even has the chance to be performed. The scene in which KJ breaks down and tells Evan about Jasper's death was becoming too routine for the actors, almost too comfortable. There are some discoveries that can only be made in the presence of an audience, there is a point that the director has to step away and let the show walk and talk on its own.

I wanted to direct *The Aliens* to give others the feelings that it gave me when I read it and from the conversations I have had with audience members since closing, I did just that. The set wasn't spectacular, the costumes weren't intricate, the lighting designer had one day to work, and the crew was the most skeletal it could have been, but the story was told in the end and I would like to think I had a part of that. Audiences seemed to understand what the play was about and were able to empathize with the characters. I know it was not a universally or platonically perfect piece of theatre by any stretch, especially on the technical side of things (the side of things I am far more ignorant on). The conversations I have had with people have been on how

they feel after watching the show, not on anything resembling spectacle. In a truly human way I think we succeeded in what we aimed to do with *The Aliens*. I was told by one person who had seen that show that not only did they comprehend Evan's grief over Jasper's overdose but could see themselves in Evan with these characters speaking for them and their life experiences. I was told by an audience member that the moment that they found themselves surprised to be moved by, was in the final scene: watching KJ silently listen to Evan play on Jasper's guitar, a moment I do not even think I directed Keith Maultbay in. He just found that emotional truth on his own based on conversations we had and discoveries he made. Other conversations I had pointed out more moments, some pointing out exactly what I meant to say and some hitting in a way I never anticipated. The show was far funnier than I expected, and I do think that comes from that place of established humanity. *The Aliens* ended up moving beyond me as I watched from the booth of the black box space. It did not belong to me anymore.

Leonardo da Vinci is often credited with having said that "Art is never finished, only abandoned." As I sat in the booth watching that opening performance of *The Aliens*, I was inclined to agree. I did have to let it go, that is true but there were always possibilities to explore before audiences began to put some aspects of the show in stone, like finding drastic changes in the blocking that could have redefined or contextualized a scene's meaning. Many small things to consider like: what if Jasper had disposed of KJ's psychedelic tea with disapproval instead of annoyance, or what if Jasper hated that part of KJ because it reminded him of that part of himself that would ultimately kill him? I do not think I really believe that, but I am also not sure. Questions do not ever end in the rehearsal process. If the cast and crew never had any there would hardly be a rehearsal process and then no point in ever doing more than one production of any one script.

Working on *The Aliens* as a director has trained me as a Theatre artist in general more than I anticipated. It did not show me how different a director is from an actor or the chasm between the perspectives of a designer and a performer but server more as a distiller of all these faces of Theatre into who we all already know we are: storytellers. Developing an understanding of blocking and what it can do to convey character informs acting as the mood an actor gives to a scene informs the lighting of a scene as the color of that scene's lighting informs a character's costuming as the needs of that costume informs blocking. It is an ouroboros that spins off into something strong and seamless at its best or something shoddily quilted and jarring at its worst. The director's concept is the unification and the beginning of a long line of communication to make that single story that is told by the cast, crew, and designers cohesive. In short: directing is about reigning in the different lives of all these artists and channeling them into one experience that is worth sharing: like a collection of lost souls singing behind a Vermont coffeehouse on a summer night.

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