

MOISÉS KAUFMAN: THE SEARCH FOR NEW FORMS

by

RICH BROWN

A DISSERTATION

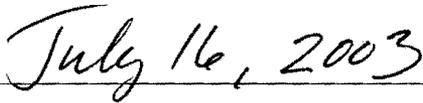
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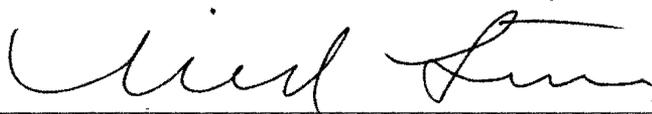
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Title: MOISÉS KAUFMAN: THE SEARCH FOR NEW FORMS

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This study identifies and examines Moisés Kaufman's theoretical questions and rehearsal techniques from their development in initial works at New York University to their specific application during the creation of Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde and The Laramie Project by his Tectonic Theater Project. Kaufman's upbringing and major artistic influences are investigated in order to trace the origins of his current theoretical language and approach to making theatre. This dissertation primarily focuses on Kaufman's approach to the workshop space as discussed in relation to his search for new theatrical forms, and his style of communication with company members. Such focus offers new questions regarding the basis and range of Kaufman's aesthetic. The two guiding questions of the study ask: What is Kaufman's directorial role in Tectonic Theatre Project's creation of new work? How does he ensure the "copulation" of form and content in the workshop space when creating new works?

Chapter II outlines Kaufman's biography through detailing his education in

Venezuela and in the Experimental Theatre Wing at New York University, as well as traces his early production history. Chapter III investigates how Tectonic techniques led to the creation of Gross Indecency – examining Kaufman’s inciting hunch, the depth of his research, his organizing principle and expanding through-lines, and “moment work.”

Chapter IV continues to trace the development of these Tectonic techniques through the creation of The Laramie Project, highlighting the fact that no two Tectonic Theater Project productions have been created in the same manner. This chapter also raises the crucial question of Kaufman’s role as Tectonic’s workshop director in regards to the issues of authority and authoring.

Chapter V arrives at concluding questions and thoughts on Kaufman’s theoretical questions in traffic with his workshop techniques, and how these shape his directorial and authorial aesthetics. Chapter V concludes with questions for further study on Kaufman and historically based theatre.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Mission of Tectonic Theater Project

Based in New York City, Tectonic Theater Project was founded in November 1991 by Artistic Director Moisés Kaufman and Managing Director Jeffrey LaHoste as a laboratory in which structural, theoretical questions of the theatre could be posed. The company's main objective, as stated on the Tectonic Homepage, is to "explore new theatrical vocabularies and theatrical languages that use the full potential of the stage." In an interview I conducted in November 2002 (eleven years after the formation of Tectonic Theater Project), Kaufman explained that his search began as a reaction to the traditional practice of play making:

I have a profound belief that if you want to question form, you have to question how that form is made. In America, the way a play is usually done is that a writer goes into a room for twenty years – this mythological room that's poorly lit – and there's the playwright with a quill and a candle. And the playwright finishes twenty years of hard work – white hair, unshaven – and runs with the script. It's like tag-team; [the playwright] gives it to the director, who says, "thank you very much," leaves the playwright behind, and goes into another room for four weeks. At the end,

they have three days of tech, and a play is born. That form will only lead or insinuate itself into specific forms. So if you are asking, “What are the new forms?” You have to ask how these forms are arrived at. (11 Nov. 2002)

Kaufman searches for new forms in the rehearsal space, where he is surrounded by a community of collaborating artists. Today, Tectonic Theater Project begins each new project by conducting workshops – exploring existing texts or creating new works through rigorous experimentation and collaboration over long periods of time. The artists involved in these projects use specific rehearsal techniques developed by Kaufman. Through this process, Tectonic Theater Project gained national recognition in 1997 when Kaufman wrote Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde, which ran for over six hundred performances in New York City. The success of Gross Indecency financed the company’s first investigatory trip to Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998 – the first step toward what would eventually become The Laramie Project.

After reading about the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Laramie, Kaufman felt compelled to respond through his art. He gathered a group of Tectonic members and accompanied them to Laramie in order to interview its residents. He states, “When we first went to Laramie, only two or three of us had ever conducted interviews. Not only did we not know what we were doing there, we didn’t know how we were going to put it together. We didn’t know how we were going to make a play out of this” (9 Dec. 2002). Yet, similar to how the trials of Oscar Wilde illuminated the culture of Victorian England, Kaufman believed that Shepard’s murder represented a “watershed historical moment” in the history of America – an event to which theatre must

respond. In the introduction to The Laramie Project, he explains the significance of such events:

There are moments in history when a particular event brings the various ideologies and beliefs prevailing in a culture into sharp focus. At these junctures the event becomes a lightning rod of sorts, attracting and distilling the essence of these philosophies and convictions. By paying careful attention in moments like this to people's words, one is able to hear the way these prevailing ideas affect not only individual lives but also the culture at large.  
(v)

Shortly after Shepard's murder, Kaufman posed serious questions to his company: "What can theatre artists do as a response to this incident? And, more concretely, is theatre a medium that can contribute to the national dialogue on current events?" (Laramie vi).

After a year-and-a-half of development, including seven trips and over two hundred interviews with Laramie residents, The Laramie Project, Tectonic Theater Project's most successful work to date, was first produced in 2000 at the Denver Center Theatre.

Tectonic later transferred the production to New York's Off-Broadway Union Square Theatre.<sup>1</sup>

Tectonic Theater Project centers on Moisés Kaufman's progressive thinking in reforming theatrical practices. Heavily influenced by his work with the Thespis Theatre Company in his native Venezuela and by the training he received at New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing, Kaufman is dedicated to a model of theatre making that lies outside the traditional, commercial theatre ventures in the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> At the writing of this dissertation, Laramie is the second most performed play in the United States in 2002, and has dozens of productions abroad. Its success also led to the making of an HBO movie with full video distribution.

He believes the rehearsal space is a place for collaborative questioning and exploration that may or may not lead to the creation of a new piece. Kaufman states, “This is what we do in rehearsal. We learn as we go. We get into a room, pose some questions, and we ask the theatre to help us discuss it” (9 Dec. 2002). Exploration and questioning lie at the heart of Kaufman’s search for new theatrical forms; he founded Tectonic Theater Project to bring together like-minded artists who could help him in his journey. Arthur Bartow, the Artistic Director of the Undergraduate Department of Drama at N.Y.U.’s Tisch School of the Arts and the man Kaufman credits with encouraging him to start his own company, states, “More than anyone I know, Moisés has managed to create a new community by gathering important people to take with him from every place he lands. He’s used faculty and students from N.Y.U., taken them with him. He has the ability to recognize talented people that he wants to work with and to encourage them to work with him” (10 Dec. 2002). LaHoste, Tectonic co-founder, concurs, in his explanation for forming the company: “Moisés was intrigued by the work of other people who worked that way – over long periods of time, with the same people over and over again. Artistically, the company was created to support his explorations and his ability to test his theories and so forth” (11 Dec. 2002).

Kaufman’s explorations over the past ten years have led to Tectonic’s current mission to produce innovative works that explore theatrical language and forms and to foster an artistic dialogue with their audiences on social, political, and human issues. Through this approach, Tectonic’s explorative work centers around the copulation of form and content. Kaufman elaborates:

I think the most important thing for Tectonic is this binary focus that we have. Whenever we do a play, we have two interests in mind: form and content. This is something that happens not only in our theoretical meanderings but in our work. Whenever we're in rehearsal, we deal with both of those issues and pose questions about both. We do exercises that explore subject matter, and we do exercises that explore form. There's this, especially last century, this very, very age-old question, "What happens first, form or content, and what follows what?" And I think over the centuries there have been so many answers to that. Form follows content, content follows form, then Beckett said, "form is content." So there have been all these things, and the way we think about it in Tectonic is that we want form and content to copulate. We want the offspring of that copulation to be the play. We think about it in binary because we like to devote time to each one individually. And that is a theoretical as well as a pragmatic way of working. (11 Nov. 2002)

As Kaufman identifies this binary focus on form and content as central to his work and the development of Tectonic Theater Project's work, my dissertation will repeatedly return to these questions as I trace Kaufman's history and practices.

### Statement of the Problem

In this dissertation, I present, discuss, and analyze Kaufman's theoretical questions and rehearsal techniques from their development in initial works at N.Y.U. to their specific application during the creation of Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project. I investigate Kaufman's major artistic influences in order to trace the origins of his current theoretical language and approach to making theatre. In addition, I discuss Kaufman's approach to the workshop space in relation to his search for new theatrical

forms , and his style of communication with company members, along with his directorial aesthetics. Special attention will be given to examining developments in Kaufman’s theories and practices from Gross Indecency to Laramie.

The two guiding questions of the study ask: What is Kaufman’s directorial role in Tectonic’s creation of new work? What does he mean by the copulation of form and content in the workshop space when creating new works? Additional questions addressed are: What personal experiences and attributes from his upbringing, such as coming to terms with his sexuality, led Kaufman to his work? What key influences have motivated his current theoretical questions? How are specific Tectonic techniques, as developed by Kaufman, used in the creation of new works – specifically in Gross Indecency and Laramie? How is the search for new forms ever-changing and specific to each project? What are the distinctions between Kaufman’s directorial approach and specific Tectonic techniques? How is the question of authority handled in the collaborative process with an auteur director? And, what had led to the commercial and critical success of his two latest plays? These questions led to an examination of Kaufman’s biographical history, his development as an artist, and his theoretical questions and how they spurred pragmatic techniques developed in the laboratory.

#### Justification and Significance of the Study

With the success of Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project, both Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project have secured their place in the history of

American theatre and are in a position to lead the way toward a unique system of theatre creation that enriches our cultural dialogue and American drama. Ben Brantley of the New York Times describes Kaufman as, “an inspired talent. One of the men that is changing the cultural landscape of the country” (Tectonic Homepage). The significance of these two plays is evidenced both in their commercial success and artistic recognition. Beyond their recent national recognition lies the story of a small, New York theatre company whose unique voice struggled to be heard for years. Women in Beckett, the first play produced under the aegis of Tectonic Theater Project in 1991, was funded through a personal bank loan for ten thousand dollars, acquired by Managing Director, Jeffrey LaHoste.<sup>2</sup> LaHoste recalls from the early years, “We really did have a lot of trouble raising money. We also weren’t making a lot of money at the box office. We never have been a theatre with a season or things for people to buy tickets to. We worked even then as a per-project kind of thing” (11 Dec. 2002). The simple formula of low overhead and working from project to project, however, proved advantageous for Tectonic. It allowed them to build a downtown theatre audience gradually during the 1990s and to prepare the groundwork for the success of Gross Indecency, which instantly launched them onto the national theatre scene.

Gross Indecency was the third most produced play in American commercial theaters in the 1998-1999 season, and boasted dozens of international productions, including: London’s West End, Paris, Budapest, Stockholm, Mexico City and Frankfurt. It was named “One of the Ten Best Plays of the Year” in 1997 by the New York Times,

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<sup>2</sup> LaHoste secured the loan only because he had a stable job as a development officer at an uptown community health center.

Time Magazine, Newsday, The New York Post, and The Advocate. In addition to numerous other awards, it garnered the Lucille Lortel Award for Best Play and the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Off-Broadway Play. In addition, Kaufman's peers in the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers awarded him the Joe A. Callaway Award for his direction.

The Laramie Project hosts a similar litany of awards. At the writing of this dissertation, not only is it the second most performed play in the American commercial and academic theaters this season, but it has also been produced abroad in London, Japan, and Australia. It received a Drama Desk Award Nomination for Extraordinary Theatrical Experience and was named "One of the Ten Best Plays of 2000" by Time magazine. Although the HBO film version of The Laramie Project is outside the scope of this dissertation, it is notable that Kaufman's directorial debut in this film earned four Emmy Award Nominations for Best Film, Best Director, Best Playwright, and Best Casting. Kaufman was named Artist of the Year by Venezuela's Casa del Artista in June of 1999, and in April of 2002 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwriting.

Before this dissertation, Kaufman had never granted permission for an academic study of Tectonic's work. This is the first look into the theories and techniques that form Tectonic's mission, its rehearsals, and its creation of new plays and will make Kaufman's work accessible to the theatre public and to academic institutions. Kaufman has managed such success with company organization and techniques which are radically different from traditional commercial theatre. So the significance of this study is threefold:

Tectonic's success, that this study is a first, and that Tectonic's success is built on exploratory alternatives, on every level, from finance to rehearsals to company formation.

### Methodology

Besides numerous play reviews and newspaper interviews with Kaufman (usually focused on the content of the plays), little has been published on Tectonic Theater Project. Therefore, due to my focus on Kaufman's personal and artistic history, theoretical questions, and pragmatic rehearsal techniques, primary source material became vital. Fortunately, through the generosity of Kaufman, LaHoste, and other members of Tectonic Theater Project who graciously gave their time to discuss their work, a substantial quantity of research was collected through interviewing company members and examining Tectonic's archival documents. This primary research occurred on five separate trips to New York between November 2002 and June 2003. During this period I conducted twenty-two interviews, each averaging two to three hours in length.

Kaufman's work within a constantly shifting community of equally valued theatre artists necessitated interviews with a wide range of performers, writers, and designers. These interviews are invaluable to tracing Kaufman's development and connecting his theoretical questions with specific occurrences in the workshop setting, as well as creating an understanding of Kaufman's directorial aesthetics, communication style, and overall approach to the creative workshop, in order to gain multiple perspectives into his directorial role in the laboratory. Finally, the biographical nature of the study mandated

that Kaufman's mentors and past collaborators from New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing be interviewed in order to trace the origin and development of his theoretical questions and workshop techniques.

In addition to personal interviews, Kaufman granted access to Tectonic Theater Project's archival records including original design sketches, rehearsal notes, video cassettes of Kaufman lecturing at universities, and numerous newspaper and journal reviews and articles. This combined research resulted in a hybrid approach to the study – a biographical, historical, theoretical, and practical analysis aimed at generating an assemblage which depicts how (and why) Moisés Kaufman creates new works.

#### Definition of Terms and Introduction to Tectonic's Process

Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project have rigorously developed a specific and unique process of creating collaborative theatre that is ever-changing. In order to understand their process, a brief definition of terms and explanation of Tectonic techniques will be beneficial. Tectonic Theater Project's unique process of creating theatre, a result of what Kaufman calls the "copulation" of his theoretical questions and techniques, constitutes the focus of this study. Significant techniques in Tectonic's process include ceaselessly focusing on exploring form and content – and how the two "copulate" – through the theoretical search for new theatrical languages; Kaufman's approach to the workshop space with his actors, designers, and dramaturges; his "hunch" that develops into "an organizing principle" which dictates the "through-lines" of each

piece; and using the technique that Kaufman calls “Moment Work.” The search for new forms, based on a series of questions, constitutes the driving impetus in Tectonic’s work.

Kaufman explains:

I always say that there are some theoretical questions that you pose and answer only through the work. They’re not questions you answer; they’re questions you go into a rehearsal room with: What is a theatrical language? What is a theatrical vocabulary? How does theatre speak? And the main concern of the company is that, while all other art forms have abandoned their nineteenth century relatives, we stay in naturalism and realism, which are forms that in my mind, at this stage of the game, under use the medium. Film and television do realism and naturalism better. So what are the vocabularies? What are the forms? (11 Nov. 2002)

For Kaufman, the progression of creating new theatre through new forms is paramount to the survival of the art form. He balances the larger questions regarding theatre as an art while addressing specific issues in the creation of new work project by project. He continues:

I am as interested in the play that I’m directing or writing as I am in posing questions about form, about the medium, and about theatre as a medium. I really feel that as long as theatre continues to be a fourth-wall phenomenon, we’re dead. So I think it’s so important to keep posing the questions: What are the new forms? What are the new theatrical vocabularies? What are the new theatrical languages? What are the new actor-audience relationships that are going to keep the theatre a vibrant, electric, exciting room? I think that theatre practitioners now have a responsibility to pose some of those questions. (11 Nov. 2002)

Of course, Kaufman is not alone in his convictions. Ariane Mnouchkine, the director of Théâtre du Soleil in France states, “If it is realist it dies. The theatre’s only

chance of survival is theatre” (Kiernander 36). Both Kaufman and Mnouchkine’s sentiments were stated earlier by Tadeusz Kantor, the Polish theatre director and theorist of the later half of the twentieth century, whom Kaufman names as a key influence. Kantor writes, “The moment we reject illusion, the automatic reproductive apparatus, fictitious plots representing life, and raise questions concerning the concept of form and molding, all this baggage of old meaning and depth proves useless” (Kobialka 63). In short, if theatre remains a simple facsimile of life, it dies. If, however, new forms are found, which Kaufman defines as “arbitrary constructs that encompass any stylistic devices that allow presentation of material,” (09 Dec. 2002) then theatre can remain an important, vibrant art form.

The need to move beyond illusionist realism led Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theater Project to create plays, and to fully commit to creating new textual forms. This was a logical progression from their first five years of mounting existing plays by other playwrights, such as Beckett, Kroetz, and Sophie Treadwell, who were posing formal and structuralist questions in their work. “Part of what determines form in the theatre is text,” states Kaufman. “There is something about the kernel of the text that determines something about the production. If you want to pose the question of form, you have to deal with the issue of text” (11 Nov. 2002). This interest in the interplay of texts and formal experimentation had to involve the company in collaborative workshop, where the question became: how does content dictate form and how does form dictate content? How do the two copulate?

Rather than maintain a permanent company, Kaufman hires actors and designers on a per-project basis. Often, he has worked with these artists in the past, and they share a common language and theatrical interest. He explains:

People come in and out because they have a kinship with some of the questions the laboratory devotes itself to – both in terms of subject matter and formal issues. It's very organic. We do hold auditions periodically, but we hardly ever hold auditions for a production. We hold auditions for a reading or for a workshop. So people enter the ranks by being in one of these developmental phases. We get to know them; they get to know us. You have to remember that, as much attention as we've received and as successful as the work is or as much influence as it's causing out there, it requires a very special kind of person to be in this company. It took us two years to put The Laramie Project up. If you are the kind of actor who wants somebody to give you a text and go onstage and do a play, we're not for you. (13 Nov. 2002)

Tectonic Theater Project demonstrates how the search for new forms can occur in the workshop space over a long period of time and can benefit from the input of a large, dedicated community of artists driven by similar social and artistic questions. Kaufman continues:

One of the things I keep feeling is that we are a community of artists that in addition to everything else have very strong social and political ideas. And I think that the company calls for people that are very political and involved – or socially conscious. Because we've been working with social, political and cultural ideas for so long, it's hard when somebody comes into the company and is very talented and beautiful and smart, but they don't have that education, or awareness, or consciousness. And we've had that problem before where someone like that clashes. I think the rigor with which we address the work is the same rigor in which we address our lives and ourselves as political beings as opposed to only artists. (13 Nov. 2002)

Tectonic's structure allows Kaufman to invite artists best suited for each individual project, which benefits the work by giving the artists a choice for participation. Unlike other collectives whose members work only in their ensemble, Tectonic's structure does not force the artist to participate simply because she or he is a member. Kaufman concludes with his explanation:

So people come in and out. It's a very fluid space. It's not like Grotowski's laboratory theatre, where he worked with twelve people for thirteen years. This is not a repertory theatre company. [. . .] I didn't want to do four plays a year or have a repertory acting company that I had to keep working all year round. That's not what we do. We develop work over long periods of time through a very rigorous process that deals with subject matter we're interested in at that moment, the forms of the piece, and the forms of theatre as a whole. (13 Nov. 2002)

In today's Tectonic workshops, each artist who signs on for a project becomes a "performance writer," meaning they use all the tools of the stage: lights, props, costumes, set pieces, blocking, and text to create individual theatrical Moments outside of the workshop. Using the technique of Moment Work, the individual artists then present their Moments to the other ensemble members.

Kaufman defines Moment Work in the introduction to Laramie as, "A method to create and analyze theatre from a structuralist (or Tectonic) perspective. . . . A Moment does not mean a change of locale or an entrance or exit of actors or characters. It is simply a unit of theatrical time that is then juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning" (xiv). Each individual spectator creates meaning through this juxtaposition of Moments. In a recent article in the Los Angeles Times, Kaufman states, "We are continuing to try to find ways in which the theatre we do addresses the audience as

individuals as well as social and political beings. [. . .] For us, that is the main question all the time: How can we use this medium to become part of the national conversation in a way that only theatre can do it” (Breslauer 41). Tectonic techniques are the tools used to discover new forms in the workshop process, where the search for and creation of uniquely theatrical languages occurs in order to contribute to the national dialogue on human issues.

In the workshop phase, this exploration of stage vocabulary is performed by all company members as “performance writers,” eliminating the traditional theatrical roles of actor, designer, and writer. Even Kaufman’s role as director is complicated by the technique because the performance writers are also directing one another. Once a piece is created, however, traditional roles are reinstated for the rehearsal process – actors are assigned roles, and designers focus on their specialized area.

The inclusion of designers in the workshop process makes the languages of the stage ever present in the performers’ minds. Designers write their own Moments, collaborate with actors on Moments, or give feedback on Moments during the discussion sessions. Laramie associate writer and actor Stephen Belber adds, “Moisés is famous for including his designers early on, including them in the process. In this one [Laramie], we had Sarah Lambert,<sup>3</sup> who moved on actually, but she was there always saying, ‘Well, physically if you do this, that monologue might not work here.’ So form doesn’t take priority necessarily, but it’s co-joined with content” (10 Dec. 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> Lambert served as the set designer for Gross Indecency and as a dramaturg on Laramie.

Including all the artists in the workshop is a specific Tectonic technique. Leigh Fondakowski, the head writer and assistant director on Laramie states, “I think it’s a technique to invite everyone in the room, whether you’re an actor, writer, or designer, to leave those titles or roles at the door and enter the room as a theatre artist. Maybe you could say that’s an approach to the work, but I think it’s a technique, a way of setting up the working environment to engage people on a different level than they are usually engaged” (13 Dec. 2002). The technique results in a collection of artists who are conscious about the way in which the entire piece is created, who are aware of the whole world of the play, not just their individual role within the play. It is a metaphysical adjustment, a different way of seeing theatre all together. Fondakowski continues, “It’s more than just creating a safe environment where everyone can take risks. No, it’s like, ‘We’re all going to think differently, we are going to perceive reality differently.’ We are going to be engaged on a different level all together and it’s happening on a subconscious level that we don’t even know” (13 Dec. 2002). The ability of creators to see the larger picture of a piece is a problem creative ensembles often face. Tectonic’s technique of bringing all the artists together in a room, without traditional theatre roles, and converting them into writers of performance working collaboratively toward the creation of a piece increases their responsibility, which fosters an understanding of the whole work.

The Tectonic formula for creating theatre – constantly questioning and searching for new forms and theatrical languages – relies on a project-based community of artists trained in the Tectonic techniques. Kaufman believes that the idea of a group of artists coming into a room and developing ideas over a long period of time is essential to his

way of working. Of his company members, he states, “We’re all on the same wavelength. We have developed some theoretical questions over the course of the last ten years that guide us. I think there’s a way in which having a company or artistic community begins to develop certain ideas that feed on each other. You create a community that is interested in a certain kind of work” (9 Dec. 2002). As the facilitating director of that community, Kaufman also has the opportunity to observe the experimentation with form first hand. “You get the thrill and excitement of being in an artistic laboratory in which the form is being experimented with; it’s a laboratory where everyone is doing their own research and that is thrilling,” he says. “You are posing some theoretical questions and asking a group of trained individuals to think about it and come up with their replies” (9 Dec. 2002).

Yet Kaufman guides the search. It is clear that he initiates each project and that the final production is strongly guided by his artistic vision and the techniques he has developed. He begins with the “hunch.” Stemming from Peter Brook’s influence, it is the leaping-off point for each new project and is couched in Kaufman’s embracing of “not knowing” – perhaps best represented by his decision to take a group of actors to Laramie, Wyoming without knowing if there was even a play there. He had a “hunch” and that was enough. Kaufman defines a “hunch” as “something you know before you know that you know it” (9 Dec. 2002). A hunch is the unformed impulse that pulls you into a rehearsal space where you can unpack it. The hunch “has to do with desire, and desire has to do with things you know you want before you know why you want them.” Sometimes the hunch takes Kaufman and his collaborators into a workshop space where

they open it up and discover that they are not interested in it – other times they are completely interested. Kaufman explains, “Hopefully, what I try to do in a rehearsal room is try to discover what is inside the hunch. What brought on the hunch and what is in the hunch? What is the hunch about? Why does it exist? How does it speak?” (11 Nov. 2002).

The hunch, the initial step of each project, always originates with Kaufman. Tectonic projects are director-initiated. Kaufman, however, has not yet created a play by himself. His approach to theatre making relies on his company’s response to his hunches, to their collaborative investigation into the forms and content the hunch may possess. This raises a question that will be explored throughout the dissertation: what tensions result from needing collaborators to create a piece while also needing to control the direction of the work’s overall development? And, what directorial role enables Kaufman to lead the process of collaborative creation? The process is controlled but not controlled. Kaufman initiates work through his hunch, but he does not know exactly what the piece will entail until the company has explored the piece through extensive workshopping.

The hunch leads Kaufman to create what he calls his “organizing principle,” which is a tool against which the work is measured to determine whether or not individual Moments fit the scope of the overall work and should be included or excluded. “The most important thing for a director to say is,” states Kaufman, “This is our organizing principle” (9 Dec. 2002). From the organizing principle, formal questions

arise, such as, how do you tell this story? The through-lines for the piece are established from those formal questions. Kaufman elaborates on the effectiveness of his technique:

Then you can turn to somebody and ask, “Where does that Moment fit in the through-lines? There’s no room for it.” So you are educating a group of actors about how to tell a story, and you are being very clear about what story you think should be told. And you make compromises and you talk. But it is very important that everyone agrees on the organizing principle, then you spend two years peeling away what that organizing principle is and how you want to present it. (9 Dec. 2002)

As the director of a collaborative creation project that spanned such an extensive period of time, Kaufman had to be very clear about the organizing principles in order to lend objectivity to his decisions of what Moments to include and which to let go. Referring to the creation of Laramie, he continues:

Because when you have fifteen people in a room who have all conducted interviews, who have invested themselves over the course of a year in their characters and their interviewees, unless you have a very strong organizing principle, how do you determine what text makes it into the play and what text doesn’t make it into the play? How do you convince your cohorts into what works and what doesn’t work? There were people who spent up to an entire year working on characters that got cut out of the entire play. (11 Nov. 2002)

From an open hunch to organizing principle to through-lines to individual artists creating Moments that explore content and form, Moisés Kaufman’s Tectonic Theater Project has developed a unique approach to creating theatre. Working in Moments allows the artists to think about theatre from a structuralist perspective, to view and understand theatre as consisting of individual blocks, which are constructed and put together. This method encourages the Tectonic members to think through the structural

approach of which Moment should follow another, and how meaning is assigned through that contextualization, which is the second phase of developing a new piece. Kaufman explains his theory:

We spend a lot of time just creating moments, then we spend a lot of time putting those moments together, then we deal with structuralist ideas like context. If you have a moment and put another moment in front of it, does it alter the first moment – through context? Can you create narratives using not story but context? How can you create narrative using context as opposed to story telling? For example, a man and woman are on opposite sides of the stage, they come together slowly, and when they reach each other they embrace. That's a moment. Then we have another moment of someone going onstage and reading a newspaper article from that day saying there has been an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Then you take those two pieces and you put them together. So you have two people crossing the stage and someone sits in front of them and reads from the newspaper about the bubonic plague. You, as the audience, will create a narrative that puts the two together, and all of a sudden it will be about two lovers who are suffering from the bubonic plague. But that is not a narrative that is constructed using traditional storytelling devices; it is using context to create narrative. (9 Dec. 2002)

Contextualization to create a narrative demonstrates Kaufman's attempt to create a uniquely theatrical experience for each individual spectator; it is the audience members' right and obligation to assign meaning through their personal reading of the individual Moments in relation to one another. The positioning of the Moments creates meaning through context, just as the contextualization of content in relation to its form creates meaning within each individual Moment. Form and content copulate through contextualization. In the case of Laramie, as the company members began to share their Moments with one another, forms were already emerging through the personification of

the interviewees as the actors introduced the characters to the group. Fondakowski defines form as a “container . . . a way of finding a theatrical vocabulary,” and describes the connection between content and form:

I would really say that you can't separate content and form. When we talk about the work, even in the very beginning when we were just presenting material to each other, there was already a form developing because the actors were mimicking the characters. They were trying to communicate the characters to us. They were using gestures, costume pieces, they were already contextualizing in formal ways. (13 Dec. 2002)

Tectonic members are intensely curious about the relationship between form and content. Their explorations are founded in the ideal of searching for the perfect form to contextualize content in order to create the most effective theatrical language.

### Limitations of the Study

I will not attempt to compile and organize a complete production history of Kaufman's career. Rather, the focus will be on tracing his theoretical questioning and specific Tectonic techniques as they developed through individual productions, beginning with Samuel Beckett's Endgame at New York University and ending with The Laramie Project. Because Gross Indecency and Laramie have garnered the greatest national attention and were created by the company with new collaborative techniques, they will receive an in-depth analysis in comparison to the brief discussion of Kaufman's other works. The evolution of Kaufman's Tectonic techniques is also the most apparent during the past five years of the company's history when the two plays were written.

I will likewise not supply a complete biography of Kaufman's life. Instead, biographical information will be examined only in its relationship to Kaufman's development as a theatre artist and specific concerns that directly inspire or inform his theatre. Kaufman's main theories of searching for new theatrical languages and vocabularies, marrying form and content through context, and investigating how we tell stories will all be discussed, but the majority of analysis in terms of Tectonic techniques will focus on Moment Work – the most unique and advanced technique created by Moisés Kaufman.

As mentioned previously, the HBO film version of The Laramie Project is outside the scope of this dissertation. As a study in theatre arts, I will analyze and discuss Kaufman's work for the stage. In the final chapter, which will look to Kaufman's present and future work, I will briefly discuss his interest in film. The HBO film, however, is significant in that it displays Kaufman's ability to reach a larger audience with his art, and its success has opened new doors for Kaufman and Tectonic that will certainly influence the direction of their future work.

Finally, not all current or past members of Tectonic Theater Project could be interviewed for this dissertation, due to conflicts in scheduling and funding. The solution, however, was to interview Kaufman on numerous occasions and focus questions on his long-term collaborators and past mentors from New York University's Experimental Theatre Wing. Jeffrey LaHoste, Leigh Fondakowski, Andy Paris, Amanda Gronich, Greg Pierotti, and Kelli Simpkins have all worked on more than one project with Kaufman. Their experience was invaluable in tracing the development of specific

workshop techniques and the changes in Kaufman's theoretical and directorial vocabulary. Additionally, guided by Kaufman's technique of working with theatre artists who have dropped their traditional roles, interviews were balanced between designers, actors, and writers, measuring experience and perspective from numerous positions.

### Review of Literature

Kaufman's publications are limited to his two plays, Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde and The Laramie Project, both of which will be summarized and analyzed in regards to how each was uniquely created. He has also written short articles for American Theatre magazine discussing Tectonic's mission and the creation of Gross Indecency and Laramie. Lastly, he has written two introductions to recently published books. In The Stage Director's Handbook: Opportunities for Directors and Choreographers, he expounds on the difficulties of navigating a young director's career, giving the advice, "the focus for me has always been to try and do the work I feel passionate about, which in my case has always revolved around theatrical language and form, and to work with people who share this interest" (qtd. in Diamond). Kaufman also wrote the introduction to Marc Wolf's play Another American: Asking and Telling, found in Political Stages: An Anthology of American Plays, which compiles verbatim interviews from gay men and women in the military to create the script. Kaufman expresses his belief in listening to people's stories by writing, "It is in the grammatical mistake, in the unnecessary repetitions, where truth lies. And because his [Wolf's]

writing reflects his listening, in this play we too learn to listen. A sentence captures a thought; a paragraph, an entire character” (qtd. in Mann 541).

As stated earlier, little material has been published on the theories and pragmatic workshop techniques of Moisés Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project. The vast majority of published newspaper and journal articles focus on the productions of Gross Indecency and Laramie, not the creative process that birthed the two plays. Don Shewey’s “Town in a Mirror,” published in the May/June 2000 edition of American Theatre magazine, is the longest article on Tectonic to date. Shewey gives an in-depth description of how Laramie was made in regards to the interview trips and number of workshops the company held, but never mentions specific techniques used in those workshops to create the play. Shewey writes, “The company members were clearly empowered by the experience of doing this kind of first-hand research. Back in New York, they transcribed tapes of their interviews and began developing performable impressions of the people they’d met” (16). Shewey does not describe Moment Work or other Tectonic techniques, but the article supplies a detailed account of the trips to Laramie and illustrates a brief historical background of Kaufman and his major influences, as well as a smart discussion of Laramie.

Robert Brustein’s “The Staged Documentary,” published in the June 2000 edition of The New Republic questions the concept of turning politics into art. Like other commentators on Tectonic’s work, Brustein compares the interview technique used in Laramie to the work of Anna Deavere Smith, writing, “Apparently inspired by the method of Anna Deavere Smith – conducting interviews that serve as material for an

enacted scenario – The Laramie Project is much more a documentary than a play” (29). Brustein’s article generated questions for personal interviews with Kaufman, which will be discussed in later chapters. In addition, numerous interviews and articles on Emily Mann and Deavere Smith were researched in order to trace the antecedents to using verbatim interviews to generate text. Finally, Alisa Solomon’s “Irony and Deeper Significance: Where Are the Plays?” inspired additional critical analysis of Laramie which inspired questions for company members regarding the issues of homophobia and forgiveness found in The Laramie Project.

In order to place Tectonic within a collaborative ensemble context, extensive reading was done on previous and current companies. Theodore Shank’s Alternative Theatre, Arnold Aronson’s American Avant-Garde Theatre: a History, and David Savran’s Breaking the Rules: the Wooster Group provided a comparative background to the development of collaborative creation in America from The Living Theatre to today’s Wooster Group and Mabou Mines. Impressions of contemporary companies that create theatre collaboratively with one strong director at the helm revolved around Anne Bogart’s SITI Company and Ariane Mnouchkine’s Théâtre du Soleil, found in Michael Bigelow Dixon and Joel A. Smith’s Anne Bogart: Viewpoints, A Director Prepares: Seven Essays on Art and Theatre written by Anne Bogart, The Work of Anne Bogart and the Saratoga International Theatre Institute: A New Model for Actor Training a dissertation by Kevin P. Saari, and Adrian Kiermander’s Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil.

I also researched three of Kaufman's major influences – Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, and Tadeusz Kantor – in order to trace the origins of his theoretical questions and rehearsal practices. Attempting to focus mainly on primary source material, I traced Kaufman's use of Peter Brook's "hunch" as his impulse for entering a theatre through Brooks books: The Empty Space, The Open Door, Threads of Time, and The Shifting Point. Grotowski's Towards a Poor Theatre and Stephen Wangh's Acrobat of the Heart: a Physical Approach to Acting Inspired by the Work of Jerzy Grotowski explained the physical acting work Kaufman did during his five years with Thespis Theatre Company in Venezuela, and his need to discover the theory behind the work, which he gained during his time at New York University while working intimately with Wangh. In addition, editor and translator Michal Kobialka's A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1900 – 1944, Tadeusz Kantor supplied a basis for Kantor's theories of discovering new forms and using the stage set as a machine. Kaufman cites both concepts as influential and prevalent in his work. Finally, I also examined Michael Kirby's A Formalist Theatre, a specific book Kaufman noted as highly influential.

The bulk of my research stems from primary source material gained from personal interviews, phone interviews, email correspondences, and access to Tectonic's archival documents. Otherwise inaccessible materials such as Kaufman's application for a Cal Arts Alpert Award in the Arts, video recordings of his lectures at universities across the United States, production photos and rehearsal notes, and theoretical and production based sketches supplement the interview transcripts. They add information on the history of Kaufman's theatrical career and driving theoretical questions behind his work.

### Organization of the Remaining Chapters

In this chapter, I presented the justification and significance of this study, outlined its methodology, and introduced the theoretical questions and techniques of Tectonic Theater Project as developed by Moisés Kaufman. I propose that these theoretical questions and techniques signal a unique approach to creating theatre. Further, I defined the limitations of the study and provided a brief review of relevant literature, and discussed the primary source material which will inform the remainder of the dissertation.

Chapter II outlines Kaufman's biography through detailing his upbringing and education in Venezuela and in the Experimental Theatre Wing at N.Y.U. In regards to their influence on his art, I will pay special attention to Kaufman's Jewish background and education in Yeshiva school, as well as his coming to terms with his homosexuality. I will present Kaufman's key influences, especially his mentors at N.Y.U.: Arthur Bartow, Mary Overlie, and Stephen Wangh, as part of the impetus for the origin and development of his present theoretical stance. His time in America will be chronicled through productions that mark the development of his current theoretical questions and techniques, including: Machinal and Endgame at N.Y.U., in addition to Women in Beckett and Marlowe's Eye – as produced under Tectonic Theater Project. A detailed

examination of Kaufman's theoretical questions and techniques will be presented in order to navigate their progression that leads up to the production of Gross Indecency.

Chapter III investigates how each of the Tectonic techniques discussed in Chapter II led to the creation of Gross Indecency, examining Kaufman's inciting hunch, the depth of his research, his organizing principle and expanding through-lines, and Moment Work. I will clarify each technique in terms of its support of Kaufman's continued interest in structure and the copulation of form and content. I will provide a short plot synopsis in order to allow the reader to follow how the play is structured and how particular design elements support each act's form. In addition, actors' and designers' stories regarding the creative process will be shared and discussed in terms of Kaufman's directorial communication style and aesthetics.

Chapter IV continues to trace the development of Tectonic techniques through the creation of The Laramie Project, especially in regards to the continued search for new forms, highlighting the fact that no two Tectonic productions have been created in the same manner. I will address and discuss Kaufman's reasoning behind using verbatim interviews in relation to Anna Deavere Smith and Emily Mann's work. Again, I will provide a short plot synopsis for the reader to follow the developmental workshop techniques that inspired the hunch, organizing principles and expanding through-lines, and Moment Work which collectively created Laramie – all in terms of form copulating with content. Like Chapter III, actors' and designers' comments on the making of Laramie will be shared. Due to the collaborative nature of Laramie's creation, however, their stories will extend beyond directorial communication style and aesthetics, in order

to include the question of authority in authorship and how Kaufman deals with authority in the workshop space. These additional areas of interest are intended to depict Kaufman's role as Tectonic's workshop director.

In order to assemble a portrait of Moisés Kaufman as a maker of theatre, Chapter V arrives at concluding questions and thoughts on Kaufman's influences, theoretical questions, workshop techniques, and directorial aesthetics. The tensions between an auteur director and his creative collaborators will be explored, especially in terms of Kaufman's need for his collaborators to create new work and his need for control over that work. In this regard, I shall examine Kaufman's directorial role in terms of how his Tectonic techniques maintain this control while allowing his collaborators the freedom to create. Based on Kaufman's previous work, I will speculate on potential problems with future Tectonic collaborations. Finally, I will analyze Kaufman's commercial and critical success with Gross Indecency and Laramie in terms of their content and creative process, and I will suggest areas for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### BEGINNINGS

#### Biographical Context

Personal life choices in the course of a career can be significant and illuminating in tracing an artist's development. In his introduction to David Diamond's Stage Directors Handbook: Opportunities for Directors and Choreographers, Kaufman explains how his career in the United States resulted from listening to his personal needs. He writes, "I was coming to terms with my sexuality, and Venezuela was not a place where one could be gay and lead a healthy life. So I decided to move to New York" (Diamond). This key decision, however, was also motivated by a shift in his artistic focus. After performing as an actor in Venezuela for five years, he came to the United States to study directing. But Kaufman also acknowledges the more personal motivations for his choices. His introduction continues, "It's interesting how many of the 'career decisions' we make in our lives sometimes have very little to do with professional choices." By listening to his personal need to experience a new, more open culture and artistic need to

progress from acting to influencing the creation of an entire production through directing, Kaufman took significant steps in developing his theatrical career.

Moisés Kaufman was born in Caracas, Venezuela on November 21, 1963 to José Kaufman and Dora Akerman. During Moisés' upbringing, José Kaufman owned several grocery stores in Venezuela. His profession allowed him to provide an affluent lifestyle and quality education for his son. José hoped that the young Moisés would follow his business path in Caracas. Yet business was not José's only interest; he also possessed a great love for the arts. Kaufman recalls the particular tension between these two values in his father and how they played a role in defending his passion for the theatre:

Our dinner conversation was always about [Antonio] Spinosa and Schopenhauer and the people that he loved. Years later when he would criticize me saying, "What is this "theatre" you want to do? Where did this come from?" I had to remind him that the dinner conversation wasn't about business. It wasn't about how many cans of mayonnaise he was selling; it was about these things he loved. (9 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman's mother also influenced his interest in theatre at a young age. They often attended the cinema together and discussed the stories they had seen. Like his father, however, Dora was also in business – a bank employee with an MBA. Kaufman's upbringing in this environment that balanced business and a love for art would later prove advantageous to his role as artistic director for Tectonic Theater Project.

His parents' affluence allowed Kaufman to be in tune with American culture while growing up. His family spent months in Manhattan each summer visiting his father's brother. These trips exposed Kaufman to American theatre; he recalls: "I remember, very vividly, seeing Hair on Broadway or The King and I – all these musicals.

There's this whole other slew of influences" (9 Dec. 2002). These trips to America gave Kaufman a perspective from which to compare the theatrical productions he witnessed at home. During the late 1980s, the teenaged Kaufman attended the International Theatre Festival in Caracas. At this yearly festival, he witnessed monumental work such as: Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre's Acropolis, Peter Brook's company's Ubu Roi, and Tadeusz Kantor's Cricot Theatre's The Dead Class. He was deeply struck by the fact that these artists did not pretend to imitate reality. Kaufman explains:

They created new worlds - strange and wonderful worlds that could exist only on the stage. Every aspect of these productions - sets, acting, movement, blocking - helped create a reality outside reality. The stage as a medium behaved entirely in the service of the discourse underlying the text. At some point during the festival, I decided that I was going to be in the theater. (Cal Arts)

Kaufman was artistically inspired by these nonrealistic works. By the time he saw his first realistic play in the United States, Noel Coward's Private Lives, he thought, "How avant-garde" (11 Nov. 2002).

Kaufman considers his parents to be very pragmatic people, and their value of action, of "doing," forms a major element in his process of creating work. On the other hand, his Jewish heritage and Yeshiva education, which values erudition and the love of books, is also an essential characteristic of his process. Thus, the dichotomy of pragmatism and erudition were combined for Kaufman from his childhood and continue to play a role in his work today. He explains:

My father was a holocaust survivor [in Romania]. Although he was never in a concentration camp, he had to hide during the entire years of the war. My mother was born in Venezuela, but her parents escaped Russia before

the war. So, I come from a very pragmatic family. And so I think that for me, these questions [that drive his search] were never, ever just brain exercises. (11 Nov. 2002)

Kaufman's religious and familial heritage forms a unique cultural context from which to fashion art in commercial America. When he arrived in the United States, he found that the effect of his upbringing was recognized by his professors at N.Y.U. Mary Overlie remembers, "Americans don't have the level of seriousness about education that Moisés exhibited at school. He was always listening, studying, questioning" (11 Dec. 2002). Kaufman's passion for reading and learning, coupled with his pragmatic search for theatrical forms, has informed his work in the theatre from his earliest beginnings in the art form.

In addition to his parents' influence, Kaufman's cultural upbringing and Judaism, as well as his homosexuality, played a significant role in shaping his artistic perceptions. In an application for the California Arts Institute's "Alpert Award," Kaufman writes, "Eventually, I became aware that community is a construct. These ideas of constructs and constructions lie at the center of my work. For what is the stage but a construct of a certain reality? And what is a playwright-director but a construction worker?" Kaufman's experience of growing up in Venezuela forced him to pose the question, "How do you construct the rules by which new worlds exist?" (13 Nov. 2002).

In many respects, Kaufman's childhood gave him no choice but to be a pragmatist since his religion and sexuality placed him outside of societal norms – at the age of eight he realized he was a homosexual. He states, "Within the community I was growing up in, the worst thing you could be was gay – the worst thing in terms of Judaism, the worst

thing in terms of a Catholic country, the worst thing in terms of a machista country” (13 Nov. 2002). Kaufman recalls receiving “looks” when he attended the synagogue with his father or was dropped off at Yeshiva training. Kaufman began to understand that if religion, which for a child can be the closest thing to an absolute truth, was viewed by his family and community as a way to define and distinguish oneself, other aspects of identity could also be dealt with through similar means. He explains, “There was a consciousness always in my life that religion, which for most people is the ultimate absolute, was a construct. That religion is something we choose, because my family chose a religion that was different from the rest of our world” (13 Nov. 2002).

Although he could not articulate it in terms of identity and constructs at that time, as a young boy he began to understand that identity (his and others’) is a construct – a theme which he would eventually explore in much of his work. He states, “Unbeknownst to them, the Jewish community had given me the tools to deal with isolation. If they could determine what to believe in, then I could determine who to love” (13 Nov. 2002). Theatre creates worlds that follow their own internal logic, their own parameters, much like Kaufman “determining” who to love during his youth. In realizing these worlds, Kaufman’s theatre consists of discovering new languages to build constructs that use all the theatrical capabilities of the stage.

### Education in Caracas

Kaufman's university education has proven extremely beneficial to his theatrical career. Following his father's wishes, he attended the Universidad Metropolitana de Venezuela to study business administration and earned his degree in 1985 (a five-year program that he completed in four). Raised by a family of administrators, studying business in college was not difficult for Kaufman. He claims, "The only thing that was good about it was that the university had an incredible theatre company that I worked with during the time I was there" (9 Dec. 2002). Looking back, however, Kaufman recognizes that a business degree has benefited his work as the artistic director of Tectonic Theater Project. Kaufman continues:

As much as I bitched and moaned about four years of university for business administration, it proved helpful because it encouraged me to think formally about the organization of a company. The overhead of our company is nil. We have an assistant half-time; we have a general manager who works off premises. We have a development director who works part time. The managing director and I are the only full-time employees. Then we hire actors and designers on a per-project basis. (2 Nov 2002)

Undoubtedly, part of Tectonic's success stems from Kaufman's business mind in combination with his artistic capabilities. His business education clearly enabled him to establish and develop the company successfully with Managing Director LaHoste, who believes that Kaufman's practical approach to making theatre, coupled with his ability to dream up new projects, has been the key to their achievements. Likewise, mentor and

collaborator Stephen Wangh has been constantly impressed with Kaufman's ability to deal with the business end of theatre:

He sees three to four shows a week; he has an agent and a lawyer – the business end of theatre. [. . .] There is no Tectonic Theater Project, there's Moisés, and he is a business. He's both the producing director and the artistic director of Tectonic Theater Project, which has allowed him to do amazing things. (10 Dec. 2002)

Arthur Bartow of N.Y.U.'s Tisch School of the Arts provides a useful example of Kaufman's business sense leading to his theatrical accomplishments. On the night he attended Gross Indecency, Bartow ran into Al Berr, a member of the New York State Council of the Arts. Berr had been following Kaufman's work but had not been able to financially support Tectonic Theater Project until Gross Indecency became a hit. The attention it received enabled the council to financially aid Tectonic. Kaufman now had a track record that was supported by critical reviews that Berr could show the council.

Bartow recalls:

I suddenly became aware that Moisés had done his groundwork with the council staff. He wasn't just off in a garret creating good work, but he had been contacting people, been taking care of the business you have to do, so that when he hit, people were ready to pitch in and help. Most young artists neglect to do this. [. . .] It's about gaining visibility in the community where you exist. He's a combination of both artistic director and stage director. He's an exceptional artist, but to have the business skills on top of that is unusual for an artist. You know, how many years does it take to become an overnight success? (10 Dec. 2002)

### Artistic Development

Kaufman's university years in Caracas, both in terms of his experiences in the theatre and in coming to terms with his sexuality, significantly contribute to how he views the sacredness of the workshop/rehearsal to this day. During one of his first theatre classes in Caracas, he played an improvisation scene which was based on the scenario of a couple fighting. Kaufman jumped up with a female classmate and said, "I'm leaving you." She replied, "Why do you have to leave me?" To which he replied, "Because I'm a homosexual." He was eighteen-years old but had not yet come out publicly and was still coming to terms with his sexuality. Kaufman recalls:

Looking back on it, I realize what I had done. I had made a commitment to a certain kind of space. I said this space will be about the truth. It will be for talking about things that I don't yet understand – where this kind of conversation will occur. I was making myself make it occur. This was a space where I was going to try and be truthful. I won't say it was involuntary, but there was something about my subconscious that had found a space in which it could play itself out – and that was kind of magical. (9 Dec. 2002)

This reverence for the rehearsal space continues in Kaufman's work today. He views the space as a room in which to bring artistic questions so that the theatre can help discover the answers.

Upon completing his business degree, Kaufman took a job in Caracas in the advertising department of Proctor and Gamble, working in the brand group for Camade soap. His business career lasted one year, at which time he found an artistic home with

the Thespis Theatre Company under the direction of Fernando Ivosky. The influence Ivosky had on Kaufman cannot be understated. First, Ivosky was influenced by Grotowski, Brook, and Kantor – the same artists Kaufman had seen and admired at the International Theatre Festival in Caracas. Kaufman now had the opportunity to study their methodologies under Ivosky. Second, Ivosky was rigorous in terms of dedicating time and effort to the rehearsal of each piece. Kaufman states, “He had an idea that theatre could only be made in the context of a theatre company. You weren’t an actor for hire; you were part of a dialogue. We’d work for six or seven months on a play, which is similar to how we work now. The way that I learned to work is from him” (9 Dec. 2002). Under Ivosky’s guidance, Kaufman developed an understanding of the art behind acting and learned how to create theatre in the context of a company; both would help him clarify and develop his subsequent work with actors upon forming Tectonic Theater Project.

After five years of acting with the Thespis Theatre Company, Kaufman was ready to move forward artistically and personally: “I grew up in the theatre using all of Grotowski’s exercises: the plastiques and the cat and all these incredible techniques that he created for the theatre, but I didn’t know why we were doing those things” (11 Nov. 2002). Kaufman was hungry for theory. But he also, on a personal level, was ready to leave the cultural suppression of Venezuela. Kaufman explains:

I was thirty-three years old, I was gay, I was Jewish in Catholic, machista Venezuela. So it was impossible to live. I came to New York because I wanted to study. But I also came to New York because I wanted to exist. And I couldn’t exist there. I’m always fascinated by these places

where you make decisions for personal reasons and they always seem to be right for your work. (11 Nov. 2002)

Upon arriving in New York City, Kaufman enrolled at the Stella Adler Institute to study acting, which he did for four months. Next, he toured Portugal and Spain with Thespis Theatre Company during the summer of 1987. Around this time, a thought that had begun to evolve during his last year in Caracas came to fruition. He realized he was more interested in shaping the larger stage event than narrowing his attention to a single character. In addition to theory, he was also hungry to direct and study directing. Both needs led him to the Experimental Theatre Wing (E.T.W.) of New York University's Tisch School for the Arts (N.Y.U.). He enrolled that fall and was an undergraduate theatre student for three years, although he never earned a degree from the institution. In 1990, he returned to N.Y.U. to assist his mentor Stephen Wangh on the actor-initiated Transit Mass – a collaboratively created work. The faculty at N.Y.U. furnished the theory and theatre history Kaufman sought while he continued his instruction in acting techniques – Grotowski plastiques, which he had been exposed to by Ivosky, and new techniques such as Mary Overlie's six Viewpoints. N.Y.U. provided Kaufman with the opportunity to take art history classes and theory classes in order to catch up on what he had previously developed experientially.

Kaufman designates his first year at N.Y.U. as the period when he embraced his sexuality. Suddenly, he was meeting people who were much further ahead in dealing with their sexuality than he was. According to Kaufman, the majority of gay men at N.Y.U. were out. He recalls the day when he realized N.Y.U. was a place where his sexuality could become part of his work:

My first class at N.Y.U. was voice with a great music and voice teacher named Jeff Halpern. He had asked us to bring a song that we wanted to perform. First day of class, nine in the morning, I get into the studio. And this very beautiful, six-foot-two, really gorgeous, young man gives his music to the teacher and he begins to sing “You Make me Feel Like a Natural Woman.” And everybody in the classroom was applauding, and he was crying, and it was such a catharsis. I took a look around me and thought, “I’m not in Venezuela anymore.” Here was a space in which his sexuality was not only accepted but cherished. (9 Dec. 2002)

The lesson of embracing the whole artist’s range of personal attributes hit home with Kaufman and has remained with him. Today, he does not think in terms of “I’m gay, so I’m writing these plays,” referring to the gay themes in Gross Indecency and Laramie. He does believe, however, that “there’s a certain kind of crystalline quality in your relationship to yourself, like the truer you are with yourself, the truer you can be about the work” (11 Nov. 2002). Kaufman’s journey of coming to terms with his sexuality began in Caracas with an unconscious slip, “Because I’m a homosexual,” during the previously discussed improv scene in a university acting class and concluded with the conscious acceptance and incorporation of his sexuality into his work. He continues:

You make a commitment to honesty in your life and therefore you make a commitment to honesty in your work. If I wasn’t out, I never could have written the works I’ve made. Gross Indecency and Laramie wouldn’t exist; they are a function of the fact that decisions are made in terms of how you choose to live your life. Those decisions encourage you to live your work. (9 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman looks back on his time at N.Y.U. with fond memories. His work there represents a time of transition in his artistic and personal life. He shifted his focus from acting to directing, worked with theoreticians who became his greatest influences, and

found peace with his sexuality. His three years at N.Y.U.'s Experimental Theatre Wing were a "magical and innocent, terrible, difficult, magnificent time." He states, "I was coming into my sexuality, and also being in a studio for two years in a row is just magical" (11 Nov. 2002). The Experimental Theatre Wing furnished Kaufman with what he hungered for – the theory of other theatrical geniuses and a laboratory with trained actors in which to test his own theoretical questions – and practice and theory melded together. Only this time, his art was illuminated by the full acceptance of who he was as a human being as well as a theatre artist.

#### Artistic Influences at N.Y.U.

Since Kaufman's university education in Venezuela had centered on business administration, he entered N.Y.U. without the benefit of a knowledge base in academic theatre – his knowledge of theatre came only from his experiences as an actor, a reader of plays, and an audience member. Richard Schechner and Ron Agerlander were the major academics who helped to fill in essential gaps in Kaufman's theatre knowledge, mainly through instruction on modern and contemporary theatre history. It thrilled Kaufman to learn of the revolutionary nature of American theatre in the later half of the twentieth century, specifically in the work of artists such as John Cage and Merce Cunningham, Joe Chaikin, The Living Theatre, and Schechner's Performance Group. Kaufman explains, "This was 1989, so all of those movements were gone by the time I got here. But they

were still permeating, and I got that from Schechner and Ron Agerlander. Those were the two scholars who taught me the most” (9 Dec. 2002).

In addition to N.Y.U.’s scholars, the Experimental Theatre Wing also maintained its reputation of actor-focused training by providing students with the opportunity to work with guest artists, such as Grotowski’s leading actor Richard Cieslak. Kaufman had learned the basics of Grotowski’s *plastiques* from Ivosky, but training with Cieslak was learning from a master. Cieslak confirmed Kaufman’s approach to working physically with actors, focusing attention on the knowing body. Also, Grotowski’s belief that actor training and theatre production should be inseparable resonated with Kaufman. Aligning the actor training to the specific content of each new production interested him and would later become one of his major Tectonic techniques. Marsha Ginsberg, a scenic designer who worked with Kaufman on his production of Endgame during his time at N.Y.U., remembers:

Even from the beginning he would always start by working physically with the actors before rehearsals began. He tended to do it more rigorously than other people. He was always very concerned about the actor and finding a language for them that was theatrical – a kind of physical and vocal language that went beyond a strictly realist language. (9 Dec. 2002)

Working physically with actors stems from Kaufman’s practical nature. He finds theory’s value in its connection to practice. For example, instead of listening to an actor intellectually explain what she or he is trying to accomplish, Kaufman’s response is usually, “Show me.” His emphasis lies in the doing.

Kaufman also learned Grotowski's theories and techniques from Stephen Wangh, another instructor at the Experimental Theatre Wing. Wangh's influential book, Acrobat of the Heart: A Physical Approach to Acting Inspired by the Work of Jerzy Grotowski, chronicles his experience of working with Grotowski as a student at N.Y.U. in the fall of 1967. Wangh also had the opportunity to work with Cieslak and learned the importance of awakening the body's memory through physical exercises from both men. In Acrobat he writes, "An actor who has learned to 'listen' to his body will find that character 'actions,' 'intentions,' and 'objectives' arise organically within the work itself, without the actor needing to sit down and do 'table work' to figure them out" (Wangh xxxvi). Wangh worked with Kaufman as an actor<sup>1</sup>, instructing him on the power of the actor's body. Wangh recalls Kaufman's intellectual fascination with the process of connecting emotions to the body, which he studied through Wangh's interpretation of Grotowski's exercises and then effectively used in his work with actors while directing individual projects at N.Y.U. Wangh states, "When he started directing the Beckett and Williams pieces, he was clearly someone who could get very strong work out of the actors; he knew how to allow the actors to work. [. . .] He also knew how to work very hard" (10 Dec. 2002). From Wangh, Kaufman learned the value of experimental theatre and actor-initiated work in developing and creating original works.

Wangh writes in Acrobat, "The central idea of experimental theatre is that this process of 'stumbling around' is, in fact, an excellent way to proceed. It can lead us to

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<sup>1</sup> Although students often direct, N.Y.U.'s Experimental Theatre Wing has no official director training program. When Kaufman researched the school, Wendell Beavers, another acting instructor, told Kaufman that E.T.W. could supply him with a space and actors with which he could explore his theoretical questions as a director.

discoveries we might never have made if we had confined our explorations to those pathways for which we had maps [. . .]” Kaufman’s acceptance and investment in “not knowing,” as displayed by his decision to take a group of actors to Laramie, Wyoming to investigate a murder as possible subject matter for a new work, reflects Wangh’s words. Wangh continues, “It instills in us a willingness to enter each new project with an open mind and with the (supremely important) courage to make mistakes” (Wangh xxxvii – xxxviii). Kaufman studied Wangh’s approach to experimental theatre by doing it. He returned to the Experimental Theatre Wing after finishing his course work in order to assist Wangh on a student-created project titled Transit Mass. Kaufman’s research of trial transcripts allowed Wangh to create his first verbatim scene from historical documents for the piece. Wangh states, “I don’t know if that later affected his wanting to do trial texts again [for Gross Indecency], but I had him research – find the text. He’s an amazing researcher” (10 Dec. 2002).

Transit Mass was created in a somewhat similar manner as The Laramie Project. Focusing around the subject of transportation in New York City, Wangh instructed his students to gather material from a community and then create work from it. The key difference, however, is that Wangh’s students did not use the interview techniques that the Tectonic members used in developing Laramie. Wangh states:

I had students study people on the subway, then bring in scenes that you could call Moments. We composed the play similarly by watching a lot of work and then putting scenes together. [. . .] But I called them images; we created scenes and images, not Moments. But the work was very similar in that it was the actors’ job to create something, then I saw myself essentially as a re-arranger and writer. [. . .] So collaboration is where I come from, too, and I

don't know how much of that Moisés learned from me or was doing beforehand. (10 Dec. 2002)

Clearly Wangh has been highly influential on Kaufman's work. Currently, the two men continue to collaborate on major projects. Wangh served as dramaturg for Gross Indecency and associate writer for Laramie and is currently working on Tectonic's latest piece based on the life of Beethoven.

In addition, Kaufman cites Mary Overlie and her theory of the six Viewpoints, which is a formalist way of looking at dramatic work based on movement and postmodern dance, as his most significant influence from his days in the Experimental Theatre Wing. Kaufman states:

She forced you to think about theatre as a form, the way you would look at film, sculpture, music, or painting. She forced you to pose questions about what the form does. She describes the six Viewpoints as a way of creating and analyzing work. I define Tectonic techniques as a way of creating and analyzing theatre. There's a slight difference there. It is true that it is heavily influenced by her work, but I think it also departs from her work. She was not terribly interested in issues of text and I am. Having said that, she was one of the people who clearly articulated the tumbling of the text hierarchy. That's the theoretical understanding that she taught. She was articulating some postmodern ideas that were in the air, but for me she was the one who articulated them. (9 Dec. 2002)

In addition to her formalist perspective, Overlie's greatest influence on Kaufman guided him towards articulating his own theories. The Tectonic language of form, content, and searching for new theatrical languages which utilize the full potential of the stage initiated with Kaufman's work with Overlie. She reflects on his N.Y.U. student years: "I believe that his main concentration was focused on 'How do you make a

theory?’ He was fascinated with work that had strong theory behind it. If you are going to be a good artist, a sustained artist, you have to have a theory. And I do think he has a theory now” (11 Dec. 2002).

Kaufman continually reiterates that his theories and techniques are different from those that have influenced him. He borrows certain concepts from those theories as a point of departure in order to develop his own techniques – specifically his development of Moment Work. While Viewpoints will always be part of his directorial and theatrical language, he rarely uses Viewpoints directly as a rehearsal technique or creation tool. He clarifies:

It’s not like we get in there and do six Viewpoints and then create Moments, but what Mary taught me was more than that. Mary’s influence on me was a theoretical one. The way she posed the theoretical pillars of dance and theatre was something that I immediately reacted to. Viewpoints are a way of creating and analyzing theatre. That inspired me to create my own way of creating and analyzing theatre, which is Moment Work. Hers was a theoretical influence as opposed to an aesthetic one. (13 Nov. 2002)

Like Stephen Wangh and Mary Overlie, Arthur Bartow was profoundly influential on Kaufman’s artistic vision. Bartow is the man Kaufman credits with encouraging him to form his own company after leaving N.Y.U.

Best known for his book The Director’s Voice Arthur Bartow had recently taken over the artistic directorship of Tisch when Kaufman was completing his work at N.Y.U. After directing Endgame for his final project, Kaufman approached Bartow for advice regarding his directorial career. Since Bartow had recently completed his book, he had a strong understanding of what it meant to be a director in commercial theatre, not only in

New York City but across the United States, and he felt Kaufman would have an extremely difficult time working as a freelance director in the profit-driven industry of Off-Broadway and the regional theatre circuit. Bartow remembers:

I knew that Moisés would have a really tough time out there. So I suggested that he start his own company, because that would be my standard advice for anybody who is unique. And lo and behold, he did it. He found out how to do that and he did it. (10 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman recalls the advice: “It was that shrewd, that harsh, and that fantastic. And I was like, ‘That makes sense because I came from a theatre laboratory.’” (11 Nov. 2002).

Both Bartow and Kaufman knew that his directorial aesthetic – working over long periods of time motivated by theoretical questioning – would best be served by forming a company. Bartow continues, “It’s not that I would say that to every director who came through the door, because Moisés was unique. He was ready. What I didn’t know at the time was his strength in writing, his strength in creating theatre. I knew him as a director, but not as a creator of theatre, and that’s been the key to his success.” If not for the company’s workshop laboratory, however, Kaufman may never have had the opportunity to continue his search for new forms, which has led to the creation of those new works. Bartow concludes, “He’s a man of ideas and that is what the theatre really needs” (10 Dec. 2002).

Finally, Kaufman’s additional influential experience originated from a desperate, terrifying time of “not knowing” – the period after school when an artist must face the reality of creating in the open market. Kaufman recalls, “One of the things that we all have to face, because this is not a society that is organized around artists, is that we don’t

have models. Each one of us has to struggle with the making of the work. And the making of a life that allows for the making of the work. I think that those first few years were very difficult because of that” (19 March 2003). During this period of indecision, new advice came from Mary Overlie. She encouraged Kaufman to contact JoAnne Akalaitis, a director he greatly admired, and ask to be her assistant on her next project. Hesitant at first, he eventually contacted Akalaitis and assisted her on a week-long workshop with Mabou Mimes called The Mormon Project. Kaufman does not cite Akalaitis as an important influence; however, working with the collective of Mabou Mimes reaffirmed his desire to work with his own company. Perhaps this opportunity to work directly with an established theatre company gave Kaufman the final inspiration he needed to form Tectonic Theater Project. Reflecting on her advice, Overlie states:

When you're young, you think the world is closed to you, and that's a mistake. If you're young, and you're smart and talented, it's an open road, an open ceiling above you. This machine called art is constantly pulling people up. It's a very porous ceiling up there. (11 Dec. 2002)

#### Theoretical Questions: Exploring Theatrical Language and Form

Today, Kaufman clearly articulates the mission of Tectonic Theater Project – “to produce innovative works that explore theatrical language and form.” Yet, that was not always the case. Ideas and reactions emerge as theatre artists absorb the world and art around them, responding to their experiences. Forming a theoretical stance that generates original techniques takes time, however, and it occurs through an on-going process of

questioning. Early design collaborator Marsha Ginsberg refers to Kaufman's vision during their N.Y.U. days:

We were just developing our own aesthetic and making work that felt fresh and new and spoke to our time. I think the only way that's manifested is through a mixture of form and content. So it was less about naming it, it was just what we did. When we talked, it was less about writing a manifesto, but more about what was inadequate to us about what we were seeing onstage. (9 Dec. 2002)

Mary Overlie's teaching of form marks the first significant step in Kaufman's development of his current theories. Her postmodern theory of the "horizontal" dramatic structure served as one of the impetuses for Kaufman's search for new forms. In her horizontal theory, text serves as an equal element of theatrical performance rather than the dominant element, as found in most narrative drama – what Overlie terms the "vertical" hierarchy of text in classical and modern theatre. For the majority of the history of drama, text has dictated everything that appears on the stage. In the vertical model of theatre, it serves as the foundation upon which all other elements are added in order to illuminate the meaning of the dominant word.

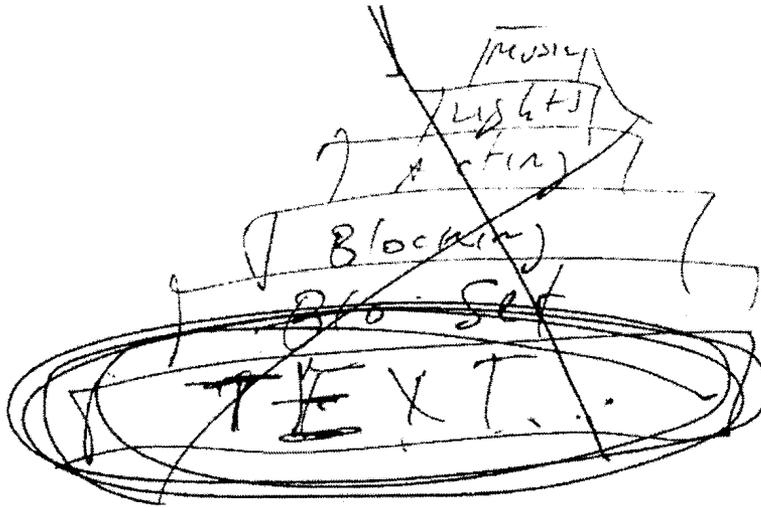


FIGURE 1. “Vertical Theatre” diagram as sketched by Kaufman.

According to Kaufman, in today’s theatre there exists a misunderstanding of directing as the art of creating a world on stage which makes the text believable. “That definition is the most reductionistic of all conditions of directing or writing for that matter” (11 Nov. 2002). It reduces communication by forcing the other theatrical elements to serve the text rather than conveying their own contribution to the work through their particular ability to create meaning for the audience – often through the spectators’ simultaneous receptions and readings of a mixture of these elements.

The work of theoreticians like Overlie and Tadeusz Kantor toppled the vertical hierarchy of the text to create theatre around the horizontal, or equal, interplay, between all theatrical elements – text, set, blocking, acting, lights, music, and costumes – to create a world on stage represented by the following diagram:

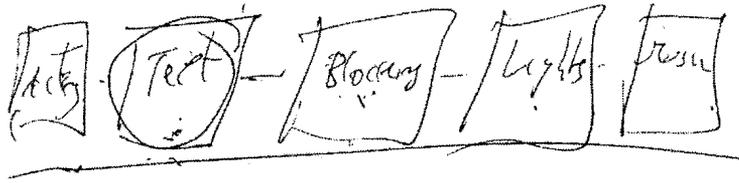


FIGURE 2. "Horizontal Theatre" as sketched by Kaufman.

The question then becomes, what occurs when the text is no longer the single dominant organizing principle? In *A Journey Through Other Spaces*, Kantor's writes: "[The] totality is achieved via the process of balancing the contrasts between diverse scenic elements, such as motion and sound, visual forms and motion, space and voice, word and motion of forms" (qtd. in Kobialka 41). Kantor's influence on Kaufman is couched in this idea of contradictions. Kaufman states:

He said that one goes to the theatre to see these elements fighting each other to determine who is going to be the next "text." So you have actors march in, then all of a sudden music comes in really loud and takes over the central role in the theatre, and then text comes in, and the tension between each of these elements with each other is where theatre is made. The conversation between them is the play. This encouraged me to think about what is uniquely theatrical. And in order to answer, "What is uniquely theatrical?" The answer has to be in the vocabulary of the blocks [the elements]. That's where the idea of Moment Work happened, because you can have a Moment that deals only with lights, or a Moment that deals only with blocking or costumes, or sets, or music, or a combination of any of those. In doing that, we become very aware of the narrative potential of each theatrical element. And in doing so, reiterate their authority. (11 Nov. 2002)

If text is replaced as the dominant organizing principle, a new approach to creating theatre must take its place. According to Kaufman, the play should no longer be

created by a playwright in an isolated room that privileges the power of the word alone. Theatre must explore the communication of ideas through new forms, new containers that reflect the impulses of a work's creators. In his book, The Open Door, Peter Brook takes this idea one step further by identifying each element as a theatrical language itself. He writes, "In the theatre, there are infinitely more languages, beyond words, through which communication is established and maintained with the audience. There is body language, sound language, rhythm language, color language, costume language, scenery language, lighting language – all to be added to those 25,000 words available" (113). Therefore, in order to discover and access these additional theatrical languages, the creation process for new work needs to occur in a workshop space with artists for whom all the theatrical elements are equally available as tools for creation. Kaufman's work embraces this approach and uses Moment Work to isolate smaller units of performance that incorporate the different theatrical elements into the creative process.

Kaufman's two latest works revolve around text. Like Kantor and Brook, however, Kaufman looks for specific theatrical logic and language beyond the text but not in complete replacement of it. The text remains an essential element in creating the total work through equal interplay with the other theatrical elements. Kaufman transitioned to creating original works rather than directing existing scripts partially in order to deal with his questions about text's role in theatre and performance.

With the help of his collaborators, Kaufman creates texts that are destabilized from the vertical structure and incorporated with the other elements through Kantor and Overlie's horizontal approach. According to Overlie, the goal of telling a story through

emotion subsists in modern theatre. She states, “The story has to say something, make rational, linear sense. Moisés mixes the modern and postmodern. In certain ways, his pieces are modern [with their emphasis on story], but in the way that he used the company to create the piece [Laramie], using many voices, is more postmodern” (11 Dec. 2002). Still Overlie feels that Kaufman has embraced her “horizontal” concept: “His theatre is much more horizontal than vertical.”

Kaufman began to search for new textual forms that would allow further experimentation. The two textual forms of Gross Indecency and Laramie, using verbatim historical documents and personal interviews respectively in order to create text, are not only significantly different from one another, but they also trace the progression of Kaufman’s exploration of new textual forms. He states, “A very pragmatic reason we did that is because we felt that a director can only push form forward in very specific ways, but the thing that really pushes the form is if the text contains the formal innovations” (11 Nov. 2002). For Kaufman, text more likely contains formal innovations when it is created in the workshop process through the writing of performance, which marries form and content. Again, Peter Brook’s influence on Kaufman is clear, “The central question, then, is one of form, the precise form, the apt form. We cannot do without it, life cannot do without it. But what does form mean? [. . .] A form is the virtual becoming manifest, the spirit taking body, the first sound, the big bang” (Open 106).

During their Theatre of Cruelty workshops in 1963, Brook and Charles Marowitz invented numerous exercises to explore the most essential element an actor might need in order to communicate an idea or an “invisible meaning.” Could the communication of an

idea be distilled to one sound or one movement? Inevitably, their experiments led to the conclusion that the actor needed a form – a creative leap that established a container in order to reflect her/his inner impulses (Brook, The Empty Space, 51). In Kaufman’s search, a central part of such a container revolves around locating the correct narrative form, while concurrently incorporating all the theatrical languages beyond the word.

The different elements, in all their variations of emphasis, can supply potentially limitless forms. Kaufman examines, or sees, dramatic material in terms of these theatrical elements and how they combine to make forms which communicate meaning through their patterns and relationships – similar to numbers in geometry. He assigns meaning through their context – how each form manifests a dialogue between the preceding and following form. For Kaufman, the meaning lies in the tension between each individual element and the forms that their combinations create. Wangh describes Kaufman’s reception of theatre:

He experiences a piece of text or a relationship between two characters in a graphic sense, so that his mind is always making a puzzle out of what the rest of us might see as events or emotions or story. In his mind these things become elements to be played with. It’s like people who have magnetic words on their refrigerator that you can move around, he experiences dramatic material that way, as things that come apart pretty easily. I suppose that one could call it deconstruction and reconstruction. (10 Dec. 2002)

Wangh’s reference to elements moving around through “deconstruction and reconstruction” describes Kaufman’s use of contextualization to marry form and content. Kaufman fashions meaning and personal narrative from the tension that exists between

each individual form, experienced as an isolated building block or Moment of the total performance.

### Contextualization: The Copulation of Form and Content

As discussed previously in Chapter I, Kaufman emphasizes context in order to allow his audience to create meaning and narrative rather than using traditional storytelling methods. Contextualization occurs in two distinct steps in Tectonic's creative process – the piling up of various Moments followed by the careful structural arrangement of those Moments. First, each Moment incurs a search for the exact form to properly contextualize its specific content. Then, once numerous Moments have been created, the second phase involves carefully arranging their order so that each Moment contextualizes the following and preceding Moment. The conversation between the Moments, how each redefines the other through new context, becomes the narrative. This open conversation allows a plurality of associations, generating different meanings for different spectators. Kantor's influence is evident through this theory of creating narrative. He writes: "The network of relations between the forms is built by contrasts and conflicts. It is the contrasts, unable to co-exist peacefully and brought together by force, that create new values and the totality indispensable for the existence of the work of art" (Kobialka 41). Therefore, the meaning stems from what lies between – the relationship and dialogue created between each Moment. Kantor continues:

These contrasts must have sharp edges, come as surprise, shock, and lead to the creation of tension between two

separate and incompatible realities or objects. A reality “will be created” by placing the other reality next to it or by grounding it in the other reality existing in a different dimension [locale, situation, etc.]. (41)

Based on this theoretical idea, Kaufman does not write transitions from Moment to Moment. The concept behind building a piece solely through Moment Work relies on the audience to actively participate in the creation of transitions in their apparent absence. Kaufman jokingly explains, “What is the thing with transitions? That I don’t care about them? Yes. [. . .] After you’ve done Moment Work, the next step is to put the Moments together, which makes the transitions. Sometimes the pitting of two Moments together makes the thing, or sometimes you need to pit a third Moment in between.” In other words, according to Kaufman, it is sometimes the spectator’s responsibility to create the meaning which links one Moment to the next – as the “reality” of each Moment contextualizes the others. Through this process, however, transitions also naturally occur within the arrangement of the Moments. One questions if the spectator actually “creates” the transitions, or rather “reads” the conversations between each Moment as the transition.

The photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose work Kaufman admires, believes that his photographs create their own subjective truths based solely on what viewers see: “To take photographs means to recognize – simultaneously and within a fraction of a second – both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one’s head, one’s eye and one’s heart on the same axis” (qtd. in *Aperture* 8). Using the numerous theatrical elements, Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theater Project search for the specific visual and textual forms to match the

content of each Moment, and then they arrange the order of Moments to create narrative through contextualization, encouraging plural readings of the narrative.

### The Set as Machine

The use of theatrical space composes an important driving force behind Kaufman's search for new forms. Inspired again by Kantor, Kaufman's interest in space is centered on viewing the set as a machine – an active construct for the narrative through its relationship to form. Kantor writes, "Space itself is an object of creation. And the main one! Space is charged with energy. Space shrinks and expands. And these motions mould forms and objects. It is space that gives birth to forms! It is space that conditions the network of relations and tensions between objects. Tension is the principal actor of space" (Kobialka 217). Kaufman feels that when one views the set as a machine, as a living thing, it contributes to the dialogue surrounding the ideas of a piece. This encourages the theatre maker to think theatrically because the set is inherently a theatrical object. According to Kaufman, one must think of the set as a place from which one speaks, not as an environment but rather an active part of the storytelling. Kaufman notes the difference in his approach versus traditional, realistic set design:

In a lot of American naturalistic theatre, the space is thought of as a place that can verify the reality of the situation that you are trying to create. To me, that is the worst misuse of theatrical space because you are limiting all the possibilities of beauty and truth and dialogue to its most elemental of uses. It's not very difficult to recreate a kitchen. I think that the big problem is that a contemporary American set designer will say, "No it's not difficult to

recreate a kitchen, but it's very difficult to recreate the right kitchen for the right play for the right characters." And you know what, that's very boring to me. All you're asking the set to do is make the rest of the work believable and not allowing it to speak in its own beauty, truth, and ideas. (9 Dec. 2002)

In this manner, the set, the theatrical space, is not encouraged to "mold and give birth to forms" as Kantor wished. Some may argue that a naturalistic design actually restricts forms, reducing the theatrical vocabulary to a facsimile of everyday life. In view of the horizontal structure of theatre it limits the sets ability to communicate on its own and battle for the attention of the audience, giving rise to the tension between all the elements fighting for the central role which forms the play.

This concept will be discussed further in later chapters in its specific relationship to the creation of Gross Indecency and Laramie. For now, however, it is important to note that this theory led to the practice of bringing designers into the workshop early for each production. Because Kaufman has rooted his search for new forms in the workshop phase, it is paramount to his way of working that spatial forms are an inherent part of his collaborators' writing of performance, which results in a powerful copulation of content and form evident in the structure and physical look of the finished works. Jeffrey LaHoste states:

With both of those plays [Gross Indecency and Laramie], they want to look the way that Moisés directed them, because he wrote them in the process of staging them. It's hard to see a production of Gross Indecency without the tables. [. . .] I think that means that the marriage of content and form are all the more successful. (11 Dec. 2002)

This copulation of content and form, couched in the set working as a machine, serves another over-arching theoretical question that drives Kaufman: “‘How do we tell stories?’ That is the über-question [sic]. Then in response to that, I’m also interested in ‘Who tells who stories?’ And in result of that, ‘How do you construct stories?’” (31 Oct. 02).

### Reconstructing History: Who Tells Whose Stories?

From Kaufman’s questioning of narratives, it might be useful to view his ideas through the lens of postmodern ideas and questioning. Kaufman claims, however, that he is not a postmodernist but admits to being heavily influenced by postmodern concepts – such as removing text from its dictatorial position on stage and allowing different elements of theatrical vocabulary to converse as opposed to only supporting the text. He states, “I can see how my work is influenced by postmodern theory and I embrace that.” One cannot say, however, that Kaufman is a postmodern director who only emphasizes form to create meaning such as Richard Foreman or Robert Wilson. The key difference lies in Kaufman’s interest in story – in creating a narrative. He deems his postmodern influence to be in taking what he has learned from deconstruction and using that theory to create his narratives. He explains:

That’s where I depart from the postmodern purists. There was a certain deconstruction that came with understanding what each theatrical element said and separating them. I think I have taken the next step in that regard in saying, “Yes, that was very valuable and now let’s think about

reconstructing.” Reconstructing from a place where you have already deconstructed. (9 Dec. 2002)

The key difference for Kaufman lies in his ability to reconnect, or reconstruct, all the different theatrical elements in their infinite forms to the content of each Moment.

Kaufman clarifies:

I depart from postmodernism in that I don't believe in a gratuitous, formal discourse being over imposed on any narrative. I don't think that helps anymore. There was a time when that was really helpful, but it's to a point where you go see a show and the text occupies one space and the production occupies a different space and the two never meet. The two have points of contact, but they are two separate events. I'm not interested in that. I am interested in something more complicated and more rigorous which is, how do they copulate? (9 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman's postmodern influences are especially clear in his attention to who tells stories and their motivations for telling them. Gross Indecency and Laramie focus on what Kaufman calls “watershed historical moments.” He believes that there are times when all the ideas, beliefs, and ideologies that are the pillars of a certain culture at a particular time surface around one event. When this happens, the event itself operates as a lightning rod which allows us to see clearly for a brief moment the contradictory ideals that make up a society.

Kaufman's questioning of stories, in regards to these watershed moments, centers on the perceived subjectivity and objectivity of truth. Again, photographer Cartier-Bresson has been influential through his discussion of the subjectivity of photography, a medium usually perceived as supplying objective truth. Kaufman paraphrases Cartier-Bresson's idea that “Photography is the most subjective of the arts because it works under

the appearance of being objective.” According to Kaufman, the theatre artist must open up the objective nature of story to expose the subjectivity of all narratives, allowing the plurality of voices to be heard in the creation of the piece as well as individual reception of the narrative amongst its spectators. For Kaufman, Moment Work and contextualization accomplish this subjectivity need. Not only does he not believe in objectivity, he feels it is a nineteenth century concept: “After Einstein, you cannot talk about objectivity anymore. I think that theatre has to deal with that – with that Roshomon nature of reality There isn’t one given reality; the camera is the biggest liar” (13 Nov. 2002). In his book, American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History, Arnold Aronson discusses the influence of Einstein’s theory on the work of previous collaborative ensembles such as The Living Theatre and The Open Theatre, both studied by Kaufman:

Slowly but ineluctably, the once fixed and reliable guideposts of life gave way to a landscape in which everything was relative, nothing concrete. [. . .] Rapidly, a Greco-Roman world view based on absolutes and logical analyses crumbled, giving way to a crazy-quilt of relational associations. In combination with Freudian explanations of the psyche, individual subjective reality replaced objective rationalism. (Aronson 23)

In order to create theatre and tell stories through the subjective truth of Aronson’s “crazy-quilt of relational associations,” Kaufman believes we must address how we construct stories and make that part of the production. He states:

We live in a cultural moment when we are savvy enough that telling great stories is not enough, we have to address how those stories are constructed, created, and told. How we make the story is part of the story itself, which is very much a postmodern idea, a good postmodern idea because

it goes to the bigger question of why are stories important to our lives? They help us gain issues of identity, personal narratives – how we grow and change – meaning personal history. I think the more that you talk about how those stories are constructed, the more you talk about how you are constructing your own narratives. I think that’s what all stories hope to do. I like stories, I’m interested in how we tell them, and I think it’s important to ask who controls narratives, how are they constructed and why are they important. So I’m very interested in how we tell stories both from a formalist perspective and a discourse perspective. The more sophisticated viewers we become, the more we need to deal with this question of form, and construct, and culture. (9 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman’s words reflect the importance of postmodernism’s influence on his work. The use of plurality of voices in constructing theatre, inserting the process of creation into the final art object, and the continual questioning of history and the power of narratives will be further examined in their relationship to Gross Indecency and Laramie.

#### Additional Tectonic Techniques

For Kaufman, the relationship between theory and practice should follow the same model as the relationship between form and content. “Theory and practice should fuck, and their children should be the plays. The result should be the plays” (11 Nov. 2002)<sup>2</sup>. Tectonic techniques are ambiguous in nature, due to their similarity to rehearsal practices that already exist. It is difficult, at times, to separate specific techniques from what is simply Kaufman’s approach to directing and facilitating a creative workshop.

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<sup>2</sup> It may be of interest to feminist or Freudian scholars that this outspoken, gay-identified artist, repeatedly uses copulation or fucking as a hetero-normative metaphor, always toward a procreative end.

Often, when Tectonic members were asked to identify techniques used to create Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project, they could only name Moment Work. But after numerous meetings with Kaufman and his long-term collaborators, five specific Tectonic techniques including: workshopping over long periods of time, investing in heavy research on the subject matter, Kaufman's specific approach to the workshop space, encouraging collaborators to write performance rather than text, and, of course, Moment Work, can be said to form the basis of a creative process that is unique to Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project. Although Kaufman uses these similar techniques in the majority of his pieces, it must be noted that he does not subscribe to one process. The content of each new work dictates its process of creation.

Kaufman's desire to direct a company that workshopped over a long period of time originates from his Thespis Theatre Company days. By the time he met Marsha Ginsberg at New York University in the late 1980s, his longing for workshopping was apparent.

She recalls:

I think it's a general dismay about how theatre is constructed in this country. That it's more business oriented, that people do these things and they aren't passionate about them. You have your four week rehearsal period and that's it. The work doesn't organically develop out of what makes sense in the rehearsal process. (9 Dec. 2002)

In his introduction to Stage Director's Handbook, Kaufman writes, "I had questions not so much about the craft of directing but about the craft of creating a room, creating an atmosphere where questions can be asked" (Stage). Creating a space for the exploration of theatrical forms and languages exemplifies Kaufman's work. Some Tectonic

workshops never manifest into the creation of a new work. The pressure to produce is not an inherent aspect for the company; their focus remains on exploration. Today, once Kaufman and his company make the choice to remain invested in a particular subject, however, the workshops take on two distinct phases. The first consists of gathering abundant material through creating numerous Moments, after which a general structural outline becomes evident from the generated material. The second phase arranges and rearranges Moments in order to clarify how each Moment contextualizes the others to construct narrative. At this point, additional material may be created by the company in order to fill in gaps or support a through-line in the work that needs bolstering.

Throughout the workshop's creative process, form and content are continually affecting one another, because they are approached as binaries in order to work on each individually. "Invariably they do combine," Kaufman explains, "because it is in the company subconscious. So when you do a Moment about the subject matter, invariably you are using forms we are developing [in that particular workshop]" (9 Dec. 02). A specific point does not exist where Kaufman deliberately forces form and content to combine, instead he "allows them to organically blend together." An attribute of the ease with which form and content are married stems from the openness of Kaufman's definition of form – "an arbitrary construct that encompasses any stylistic device that allows presentation of material." This approach invites exploration through an openness to investigate any new form that conveys the content a company member is presenting, which takes time. Kaufman does not schedule a production date for his workshops.

Productions organically evolve from the workshops and emerge from the creative rate the company agrees upon for each individual work.

The initial workshops are usually a total immersion in the world of the subject matter, generated by heavy research which is guided by Kaufman. LaHoste states, “He’s very rigorous about what he takes on. He does a tremendous amount of reading, of interviewing, and generates a lot of work for other people” (11 Dec. 2002). Those others include company assistants and interns as well as the collaborators who are creating the piece. Leigh Fondakowski, Kaufman’s long-term assistant director, explains what actors and designers sign on for when they work with Kaufman: “When you do a piece with Moisés you have to study, become a student of the piece, and immerse yourself in it. I think one of the techniques is that intellectual submersion. There’ll be books, movies, and videos, a kind of invitation to actors to immerse themselves in the material” (13 Dec. 2002).

Such research is just one aspect of Kaufman’s preparation for entering the workshop space. The crucial guide for Kaufman is his hunch – the question he knows and desires, but does not know why he knows or desires it. Kaufman credits his concept of the hunch to Peter Brook who writes, “The director must have from the start what I have called a ‘formless hunch,’ that is to say, a certain powerful yet shadowy intuition that indicates the basic shape, the source from which the play is calling to him. What he needs most to develop in his work is a sense of listening” (Brook, Open 143).

The hunch drives Kaufman into the workshop space where he searches for the form of the new piece. Kantor writes, “A theatre piece is built around just one form. Finding it,

or its shape, is a revelation. Maybe this form is a pure idea or a key concept in the process of deciphering drama” (Kobialka 40). If the hunch leads Kaufman towards the workshop space, then the process of deciphering that hunch must occur in the workshop with his collaborators. He explains:

When I’m in rehearsal, I always say, “There are some questions that are important to be discussed. Then there are questions that you go into a rehearsal with.” Those are two very different things. It’s important to keep articulating the ideas that are influencing subject matter. But then when you are talking about how you portray those onstage, it’s important that you pose those questions in a rehearsal room, and that you get up on your feet as quickly as possible. Because otherwise you do what I fear – you go into a room and write a play on a desk! (9 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman designed his process of questioning in order to open up the hunch, to delve into it to see what dwells inside. This initial hunch then leads to the organizing principles and through-lines.

The final characteristic of Kaufman’s approach to the workshop space consists of his opening speech to the company members assembled for that particular project, which he gives at the beginning of each workshop. LaHoste recalls hearing the speech a number of times at the commencement of workshops or play readings. Quoting Kaufman, he states, “We in this room are very fortunate because for the next two weeks [depending on the length of the workshop], we have the opportunity to create the world that we’d like to live in.” LaHoste notes the importance of Kaufman’s ritualistic speech:

That is the beginning of group development for the workshop, but it’s also a metaphor for what we do in theatre. Yes, we’re creating a working environment, but we love to do theatre because we get to make the world. When he says that, it communicates to everyone the soaring

possibilities and also the humility of having that opportunity. (11 Dec. 2002)

Workshop members share this common goal because all the collaborators become creators through Kaufman's technique of writing performance rather than writing text. Kaufman relies on his community of artists to create original material in response to his hunch, which may or may not lead to the creation of a new work. Steven Wangh believes Kaufman's ability to excite and motivate other artists represents one of his greatest talents. "What he's been very good at is creating a space in which actors feel that they can make things" (10 Dec. 2002). Yet, it is not just actors, "designers are right in there in the mix talking about the ideas as equal partners, as equal players," Fondakowski clarifies (13 Dec. 02). With his collaborators, actors and designers alike, Kaufman is creating theatre that starts from the stage, not from text. Using initial materials from the research and ideas from the hunch, the collaborators improvise and begin to create Moments, using all the languages of the stage including set pieces, props, costumes, and lights to write performance – and from that text emerges (American Theatre Wing). Kaufman writes:

This technique, which I began to develop during Marlowe's Eye, introduces various elements, including design, music, and performance, into the writing phase, not waiting for a rehearsal period. I deepened this technique and increased its use in developing The Laramie Project in 2000, which is based largely on interviews and was written in collaboration with actors and designers in my company.  
(Cal Arts)

Fondakowski believes that the collaborators may not understand the overall lasting effect that working in this manner has on their artistic intuition. Actors and

designers are naturally thrilled by the opportunity to create original work in comparison to their more traditional roles as interpretive artists. The benefits of writing performance, however, go beyond a more energetic engagement in the work. Fondakowski states:

They might see it on more practical terms of, “Oh, I’m asked to collaborate, I’m asked to create.” But I’m not sure that they’re in on what is really happening to their thought process. [. . .] The impact it’s having on them as performers: their stage presence, their awareness of each other in space, all these things have happened to them as a result of being engaged on this level. (13 Dec. 2002)

Many of the company members including Fondakowski are now making original work themselves using the Tectonic techniques they learned from creating work with Kaufman. When actors are given the freedom to select content and create theatrical forms in order to communicate their Moments, they naturally train their theatrical intuition. They become responsible for the entire production, not simply their individual role. That encompassing awareness includes a more attentive interest in spatial alertness, a consciousness of the power of selecting text, the precise use of gesture, and the specificity of innumerable other theatrical languages. Kaufman explains the impetus behind his technique in its relationship to the creation of The Laramie Project:

I knew I was interested in allowing the actors of the company to become writers, directors, and editors. I wanted to pose the question, “Can people in a theatre company be theatre artists?” Our theatre has a tendency to say, “You’re an actor, you’re a writer, you’re a director.” And we tend to believe that we profit from those divisions, and I’m not sure we do. So that hypothesis also made its way into the play, could an actor become an interviewer? So we came back into the studio; we had a three week workshop. The first thing that we realize is that no one knows all the material. [. . .] I made up very few rules, but

one rule was that it was not permissible to sit down and read from the text that you had gathered. We should always try to use some of the Tectonic techniques to do presentations. Even if it was a piece of costume, a theatrical set space or piece, so again it was writing performance as opposed to writing text. It was also a way to keep exploring the world of Laramie through the world of theatre, as opposed to the world of Laramie through the world of text. But it is always a struggle because our desire is always to sit and read the words. Text has that kind of power always. (31 Oct. 02)

Kaufman's approach to exploring worlds through theatre resides mainly in his technique of Moment Work, which relies on the artists becoming writers of performance who use all the languages of the stage. Actors and designers are not allowed to simply say, "I have an idea." They must show it – do it by creating and presenting a Moment to Kaufman and the other company members, which forces them to think about their idea in theatrical language, immediately changing their perception of what the original idea involved.

The introduction to Moments discussed in this document thus far warrants greater explanation, for it is, undoubtedly, Kaufman's most unique technique used in his process of creating theatre. Kaufman defines a Moment as "an arbitrary unit of time that can be put with other units of time to create meaning" (11 Nov. 2002), which means that a Moment could be as brief as a breath or a gesture or as durative as a monologue, a scene, or an entire act. Company members may present Moments alone, or direct others as part of their Moment. After the presentation of a Moment, the company discusses their personal response to it. Then others may add to it, perform their own Moments before or

after it – in order to recontextualize the original Moment – or ask to see it in different ways. Kaufman elaborates:

This is a specific technique. Because we're a structuralist company, the theory behind Moment Work is: instead of thinking story, or plot, or dramatic action, you think in terms of building blocks. That you can look at any play as a series of building blocks that build something bigger than each one of the pieces individually. We encourage the company members to think about Moments as blocks. And the way that you do that is that you get up on stage, and you say, "I begin," and you do a Moment. A Moment can be a three hour monologue, the way that you use a prop or a set piece in the theatre, a piece of music, a light cue, anything – anything that explores the vocabulary of the stage. At the end you say, "I end." So you impose the unit of time. You say, "I begin." You do it. And you say, "I end." And that is a Moment. It defies this idea of theatre built on story, plot, dramatic action, or dramatic arc. It recontextualizes dramatic literature as an event that occurs by putting theatrical Moments together. By doing that you are taking it away from the domain of literature and putting it back into the realm of theatre. And that, unfortunately, is a revolutionary idea in America today. (11 Nov. 2002)

The performers are asked to always be cognizant of dramatic time, as indicated by marking in and out with "I begin . . . I end." Through this structure of the technique, performers are constantly reminded that they are writing performance as they strive to create a portion of what may or may not become part of the final piece. In doing so, they are always encouraged to use the theatrical elements: props, costumes, sets, lights, and movement, in the creation of their Moments.

The creation of individual Moments are not assigned to specific collaborators. Kaufman, Fondakowski, and/or the collaborators establish a focus, often thematic content, for each workshop day's Moment Work, which is presented as problems or

issues to solve: How do we show or theatricalize this? How do we fix this? Kaufman and Fondakowski lead the questioning, but the company is fully involved in voicing their questions as well. “Then everyone goes home and works on that and presents it the next day,” Fondakowski explains (13 Dec. 2002). During the first phase of piling up numerous Moments in the workshops, days often begin with Kaufman simply asking, “Okay, who has a Moment?” The structure of the workshop opens, becomes free-flowing, as company members add on, re-direct, re-stage, or re-contextualize presented Moments. Fondakowski details the way in which Moment Work has evolved over the past five years:

In the past people would join Moments as they were happening. But now, people have become so good at it, and they come up with such amazing things that everyone else just kind of watches as opposed to thinking about ways to jump in spontaneously. Now, after the first showing, there is discussion and analysis of what works or not – group discussion. Or, if there is something really strong in it, Moisés or I might just jump up and start directing off of it. But the actors are becoming so sophisticated that they are directing each other. (13 Dec. 2002)

Through Moment Work, Kaufman has discovered a way in which to empower and guide his collaborating actors and designers to write performance filled with all the languages of the stage rather than simply writing text. Moment Work encourages actors to be designers and designers to be actors; all the artists become directors as they instruct fellow collaborators on how their Moment was designed to be presented.

Finally, as a principle of company commitment to experimentation, no two Tectonic Theater Project works are created in exactly the same manner. For example, while Kaufman refers to Gross Indecency and Laramie as “cousin pieces,” their creation

process differed significantly. Not only were the workshop processes different, but the objectives of each work differed as well. Tectonic member Stephen Belber states, “Even though there’s a central way of working that serves as the foundation for his work, his goal seems to change every time he puts a new piece up. Even though it has his stamp on it, it’s different and fresh. It’s not just rehashing all his old ideas” (10 Dec. 2002). It takes courage for an artist to shift and adjust his/her creative approach. After the success of Gross Indecency, Kaufman could easily have found another historical “watershed moment” from which to create a new work based solely on archival documentation. Indicative of his continual search for new theatrical forms and languages, however, he chose a contemporary situation and explored the form of original interviews in addition to factual documentation. Collaborator Stephen Wangh states, “I just continue to be impressed with his ability to move himself forward, to find new objects of fascination. I don’t think his aesthetic has changed. I think he has allowed himself larger, more daring subjects, in order to do deeper work” (10 Dec. 2002). And yet, as Wangh notes, in addition to adjusting the process of creation to connect more deeply to the content of each piece, Kaufman has also developed a similarity in those creative processes – a consistency of principles and techniques which become evident in examining his past production history.

### A Brief Production History of Early Works

Rather than attempting to include a complete production history of Kaufman's work, the following productions were selected for their relevance to tracing the origins and developments of Kaufman's current theories and techniques. The works examined range from Kaufman's early directing projects at the Experimental Theatre Wing of N.Y.U. and end just prior to the creation of Gross Indecency. They include: Machinal, Endgame, Women in Beckett, In the Winter of Cities, The Idiot Works, and Marlowe's Eye. The formation of Tectonic Theater Project will be discussed chronologically between Endgame, Kaufman's final directing project as a student at N.Y.U., and Women in Beckett, the first play produced under the aegis of Tectonic Theater Project. Referring to these early works, Kaufman states, "Because I was interested in new forms, I wanted to look at writers who themselves were interested in form, or plays that allowed me to do experiments in form" (11 Nov. 2002).

Machinal, by Sophie Treadwell, depicts a woman on trial for killing her husband. For his production, Kaufman approached the narrative from the protagonist's point of view – as if she were telling the audience her story. He also researched the newspapers of the play's time period to find actual documented coverage of the trial which inspired the play, and used this found text in performance to add the journalists' points of view to the overall narrative. Through this device, he juxtaposed the different versions of her story, forcing the spectators to deal with the contradictions and decipher their own

interpretation of “the truth.” These formal devices and thematic ideas concerning plurality of versions found their full resonance in Gross Indecency.

In addition to using historical documentation as text, the Brechtian influences of narration and splitting the actor’s presence onstage into character, actor, and political commentator were present in the staging. Kaufman states, “The idea was a very Brechtian space where people would just pick up a costume and go in, not unlike now [referring to The Laramie Project]” (11 Nov. 2002).

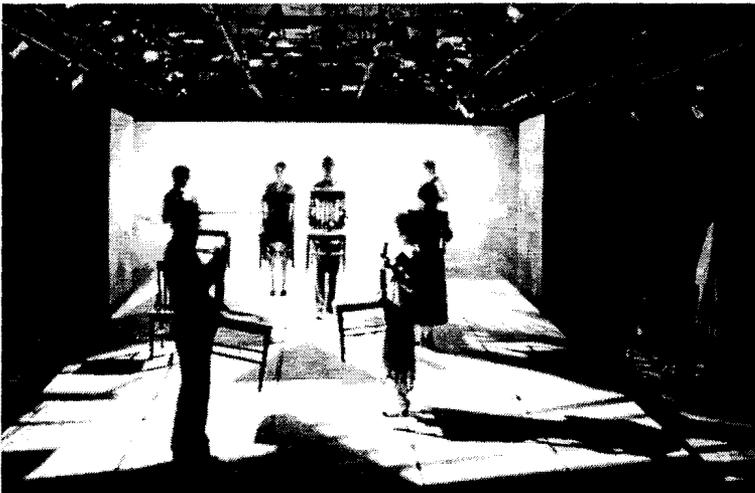


FIGURE 3. Machinal. Frederick Loewe Theatre, N.Y.U. Photo courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

Kaufman placed one microphone downstage right and one downstage left. Throughout the production, two actor-narrators periodically approached the microphones and read from the newspapers, commenting on the political significance of the piece.

Machinal also marked Kaufman’s first collaboration with costume designer Kitty Leach, a faculty member at N.Y.U. who later became the designer for Gross Indecency. Unlike Kaufman’s current way of working, Leach came into the process only a few

weeks before opening. Leach and Kaufman, however, both shared similar backgrounds in experimental theatre from N.Y.U. Leach recalls the ease of their collaboration on Machinal: “I watched the run-through and I knew exactly what everyone should be wearing. So it was a very easy process” (10 Dec. 2002). Leach’s long-term relationship with Kaufman demonstrates his interest in working repeatedly with artists, especially those with similar training, in order to establish a congruent working language.

Such was the case with his production of Samuel Beckett’s Endgame when he collaborated with N.Y.U. student, set designer, and friend Marsha Ginsberg. The significance of Endgame for Kaufman’s development lies in its structure and form. Kaufman credits Beckett with the idea that form is content. In regards to Kaufman’s student years, Mary Overlie recalls, “He seemed particularly interested in philosophical, structural, deconstructive disciplines. It was clear that he was methodically going through almost a self education by directing Beckett” (11 Dec. 2002). Because the Experimental Theatre Wing has no directing program, Kaufman created his own opportunity to explore his interest in structure and form. Arthur Bartow recalls being impressed with the production, “I think if you do Beckett, you are already interested in form and content. I just saw a good director who was doing a wonderful job. I was more aware of his experiments in structure and form later when I saw his Women in Beckett” (10 Dec. 2002). Kaufman received the advice from Bartow to start his own theatre company based on Bartow’s reaction to seeing Endgame. Kaufman followed the advice and formed Tectonic Theater Project immediately after leaving N.Y.U. in 1991; by 1992 Tectonic was incorporated as a nonprofit organization.

The recurring use of the same theatre artists characterizes Tectonic's work. Tectonic has never been an exclusive company where artists only work for Tectonic; artists flow in and out determined by project needs. The company was, however, founded by Kaufman and his companion and main collaborator from that early era, Jeffrey LaHoste, who remains Tectonic's Managing Director. Marsha Ginsberg also worked on Tectonic's first production. Kaufman states, "So, I didn't get out of N.Y.U. with any actors, but I did get out of school with a Managing Director and a set designer. And then I hired all of the actors who were between sixty-five and eighty years-old [for Women in Beckett] (13 Nov. 2002). Kaufman also stayed in contact with Andy Paris, an actor he worked with at N.Y.U. who has remained with the company since its inception. Again, however, the phrase "with the company" is problematic due to the transitory nature of the company members. Kaufman explains how people join Tectonic Theater Project:

People come in and out because they have a kinship with some of the questions the laboratory devotes itself to – both in terms of subject matter and formal issues. [. . .] It's very organic. We do hold auditions periodically, but we hardly ever hold auditions for a production. We hold auditions for a reading or a workshop. People enter the ranks by being in one of these developmental phases. (13 Nov. 2002)

Kaufman continues by stating that he seeks politically like-minded artists who possess "craft, talent, dedication, intelligence, curiosity, fascination with theatre as a form, and patience [he laughs]. Prior to one of our interviews, Kaufman had read and been moved by a passage from Michael St. Denis' Theatre: The Rediscovery of Style. St. Denis writes:

An artist lives within two kinds of realities. There is his humble human reality in which he shelters, and there is his reality as an artist, as a craftsman, which exposes him for much of the time, especially if he works in the theatre, to the public eye. There is unceasing conflict between these two realities. But one cannot become, or remain, an artist, if one is not first and foremost a man. (37 – 8)

Kaufman believes this passage addresses how people become and remain members of Tectonic Theater Project. “It is of course a matter of craft and talent, but it is also a matter of where they are in their political and social awareness” (13 Nov. 2002) – basically their humanity as artists. Loyalty to designers who become part of Tectonic through this process works in a similar fashion. Kaufman continues, “Kitty Leach was the costume designer for some of the pieces I did at N.Y.U., so when it came time to do Gross Indecency, I called her.” This contradiction between seeking company members who possess a certain humanity and social awareness, along with the practical act of rehiring members based on loyalty and an established working language, points to Kaufman’s balance between idealist and business administrator – as discussed earlier in the chapter.

There were numerous reasons for forming Tectonic Theater Project. According to LaHoste, Kaufman was never interested in being a director for hire. Forming Tectonic gave Kaufman an artistic identity and a space to pursue his search for new forms, which was the driving motivation to start the company. LaHoste explains:

I think that he had wanted to have a company from the beginning when he came to N.Y.U. He was intrigued by the work of other people who worked that way: over long periods of time, with the same people over and over again. And I know that was something that he wanted to do. Artistically, the company was created to support his

explorations and his ability to test his theories and so forth.  
(11 Dec. 02)

Kaufman also formed Tectonic because his artistic method works best in responding to other artists. Always aware that the personal is inextricably linked to the artistic, Kaufman acknowledges that he thrives on the energy supplied by other creative minds. It inspires his work and fulfills him personally. Kaufman's social nature requires him to work in a collaborative workshop environment. He expounds:

One of the reasons that I *have* [Kaufman's emphasis] a theatre company is that I hate to be alone [Kaufman laughs]. I think that the artistic pursuit is a lonely one and I don't like that part of it, so I'm always trying to fix that. [. . .] I believe that you do what you do because you have a dream, and a project, but also because you are a human being. As a human being you have needs and desires, and sometimes your career decisions are completely guided by who you are as a human being. I love artists and I love being part of a community of artists. (9 Dec. 2002)

The need to be surrounded by others, inherent in Kaufman's nature, fortunately led to the formation of Tectonic Theater Project. Unfortunately, however, like many young theatre companies, especially those experimental companies working outside the mainstream, Tectonic's early years were difficult ones.

Their first production, Women in Beckett – a collection of Beckett's short plays performed by women over the age of sixty-five, was funded by a personal bank loan of ten thousand dollars taken out by LaHoste. Despite the lack of funds, Kaufman and LaHoste remained true to their cause behind forming Tectonic. LaHoste states, "We never considered doing work that was more likely to bring income to the company, more 'commercial.' We were really only interested in doing what we did. We were just a Pop

and Pop operation. [. . .] For me, I always felt like it's only worth it if you are doing something that really makes you come alive" (11 Dec. 2002). Those choices, which were based on an emotional and artistic commitment to their search for new forms, produced work that was eventually embraced by a wider audience.

Forming Tectonic Theater Project and specifically working with older women for the first production, who were not trained in the theatre tradition of the Experimental Theatre Wing, forced Kaufman to synthesize his theories on form and structure into easily teachable techniques, which could be taught to a variety of future collaborators on a variety of projects. He states, "I had to become very rigorous about what the techniques were so that I could quickly teach them [the actors] the vocabulary – techniques and ideas. So I could bring the actors into a room together. All of the Tectonic techniques can be very easily taught. What varies is the level of understanding depending on how long the community of artists has been together" (9 Dec.2002). The transition into director-facilitator of a unique vocabulary, precipitated by the formation of Tectonic, forever changed Kaufman. His search now had a means to be fully explored. In his introduction to the Stage Director's Handbook Kaufman writes:

Starting Tectonic was the best decision of my life. It helped ground me. Many of the questions about how to approach the work were answered, and, of course, a hundred other questions came up. But the centering effect that the company had on me was terrific. This was a place where I could do my work, where I could collaborate with other artists over a long period of time. (Stage)

Kaufman collaborated with scenic designer Ginsberg to set Women in Beckett in a retirement home. He encouraged his actors to find how Beckett's text articulated their

experiences as older women in America. Women in Beckett marks Kaufman's first voyage into creating work with actors using his techniques that were based on his theoretical questioning. He states, "It was my first step in collaborating with actors in creating work. [ . . . ] I realized that the company was providing me with an environment in which I could articulate some of the theoretical and practical questions that I wanted to address in my work" (Cal Arts). Once again, characteristic of Kaufman, the impetus for the piece was inspired by his research, and he called upon Ginsberg with whom he had previously collaborated on designing Endgame. Ginsberg recalls that Women in Beckett derived not only from their Beckett investigations on Endgame, but also from books that highlighted significant aspects of Beckett's work in contemporary ways, most notably Beckett in Performance by Jonathan Kalb and an anthology of essays titled Women in Beckett. She recalls, "Moisés had recently read that book and it made a deep impression on him. From that, Moisés came up with the idea of doing all these short Beckett plays and he wanted to cast them with older women" (9 Dec. 2002). Kaufman and Ginsberg explored numerous design ideas. Eventually, Ginsberg started looking at images of nursing homes, which strongly resonated with Kaufman. Ginsberg created a sparse, interior box set with handrails on the stage right and stage left side, keeping the majority of the space bare to focus the attention on the acting.

Kaufman worked with his actors collaboratively to create forms, based on their personal experience that contained Beckett's words. LaHoste recalls, "The rehearsal process was very fascinating because he rehearsed then like he does now, really trying to draw from the actors' life experience and involving them in creating this event" (11 Dec.

2002). These women were not N.Y.U. trained actors, which proved to be a challenge for Kaufman in communicating his new theories and techniques. Ginsberg notes, “It was an interesting thing for him as a director to see if he could begin to apply the ideas he had developed at E.T.W. with actors who had very diverse backgrounds” (9 Dec. 2002). Fortunately, Kaufman had a space in which to explore his theoretical questions with his actors. At that time, he and LaHoste lived in an apartment on the upper-west side of Manhattan where one large room remained empty for rehearsing, which meant he could rehearse for as long as needed. Long rehearsal periods have also become indicative of Kaufman’s process. Once his fascination has been ignited, Kaufman explores the idea until he feels he has worked through the question.

In the end, the production, staged at Theatre for the New City, was artistically and commercially successful<sup>3</sup> and Tectonic Theater Project had arrived. Rather than attempting to produce a full season of works, Kaufman and LaHoste kept their operation small and started devising their company plan of working from project to project. LaHoste recalls, “We didn’t have the option of getting big because we didn’t have money. But you do have to have a plan. We knew that we didn’t want to immediately attempt to hire all sorts of personnel, and have a payroll, or a space, or things like that, so that was how we were able to make it the first few years – just on a shoe-string” (11 Dec. 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> Although it took five years to pay back the ten thousand dollar bank loan acquired to fund the production.

After the success of Women in Beckett, Arthur Bartow invited Kaufman to direct a production for N.Y.U.<sup>4</sup> Kaufman directed three Tennessee Williams' one-acts titled In the Winter of Cities, which are significant in that they mark the first seedlings of Moment Work. I Can't Imagine Tomorrow tells the story of a man and woman who are both outcasts. The woman is dying, yet the man continues to visit her because he yearns for her to love him. Kaufman approached the work from a formalist perspective rather than embracing the style of poetic realism usually associated with Williams' work. He dissected the text, fracturing it into episodes. He recalls, "I created what we would now call Moments. Literally, you see it in the text, there's this Moment, then this one. And each Moment was a tableau. That was really the beginning of Moment Work. And all of a sudden, this play that I couldn't make work, worked" (11 Nov. 2002). The key difference is that Kaufman alone was deconstructing a text to construct Moments as opposed to creating original Moments with his ensemble. As Wangh stated earlier, Kaufman viewed Williams' text in patterns, as blocks capable of being separated and rearranged like poetry on refrigerator magnets. The form, however, was then, as it is now, inseparable from the content. The episodic Moment tableaus stemmed from Kaufman's interest in constructing a story about the alienation in cities using works by Tennessee Williams that were not performed in a realistic style. To further break the realism, he added narration. In this early work we see many of the techniques employed by Tectonic today.

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<sup>4</sup> Bartow believes this was the only time a former student has been invited back to direct at N.Y.U.

For Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen, Kaufman used Williams' pre-existing text and deconstructed it by dividing the text originally intended for two characters, a male and female, into text for three couples: one male-female, a second male-male, and a third female-female.

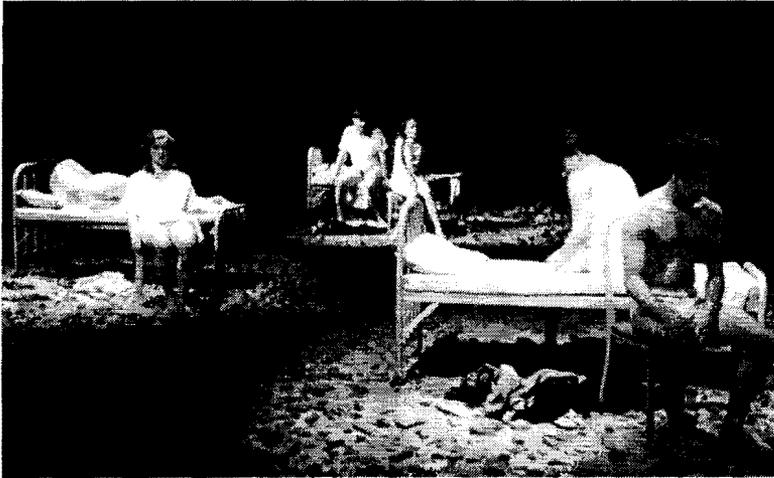


FIGURE 4. Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen. Frederick Loewe Theatre, N.Y.U. Photo courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

Kaufman used Williams' text as text, but used the form of differently gendered couples to recontextualize the meaning of the dialogue – creating new content. Through this deconstruction, Kaufman used Williams' writing to introduce questions of gender, sexual orientation, and identity – issues he continues to explore in his present work. In addition to deconstructing the text, Kaufman also deconstructed space – treating it in a cubist manner. As shown in Figure 4, Kaufman isolated characters in their own pools of light. They spoke facing full front or away from one another, constructing their conversations in a fractured or splintered theatrical space without recognizing the presence of the audience.

In 1991 former Experimental Theatre Wing actors Kirk Marcoe and Alysa Bresnahan, who worked with Kaufman on his production of Endgame, asked him to direct a low-budget, collaboratively-created piece titled The Idiot Works. Kaufman recruited Ginsberg and the director-designer team tackled another project. Ginsberg recalls that there was a “Beckett-like” base text that felt “more like an outline for an event” from which to start the creation process. “The actors and Moisés had to create a whole world on top of the text, but this was a comfortable way for everyone to work, since E.T.W. actors were accustomed to creating actor-initiated work” (9 Dec. 2002). This process proved to be another opportunity for Kaufman to explore his theoretical questions and techniques of creating theatre with numerous collaborators. For this project, however, the workshop was located in a “found” performance space.

Indicative of low-budget theatre, the production process for The Idiot Works placed Kaufman in the stereotypical position of a young, hungry theatre artist striving to overcome monetary obstacles in order to see his work on stage. Financially unable to afford a traditional theatre for rehearsal or performance, the artists located a synagogue that would provide a rehearsal (and eventually performance) space in exchange for work on renovation projects on the synagogue. Ginsberg recalls, “It was a nightmare for everyone, but in the end it was worth it because the two pieces were created in the space. The *misé en scene* and the approach grew out of the space, as well as the design” (9 Dec. 2002). The actors often used objects they found in the space as set pieces or properties, which were inserted into the rehearsal, tried by the actors and used or discarded. Ginsberg observed the actors’ actively using the space in rehearsal experimentations,

from which she gleaned design ideas. After creating a model of the synagogue and working formally with Kaufman in her design studio, Ginsberg responded to the actors' work, incorporating their use of found objects in her design.

Using the workshop space to inspire the final design of a production occurs often in Kaufman's work. Similarly to Ginsberg's scenic design for The Idiot Works, Robert Brill's design for The Laramie Project used the unique characteristics of the workshop space to guide the overall design, as did Sarah Lambert's design for Gross Indecency. Kaufman's respect for the workshop space as a place of innovation and discovery, where new forms and theatrical languages are created in conjunction with the space in which they were created, carries over to final productions through this visual means. In reference to The Idiot Works, Kaufman states: "The space was magical; it was a very site specific piece. There has always been a desire on my part to do workshops that include design elements right from the start" (19 March 2003).

In the winter of 1995, Kaufman collaborated with playwright Naomi Izuka while directing her new play Marlowe's Eye, which was produced at the Theater at St. Clement's. Kaufman was drawn to Izuka's work because she was pushing the boundaries of theatrical event and language. Izuka was also open to Kaufman creating theatrical Moments from her writing, which is lyrical and open ended – loosely structured and open for interpretation. The in-depth exploration and creation within the boundaries of an open text represents an important step in Kaufman's development and a beginning step toward his technique of writing performance. He explains:

I brought in a lot of material about the play's subjects,  
Christopher Marlowe, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and the Branch

Davidians, that the author used in revising and expanding her play. It became clear to me that if I was truly committed to exploring theatrical language, I had to deal with the issue of "text." I wanted to create texts, understood not only as words, but what I came to call "writing performance." (Cal Arts)

Under his guidance, Kaufman relied on his collaborators to write performance through his technique of Moment Work, which was still in the developmental stages at this time. The evolution of Moment Work will be traced in Chapters III and IV through its use in creating Gross Indecency and Laramie.

Marlowe's Eye marks the first collaboration between Kaufman and Leigh Fondakowski, his assistant director and a long-term Tectonic member. Since she assisted Kaufman on the creation of Marlowe's Eye, Gross Indecency, and The Laramie Project, Fondakowski offers an additional perspective on the development of Moment Work. She recalls the excitement of first experiencing the power of actor-created work:

That group of actors really took hold of Moment Work. A Moment can be a very short bit of theatrical time, but it can also be a kind of entry way into really expansive improvisation if the actors jump on board and engage on that level. Some of the most incredible improv I've ever seen happened during Marlowe's Eye. Someone would start with a simple Moment, and then someone would join them with another Moment, then another, and before you knew it this entire world was born. (13 Dec. 2002)

Like The Idiot Works, the actors based their creation on the themes and subject matter of a pre-existing text, though in the case of Marlowe's Eye the text was loosely structured. Their Moment Work was character, theme, and history based since the characters were historical figures. The actors were encouraged to do extensive research on such figures as Queen Elizabeth and Christopher Marlowe as inspiration and material for the creation

of their Moments. From the research, Fondakowski recalls actors bringing in their own text, visual imagery, costume pieces, and scenic objects. By the creation of The Laramie Project, designers, who were also involved in the workshops, provided such materials. “It was kind of crazy and almost out of control,” Fondakowski continues. “I think it was solidifying Moisés’ thinking that this was a really great thing to keep nurturing and pursuing.” She notes, however, that as Moment Work evolved to its present state, it has lost some of its spontaneity and wildness from the days of Marlowe’s Eye. “It’s more refined now and in a way it’s become almost neater, orderly; it doesn’t unravel into these insane improvisations” (13 Dec. 2002).

The collaborative use of Moment Work resulted in a production that received notice in the downtown theatre community. David Rothenberg, a veteran producer and publicist of Off-Broadway theatre recalls: “I remember being constantly surprised by his creative staging, where people were coming from, how he used the set and the lighting. It was very innovative. It reminded me of certain landmarks in my own theatergoing, such as Ellis Rabb’s production of Pantagleize with the APA or Peter Brook’s staging of Marat/Sade. It was that extraordinary” (qtd. in Shewey 67). Marlowe’s Eye demonstrated that in addition to being a technique for creating original theatre, Moment Work could also be an effective rehearsal tool for more traditional rehearsal processes as a method for exploring an existing text. Directors can use Moment Work as they might use other rehearsal improvisations in order to explore characters’ lives or themes which lie outside the text.

N.Y.U. Connections: Kaufman and Anne Bogart

Whether or not the Moments are added to the final production, actors benefit from the opportunity to create Moments much like the performers in Anne Bogart's SITI Company benefit from creating Compositions. Tina Landau, long-time collaborator with Bogart, defines a Composition as "the practice of selecting and arranging the separate components of theatrical language into a cohesive work of art for the stage. [. . .] a method for revealing to ourselves our hidden thoughts and feelings about the material. [. . .] assignments given to the company to create short, specific theatre pieces addressing a particular aspect of the work" (qtd. in Dixon 26-27). Compositions provide a structural framework for creating new material and exploring existing text through collaborative creation by actors, usually by supplying a list of elements that must be included in the composition, for example: "a staged accident, a surprise entrance, a broken expectation" (29). The total openness of a Moment, where the only structure is "I begin . . . I end," and the use of a question, theme, or idea to be explored, is not present.

Due to their similar training at the Experimental Theatre Wing, Bogart and Kaufman's work share similarities in their emphasis on actor-creation. And yet, in addition to different interests in subject matter, Bogart's emphasis on Viewpoints and Kaufman's focus on writing performance distinguish their work – as do the differing structures behind Moment Work and Compositions. Kaufman's interest in narrative and his work as a playwright are also important distinctions. Their similarities, however, reside mainly in their connection to Mary Overlie's Viewpoint training. In her article

“Source-Work, the Viewpoints and Compositions: What are They?,” Landau writes: “I remember Anne saying that the work she did was ‘stolen’ from a myriad of sources, most prominently the Viewpoints from a dance teacher at New York University named Mary Overlie [. . .]” (Dixon 16). Overlie provided the theory and technique of the six Viewpoints, which Bogart later expanded to nine. Although Kaufman will use Viewpoint exercises at times in his work, Overlie’s key influence on him, as noted earlier, lies in her theory of horizontal theatre. Both Kaufman and Bogart have been described by their respective actors as strongly visual directors who possess a keen sense of spatial awareness and kinesthetic response – two of Overlie’s original Viewpoints. Clearly, both artists were powerfully affected by their N.Y.U. training. In particular, it should go noticed that Mary Overlie’s innovative theory has had a profound effect on arguably two of the most influential theatre practitioners in the United States today.

#### Conclusion: Looking Forward

In 1996, a friend gave Kaufman a copy of The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde. In the back of the book, he discovered the transcripts from Wilde’s trials. He recognized that many of the ideas being discussed in the trials were pertinent to contemporary American culture and began some intensive research, all the while discovering that different versions of the trial contradicted one another. Kaufman recalls, “In my naiveté I thought, when I am done researching, I will know who is telling the truth. As I continued my research, it became more and more impossible to determine who was telling the truth,

which is what the form became about. I decided to do the play not only because the subject matter interested me, but the challenge interested me” (11 Nov. 2002).

As a writer-director, Kaufman continued to develop methods of creating text as an extension of the theatrical explorations he had embarked upon as a stage director. The beginnings of Kaufman’s current theories and techniques outlined in this chapter came into fruition in the creation of Gross Indecency. He writes, “Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde, which opened in 1997, represented a breakthrough in the ‘Tectonic’ techniques I was using to create theatrical events” (Cal Arts).

## CHAPTER III

### GROSS INDECENCY: THE THREE TRIALS OF OSCAR WILDE

#### Introduction

In Chapter III, I trace the developments in Kaufman's previously discussed Tectonic techniques and theoretical questions, and identify new techniques as applied to the creation of Gross Indecency. After a brief plot synopsis, through first-hand accounts from Tectonic company members involved in the project, I will examine the development of Kaufman's theoretical and technical questions, his communication style, and what appears to be a matured stage aesthetic. Finally, I will discuss the effect of Gross Indecency's unexpected success on Tectonic Theater Project's development as an organization.

#### Brief Plot Synopsis

Kaufman and his collaborators compiled the script of Gross Indecency almost entirely from a pastiche of period documents – trial records, memoirs, letters, newspaper stories, and, of course, the works of Wilde himself – artfully arranging them to reveal the

links between Wilde's life and his art – connections that unfortunately led to his downfall. Kaufman emphasizes the use of this found source material by including four narrators, who sit at a long table below the stage, announcing the name of each text from which they (or other characters) recite. The only segment of the script which is not composed of historical documents occurs at the beginning of the second act, wherein the transcripts from a brief interview between Kaufman and a New York University Wildean scholar are presented.

By tracing the progression of the three trials that ultimately destroyed Wilde's life, the play begins with his attempts to clear his name of slander and concludes with his imprisonment for acts of "gross indecency with male persons." Angered by Wilde's homosexual relationship with his son, Lord Alfred Douglas, the Marquess of Queensbury denounces Wilde as having *posed* as a "sodomite" [sic] while at a private club to which both he and Wilde belong. At the time, Wilde was at the height of his fame, recognized as one of the era's most valued writers and thinkers. The Importance of Being Earnest and An Ideal Husband were both playing in London's West End, when at Douglas' urging, Wilde pursued a legal case of libel against Queensbury in 1895 to eventually disastrous effect.

When Queensbury's defense counselor, Edward Carson, presented the names of four "rent boys" who claimed Wilde paid them for sex, Wilde's prosecuting attorney, Sir Edward Clarke, withdrew Wilde's libel charge against Queensbury. The evidence of Wilde's lascivious sexual acts caused the court to bring charges against Wilde himself. A dramatic turning point occurred during that first trial. After a glorious display of Wilde's

verbal prowess in response to Carson's attacking questions in regards to his writings, a moment came when Wilde was betrayed by his own wit. Carson asked Wilde if he had ever kissed one of the young working-class men. Wilde answered, "Oh, dear, no, he was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly" (56). Carson immediately pounced on the opportunity to expose Wilde's sexual attraction to men. Thus began his downfall; for the remainder of the play, Wilde is forced to be on the defensive.

Gross Indecency leaves crucial questions about Wilde's life open to interpretation. Why did he not flee England when given the chance, and why did he allow himself to become a pawn amidst Lord Alfred Douglas and his father's tumultuous relationship? Did he simply lie about his sexual behavior on the witness stand or was he aiming at an Aestheticist definition of his actions? Rather than try to solve these issues, "Kaufman uses the device of the three trials to stage different accounts of Wilde [. . .]" (Cohen 530). The resultant multiplicity of perspectives amplifies the contradicting versions of the same story, forcing the spectator to determine who is telling the truth, if there is one truth to begin with. Kaufman uses these conflicting accounts to ask one of his larger questions – how can theatre reconstruct history? Who is telling whose stories?

#### Kaufman's Theoretical Questions: Gross Indecency

The writing of Gross Indecency marks a major development in Kaufman's search for new forms and theatrical languages. For the first time, Kaufman used his "hunch" to

write an original work rather than using his techniques and theoretical questions to explore a pre-existing text. Obviously, this gave Kaufman complete control over the content of the piece and the freedom to search for forms in the workshop and rehearsal processes that would bring that content to life onstage. It also established a more open environment for his binary focus on content and form, and through their dialectical relationship, each continually influenced the development of the other.

One must note, however, that the “writing” of this piece consisted of locating and arranging (and rearranging) found text from historical documents in order to construct the final script. Kaufman had first explored this technique with his N.Y.U. production of Machinal, inserting period newspaper articles which commented on the protagonist’s trial into the script. He continued to explore the use of found texts during his work on Marlowe’s Eye where religious texts from Queen Elizabeth’s prayer book were added to Naomi Izuka’s script. That one can “see the birth of Gross Indecency in Machinal and Marlowe’s Eye,” Kaufman makes clear (19 March 2003). The distinction between this and his other works, however, lies in his progression beyond adding to pre-existing texts. Also, Kaufman wrote fictional scenes during the workshop process of creating Gross Indecency, though no fictional writing made it into the finished text.

Originally, Kaufman had not intended to author Gross Indecency. He presented his “hunch” to another playwright (who will remain anonymous upon Kaufman’s request) and hired him to write a script but was unsatisfied with the result. According to Kaufman, two problems, both concerning content and form, blocked their collaboration. First, the two men were interested in different techniques of creation so no *simpatico*

existed in their views on the style of the piece – Kaufman emphasized the workshop space to discover new forms collaboratively and the playwright focused on his own techniques of writing as an individual. Second, their perspectives in terms of content differed. The playwright’s first draft was very critical of Oscar Wilde, whereas Kaufman was interested in exploring Wilde as an artist and thinker. It became clear to Kaufman early in the process that their interests were very different, which provoked severe reservations about the project. He recalls, “That’s when I went to Steve [Wangh] and said, ‘I should do this myself.’ And he said, ‘Yes, do it yourself” (19 March 2003).

In response to the early conversations which had taken place between Kaufman and the playwright, he had already begun writing the piece in his head. “It was writing by opposition,” he continues. Kaufman began his extensive research, formed his ideas on structures and the narrative, and did what he does best – he organized a workshop to begin exploring. The workshop established a deadline for which he would have to have something prepared – something finished. In a way, he set a limitation to momentarily halt his research in order to shift his efforts to compiling a text for the workshop. He recalls, “So I put a bunch of text together. I came up with a slew of books and asked the actors to read the books [in the workshop], and in the action of the actors reading from books came the birth of Gross Indecency” (19 March 2003).

That original “bunch of text,” which would eventually be distilled down into act one, was over four hours in length. Kaufman compiled it by logging individual blocks of text that struck him, emotionally or intellectually, into his computer. As he began placing these isolated chunks of text together in a sequence, they started to construct a narrative.

Kaufman became aware that each segment of that narrative had a different emotional tenor, which eventually led him to determine three different forms for each of the three Wilde trials. “It becomes this dialectic between it teaching you what it wants to be and you hearing what it wants,” states Kaufman. “Then you put something new in and it tells you again what it wants to be. It’s that kind of dialectic process” (19 March 2003). This organic, constantly changing, process of finding material from historical documents and inserting it into a sequential narrative generated a leaping off point for the first workshop. From this point forward, Kaufman’s collaborators played a vital role in the development of Gross Indecency.

In addition to the actors, Kaufman had another key collaborator in the process of writing the script. Inspired by their long-term friendship and collaborative efforts while at N.Y.U., Kaufman invited Stephen Wangh to serve as the dramaturg for Gross Indecency. The man who first encouraged Kaufman to write the script himself became his biggest ally in the writing of the piece. Throughout the different stages of the workshop process, Kaufman sent Wangh drafts of the evolving script for rewrites. Wangh explains, “There were times when Moisés was writing and would ask for my feedback. There were other times when he would send me a script, and I would do a big rewrite on it and send it back to him. My sense was that in some of the stages we were acting as two writers, although it was always clear that he was the initiator of the piece” (10 Dec. 2002). As the initiator, Kaufman reserved the authority to make all the final textual choices, but Wangh’s input clearly played a principal role in the writing of Gross

Indecency. Their successful collaboration carried on through the creation of The Laramie Project and continues to this day.

### Watershed Historical Moment

Kaufman considers the trials of Oscar Wilde to be a watershed historical moment – one of the key events of the history of art in the twentieth century. The trials ask: What is the relationship between art and society? Can art be defended in a court of law? Can you judge art by morality? What is morality? One has only to reflect on Congress' recent questioning and cutting of the National Endowment for the Art's funding of artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Karen Finley to understand how relevant, how controversial, these questions concerning art, society, and morality were in the United States during the 1990s. Kaufman explains, "Here was an artist in a court of law being asked to defend his art, and it seemed so appropriate for our time. Right now we tend to look at art from a political or social or religious standpoint, and that's all very valid. But Wilde was a purist – he's talking about art as art and trying to isolate what only art can do that nothing else can do" (qtd. in McKinley 24). This idea of isolating what art, and only art, can do resonated strongly with Kaufman because in his own work he strives to investigate what theatre, and no other medium, can do.

The trials were only partly in response to Wilde's homosexuality. Rather, his subversive ideas concerning art, the society of Victorian England, the monarchy, and education were also on trial. Building his narrative around these differing themes and

highlighting the contradicting versions he found in the historical texts allowed Kaufman to fashion a work that Ben Brantley of the New York Times called: “as much a multilevel study in public perceptions of class, art, and sexuality as a portrait of one man’s downfall, while retaining the pull of the old-fashioned courtroom drama” (Brantley 13).

### Theatre Reconstructing History

During the workshops, it became evident to Kaufman that the real question for Gross Indecency was not: how do you create a narrative containing the truth about Oscar Wilde? But rather: how do you construct a piece about the impossibility of reconstructing history? Kaufman believes not only that it is important to tell stories, but that one must also address, within the narrative, how stories are constructed and conveyed. During these early stages of intensive research, one of Kaufman’s friends was teaching history at an inner-city school in the Bronx and relayed a story that impacted Kaufman’s approach to the work. As a motivational tool, Kaufman’s friend asked his middle school students to generate their own definition of history. Kaufman recalls their answer:

“History is a story told by people in power, in the vocabulary of people in power, mostly about other people in power.” Beautiful, delightful, definition. In that definition, two things happened: one, there is the assumption that it’s a story, and two, it poses questions of who tells stories - and why. Who is the re-constructor? That story, that definition, really resonated with me. (11 Nov. 2002)

Kaufman decided to highlight the contradicting versions of Wilde's history that he had discovered during his research. As actors read from the different books that Kaufman brought into the first workshops, he would instruct them to read these conflicting accounts of the same event directly beside one another, allowing their juxtaposition to resonate. Within the tension created by dueling accounts, Kaufman found a great deal of drama – collisions of emotional and historical truths. He listened to the differences between the documented accounts and searched for ways to activate those collisions in a dramatic performance through his continual binary attention on form and content in the workshop space. According to Kaufman's approach to the copulation of form and content, if the content highlighted the different versions of the story, then so must the forms. He explains:

I became very clearly aware that this issue of versions that I was dealing with dramaturgically was a similar issue to the directing of an actor. Because as soon as an actor takes the text of Oscar Wilde and says, "I am Oscar Wilde and this is what he said," he's doing a version of Oscar Wilde. It's his interpretation of Oscar Wilde seen through the filter of his own psyche, his heart, his mind, his complexity as a human being. So the question became, how do you create a form that encompasses all of that and talks about versions both dramaturgically and in a performative sense? (19 March 2003)

The answer came through actor transformation, from allowing the audience to watch the actor transform in and out of character. This meant that the piece had to make the presence of the actor telling the story visible throughout. In order to achieve this effect, Kaufman created the four narrators that announced the sources from which material was quoted, and also transformed in and out of many different characters, ranging from the

“rent boys” to Queen Victoria herself, dependent upon the narrative’s needs. In fact, all of the actors, except Michael Emerson who played Oscar Wilde, performed multiple roles with all character transformations occurring in view of the audience.

At first the nonfictional sources for the play inspire a sense of the drama’s authenticity, but as the contradictions among the various accounts emerge, the audience dramatically experiences Wilde’s claim from the Importance of Being Earnest that truth is merely a construction and is “rarely pure and never simple.” In his review for Theatre Journal, William Cohen writes, “The point, made in this way, is demonstrated far more effectively than would have been done simply by repeating Wilde’s Aestheticist slogans” (529). These contradictions are juxtaposed side-by-side throughout the entirety of the script. The following two selections serve as representative examples. The first occurs in act one after Lord Alfred Douglas has been pleading with Wilde to prosecute his father, Queensbury, while Clarke, Wilde’s attorney, voices concern over the cost of the proceedings in light of Wilde’s financial situation. A narrator informs the audience that Douglas’ line is from Clarke’s unpublished memoirs of the trial:

DOUGLAS. [. . .] My family will be only too delighted to pay for all costs and expenses to try my father.

NARRATOR. From *De Profundis*:

WILDE. Of course his family never paid for the costs of the trial. (24)

In this example, the collision of the two versions not only generates a comic moment in performance, but also elucidates the contrast between Douglas’ youthful, vengeful, game-playing approach to the trials versus Wilde’s grief-stricken, ironic reflection on their

relationship as framed by the experience of the trials. By not explaining the juxtapositions, Kaufman allows multiple readings of the script's meaning, and helps it to remain open for the audience's interpretation as well.

The second example is also from act one. Here, Douglas and Clarke discuss the importance of putting Douglas on the witness stand during Wilde's prosecution case against Queensbury:

NARRATOR I. From *The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas*: [. . . ]

DOUGLAS. I said: Yes, but you must promise faithfully you will put me  
in the box. He replied:

CLARK. I promise you I will; you shall go into the box immediately after  
my opening speech.

NARRATOR 2. From the unpublished memoirs of the trial by Sir Edward  
Clarke:

CLARK. I made no such agreement or promise. (30 – 1)

Again, note the use of the narrator citing the sources from which these contradictions originate. This example of colliding truths also demonstrates Kaufman's use of first and third person to simultaneously reinforce the feeling of historical documentation and personal, subjective truth. Unlike the earlier example, little humor exists here, rather one might interpret Clarke's need to "clear his name" or "set the facts straight" according to his personal truth.

In the end, although the play's multi-source approach allows the audience to weigh conflicting points of view regarding the narrative from the various characters,

Kaufman's choice of material inevitably skews the audience's perception. We are directed to sympathize with Wilde because he is elegant and witty and to reject Queensbury due to his ignorance and mean-spiritedness. Yet, Kaufman also challenges the audience to question Wilde's decision to not leave London and his perjury in regards to his sexuality. As the architect of the script, Kaufman not only accepts that Gross Indecency delivers his own perception of the different versions of the Oscar Wilde story (along with the input of his collaborators), but through reflexivity, he highlights that fact by including himself as a character in the text, which places the author's process of making the art object in the foreground.

After establishing a Victorian world onstage during the first trial which makes up the entire first act, Kaufman jolts the audience out of that world by placing the beginning of the second act in present time. The opening scene depicts an actor playing Kaufman, the researcher-writer of the play the audience is viewing, interviewing Marvin Thomas, a professor and Wildean scholar at New York University who advances Foucault's theory that "it was impossible for men in the Victorian era to think of themselves as gay or homosexual because that construction didn't exist" (Kaufman, Gross Indecency 76). Through this intellectual discussion of sexual identity and the morality of Wilde's answers on the witness stand, Kaufman again emphasizes that the spectators are watching a play. Through a dramatic shift in stage imagery (simply seeing contemporary costumes in contrast to Victorian dress is shocking in itself), Kaufman forces the audience to question the piece they had experienced up to that point. This Brechtian alienation effect keeps the spectators from losing themselves in the narrative and directs their questioning

to who is telling whose stories? The scene also recontextualizes both the first and second act by heightening the process of researching, editing, and compiling that created the theatre piece the audience is witnessing. In a sense, the interview can be read as Kaufman asserting that this play represents his constructed truth of Oscar Wilde's narrative (that the truths lie within the tension between the different versions he presents). In this manner, Kaufman achieved Wilde's metaphysical definition of truth: "something so personal that the same truth could never be appreciated by two minds" (Gross Indecency 40).

Gross Indecency marks the first occurrence of Kaufman inserting himself as a character into his work. He states, "That scene is formally, in terms of the text, the most radical thing in that script. Because it was the most radical it was the most terrifying and exhilarating" (19 March 2003). At one point during the workshop process, Kaufman almost removed the interview scene. Fortunately, however, his approach to working allowed him to heed the advice of his dramaturg Stephen Wangh, who recalls, "There were times, for instance the middle scene interview, where I had to fight hard to keep the scene in the play. Moisés wanted to cut it" (10 Dec. 2002). Wangh liked the break in style of the piece that the interview created. It allows the audience to relax before they are hit again with the second and third trials. He continues, "I think it puts everything else in a slightly different perspective. Like the technique of holding up books in that play, it's a framing device, which historically contextualizes dramatically." The scene also forces the audience to take another step back and recognize that this play was created by this author that they see before them. Wangh explains the effect:

Like the beginning of Six Characters [in Search of an Author], there's a way that undercutting reality makes you take the reality as even more real. It takes away the little voice in the back of your mind that is saying, "Oh, this is just a play." Because it's coming out and saying, "Oh, this is just a play." So we're not pretending anything here, which in some ways allows us to take it more seriously. (10 Dec. 2002)

Working in close collaboration, which often includes debate and conflict, Kaufman and Wangh made the decision to retain the scene, despite trepidation about the audience reaction. For Arthur Bartow, their risk paid off. He states, "I think it's the most difficult scene in the play and the one that makes the piece successful" (10 Dec. 2002). Similar to many critiques, the interview scene jolted Bartow, pulled him out of the Victorian world and broke up the flow of the piece – exactly Kaufman and Wangh's intent. In sum, they had changed the game. Bartow continues, "It is Brechtian; it distances us from the play, and then brings us back into it. It's very clever." Overall, the interview scene represents another instance of content copulating with form. Throughout the piece, Kaufman calls attention to the process of its creation, of blending numerous cited sources to present manifold perspectives on Wilde's story. In addition to announcing the historical documents, the form of this contemporary interview adds yet another voice to the content of multiple versions – this one looking back in time to analyze Wilde's story from a postmodern perspective.

### The Copulation of Form and Content

In his later work, Kaufman's search for new forms and theatrical languages occurred in the workshop space with his collaborators as they immersed themselves in the process of creating content. From this immersion, the structural dramaturgical forms, as well as the visual stage forms, organically rise from the content – a result of Kaufman's continual binary focus on their dialectical relationship. Because of this binary focus throughout the creation of Gross Indecency, Kaufman realized that his content of disparate versions of the same story posed a question about the “versions” inherent in all acting. When Michael Emerson read Wilde's words onstage, he did so through his personal, subjective interpretation of Wilde – his version. In order to marry the two, Kaufman searched to construct a container, a form, which visually and dramaturgically expressed the idea: ‘this is not what happened to Oscar. This is how we attempted to reconstruct the different versions that tell us what happened to Oscar’ (11 Nov. 2002).

This search led Kaufman to his “über-form” for Gross Indecency: “a group of actors come on a stage, and with all these books they try to figure out what happened to Oscar, with all the different versions” (19 March 2003). It is important to note that this form is written as an immediate action. The actors invite the spectators to become the creators of Wilde's story by presenting them with specifically selected yet conflicting accounts. This simultaneously puts the actors and audience in the action of uncovering evidence in an attempt to discern the truth of Wilde's trials. Instead of encouraging the audience to discover one truth behind Wilde's story, however, Gross Indecency presents

fractured pieces of truths, and communicates that other perspectives of the story exist that are not being presented. Kaufman forces each audience member to decipher their truth amongst the tension of the disparate perspectives presented. In sum, we can not re-create history; we only reconstruct our personal version of its retelling.

The central formal device in Gross Indecency is the action of an actor picking up a book, presenting it to the audience, and stating, “from this book,” or “from this newspaper.”



FIGURE 5. Michael Emerson as Oscar Wilde. Photograph courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

Not only is this form visual but dramaturgical and dramatic as well. The form inserts quotations and their sources directly into the text, allowing different versions to disagree with one another and to fight for the audience’s belief in their truth. “This idea of deconstruction followed by reconstruction became part of how the narrative was constructed,” states Kaufman (19 March 2003). Through this reconstruction of

juxtaposing conflicting versions, each text is deconstructed, or opened up to reveal what it refused to include – saying the unsaid. This deconstruction is then visually enhanced through the self-conscious convention of displaying the source manuscripts and books as props, incessantly reminding us of the play’s composition and giving it a modern feel despite its nineteenth century language.

This form also forces the audience to remain aware of performance. An actor citing a text’s source immediately before another actor re-enacts that text generates a kind of Brechtian dramaturgy where the actor becomes more of a demonstrator than a character. The central form also contained multiple variations – forms within a form. For example, a narrator may announce a source before it is quoted, or he may cite the source internally within the quotation to highlight whose truth is being spoken:

DOUGLAS. My father used the period right before the trial to hire two  
detectives to round up men who had been with Oscar.

NARRATOR 3. From the Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas:

DOUGLAS. These men were warned that unless they testified against  
Oscar, they themselves would be taken to court. (47)

The company also created physical forms within these dramaturgical variations. When citing a source, the narrators often stood, delivered their citation, then returned to their seat at the large downstage table. At other times, however, a narrator stood, pronounced the source, then remained standing, silently reading the book or newspaper they had cited as the action of its content played out behind them, a form which visually accentuated the reconstruction of history.

Another visual form that stressed the production's re-presenting historical versions occurs at the end of the first act. As the order is given for Wilde's arrest and two detectives, Charles Richards and Sergeant Allen (played by two of the narrators), come to take Wilde to Scotland Yard, actor Greg Pierotti played a death march on a drum. Rather than simply hitting the drum, however, Pierotti performed an exaggerated typing gesture, as if this point in the story was another historical event recorded in text. His interaction with the object transformed it into a typewriter and abstractly underscored the impression of writing history.

In performance, the play never asks the audience to willingly suspend its disbelief and accept the actors as the characters. Rather, it heightens the theatricality of performance and uses the actors' transformation in and out of character to emphasize that the piece reconstructs history through pluralizing the perceptions of a historical event. In the opening author's note of Gross Indecency, Kaufman writes:

This play has been inspired by techniques used by Erwin Piscator and the young Bertolt Brecht. In this regard, the performers should portray the characters in the play without "disappearing" into the parts. Along the same lines, this play should be an actor-driven event. Costume changes, set changes, and anything else that happens on the stage should be done by the actors." (5)

In his "Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht writes that the actor must appear onstage in a double role – that of actor and character: "at no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played" (qtd. in Willet 193). The tangible, matter-of-fact process of acting is no longer hidden behind a veil of suspended disbelief; the actor is present onstage showing us what he imagines the character to have been. Brecht

continues: “‘I am doing this’ has become ‘I did this,’ and now ‘he did this,’ has got to become ‘He did this, when he might have done something else.’ It is too great a simplification if we make the actions fit the character and the character fit the actions: the inconsistencies which are found in the actions and characters of real people cannot be shown like this” (195).

Kaufman used this attribute of Brecht’s concept of epic acting and inserted it directly into the text of Gross Indecency; the convention of quoting text to openly pronounce, “he did this,” became an essential element of the content. Kaufman also used the different versions to bolster Brecht’s idea of “he did this, when he might have done this.” The conflicting versions themselves not only raise questions regarding Kaufman’s choice of material, but they also lead the audience to ask similar questions regarding Wilde’s choices. For example, before Wilde’s third trial, his friend, Frank Harris, had arranged for a private yacht to take Wilde to France in order to avoid prosecution. Harris was convinced that the authorities would allow his escape (Wilde was then free on bond). Using numerous sources and characters, Kaufman presents the conflicting influences on Wilde while making his decision to stay:

NARRATOR 5. Wilde’s family had other opinions. His brother:

WILLIE (*drunk*). You are an Irishman. You must stay and face the music.

NARRATOR 5. His mother:

SPERANZA. If you stay, no matter what happens, you will always be my son. If you leave, I shall never talk to you again.

NARRATOR 5. His wife:

CONSTANCE WILDE. You must go, Oscar.

NARRATOR 5. A letter from Oscar Wilde to Bosie [Lord Alfred Douglas] on the evening of his third trial:

WILDE. I have decided that it is nobler and more beautiful to stay. We cannot be together. I do not want to be called a coward or a deserter.

[...]

NARRATOR 5. From *The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas*:

DOUGLAS. I don't like to think of it, but I have thought since a hundred times that it was an insane thing not to go, and that really leaving would have been a braver thing to do. (116 – 17)

This form of quoting and using Brechtian techniques in the writing of the script as well as the style of acting were thoroughly explored in the workshops. Through collaboration the company discovered the overriding dramaturgical forms that affected the development of the content, and also explored physical forms to bring that content visually to life onstage.

### Tectonic Techniques

The process of creating Gross Indecency through numerous workshops took over two years to complete. Kaufman used this long period of working with his collaborators to create theatre that was initiated from a rough scriptural sketch, but fully developed

through various activities in a performance space – not from a finished text. Gross Indecency was created by listening carefully to what occurred between the actors and the materials and ideas Kaufman had gathered, along with improvising and experimenting with the different textual ideas his collaborators suggested. The impetus for the early workshops was to devour the material Kaufman had found and discover what structures arose from these texts. The original script Kaufman brought into the first workshop allowed the initial unpacking of his hunch. From there, Kaufman relied on his company to collaboratively discover the final direction of the piece. He explains the process:

With the actors in the space, I could hear what could work and what couldn't and also say, "put this text next to that and let's see what happens." Then I would ask questions, and someone would say, "Look at what this book says here." So then I would take that book home and devour that. So it was the beginning of this kind of dramaturgy that really found its vocabulary in The Laramie Project. Gross Indecency was written by me, with dramaturg Steve Wangh, and now you have a play written by me with a theatre company. (19 March 2003)

Often, on each new day of a workshop, Kaufman would return with different compilations of the text based on what the actors had found during the previous day. Then the company would read the new text, organically rearranging the material based both on individual intuitions and collective decisions.

Because all of the source materials were kept in the room, actors also continued to discover new text, which was often read aloud, experimenting with where it should be placed in the script to heighten the conflicting versions and support the established through-lines. Actor Andy Paris recalls, "Kaufman had pretty specific imagery he was working with such as the courtroom, Victorian England, and Wilde's world of aesthetics"

(18 March 2003). These thematic ideas became the container within which the actors and Kaufman searched for additional material. Most of the workshops lasted for a week, followed by a reading for an invited audience of around a hundred people. After receiving feedback, the company would conduct more discussions, then Kaufman and Wangh would take whatever time they needed to rewrite a new draft of the script before scheduling another workshop. During this process, Tectonic Theater Project conducted four workshops before beginning rehearsals for Gross Indecency.

Throughout the workshops, the text was not the only developing element. Due to Kaufman's binary focus on form and content, the structural changes in the text mirrored the simultaneous discovery of forms and theatrical languages. The staged readings that followed each workshop forced the company to experiment with theatrical vocabularies from the beginning. For example, the setting for the first workshop's reading consisted of two large tables, both on the same level, separated by a podium. All of the actors sat at the two tables and periodically used the podium to represent the courtroom. By the second workshop's reading, Kaufman, along with the actors and scenic designer Sarah Lambert, had developed the original groundplan into the split level arrangement of tables that remained the dominant scenic construct throughout the creation and production of the show. In this arrangement, Kaufman placed the four narrators below the stage level at one long table, allowing the stage to include a multitude of different performance areas. In addition, an acting area was added far stage right for Lord Alfred Douglas to perform his scenes once he had fled London, and an upper above was added up center for the attorneys during the second and third trials.

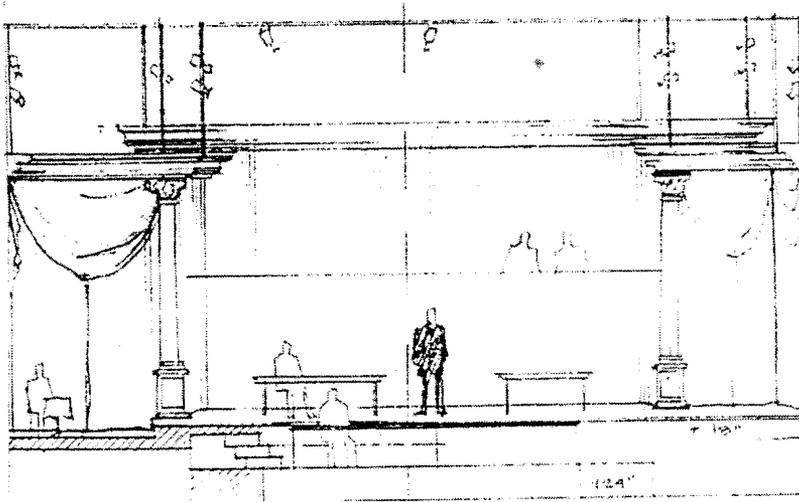


FIGURE 6. Stage Elevation. Note narrator sitting at audience level (DR), stage floor as courtroom (C), and upper above for attorneys (UL). Sketch courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

Kaufman recalls, “The moment I got that, I knew I had the play. I couldn’t have written Gross Indecency without having that image. It was written for that configuration. That was the theatrical machine” (19 March 2003). This is a quintessential example of how Kaufman’s binary focus on form and content allows the two to copulate during the workshop process. Without discovering the content of highlighting disparate versions, Kaufman and his collaborators may not have found the dramaturgical form of quoting original source material, which necessitated a scenic form which could both pragmatically support the expanding number of books and articles, as well as abstractly imply a courtroom. On the other hand, without the scenic form, Kaufman may not have found the overall dramatic structure of the content that allowed the narrators citation of material to work. He explains, “By rehearsing in a space that is a performance space, you are assuring that the design is such an intimate part, not only pivotal but a primordial

element in creating the construct. That's what I'm interested in. How are each of the elements important in the über-construct of the piece that you are making?" (19 March 2003). The stress he gives to each theatrical element is a direct result from embracing Overlie and Kantor's theories on "horizontal theatre."

The narrators operate as the mechanism that drives Gross Indecency. Their citations propel the action forward and constantly emphasize the historical nature of the work and its plurality of voice. Kaufman did not discover the form of using the actors to cite references before the workshops began; it developed organically through the creation process. He explains, "As soon as someone said, 'oh, this is from this book, or this is from this book.' I knew that was the form" (19 March 2003). By carefully listening to what occurred between the actors and the material Kaufman had supplied, he discovered the dramaturgical form that drives the action of the script, and for many, including Ben Brantley, makes the show successful. Brantley writes:

Essential to the production's success is its use of actors who appear both on the stage and in front of it, where they are seated before a long table like the investigators in a Senate hearing. Quoting or reading from a variety of sources – from biographies to contemporary newspaper accounts – they establish an ever-shifting mosaic of perspectives" (13).

This form not only produced dramatic tension in its juxtaposition of contradicting accounts, but also gives rise to much humor with its delicious counterpoint of journalistic voices, especially in the first and second trials. For instance, Kaufman used the form to point up the different reactions that national newspapers had to Wilde's first trial:

NARRATOR 1. [. . .] In Paris, *Le Temps*:

NARRATOR 4. This is how the English behave with their poets.

NARRATOR 1. *The New York Herald*:

NARRATOR 2. This is how English poets behave. (46 – 7).

In addition to allowing actors to discover textual forms, the Tectonic technique of including designers early in the workshop process continued to develop during the creation of Gross Indecency. This collaboration, however, had not yet reached its peak, as would be evidenced in the creation of The Laramie Project. As previously mentioned, Sarah Lambert joined the work between the first and second workshops. Costume designer Kitty Leach, and lighting designer Betsy Adams, however, did not come on board until the company began rehearsals at the Greenwich House Theatre. Therefore, unlike other Kaufman workshops, the workshop phase of Gross Indecency was limited to the theatrical languages of text and set.

#### Investing in Intensive Research

Kaufman first became inspired to create a piece about Oscar Wilde after a friend gave him a copy of The Wit and Humor of Oscar Wilde. The majority of the book consists of epigrams and Wildean quotable quotes, depicting Oscar Wilde the court jester whom Kaufman had always known. The final ten pages, however, contained transcripts from Wilde's trials. Kaufman became excited by a Wilde he had never known before, a man talking seriously about the purpose and nature of art. Kaufman recalls his interaction with that text: "I was marking and writing, and then I went back and read the

whole book and found references to other books, which I would run and find, so I very quickly became SORT OF [Kaufman's emphasis] a Wilde scholar" (19 March 2003). He began to spend considerable time in the specialty libraries of New York. A major advancement occurred when Kaufman discovered the complete trial transcripts, which are bizarre objects in and of themselves because they are not verbatim. They consist of typographical notes taken from the recollections of people who were present at the trials.

The research process became an explosion of interconnected historical sources. For example, from a reference in the trial transcripts he encountered Edward Clarke, then discovered Clark's unpublished writings. Kaufman explains the excitement from that period: "It's like an atomic explosion. You read something and then you have to read the next, and the next, and the next. And I started saying, 'Okay, there's a play here.' So I started marking and codifying in my mind where things were, then different versions started to collide with others" (19 March 2003). Those collisions only spurred more research. At first, in his naïveté, Kaufman believed he would eventually find "the truth" to Wilde's story. As the search continued, it became apparent that "the truth" in a play about Wilde would have to center on the idea that one truth does not exist – that we cannot re-create history, only reconstruct our version of it.

Some critics question why the extreme unreliability of some of the sources – unpublished writings, unauthorized biographies, and non-verbatim trial transcripts – goes without mention in the final script, which would only serve to enhance the questioning of truth. For example, "The memoirs of Wilde's friend, Frank Harris, and his companion, Alfred, Lord Douglas, which the play cites frequently, are notoriously inaccurate and

patently self-aggrandizing” (Cohen 530). Although their self-inflation became partly clear in performance, Cohen continues, “more credulous audience members may think they are getting ‘the true story of Wilde’ (which this is not) rather than ‘the story of the story of Wilde (which, appropriately, it is).” In the second line of the play, a narrator does state: “The text of the trials are from the book *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, compiled by H. Montgomery Hyde from shorthand notes from the trials” (11). Kaufman does not include, however, any description of the validity of Harris or Douglas’ memoirs, or any of the other primary source documentation. This exposes a problem with the postmodern lens – all sources become equally valid.

Kaufman’s research extended well beyond texts to include visual and musical resources as well. He traveled to England and experienced the pilgrimage to Paris’ Pere LaChaise, the cemetery where Wilde is buried. A portion of his research also centered on Victorian life and decorum in an attempt to become an expert on Wilde’s time period. He explains, “You work on something in the morning and in the afternoon your subconscious is still working on it. When I work on something I become obsessed and everything is viewed through that lens” (19 March 2003). Kaufman then endeavors to pass his obsession on to his collaborators. Part of Kaufman’s early workshop process resides in inspiring his collaborators to become enamored with the content in order to encourage their questions and intuitions during the creation of the piece. He conducts long discussions in which the major questions and thematic ideas of the piece, as well as the importance of discovering its structure and forms, are explored by all the collaborators. Paris recalls, “He would talk about the importance of Victorian England.

We spent most of the first rehearsal talking about the politics, social mores, and the society of Victorian England. He set the tone that it was really important, but then how far we took that was really up to us” (18 March 2003). These discussions are designed to invite the actors to immerse themselves in the world of the play in order to create from within that world.

One element of this technique comes from simple availability of the research. Throughout the periods between the workshops, the materials Kaufman collected were housed in the Tectonic Theater Project’s offices and made available to the collaborators for personal use. Also, during the workshops and subsequent rehearsal period, the texts’ presence provided a constant opportunity for continuing thorough research. Paris explains:

For me, during that six-week rehearsal process, we would be sitting there for half an hour while he worked out scenes. So there was a lot of thinking about the piece, quiet discussion about the engine and the form, but there were also all these books in front of us. So I just started to do the research. I got a lot of ideas and information just from looking through the books. (18 March 2003)

Kaufman also made the body of research available to his designers, which was paramount to bringing them up to speed with the rest of the company since they joined the process later. Leach recalls, “He sent over this enormous packet of information about Oscar Wilde, about everyone connected with the story. It was really enormous” (10 Dec. 2002). By providing an intellectual foundation gained from an immersion in the research, Kaufman empowers his collaborators to freely contribute their intuitive ideas to the creation of the final piece.

Kaufman's Approach to the Workshop Space

Kaufman's approach to the workshop space involved three steps that organically blended into one another, starting with the hunch that takes him into a room and naturally evolves into the organizing principle and through-lines that make up the work. For Gross Indecency, Kaufman's "hunch" originated in the discovery of an Oscar Wilde he had never known – a man thinking seriously about art and the artist's relationship to the society in which s/he lives. Kaufman believes our culture fears that mysterious word – art. He explains:

The right is afraid of art because they see it as something that is subversive and daring and questioning. And the left is afraid to talk about art because they find it pompous and self-congratulatory. But it's a beautiful word and Oscar understood that talking about art had a purpose and a meaning. I wanted to hear him talk about art, so I said, "Let's go into a room!" (9 Dec. 2002)

His second "hunch" came from the historical situation of an artist seated in a court of law being forced to defend his work. Queensbury's defense attorney, Edward Carson, reading from Wilde's poetry and novels and questioning him about the morality of his writing formed a powerful image in Kaufman's mind. "There was something there that I wanted to hear more about, it was a desire," he continues. The question of power, of the government's right to judge the work of an artist is still a relevant issue today. Kaufman views Wilde's trials as an important historical event from which to trace our current questioning of censorship. "That to me was a pivotal event for art in the twentieth

century – in the history of humanism and in the history of beauty,” he explains. “I wanted to know why the lawyer felt that he needed to do that” (11 Nov. 2002).

After Kaufman began the collaboration with his company in the workshop environment, his hunch developed into the work’s organizing principle. As an overarching structuralist concept, Kaufman wanted to explore the idea of Wilde as the first postmodern performance artist – a man who had created a persona of himself that he then proceeded to parade around the world. Wilde believed in being his own publicity agent, as demonstrated by his eccentric dress and mannerisms. He once advised, “If you wish for reputation and fame in the world and success during your life-time, you are right to take every opportunity of advertising yourself, you remember the Latin saying, Fame springs from one’s own house” (qtd. in Redman 21). Kaufman focused his attention on this self-generated fame. “The dramatic arc of the piece,” states Kaufman, “was to see this edifice that Wilde had created, called Wilde, crumble” (11 Nov. 2002).

Within this organizing principle, the three trials became three separate through-lines that solidified the structure of the piece. Although the script divides itself into two acts, an argument could be made that Gross Indecency consists of three acts. At times, Kaufman even refers to the third trial as the third act. What is important, however, is to identify how the structural forms of the three trials differentiate and build upon one another.

Today, Oscar Wilde is not only famous for his writings but for being the great aesthete. This is the Wilde of the first act, and in order for this Wilde to truly excel, he needed a public space. To match the content of Wilde, the witty, untouchable peacock,

Kaufman needed to establish a “stage” on which he could perform. “The form of act one was the documentary – strict form, courtroom aesthetic. Every book was held up. I wanted to create a public arena in which he could shine,” Kaufman states (11 Nov. 2002).



FIGURE 7. Act one: courtroom on upper level, narrators below. Photo courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

As illustrated by FIGURE 7, the narrators are paramount in establishing the form of citing during the first act. Throughout the workshop and rehearsal process they asked questions: do we need more energy? How do we handle the books? “There was a constant checking in with us and Moisés regarding what’s working, what’s not working” recalls Paris (18 March 2003).

In the second act, Kaufman strove to create a lusciously lurid and sensual space where the audience could experience not only the sexuality of Wilde’s deeds but the sensuality of his ideas. For example, in this act Kaufman inserted Wilde’s text, “The arts are the only civilizing influences in the world, and without them people are barbarians,”

(85). To match this content, Kaufman sought forms that created “a much more internal, lyrical world,” (Kaufman 11 Nov. 2002) in order to link Wilde’s sensual thoughts to his sexual deeds. Kaufman found the physical form he needed by inserting the testimony of four lower-class prostitutes: Wood, Atkins, Parker, and Mavor (played by the four narrators).



FIGURE 8. Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, and the four male prostitutes costumed in a modern interpretation of Victorian underwear. Photo courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

One could not discuss homosexual sex in Victorian society because the word did not exist at that time. Four young lower-class “rent boys” discussing their sexual relationship with an older, upper-class man, broke numerous boundaries for Victorian society. The second trial, therefore, was a radical event in Victorian England. Kaufman needed to find a theatrical form that could instill an equivalent feeling of a radical event for a modern theatre audience who has grown accustomed to sexual content. This need

spurred the costume choice. Kaufman explains, “The equivalent of that event, now, is to have the boys in their underwear talking about sex. So the second act allowed us to go deeper into Wilde’s mind, to set aside the dandy and go deeper into Wilde” (11 Nov. 2002).

In order to complete the structure of tracing the unraveling of Wilde’s public persona to reveal his inner most private self, the third trial had to add a nightmarish through-line to the script. Kaufman and his collaborators chose an expressionistic vocabulary in their forms in order to emphasize the content of Wilde’s fractured, disjointed, inner world that quickly collapsed during the third trial after he was found guilty of “gross indecency with male persons” and sentenced to two years of hard labor. Kaufman explains, “There were these long shadows and we had deconstructed the space so that no one moved in straight lines anymore. It was all completely fractured because we are talking about a fractured psyche” (11 Nov. 2002). The result effectively established Wilde’s final collapse. In his New York Times review, Ben Brantley wrote: “Wilde the stand-up aesthete has become Wilde the disoriented quarry” (13).

In conclusion, the three different forms of the three trials parallel the journey of Wilde’s character, resulting from the collision between his public and private self. Act one uses a clean, strict form wherein every source is quoted and footnoted. In the second act, when Wilde takes the first steps into his journey of the inner mind, the space becomes more dangerous, sexual and subversive. Then in the third act the form fractures the space to reflect the fracturing of the psyche. Although Kaufman states that all the sources are annotated throughout the text, as the play continues, not all of the sources are

identified. As Wilde's world begins to crumble, so does that formal device in the script. In the play Kaufman articulated this content through the form, indicating, once again, how he constantly marries the two.

### Moment Work

During the writing of Gross Indecency, Moment Work was still in the developmental stage. Much like the inclusion of designers in the workshop process, it had not yet reached its apex as a tool for generating new work as employed in the creation of The Laramie Project. Gross Indecency, however, was an elemental step in the technique's development, which eventually led to Kaufman's concept of utilizing his collaborators to "write performance." "Really it was his chance to experiment with the hypothesis that if you want to see new forms onstage, you need to have a new form of creating it, or experiment with new ways of creating it," explains LaHoste (11 Dec. 2002). Kaufman directed his experimental efforts towards the workshop space, in an effort to discover the different ways in which Moment Work could be used to discover new forms as well as explore text.

Kaufman had employed Moment Work previously while directing Naomi Izuka's Marlowe's Eye. As described in Chapter II, the actors improvised around found historical texts in order to create additional Moments that were added to Izuka's text; they also used the technique to explore character and discover the theatrical vocabulary of the piece. For Gross Indecency, however, Kaufman's first instinct was not to begin the

creation of the script with Moment Work for two reasons. First, the conditions were different. Marlowe's Eye was a pre-existing text. Kaufman focused the attention on Moment Work to explode the text, making the script disclose all its mysteries and resonances. The point of departure, however, was the story Izuka had constructed. She was not present during the rehearsal process so the final text could not change significantly – although a few Moments were added to the piece in performance. Kaufman wanted to begin with a rough script in order to use Moment Work to explore dramaturgical forms that would inform the development of the text. Gross Indecency marked Kaufman's first attempt at writing an original work. He wanted to focus his exploration on Moment Work's potential as a writing technique, as a way of "writing performance" as opposed to writing text. Second, he also wanted to explore Moment Work's potential for staging a text as it developed, allowing a free exchange between content dictating form and form dictating content. This second emphasis, the staging of the production, is where Moment Work was most utilized in the creation of Gross Indecency.

His efforts resulted in allowing Moment Work to incite dramaturgical structures such as the narrator's citation of sources and dropping different segments of text into the three forms of the three trials. Kaufman explains, "We can't really talk about the actors writing performance in these workshops because we were using Moment Work to kind of explode the material. It wasn't until The Laramie Project when we really nailed it" (19 March 2003). The collaborators were not yet up on their feet using the structure of "I begin . . . I end" to create original Moments that would be compiled to create the final

text. Kaufman was still one project away from making that crucial step with this technique. Andy Paris explains: “The process of Gross Indecency was much less about Moment Work because the play and the project demanded something different. We weren’t involved in the writing process as thoroughly in Gross Indecency” (18 March 2003). During the period of the script’s development, the actors’ involvement was contained to discovering blocks of text and calling Kaufman’s attention to them, at which point they might be read aloud in the workshop and experimented with in order to juxtapose different versions of the story, or Kaufman would take the text home and return the next day with a decision of whether or not to include it. Paris continues, “There was always discussion in Gross Indecency about script things. It was much less fluid; he kept much more control over the script.”

The process revolved more around using an ensemble of actors to read text, discover additional text, and discuss the direction of the piece. Kaufman’s pragmatic way of working, however, encourages his collaborators to also “do,” as opposed to simply discussing their ideas intellectually. So the workshops progressively evolved into staged readings with the actors moving within Lambert’s staging configuration. Much of the work revolved around how to bring the first act to life, which consisted mostly of narrators sitting at the long table. The question became how to bring the engine of the narrators alive – breaking in and out of the action to cite their sources – in order to drive the play. “That was really just the work amongst an ensemble,” Paris explains, “more textual and rhythm-based than something visual. How we got there was really a function of doing it” (18 March 2003).

The closest the company came to using Moment Work in its fully developed sense came during the exploration of a fictional scene Kaufman had written for Gross Indecency, which was eventually cut from the script. The scene was based around a historical account of numerous homosexual men fleeing England on the night of Wilde's first indictment. Kaufman wrote a scene where the four narrators played foppish men preparing to board a ship for Paris, leaving their wives and families behind. Kaufman collaborated with the actors to rewrite and stage the scene. Paris recalls, "We tried to make that work, which was a bit more like Moment Work in the sense that it wasn't quite so structured and we were all involved in trying to make it work – all the elements that went into Moment Work" (18 March 2002). In the end, the decision was made not to include the scene, not because the collaborators were unable to make the scene work, but because it ultimately did not fit into the three through-lines or organizing principles of the piece.

Moment Work did come into play, however, while staging the production during the five week rehearsal period. Again, the technique was still in development, so its use centered on experimenting with different blocking possibilities, asking the actors to explore different physical forms to bring the content to life. "A lot of that time was, 'let's try this or that, what happens when this happens this way or that way,'" explains Kaufman. "I taught the Moment Work and we played, but not in any way as rigorously as in The Laramie Project" (19 March 2003).

Perhaps the most significant example of how Kaufman and his collaborators used Moment Work to stage Gross Indecency comes from the discovery of the signature form

used throughout the work – an actor holding up a text to show the audience the source from which they quote. The company had the set the content; they were searching for the form – led first and foremost by their questions. For the narrators the questions included: How do we handle the books? How do we handle our upper bodies? How do we get up, or do we remain seated throughout? The answers came from Kaufman’s pragmatic nature of experimenting with the body, trying different physical movements which were initiated by the actors who were given the freedom to explore their intuitions. Of course, many forms were tried before the company found what they wanted. Paris recalls one such attempt:

During the very first rehearsal we were dealing with the beginning of the play and I had a narrator line, “From this book,” and I stood up and placed the book under the face of the actor playing Wilde while he was talking. It was something I was trying as a form. Maybe the books would be sitting right by the person who was talking. (18 Dec. 2003)

A signature trait of Kaufman’s directing style is that he encourages his actors to explore until organically the company finds the form that most closely compliments its content. In the end, the dramaturgical form of quoting the content of historical documents was communicated most effectively by the dramatic gesture of holding up the document as the source was declared.

Another example of the company’s experimentation with form to fit the content comes from the third trial. Kaufman knew that they needed to break down the convention of the courtroom. Using the training he did with Mary Overlie at N.Y.U., Kaufman led a Viewpoints exercise to find the physicality of how the characters moved

in the space. As previously mentioned, the third trial creates a nightmarish effect. In the text Wilde attempts to defend himself while the characters of his past and from his trial rail against him in one line jabs – piercing and fracturing his psyche. The company used the Viewpoints exercise to discover how they could visually create that cloud of violence around Wilde. Paris recalls, “We wondered if the characters then became more surreal, sort of cartoonish. So there was an exploration of character to fit that text, an exploration of space, all to go into the Moment of the third trial” (18 March 2003).

The result of the company’s exploration fashioned a powerfully theatrical climax for Wilde’s descent. For the first time throughout the trials, Wilde remained center stage as his world collapsed around him, spiraling downward as shown through the actors’ circling movements. By enlisting numerous theatrical languages, the stage transformed into Wilde’s psychological nightmare.



FIGURE 9. Wilde’s third trial: lighting and furniture fragment the space to represent Wilde’s fractured psyche. Photo courtesy of Tectonic Theater Project.

The rear curtain, which had been red up to this point, faded to a mystic, swirling blue and the lighting in the courtroom used gobos to form fractured shadows and irregular angles on the floor. Lighting designer Betsy Adams explains, “We broke up the space physically with the furniture and we broke it up with the light. It suddenly got very cold. It was very, I don’t want to say violent, but it was a major visual change and I think it worked” (11 Dec. 2002). The narrators encircled Wilde, moving in dreamlike slow motion as they cited newspaper sources and hurled accusations towards him, such as: “Oscar Wilde is an artist who exercised considerable influence over young men,” and “He has used his art to subvert morality” (125). Throughout the scene, a drum beat, representing Wilde’s heartbeat, increased in tempo and pitch to build the dramatic tension. By the end of the third trial the narrators yelled their accusations while Wilde bent over to protect his head, each shout hitting him like a blow to the brain.

Unlike The Laramie Project, however, only half of the actors involved in these workshops went on to rehearse and perform Gross Indecency – due to time conflicts, levels of interest in the project, and casting considerations. In those who made the transition from workshop to performance, Kaufman recognized their significant feelings of ownership that directly influenced their performances. In The Laramie Project, all the actors would be involved in the workshop phase, although many joined the process as it progressed over its eighteen-month period. Also dissimilar to The Laramie Project, the rehearsal process for Gross Indecency was closer to a traditional process because the script had reached a much more finished state and the use of Moment Work had not yet been fully developed.

The result of the final script, however, was to humanize and intellectualize the reconstruction of Oscar Wilde's story by presenting it through a multitude of personal versions. Kaufman defined history in such a way that it exceeded Wilde's narrative to include an analysis of what it meant to be gay in Victorian England and what made Oscar Wilde the first gay man. Arthur Bartow explains, "He showed that prior to Wilde there was no special identification for a gay man. Whenever a play succeeds on the level that Gross Indecency did, it has to affect you both emotionally and intellectually (10 Dec. 2002).

#### Directorial Communication

In addition to the developing Moment Work, Kaufman's communication with his collaborators also developed during the creation of Gross Indecency. One major change from Gross Indecency to The Laramie Project illustrates Kaufman's different approach to his designers. Sarah Lambert was the only designer involved early in the workshop process during the creation of Gross Indecency. Lighting designer Betsy Adams, however, did not join the company until just before going into the theatre. There she played with different looks during rehearsals, but was never part of the workshops. This production was the first opportunity for Kaufman and Adams to work together, a collaboration that would continue throughout the making of The Laramie Project. For the majority of the process, Adams created lighting looks, showed them to Kaufman and received feedback. The two also created some of the looks together. Adams recalls, "I

found that with Moisés it's better to just try and show him what he wants to see [rather than verbally describing it]. Even though it takes longer, and it's a very slow process, I found that it's easier in the long run" (11 Dec. 2002). As the lighting continued to evolve and change, even into previews, so did their collaboration. "Throughout the whole process there was a real sense of being part of an ensemble," Adams continues. One common comment from numerous actors and designers who have worked with Kaufman describes his need to see their choices presented in the space no matter how much the idea was discussed previously. In the end, Kaufman must see it. Adams concludes, "One of the things I discovered over time was that no matter how wild of an idea I or he thought it was, I would never stop hearing about it until I showed it to him." This characteristic sometimes led to frustration because Kaufman does not always understand the technical difficulties of bringing his mental images to the stage. Greg Pierotti, an actor who worked with Kaufman on both Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project, explains:

He's very visionary, so sometimes he gets an idea of what he wants and he knows it, but then he doesn't understand that there are a million steps to realizing that. He just wants to see something happen because he's seen it in his mind. That can lead to a lot of frustrations both as a writer and as an actor. It's almost like a childlike quality. Betsy experiences that frustration a lot because he sees the lights he wants in his head but doesn't understand that you might have to re-hang the lights to do that. (10 Dec. 2002)

Costume designer Kitty Leach also joined the process when the company had moved into the Greenwich House Theatre to begin rehearsals. Due to scheduling conflicts, Leach had to turn down Kaufman's invitation to join the process during the

workshop phase. Kaufman had worked with Leach on projects at N.Y.U., so the two had already established a method of working together. Kaufman's process for Gross Indecency, however, differed somewhat due to the nature of the work. Previously, the two had only collaborated on plays with pre-existing texts. Creating an original work included the addition of new characters as the script completed its evolution towards the final stage. Similarly to working with Adams, Kaufman needed to physically see Leach's specific costume items, which he then accepted or rejected. From the first run-through, Leach gleaned a fairly clear idea of the basic structure for the costumes, such as the suits for the narrators and the more formal Victorian look for the courtroom, but the internal changes continued to develop throughout the rehearsal process. Leach recalls:

It was important for actors to be in their clothes during rehearsal. Moisés continually said, "Kitty, I have to see it." It was definitely a process. There was a script but it was changing all the time. Characters coming in and out at a great rate, and me running all over the place to get their stuff together, but it made it hard to get the things done which had to be done – like the boys' suits. (10 Dec. 2002)

Fortunately, due to their similar training at N.Y.U.'s Experimental Theatre Wing, both Kaufman and Leach were accustomed to working in this manner. "The process of experimental theatre goes on and on and at a certain point you stop the process, dress everyone up, and open the show," continues Leach. The collaboration formed a great marriage between Kaufman's needs and Leach's skills, who considers her strengths to be patient understanding with the experimental process and resourcefulness in fulfilling a director's needs quickly. She matter-of-factly reiterates, "In a workshop experience, I can't make all those decisions at the beginning because things change every single day."

The significance of quickly finding costume pieces, especially rehearsal clothes, is paramount to Kaufman's style of working. He wants his actors in the world of the piece for as much of the creation process as possible. Placing the actors in the clothes of the period put them in that completely different world which is unfamiliar to ours – a formal, buttoned-up world. "That Victorian world is so alien to us," Leach explains. "It was really, really important to Moisés that they were in costume from day one, which is not impossible to accomplish. He had them in rehearsal clothes from the very beginning." This characteristic of Kaufman's style relates directly to his predominately visual approach to making theatre. Leach finds Kaufman to be more visual than he thinks he is, but understands his need to have all the theatrical elements in place as the process occurs. She continues, "He has to see it, not because he can't see it in his head, but in order to get everyone to do what he wants them to do, they have to be in as close to the environment as they possibly can to what he wants the final project to be" (10 Dec. 2002).

The constant changes in the script did generate difficulties, but Kaufman trusted Leach to accomplish their mutual goals, and their conflicts mainly centered around timing and budget. Leach concludes by describing the urgency inherent in Kaufman's process: "His is the kind of work where you need everyone there all day, everyday, and when you have an idea, you have someone there to go out and get it" – a costly approach to making theatre. This certainly does not resemble the traditional design process of weekly production meetings and designers who work independently from the rehearsal

process. Kaufman's process, however, refuses to follow those traditional models for working.

Kaufman's communication with his actors also became more complex during the creation of Gross Indecency. The long workshop process focused his attention on the specific actor qualities that his work necessitates. Kaufman's work profits from actors who do not limit their energies to portraying just one character. Additionally, they must be interested in posing questions about form and be willing to experiment in creating forms to bring the content of the work to life on stage. Kaufman seeks actors who view the stage as a platform for discussion, a place where enlightened dialogue might occur. The desired result seeks an actor who becomes infatuated not only with the roles s/he plays, but also with the narrative and the discovery of structural forms. He states, "As a director, you are trying to inspire a certain kind of falling in love. That's a good definition of directing, someone who inspires a certain kind of falling in love for both the actors and the audience. It's an intelligent kind of falling in love" (19 March 2003).

As an acting coach, Kaufman's major objective for Gross Indecency centered on discovering specificity for each character. He brought in numerous character building exercises and worked individually with actors to create full, rich characters who might only have a single line in the script. Andy Paris recalls, "We did a lot of playing around with voice, taking a line and putting it into different places in the body, different ways of walking – all to really differentiate the characters so that all the newspapers weren't the same, all of Oscar's rent boys weren't the same" (18 March 2003). According to Paris, during this vocal and physical exploration, Kaufman excels at recognizing the diamond in

the rough – the specific gesture or vocal rhythm an actor performs that allows them to find the character. Paris continues, “He’ll go, ‘you did this thing with your hand and it really seemed to drop you in.’ And you do it, and it’s like, yeah, that’s the character.” Kaufman provides the space and the exercises to encourage exploration from his actors, then he shapes their choices into what fits the bigger picture of the work. “I think that he appreciates cleanliness and simplicity even in the messy stuff,” concludes Paris.

### Gross Indecency Aesthetics

Like much of his previous work, for Gross Indecency Kaufman collaborated with his designers to create a theatrical space that did not imitate reality. Rather, it created a separate reality that followed its own internal logic – a world that could only exist on a stage. Kaufman strives to create work where all the theatrical languages of set, costumes, lighting, blocking, sound, and text work in dialectical relationships in order to create his stage worlds. Gross Indecency was no exception.

As discussed previously, Kaufman works with his scenic designers to create sets that act as machines, interacting and changing as the content progresses, speaking through their visual medium rather than simply creating a realistic environment in which the action may take place. This approach creates a minimalist, essential look to the scenic design, often consisting of an open stage with relatively few, clean objects. In the case of Gross Indecency, this aesthetic played itself out in the use of the tables and chairs on a split playing area. Kaufman constructed the piece to work within this scenic form,

which he describes in his “author’s note” in the final script: “The set is a performance space divided into two playing areas. One is an elevated stage that serves as a courtroom and other locations and the second is the area in front of that elevated stage. In this second area there is a long table covered with books from which the narrators quote. This area should be at the same level as the audience” (5).

Also similar to his previous work, Kaufman allowed the workshop space to influence the final design. The construct of using the tables and chairs was inspired by the different furniture arrangements the collaborators used during the workshops. In this manner, the workshop space transforms into something of a found space, or site specific location, that inspires the world created for the final production. This effort extended to the lighting design as well. Adams explains, “We also wanted to integrate the performance space into the show. It was an old meeting house with huge windows covered by brown curtains, and a big brown curtain against the back wall, all of which Moisés wanted me to turn red” (11 Dec. 2002). The explorative environment of the workshop space blended into the rehearsal space and final designs as well. Adams continues, “It was interesting because we were trying to solve problems creatively. I brought lots of things in to play with, so that the actors could react to the lights. There was a real sense of being open to anything.” Unfortunately, scenic designer Sarah Lambert declined an on-record interview for the writing of this dissertation, so she can not directly explain how the workshop space inspired her design. Based on Kaufman’s comments, however, the reverence for the workshop space and the final production’s design are clearly interconnected. The final result of Lambert’s collaboration with

Kaufman created a theatrical world that Performance Art Journal's Mark Zimmerman described as: "a complexly minimalist set design which allowed the flow of Kaufman's pacing to dictate an amplification of tragedy and spectacle" (45).

Kaufman also worked closely with his designers to establish a different visual form for each of the three trials. For example, the more naturalistic lighting for the first trial established the Victorian courtroom, but as Wilde descended through the second and third trials, the lighting became more theatrical and saturated. The overall lighting design focused on etching the characters into the space with white light. Kaufman speaks in visual, non-technical terms when it comes to lighting design. In regards to lighting, one of his favorite words is "volume," which Adams now knows to mean etching the actor more clearly into the space. She explains, "He's very influenced by Brecht, who was all about white light. So, when we did use color, like in the scene where Oscar kisses Bosie [Lord Alfred Douglas], and when the boys are in their underwear, it had a lot of visual impact" (11 Dec. 2002). This use of color in the second trial expanded in the third trial's expressionistic form with its saturated blue backdrop curtain and intensely fractured and angled gobos, used to visually break up the space (see FIGURE 9).

This stylized play found its strongest realistic element in Kitty Leach's costume design, which also transformed subtly from trial to trial to visually reinforce the overall structure of the piece. Leach brought a working knowledge of Victorian England to the process. Based on her collaboration with Kaufman, she approached the first trial as a straight, legal thriller; the second trial as how the jury would have seen Wilde and his rent boys as opposed to how they would have actually appeared, (hence the period

underwear); and the third trial as the nightmare inside Wilde's head. Leach credits the overall success of her design to the actors: "A wonderful thing about experimental theatre is that the actors are so invested, so if you trust them and allow them to make clothing decisions, a lot of times the clothes just look amazingly better" (10 Dec. 2002). One example of these subtle changes influenced by the actor's investment is Michael Emerson's tie. Leach had made Emerson a champagne colored tie, but he brought in a red one that he liked better. Instead of demanding that the actor wear her design, Leach respected Emerson's personal investment in creating Oscar Wilde during the workshop process and therefore worked with him to arrive at a final decision. Their collaboration concluded with Emerson wearing his red tie in the first trial, Leach's champagne tie in the second, then a lighter one she brought in for the third trial. Leach recalls, "It was like the color, the life, had drained out of him. It was really tiny things like that which just kind of happened" (10 Dec. 2002).

In conclusion, the stage aesthetics for Gross Indecency mirrors the powerful visual impression of Kaufman's earlier work. The design elements created a nonrealistic, theatrical world that transformed as Wilde's journey from public self to nightmarish private persona progressed. In addition to reflecting Kaufman's past work, the staging elements also echo the design aesthetics that will be examined for The Laramie Project.

### Conclusion: Tectonic Theater Project's Growth

Gross Indecency's artistic and commercial success stemmed from a new perspective of Wilde's narrative that called upon the spectator to think and feel. The production opened at the Greenwich House Theatre, a small ninety-nine seat house off-off Broadway on February 27, 1997. No reviewers came, but because Tectonic Theater Project had become known in New York's downtown arts scene, the show continued to play to sold-out houses, and people were often turned away. Then the company's publicist wrote what is now a legendary letter, begging critics to come see the show. By the fourth week, the New York Times came. When Ben Brantley's review came out the following Wednesday, the whole company went to the bottom of the New York Times building to read it. Kaufman recalls the magic of that night: "Your life changes and you're not aware of it until later on. I remember that we were all reading the review at the bottom of the New York Times, there were like seventeen people, everybody with newspapers and there was a sense of, yes, our lives have changed and this was going to be something else" (American Theatre Wing Video). The strength of Brantley's review allowed the production to subsequently transfer to the off-Broadway Minetta Lane Theatre on June 5, 1997 with the original cast.

Kaufman and LaHoste became serious about developing the business organization of their company after Gross Indecency transferred to the Minetta Lane Theatre. They knew they needed to match their business development with their creative artistic achievement. Their first step involved hiring outside consultants to help restructure their

organization. LaHoste explains, “Before, we had literally spent all of our money on production and almost nothing on organizational development and we knew we had to do that” (11 Dec. 2002). Spending all their profits on each new production was both beneficial and harmful to the organization. Beneficial because their overhead was low, but harmful because all nonprofit organizations need overhead. Those consultants helped Tectonic Theater Project develop an organization that LaHoste describes as “very, very lean” as it remains to this day. The company’s business development’s largest benefit came through its ability to reimburse its artists. In Tectonic’s early days, everyone essentially worked for free. LaHoste continues: “Eventually we were able to get to the point where we started paying everybody – all the artists, crew and production staff – a decent, industry rate for what they do. That’s a very good feeling.”

During Gross Indecency’s Off-Broadway run, Kaufman conducted a one-week workshop to explore a piece that used Bertolt Brecht’s play Galileo as a point of departure in order to draw parallels between the lives of Galileo and Brecht, such as Galileo being called before the Inquisition and Brecht before the House on Un-American Activities. By the end of the workshop, Kaufman’s interest in the project diminished and no “product” came out of the exploration except a fifteen-minute piece. Kaufman saw no play emerging, so the workshops stopped, which is an important Tectonic characteristic – their focus lies in exploration. Kaufman recalls, “Our workshops were getting more sophisticated and more adept at doing what we do” (19 March 2003). For the first time during a project’s initial workshop, a full-time musician, and lighting and set designers

were present. This step forward in the workshop process would become paramount for the company's next major undertaking – the creation of The Laramie Project.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LARAMIE PROJECT

On November 11, 2002, during my first interview with him, Kaufman described the first performance of The Laramie Project in Laramie, Wyoming<sup>1</sup>. In the following transcript, Kaufman recalled the emotional intensity and connection between the audience, some of whom were portrayed in the performance, and his company, who had dedicated over eighteen months of their lives to the project:

MOISÉS KAUFMAN. When we went to Laramie it was so moving, so thrilling, and so scary. We got there and we were terrified. Because for us it was trial by fire, you know, we had spent over two years with these people asking them to open their hearts and their minds to us.

RICH BROWN. And their lives.

MK. And their lives. And here we were going to go back and say this is what we heard, and this is what we saw, and this is the story that we constructed from the stories you told us. So it was terrifying. But what I didn't expect, and this was the big revelation: *The audience walked into the theatre and I could feel that they were nervous too. They were nervous about being asked to relive one of the most difficult moments in their town's history. They were nervous about how their town was going to be portrayed. They were nervous about what they were going to learn about their town.* [Kaufman's emphasis]. So the play begins and the actors come onstage, and I know my company, they weren't breathing. And the audience wasn't breathing. There was nobody in the room that was

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<sup>1</sup> After premiering at the Denver Center Theatre Company on February 26, 2000, and transferring to its Off-Broadway run in New York at the Union Square Theatre, Tectonic toured their production of The Laramie Project to Laramie in November of 2000.

breathing, me included, least of all. I hadn't breathed for a week before. And then what happened, and this was like the most moving, powerful thing, was that the play began and three or four minutes into the play the first laughter happened. And that laughter broke the room open and all of a sudden the audience laughed and the actors heard the laughter . . .

RB. And breathed.

MK. And breathed. You can't laugh without breathing. And so then this connection occurred. Oh my god, I remember very vividly what the line was, it was about the wind. The Laramites were listening to the New Yorkers make a joke about the wind and that was a connection. That was like, "Oh, you have understood something that we deal with everyday."

RB. It's always humor.

MK. It is always the humor. And then what happened was, it was so layered and complicated, that relationship, because for example, someone would start speaking and a pocket of the audience would start giggling because that person was there with his or her friends and they knew, so different pockets would have different responses. But at the same time, and this was something that I never expected because I always thought in theoretical terms: this community is going to be able to see their story, their lives over the course of the year after Matthew's murder. But what didn't hit me was, because it's a town of 27,000 people, we got to know them in a way that they don't know each other.

RB. So you were introducing Laramie . . .

MK. To Laramie. And that was something that I never thought would happen. So we had Jonas Slonaker, who is a gay man in Laramie, speaking his words to people who either know him or don't know him, but had never heard him say these things. So all of a sudden these people, and I use Jonas as a very specific example because he's a gay man, who A, was in the closet for a long time, and B, said things to us that he perhaps not dare say to them. Which is, "I am having a horrific time living here as a gay man." So all of a sudden the people of Laramie were listening to one of their citizens open their hearts like this to 400 people a night and say, "I am dying. What you are doing is making an environment in which I can't live." This is something that that community would have never heard.

RB. Which is the concept of a community talking to itself through theatre, not necessarily to a theatre company but . . .

MK. Right. I went to Yeshiva all my life and there's one thing that Judaism is very big in which is this idea that usually in your work you don't make full circles, you make half-circles. Then in time the half-circles that you make come together. And this was that

moment. We had made the play, we had come to these people, and all of a sudden by us being there these people were talking to themselves. The circle was complete; the conversation had come full circle and that was really great. And then what happened was, the play was over and there was a lot of sobbing and a lot of laughter and the performance of the audience was very intense. There was so much at stake in that encounter. They were laughing and they were crying, but it had this, this edge, this sense that it was more than a play. The lights came down, end of play, the lights out, and I made a grave mistake. The cue for the lights onstage to come back up at the end of the play was the audience applause. I had told the stage manager to wait until they start applauding and then bring the lights up. And there was silence.

RB. That is what happened when I saw it here in New York.

MK. There was this moment when they couldn't . . . they just couldn't. So sure enough, they're not applauding and the lights aren't coming back up. So a big lesson for directors, you should never do a cue that's based on audience reaction. And finally, and I'll never forget it because I was sitting in the middle of the audience, there was this lonely person in the back [he demonstrates a slow, purposeful clap]. It was a moment where, and I still get chills, this person, very slowly somehow . . .

RB. Was trying to give back.

MK. Yeah, and then there was this sound, that was a roaring, deafening, like thunderous outcry, and as soon as the lights started coming up on the stage, the audience was roaring and the actors . . . By the time the lights came up the actors saw this standing ovation from these people they'd worked two years for and there was this moment of . . . and the actors started crying . . . because the company are all whooshes, we all cry at the drop of a dime. And so the actors were crying and the audience was crying, and you know when you go to college, they always tell you that the purpose of the theatre is catharsis.

RB. And this was total catharsis.

MK. I go to the theatre four, five nights a week. And I can count on one hand the number of times I've had a cathartic event in the theatre. But that was one of them. That was certainly a moment when I thought, this is what it can do, oh my god, this is what it can do. It can have this kind of power.

RB. A fully communal response.

MK. All these people were in a room looking at the last year of their lives trying to rise from the ashes of that year, with all of its complications, with one of the last lines of the play saying, "nothing has changed." And yet trying to say, okay, how do we move on from this?

### Brief Plot Synopsis

The Laramie Project does not claim to dramatize Matthew Shepard's murder. While the play discusses the crime, the focus of the piece investigates the disparate effects of Shepard's murder on the town of Laramie in the year following his death, allowing the contradictions of different perspectives from various citizens to co-exist. Don Shewey writes in American Theatre magazine: "Kaufman's gift as a director lies in his ability to create a structure that allows multiple, potentially conflicting points of view to stay afloat at the same time. Rather than dictating a single truth or conclusion, he invites the audience to synthesize the material themselves – a classic Brechtian technique" (17). To further complicate the storytelling, the Tectonic Theater Project company members themselves appear as characters in the play, drawing attention to the subjective nature of its narrative.

These characteristics fashion the play's three through-lines: Shepard's story, the story of Laramie, and the story of the company members. The script is structured chronologically from the company's first interviews, occurring a month after Shepard's beating, to the end of the Aaron McKinney trials – a period of just over eighteen months during which in excess of four hundred hours of taped interviews were collected from more than two hundred community members. The company edited this mass of collected material down to three acts, representing over sixty characters played by eight actors. Obviously, some characters are more prominent, in terms of durative stage time, while

others only appear briefly with one or two lines. The play consists of three key beats separated by act breaks. Act 1 focuses on the community prior to Matthew Shepard, act 2 investigates the community after Shepard, and act 3 questions how this community will survive the Shepard incident.

At first glance, one recognizes the differences between this script and that of a traditional play. Although it is broken down into three acts, there are no scene breaks. Rather, the script is divided into Moments, ranging from the first Moment – “Moment: a Definition,” which identifies the convention of actors transforming in and out of different characters in addition to playing themselves – to the final Moment – “Moment: a Departure” that depicts the Tectonic company members saying good-bye to the town of Laramie and its residents. Each Moment exists of its own accord, like a building block, with no clear transition into the following Moment. Instead, the writers allowed the tension between Moments to exist, relying on the audience’s reception and interpretation to assign meaning from one Moment to the next. The creation and arrangement of these Moments into the final script depicts the eighteen-month journey of the Tectonic Theater Project company members that this chapter will attempt to reconstruct.

### Kaufman’s Theoretical Questions

It warrants repeating that the theoretical foundation of Tectonic Theater Project is the search for new forms and theatrical languages to drive the creative process of each new piece. For Gross Indecency, Kaufman had previously assembled a rough draft of the

play – a collection of material that he wanted to hear – and through that examination, with the help of his collaborators, the final script emerged. For The Laramie Project, Kaufman approached his company with only a hunch – not a word of text. He wanted to tell the story of the town of Laramie, not the story of Matthew Shepard.<sup>2</sup> Some, but not all, of the company members who Kaufman invited responded to his hunch. Those who were interested in the project stayed, while those who were not chose not to participate.

In this manner, both Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project share similarities in that they are director-initiated works. However, the two starting points, and means of development, were vastly different. Tectonic member Stephen Belber explains:

Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project have similarities in that they are documentary-esque work (sic), but they are certainly different. I think he's determined not to fall into the rut of that form. That is the best thing, to not fall into the traditional way of storytelling. To say, "There's got to be a way that the technique, the form, will contribute to the story." It really is a valiant and important way to approach it, because the moment you start relying on one form, I think you're running the risk of creating stale material. (10 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman's use of verbatim interviews as primary source material, and his approach to collecting those interviews, signifies the key advancement in matching a new Tectonic form to the content of the piece – using a community of artists to collect and reconstruct the community of Laramie's narrative.

Kaufman's approach to this project, as previously discussed, was a leap into "not knowing" – not knowing if a play would emerge, not knowing how the residents of

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<sup>2</sup> The country had already been inundated with sound bites from the national media by the time the company decided to make their first journey. Kaufman did not want to merely contribute to forming the national image of Matthew Shepard.

Laramie would respond to his company's presence, and not knowing how to collect interviews.<sup>3</sup> Kaufman did, however, have a model on which to base his hunch. "The model came from Brecht, from the street scene. So the model was: 'Can we as a company go to Laramie and listen to the people of the town, then come back and get on a stage, and create one degree of separation between the audience in New York and the audience in Laramie?'" (Kaufman 11 Nov. 2002). From the beginning, the copulation of content and form had been established. The content consisted of a multitude of personal stories that could collectively capture the community's experience, and the form reconstructing their narrative utilizing the Brechtian model of observing an incident and reporting one's subjective experience of that incident.

In the original production, the Brechtian influence became apparent immediately when titles for different sections, such as "journal entries" and "the fence," were projected on the rear wall of the theatre (the twenty-first century version of placards).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Brechtian model influenced the presentational acting style as well, as the eight actors continually transformed, in full view of the audience, in and out of the characters they performed (many of whom they had personally interviewed) without ever completely "becoming" the character. In her review of a later production at the University of Wyoming for Theatre Journal (the company returned to Laramie after their New York engagement in 2000), Sarah Thompson notes, "More Brechtian than realist

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<sup>3</sup> Only two company members had previously conducted interviews before the company's first trip to Laramie.

<sup>4</sup> The projected titles matched the title of the Moment being performed, but not every Moment's title was projected during the performance.

theatre, The Laramie Project self-consciously reflects its creative processes and representational choices” (644).

This Brechtian model drove Kaufman’s questioning of the role of his actors in the creative process. He was asking, can actors be interviewers, transcribers, editors, and eventually directors and writers of performance, using the text the company had gathered? Although the bulk of the interviewing was done by Kaufman, head writer Leigh Fondakowski, and associate writers Stephen Belber and Greg Pierotti, each of the actors and some of the designers also conducted numerous interviews. Untrained in this work, the company members relied on their intuition and what they learned experientially as the process developed. Belber states:

I think how we learned to listen, as interviewers, from our first interview to our last, how we became good at shutting up and letting people reveal themselves to us was so important. To draw the parallel, if theatre can teach people how to listen . . . That’s where our society fails; we don’t listen in new ways. Thus we don’t listen to new people, to new ideas. So if theatre can make you listen differently, content aside, make you listen differently then before. . .  
(10 Dec. 2002)

The investigation of listening played a key role in the creation and performance of The Laramie Project. Not only was it challenging for the company to learn the skills of interviewing, especially listening without interrupting and establishing trust with their interviewees, but it was also a challenge to use their attention on listening in performance, attempting to inspire their audience to listen in new ways to numerous voices and viewpoints. In addition to those formidable challenges, interview text consists

strictly of dialogue with little inherent action, which makes it difficult to stage with interesting visual imagery. Assistant director Fondakowski explains:

In some ways interview text is unstageable. It's really hard to stage. It's just people talking right to the audience. Yet, there's something about putting ordinary people, just ordinary people on the stage that is very exciting to me because it brings out all of these elements of our humanity that are really extraordinary. Just how thoughtful and poetic we are as people. Just how interesting we are; that goes unnoticed. It's sort of like putting a spotlight on those qualities of human beings, but also on the opposite, how we lack compassion and empathy. (13 Dec. 2002)

As the interviews were collected, Moment Work became a very important tool in the workshops to facilitate the discovery of new forms that could help resolve Fondakowski's concerns.

#### Antecedents to the Form

Tectonic's use of verbatim interviews has spurred numerous comparisons between The Laramie Project and the work of artists like Emily Mann and Anna Deavere Smith. Clearly, both artists' use of verbatim interview text is an influential antecedent to this piece. Connections can also be drawn to the Living Newspaper, a type of theatre fashioned by the Federal Theatre Project between 1935 and 1939, whose performers collected and represented their own texts which explored major contemporary social,

economic, and political issues.<sup>5</sup> Much of their dialogue was “extracted from speeches, newspaper stories, and public documents” (Brockett 289).

History has always been a part of drama. Beginning with Aeschylus, through Shakespeare, Brecht, Shaw<sup>6</sup>, and others to today’s contemporary documentary drama (or docudrama), historical material continues to occupy our stages. Documentary theatre is defined by Melissa Salz Bernstein as “a dramatic text or performance that uses primary source material” (81). As often written today, it establishes a postmodern perspective of dramatizing history by foregrounding the question of whose truth is dramatized. Many current docudramatists embrace this pluralizing approach because true neutrality in reconstructing history has proven to be an impossible ideal to attain. One such playwright, Peter Cheeseman, writes: “We have to find a way of asking disturbing questions which do not take a single viewpoint or single political alignment” (qtd. in Elvgren xvi).

According to Bernstein, two different types of contemporary documentary drama exist: the personal/autobiographical and the social/political. The first uses autobiographical material extensively to re-tell the author/performer’s own experiences<sup>7</sup>; the latter incorporates interviews, trial transcripts, and multimedia materials to create “a kaleidoscope of images, perspectives, and memories, usually centered on one specific, controversial, current event” (Bernstein 82).

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<sup>5</sup> For some pieces, the Federal Theatre Project also hired out of work journalist to assist the theatre groups in collecting materials for their plays.

<sup>6</sup> The Persians, the history plays, Galileo, Saint Joan, and many others respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Spalding Gray’s Swimming to Cambodia is a prime example.

Both Emily Mann's "theatre of testimony" and Anna Deavere Smith's work falls in this second category, although not neatly. While Deavere Smith keeps her personal presence out of her work, portraying characters only, Mann's presence is found in two of her plays. First, just her voice is present as narrator/storyteller in Annula: An Autobiography (1978), and then in Greensboro (1996) Mann herself is a character who interviews two men, which can be viewed as leaning towards the first category of personal/autobiographical. And yet, to complicate the question even further, can one watch Deavere Smith perform the characters she interviewed without reading her personal/autobiographical experience of conducting those interviews and studying her subjects? In his essay, "The Holocaust and Rodney King, Memory and Silence: *Cliffs Notes* in the Age of Historical Reproduction," Alan Nadel questions how to read Deavere Smith's performance in Twilight: Los Angeles 1992: "Every moment of the performance, furthermore, forces us to look at and listen to an array of witnesses and at the same time to distrust what we see and hear. In what way do we repress the dual messages: this is a white man speaking; this is a black woman speaking?" (465 – 66).

The most obvious difference between The Laramie Project and these works centers on Tectonic's decision to foreground the actors' presence in conjunction with the characters they play. By coming out and naming themselves, reading from their personal diaries, in short, speaking to the audience as themselves and sifting their experiences into the "kaleidoscope of images, perspectives, and memories" surrounding Laramie after Shepard's death, The Laramie Project combines both the personal/autobiographical and the social/political forms of documentary theatre. Kaufman and his collaborators have

not created a brand new form of theatre, but they have successfully combined Bernstein's types of documentary theatre to fashion something different from Mann and Deavere Smith's work.

Yet, most critics view The Laramie Project as documentary theatre and compartmentalize it with Mann and Deavere Smith's work. In his New York Times review of the New York premiere of Laramie, critic Ben Brantley writes: "The production's translation of transcribed interviews and documents may directly recall the methods of the performance artist Anna Deavere Smith, especially in her study of racial conflict in Brooklyn, Fires in the Mirror" (Brantley E1). Brantley continues by describing Laramie as a "very earnest and often deeply moving work of theatrical journalism."

However, Kaufman dislikes the labels of theatrical journalism and documentary theatre because he feels they are usually presented and understood by most audiences as communicating an objective truth, while he believes that his plays are not necessarily about that single truth. Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project both encourage us to ask, "What is the truth?" What is history and how can theatre construct and reconstruct it? Who is telling whose stories? Kaufman rebuts, "The Laramie Project is not a documentary play. It's a very personal account of what we saw and what we heard. It is an attempt at a reconstruction of what that town went through based on the limited sample that we gathered. That's why it was so important for us to have the company in that play" (13 Nov. 2002). In short, Kaufman does not believe that reality can be captured and recreated. All we can ever be left with are different, often contradictory,

interpretations of the same event. Kaufman's interest lies in the dialogue created between these differing versions.

When directly asked to differentiate his work from Anna Deavere Smith and Emily Mann, Kaufman specifically identified their differences in terms of the focus of each artists' intention:

I think for Anna, her main interest is in recording people's text – character through language. And I think that for Emily Mann there is a similar space where the performance occurs, a sort of documentary interest. That's not my interest at all. My interest is purely in theatrical language and theatrical form, so right there you have a huge schism. They're interested in a very specific kind of work and I'm interested in posing questions about form. The focus is really different. [. . .] Tectonic Theater Project points to the stories that we tell as much as we point to how those stories are told, and created, and constructed. I always try to put the storyteller into the story, and I try to pose those questions about how story is reconstructed and put it inside the work. (19 March 2003)

And yet, additional similarities also exist between Deavere Smith's work and Kaufman's – such as collaborative creation. After conceiving, writing, and performing Fires in the Mirror by herself, Deavere Smith now travels with a group of dramaturgs who help her collect interview data and shape the final script (although she, like Kaufman, holds final authorship power). A difference, however, resides in performance. Where as Deavere Smith performs all the characters in her work, an entire company constructed and performed The Laramie Project.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the company members' perspectives and varying interests in the creation of the work played themselves out on the stage. Nearly every company member interviewed for this dissertation stated that the

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<sup>8</sup> Although Emily Mann does not perform in her plays, she often directs their premieres.

piece would not be what it is if it were not for the variety of input from each of the company members and that their involvement affected their performances. Stephen Belber distinguishes another important dramaturgical difference from Deavere Smith's work, stating, "The whole inclusion of ourselves was to say, 'This is a subjective thing, we're showing you what our perspective of this interview was.' I think that's what made it a theatre piece, that's why it's not a journalism exercise" (10 Dec. 2002).

One final similarity between Deavere Smith and Kaufman lies in the breadth of interviews and length of the creative process. For example, while creating Twilight: Los Angeles 1992, Deavere Smith and her dramaturgs returned to the community on numerous occasions to collect over two hundred interviews, which she distilled down to twenty-seven characters. Likewise, because The Laramie Project was devised over a period of eighteen months, company members were able to trace the personal growth in their individual characters. Toward the end of the process, company members often heard their interviewees contradicting their earlier beliefs, making each individual's character arc, in response to the tragedy of Shepard's death, a significant element of the overall content of the work. Tectonic member Kelli Simpkins recalls, "Going back a year later for the trials, some people had changed. So it was difficult to reconcile presenting aspects of the character if their views, their philosophies, or their politics had changed in the past year. So sometimes it was, 'He doesn't think that anymore, why are we presenting that?' That became difficult" (18 March 2003).

So, while the difference in Kaufman's intention differs from Deavere Smith and Mann's work, the heritage of this style of work should not be disowned. All three artists

emphasize the plurality of perspectives centering on a single social/political event, the artistic arrangement of verbatim interviews to fashion a narrative with a strict commitment to being truthful to the interviewees' meaning, and reconstructing a community (no matter how small or large). The key distinction for Kaufman's work resides in the collaborative process of creation which aims for theatrical storytelling and the inclusion of the performers' experience as an essential element of the narrative.

### Who Tells Whose Stories?

Like the Oscar Wilde trials, Kaufman considers the Matthew Shepard murder a watershed historical moment – an event in history that illuminates a culture's stance on major societal issues, including, but not limited to: homosexuality, class, violence, privileges and rights, sexual politics, education, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance. The murder of Matthew Shepard represented one of those watershed moments for Kaufman:

There was something that really resonated because the imagery was so potent, the violent nature of the crime. On a very pragmatic level, it was in every newspaper, on every news station. There are twenty anti-gay homicides a year that are reported, which means there are twice as many. There are seven thousand hate crimes [per year], but for some reason this one resonated. (13 Nov. 2002)

One element, perhaps, of that resonance originates from the lack of national media attention given to the other seven thousand hate crimes. The significance of the crime led Kaufman to his hunch: if he went to the town of Laramie and listened to the people, could

his company collect enough material to create a document, allowing theatre to contribute to a national dialogue, not only on the crime, but where the nation stood at the end of the millennium in terms of these major societal issues?

The search began with this question and played itself out through Kaufman's long-standing questions: How can theatre construct or reconstruct historical stories? How does one make that construction a part of the narrative itself in order to increase questions of identity? How can the storytellers become part of the narrative? Upon first arriving in Laramie, Kaufman, concerned with safety, instructed his company members to work in pairs and carry cell phones. That caution did not last long, however, because each company member had his/her own unique interests in the project. They went in search of the story that their personal questions and curiosities guided, resulting in an interesting situation – after they returned from the first trip and went into the workshop space no single person knew all the material that had been gathered.

Instead of asking each company member to report on her/his findings, Kaufman asked his collaborators to actually embody those they had interviewed and present the people to the ensemble, allowing the group to explore Laramie through the world and languages of theatre rather than through text. In describing that first workshop Kaufman explains, "They would say, 'What struck me most about this person was the way that they used their scarf.' And they would say a couple of lines from that person" (11 Nov. 2002). The collaborators used costumes, props, and other theatrical devices to convey not only something about the person they had interviewed, but also about their subjective experience of the interview. During this first workshop, Kaufman recognized that his

collaborators had become personally invested in many of their interviewees, which meant they would argue strenuously for their characters' voices to be included in the play (Shewey 18).

Each interview was approximately two hours in length. Much of the material was not directly connected to the subject matter of the play, and therefore not useful.

Kaufman asked his collaborators to only present what moved them, what struck them.

He continues, "The moment that I ask an actor to do that they become editors, because they have to select and choose and cut and paste text to present. They went from being actors, to interviewers, transcribers, directors, and performance writers. They were the theatre makers and that was exciting" (11 Nov. 2002). By embracing the numerous company voices and their differing interests in the creative process, Kaufman was eventually able to facilitate the creation of a script that included over sixty characters from the town of Laramie – certainly one of the strengths of the piece. Actor and writer Stephen Belber states, "I think an audience needs that. How refreshing it is to get ten splatter shots [ten artists' perspectives], because this is about a town, there's no single vision" (10 Dec. 2002).

The story of Tectonic's process of creation resides in the final script of The Laramie Project and leads an audience to question the creative process as well as the content of the work. What was included, left out, edited and rearranged? Whose stories are being told and who are these people telling them? One of the first statements in the opening narrator's lines is: "The play you are about to see is edited from those interviews,

as well as from journal entries by members of the company and other found texts”

(Kaufman, Laramie 5). Upon seeing the New York production, Arthur Bartow recalls:

There was a question in my mind about what he included and what might have been omitted. It was set up to make you aware that there were choices, choices of who was interviewed, what was retained of the conversation, the carefulness of the community, the acting group’s contribution to it. It was an interesting process that was under his control and not under his control because he was allowing the company to create too. (10 Dec. 2002)

One benefit of Kaufman’s approach stems from allowing diverse artistic intuitions and intellectual curiosities to bloom; different company members became interested in multiple aspects of the event. Because of those varying interests, they were able to conduct interviews across a diverse section of the population, ranging from Doc O’Connor, a limousine driver in his fifties, to Zubaida Ula, an Islamic feminist in her twenties. Kaufman justifies his approach:

The work I do is so epic in size and magnitude that it profits from having a number of people talking about it at the same time. One of the great things about The Laramie Project is that I could never have written that alone. And it profited from the form. [. . .] I wanted to tell the story of a community and to tell the story of a community, I needed a community. (9 Dec. 2002)

Considering the effect that the plurality of voices has had on this script, one wonders what would have happened if a single author had attempted to create this piece. Would that cross-section of Laramie vary as widely? Or would a solo author only follow the voices that spoke to her/his subjective views and ignore the total complexity of Laramie? It is impossible to know, yet Fondakowski believes that the work could only have been written through the collaborative creation process. “I think one reason why

people identify with this play and love it is because they can find their clan in the play. They can find the people they identify with. They can find the voices that speak to their heart, because there was a whole range of people who pulled those voices together” (13 Dec. 2002). At the same time, one should also question Fondakowski’s “clan” and Kaufman’s phrase: “I wanted to tell the story of a community.” Does collecting sixty voices<sup>9</sup> from the twenty-seven thousand residents of Laramie form a viable cross-section of the “community”? Critic Robert Brustein describes Tectonic’s efforts as “a very generous representation. By the end of the evening, we feel that we have met a fair sampling of Laramie residents” (29). Yet, it is important to ask: no matter how diverse or how many interviews are conducted, or how embedded interviewers become in a community, can outsiders ever “reconstruct” that entire “community”?

Nonetheless, in addition to expanding the breadth of personalities represented on stage, the company’s varying interests drove the thematic investigation to greater depths, expanding the complexity of the issues presented. Belber, explains:

To try and cover this piece alone would have been impossible. It’s not just one person going out and getting a lot of voices. It’s one person who has an inclination to find out what the perpetrators have to say, one person who has a personal need and desire to find out what the priest has to say. I think that contributes to the depth and focus of the interview. (10 Dec. 2002).

To cite specific examples, Kaufman was interested in the conflict between the university workers and local residents; Fondakowski and Greg Pierotti wanted to

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<sup>9</sup> The sixty-plus characters were distilled down from over two hundred interviews, which produced over four hundred hours of tapes. An exact count of the total number of residents interviewed does not exist.

investigate homophobia in the community; Belber was driven to learn more about the perpetrators; as an outsider, who kept his “artistic distance” from the interview process and periodically come into the workshops, associate writer Steve Wangh focused on the larger structural picture of the piece; and, although it did not make it into the play, Barbara Pitts investigated domestic abuse in Laramie. Each company member’s interest in specific aspects of the story varied on a continuum, often manifested in self-created investigatory roles, while simultaneously understanding the bigger picture of the work’s structure.

For example, after reading the article in the New York Times and seeing the picture of Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, Belber immediately felt a need to discover what had happened. Upon arriving in Laramie, his investigation into the two young men’s lives came as a revelation, spurred a deeper level of understanding of their lives, and eventually added to the complexity of the piece through Andy Paris’ somewhat sympathetic portrayal of them. He explains, “There are no monsters. I think that to break an expectation is the most theatrical thing – to set up a stereotype and explode it. So I became conscious that that was what I wanted to do in this group, that that was my role. And I got obsessive about it, about getting to Aaron and Russell and getting their families in the piece” (10 Dec. 2002).

As anticipated, much of the material gathered during the company’s interviews never made it to the stage. Because Kaufman encouraged the company to pursue their personal interests, breadths of issues were investigated that are not readily apparent in the

text, but informed the company's overall understanding of Laramie as a community.

Pitts recalls her interest in domestic abuse in the town:

I was interested in characters that were working on domestic abuse, and seeing where Matthew Shepard fit into all of that, how that was part of the picture. And I think one of Moisés' strengths is that he knows what an audience can handle, and he knows you can't have the story be about too many things. But he didn't discourage me from pursuing it. (9 Dec. 2002)

In addition to these more narrowed areas of interest, Wangh focused on the larger, structural nature of the work. Wangh worked mainly with the writing team of Fondakowski, Belber, Pierotti, and Kaufman. He never conducted interviews or created Moments. So unlike other company members who were more connected to the text of individual characters or Kaufman's concentration on form, Wangh was able to focus on the progression of emotional acting beats and the importance of what was said. He recalls asking specific questions during the final writing process, "Are we going to come out at the end feeling relief, or forgiveness? What happens to the anger that one feels in the middle of the third act?" (10 Dec. 2002). The shifting emotions for both the character and the audience fascinated Wangh and informed his contributions to the writing.

The subjectivity of the creative process became a major element in the overall form of The Laramie Project through the inclusion of the actors themselves as characters. Kaufman made this decision because he did not want to include omnipresent narration, which may have given the impression of communicating an objective truth about the Matthew Shepard murder. He explains:

I wanted you to know us. I wanted you to know that half of us are gay, that half of us are Jewish, half are Latino, that

all of us are New York theatre artists. And that we live in a very privileged community in the upper west side of Manhattan. I wanted you to know that. And we are not prejudice free. We are not lacking a point of view. On the contrary, we have a point of view and we're going to show you what that is. (13 Nov. 2002)

In the original production, Greg Pierotti, playing Greg Pierotti, was the second voice heard in the play. He was the first to exhibit the subjective interpretation of a Laramie resident:

GREG PIEROTTI. My first interview was with Detective Sergeant Hing of the Laramie Police Department. At the start of the interview he was sitting behind his desk, sitting something like this (*he transforms into Sergeant Hing*):

I was born and raised here.

My family is, uh, third generation. (Laramie 5)

During that moment of transformation, which took place in front of the audience, Pierotti sat down with his head tilted downward, paused for a beat, then lifted his head and performed his vocal and physical interpretation of Sergeant Hing. While foregrounding the actors' subjectivity may imply Kaufman's sentiment, "We have a point of view and we're going to show you what that is," Kaufman's own authorship of the project in determining the selection of the final text is not conveyed in the script. In the end, Kaufman served as the justifying lens through which even the individual and differing subjectivities were transformed, yet his own authoring lens remained outside the frame. This element will be discussed under the Tectonic technique of developing organizing principles and through-lines.

Kaufman's original staging also maintained the actors' presence as company members by arranging them either onstage or in the visibly exposed wings, watching the action unfold along with the audience when they were not performing in a scene. This allowed the actors to express their experience as storytellers – their role as creative interpreters and narrative device. Pitts states:

I was playing company member Barbara Pitts, so I was very proud when that moment happened. It is very weird to sit on stage as yourself, but there is a real liberating kind of thing where, if the audience is enjoying something you can just turn out and smile with them and be like, "Yeah, I know, that's amazing isn't it?" You can enjoy it with each other and enjoy it with them. (9 Dec. 2002)

The production I saw in New York demonstrated Pitt's comment. The acting company continually connected with the audience through direct eye contact and smiling or laughing with them as themselves when the audience laughed at something their character said. The performers constantly shifted between actor presence and character presence, sliding along Michael Kirby's continuum of acting and not-acting. In his book A Formalist Theatre, Kirby examines acting by tracing the acting/not-acting continuum from one extreme to another. At the "not-acting" end of the scale, the performer "does nothing to feign, simulate, impersonate, and so forth" (3). At the polar opposite "acting" end of the continuum, the performer's behavior reinforces the matrixes of fictional character, time, and place. For example, when Pitts performed Catherine Connolly's line, "And so – she was – a kind of lesbian who knew I was coming and she wanted to come over and meet me immediately," her vocal inflection on "kind of lesbian" received a laugh from the New York audience. Pitts held, dropped her character, smiled and

gestured to the audience as herself as if to say, “I know, can you believe she said that?” then shifted back into Connolly and continued on with her next line.

Finally, the actors’ presence came to the foreground throughout the script in the form of journal entries recorded by the company members throughout the creative process. In performance, different narrators announce at different times, “Journal entries – members of the company,” then identify the actor before they state their personal entry. Reviewer Sarah Thompson writes, “The actors self-deprecatingly present their preconceptions about the West before the project, including fears of being gay-bashed in Laramie” (644). The actors also offer their fears, self-doubts, and constant questioning. Amanda Gronich playing Amanda Gronich says, “I’ve never done anything like this in my life. How do you get people to talk to you? What do you ask?” (Laramie 10).

The result of these subjective devices culminates in the constant awareness of the actors’ presence during performance. In this way, Kaufman’s use of the Brechtian street scene model – in which an eye-witness demonstrates how a traffic accident took place to a collection of bystanders – achieved its purpose. Found in John Willet’s book, Brecht on Theatre, Brecht writes in “The Street Scene”: “He [the demonstrator] never forgets, nor does he allow it to be forgotten, that he is not the subject but the demonstrator” (125). In the performance of The Laramie Project, the actors continually fluctuated between character, self, and social commentator on the action. Kaufman explains:

I believe profoundly that every time you take two pieces of text and you put them together, you are becoming the architect, you are becoming the storyteller. There’s a way in which you are telling as much your story as you are telling the story of the people whose words you are

quoting. A lot of my work is interested in pointing towards that fact. (19 March 2003)

By staging the actors' transformation into and out of character in view of the audience, Kaufman constantly reinforced the theatricality of the piece, keeping the spectators aware of the storytelling. On a pragmatic level, the presentation of sixty-five characters without breaking the rhythmic flow of the piece necessitated this kind of form. The breadth of Laramie residents presented, each with his/her individual kernel of truth, denotes one of the major strengths of the work. After being bombarded by the national media blitz, the citizens of Laramie found in the Tectonic company members people who were interested in listening to their stories – their whole stories, not just the sound-byte versions. Company members specifically sought out under-represented voices in an effort to expand the number of perspectives collected, which allowed the creation of a rich, fully complicated, and fractured representation of Laramie, Wyoming. Thompson writes that The Laramie Project's "strategy of sewing together fragments captures the community's unresolved struggles, the variety of its individual personalities, and, finally, its ultimate resistance to ever being wholly contained within any representation" (645).

The diversity of voices represented in The Laramie Project propelled the work to an unexpected plane on which theatre introduced the citizens of Laramie to each other, many for the first time. Laramie talked to Laramie through the work. In his unpublished essay "Listening to Laramie: Trying to Understand the Town Where Matthew Shepard Died," Belber writes, "Throughout the entire next year, Moisés would keep reminding us that the tradition of theater began with the Greeks, for whom the form was about a community speaking to itself." The Laramie Project approaches that classic ideal of

communal art. For instance, the company members introduced Dr. Cantway, the emergency room doctor, to Rob DeBree, detective sergeant for the Albany County Sheriff's Department. On the night of the premiere performance in Denver, Colorado, company members witnessed the two men meeting one another and talking about the night of Shepard's beating, which they had never done. Additionally, as discussed in the interview at the beginning of this chapter, Jonas Slonaker, a gay man in his forties, was able to communicate his darker feelings concerning Laramie through The Laramie Project. Referring to the performances in Denver and Laramie, Kaufman states, "The people of Laramie were listening to one of their citizens open their hearts like this to 400 people a night and say, 'I am dying. What you are doing is making an environment in which I can't live.' This is something that community would have never heard" (11 Nov. 2002).

It can be argued that this work also helped the town of Laramie begin its healing process. In addition to participating in interviews during the eighteen-month long creation process, individuals portrayed in the piece and others directly involved in the incident and its aftermath were present during post-show discussions after the premier in Denver and on the company's return to Laramie for performances in November of 2000, including "one jury member who commented that the performance and talkback provided the first chance the community had to de-brief and heal" (Thompson 644). Rebecca Hilliker, professor of theatre at the University of Wyoming and one of the first contacts in Laramie for the company, had made similar comments in the press.

### The Search for New Forms Ignited by New Content

The Laramie Project presented Kaufman with the ideal situation in which to marry new content – documentation in conjunction with verbatim interviews – with his developing technique of writing performance through Moment Work, stemming from his search for new theatrical forms and languages. Because Kaufman and his company embraced “not knowing,” arriving in the town in an unbalanced state of curiosity and exploration that continued into their creative workshops, they remained open to the discovery of new forms to illuminate the material they had gathered, especially in regards to their interviews. Fondakowski, who continues to develop work around verbatim interviews, states, “Even when an interviewee is talking to me, I’m already thinking about performance materials, forms, this material is going to have. It’s like second nature” (13 Dec. 2002). With this skillful awareness, the company members not only recorded interview text, but gathered individual characters, mentally recording the specific traits that they would need to present those characters onstage – a striking physicality, a repeated nonverbal utterance or verbal phrase, or a specific costume piece. These theatrical elements used to demonstrate each character became the new languages of the workshops in conjunction with the text.

Kaufman gathered a group of collaborators who were willing to explore his search for new forms with him, and who contributed individual artistic strengths to the company. Stephen Belber, for example, had been working as a part-time journalist at the

United Nations as a stringer for a Saudi press agency. He believes he was invited on the original trip to Laramie because, “Moisés was looking for someone to get involved, especially with the perpetrators, who had the ability to go in there and ask questions as a journalist, as opposed to just an actor” (10 Dec. 2002). In addition to becoming interviewers, Kaufman asked his collaborators to become editors, writers, and directors. In short, with The Laramie Project, Kaufman realized his technique of utilizing his collaborators to write performance. “You can never separate the writing of material from stage picture. Stage picture and blocking can support something that the words alone can’t support,” explains Pierotti. “Even though I was writing Moments by myself, I was writing them with visual unfoldings all the time” (12 Dec. 2002). At times, in fact, Pierotti and the other collaborators wrote Moments for the entire company. Because everyone was completely immersed in the creative process, they all knew the characters around whom they were creating Moments, as well as the actors who would most likely be performing those Moments (if they remained in the final script).

Kaufman is the first person to acknowledge that he could not have written The Laramie Project alone. His reliance on his collaborators to complement his limitations denotes an important trait of his leadership. For instance, Kaufman’s directorial aesthetic is heavily visual. Fortunately, his long-term collaborator Stephen Wangh’s personal experience is much more aural or musical; he listens for the layering of different voices. When writing, he experiences “the rhythm, like a fast scene followed by a slow scene, which I think Moisés also respects,” he explains. “But it doesn’t jump to him like it

jumps out to me. [. . .] So when you are painting with sound, or using sound, you have to control it in a different way, through different containers or forms” (10 Dec. 2002).

This combination of collaborators, technique, and content formed an ideal situation for Moment Work to evolve. The first segment of the workshops included presenting all the characters from Laramie, through the theatrical language of performance, to all the members of the company. The next step involved the creation of Moments. Like the amassing of interviews, the first phase of Moment Work consists of compiling a mass of individual Moments, like collecting a number of building blocks. The emphasis during this phase of the process remains on exploration, on investing in the search. “Even if the Moment doesn’t turn up in the play, you might find your way to a new form, and that’s really what the Moment Work is about – finding new theatrical forms”, states Pitts. “So it’s important to let it be that open, because you never know who is going to come up with something” (9 Dec. 2002). Moment Work acts as a tool for creating new forms. It encourages the collaborators’ creative intuition to compose within theatrical languages – the elements of text, lighting, sound, costumes, set, and blocking.

As the company discovered new forms through the creation of Moments, they were added to a large list posted in the workshop space on butcher paper, which acted as a constant visual reminder of the tools at hand for the collaborators.<sup>10</sup> Each narrative form could have numerous variations. For example, an interview may be in the form of

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<sup>10</sup> Although not all of these narrative forms were used in the final script, that workshop list included: cross-referencing; interviews; personal narratives: phone conversations and emails; journal entries; written material: data sheets and release forms; environment/images; bars; fiction; media materials; recorded conversations; self-interviews; and group experiences (“Re: Laramie Forms”).

two actors – one playing the interviewer and one playing the interviewee – or one actor may introduce the interview then transform directly into the interviewee as company member Amanda Gronich did in “Moment: Lifestyle 2,” where she alternated between playing herself and the Baptist Minister (who is not named in the script at his request). After establishing the interview as a telephone call with the help of sound cues and lighting, the Moment concludes as follows:

BAPTIST MINISTER. Now, as for the victim, I know that that lifestyle is legal, but I will tell you one thing: I hope that Matthew Shepard as he was tied to that fence, that he had time to reflect on a moment when someone had spoken the word of the Lord to him – and that before he slipped into a coma he had a chance to reflect on his lifestyle.

AMANDA GRONICH. Thank you, Reverend, I appreciate your speaking to me. (Laramie 69)

This results in form and content copulating. As Gronich transformed back into herself through the slow exhalation of breath, the audience saw on her face the effects of the Minister’s words, communicating Gronich’s personal experience in the interview.

### The Copulation of Form and Content

Since the writers of performance created theatrical forms to communicate specific content – an interview, a hospital report, a live news broadcast – the copulation of form and content occurred during the original writing of each Moment. The emphasis on these

two binaries, however, continually fluctuated throughout the workshops. At times, Kaufman simply assigned a theme for the next day's workshop – homophobia, the perpetrators, the town's response to the Russell Henderson trial – and asked the collaborators to return with Moments. Or the company was instructed to search through their interviews for content relating to a particular theme. Still other workshop time was spent exploring questions of form – searching collectively in a room for the correct form into which content could be dropped.

The question of representation – how do you perform a demonstration of an interviewee – drove one such search. The company's first reaction to this type of question usually began with discussion, trying to determine who could play what. Could women play men (which did occur in the performance) and what did that mean? How could representation be highlighted to emphasize the theatricality of transformation and the subjectivity of their storytelling in order to maintain the idea that these are actors representing the Laramie citizens' stories as edited through their own interpretation? After their initial discussion, the company members went away and created Moments dealing specifically with this content question, searching for its proper form. Kaufman recalls that workshop:

Greg [Pierotti] came in with a tape-recorder, set it down, and the tape-recorder played, "Good evening, my name is Rob DeBree . . ." Then he turned the tape off and said, "Good evening, my name is Rob DeBree . . ." And then he began retelling everything we had heard on the tape. Then he rewound the tape and did it again. That was a piece that dealt with representation. Obviously, Greg was not Rob DeBree, but he was saying his words. Then we used that for other moments with other text. So we used other subject matter with this form. (9 Dec.2002)

That form remained in the final work, and it clearly raises the issue of representation and subjectivity in the initial minutes of The Laramie Project. They discovered it, however, only after long explorations by the entire company. Belber's remembrance of that particular workshop is as follows:

We spent hours just fucking around with twenty tape recorders onstage and a candle, and we'd all be offstage looking at that. Then one of us would walk on and start with a monologue, that didn't really feel right. Greg walks on with a tape recorder, starts his interview, that's kind of closer, then going back and doing this whole Our Town mock narrator and introducing Laramie the same way – all searching for form. We knew we wanted to start with Sergeant Hing. So we were searching for the best way to present it, and if we find the best way then is that the best monologue to start with? (10 Dec. 2002)

Belber's statement identifies how the search for forms often led to new questions regarding proper content, the repeated use of a form, or how one Moment is recontextualized by what precedes it – in short, the inherent reciprocal nature in the relationship between form and content. This relationship between form and content, of which begets which, is an ever-changing, organic, and flowing correlation.

The theoretical question of representation stems from the performative action of transformation, which also became a formal question to explore in the workshop. Here the specific structure of Moment Work – “I begin . . . I end” – forced the performer to carefully pinpoint exactly where that instant of change from actor to character occurred. Pitts asks, “So at what point when I put on these glasses do I become the character? So you can do that as a moment rehearsal. You tell the actors to bring in different ways of showing how the costume becomes the character.” The point of such precise exploration

was to heighten the intersection of the actor presenting or demonstrating the character but not becoming the character, of showing the audience rather than trying to convince them that they are the character. The structure of “I begin . . . I end” increases the actors’ awareness of this intersection. Kaufman’s role was to constantly encourage the collaborators to explore how their bodies and voices could demonstrate someone else, in order to share that transformation with the audience.

Pragmatically speaking, the use of transformation was also important for the overall copulation of form and content in order for eight actors to present over sixty roles. The form of transformation in view of the audience ideally fit the content – multiple townspeople’s perspectives on the Shepard incident. In addition, the formal device of each actor playing numerous roles reflects that content, again encouraging the two to copulate. The actors’ subjectivity, trying to understand the citizens’ lives and how something like Shepard’s murder could happen in Laramie, was also heightened.

Managing director LaHoste describes the outcome:

It illuminates the mystery that this play is, that the story is – not a mystery of who did it, but of how and why. And furthermore, how do we understand each other, create a community, how do we tolerate each other; know each other after this event? I think the play is really about that, and how does one person ever really “tell” about another. So that form really underlines that in a very beautiful way. And yes, in the creation of the play, the multiplicity of voices certainly could only be done that way. (11 Dec. 2002)

The openness with which the workshops were conducted allowed a continual vacillation between searching for the proper forms and locating the specific content to drop into those forms. Unlike staging a newly written text where discoveries in the

rehearsal process could lead, at most, to a playwright making dramaturgical alterations through rewrites, the dialectic established in the Tectonic workshops – because Kaufman was the director and writer – allowed form to dictate content and content to dictate form. The way in which “Moment: the Fence” at the end of Act I (Kaufman, Laramie 34) was created displays this dialectical exchange. Greg Pierotti originally created the Moment. He found numerous opinions about the fence from the collected interviews, which he arranged in an order. Then he directed his fellow collaborators to come forward with a chair, sit down, and read their bit of text. All the characters came from different emotional and intellectual places in regards to their feelings and thoughts about the fence, so he directed the actors to come from different areas on the stage. At the end of the Moment, the actors stood and spun their chairs around causing the backs of the chairs to form the visual image of the fence. Pierotti recalls, “If I had created the piece without putting all of the Moment Work ideas into it while I was writing it, it would have just been this intellectual conversation about a fence. There is an extra level that is only brought about because of the form” (12 Dec. 2002). This Moment did not make its way to the final script, however, in its original form. The company embraced the visual form of the fence but wanted to find different text to replace Pierotti’s original content. Only a few of his initial lines remained, the rest were removed or replaced. So the form remained, but the majority of the text and the ideas communicated from that text changed. Pierotti sums up, “It may be the text that ends up mattering and the form needs to be replaced. On the other hand, form might actually determine what text goes in there” (12 Dec. 2002).

Finally, the copulation of content and form can also occur when a previously discovered form is used, in which case, the company searches for content to drop into it. The physical arrangement of the chairs – two rows of four chairs each, staggered for sightlines – that remained in place mid and upstage right throughout the third act demonstrates a primary example (see FIGURE 10). Amanda Gronich originally created the “Moment: Jury Selection” for the Russell Henderson trial, which occurs early in the third act. When she originally presented the Moment, act 3 had not been written because the company was waiting for the outcome of the Aaron McKinney trials.<sup>11</sup> Kaufman, however, knew that the third act would revolve around the trials. He recalls, “She had given me a scenic form that dealt with the trial. So I thought, ‘What else can I put into that form’” (9 Dec. 2002). It then became a question of finding content that fit the form. Obviously the latter trial (Aaron McKinney’s death penalty case) would also fit, but the questions became, how to make the funeral fit the construct, the Fred Phelps demonstration, and the final homage to Our Town. Kaufman wanted to include a theatre based collective unconscious connection to Thornton Wilder’s play, as if to say, “this murder could have happened anywhere.”

The answer came through finding the content to insert into the form through contextualization, and discovering new forms that fit within the larger form of the chair arrangement. During the entire third act one or two actors sat in the upstage chairs

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, Tectonic Theater Project went into the final workshops in Denver without a third act; it emerged as they were making the transition into rehearsals for the Denver opening.

holding black umbrellas, recalling the final funeral image from Our Town, which inserted a new form within the form of the chairs as seen in the following production photo:



FIGURE 10. “Moment: Snow.” Photo courtesy of Ken Friedman.

As different Moments occurred, actors shifted their focus to the chair arrangement, transforming the physical scenic construct into different locations. Belber explains, “If I have something to say, I’m going to say it as I look back on the funeral, as I’m commenting, even though I’m not talking about the funeral. All of a sudden those chairs become what I’m talking about. It becomes the Phelps demonstration” (10 Dec. 2002). Kaufman and his collaborators were able to use a form that had been previously created to represent only the Henderson trials, and merge it with new content encompassing more of the aftermath of the crime. In this way, certain visual forms continue to resonate even as the plot continues forward. Through these examples, it becomes clear that “form” dictates the gestural, aural, and physical material and “content” means text.

### Tectonic Techniques

Many of the techniques which Kaufman had been developing throughout his career culminated in the creation of The Laramie Project, including: extensive workshopping over long periods of time; investing in heavy research with his company; approaching the workspace with a “hunch” through “not knowing”; and writing performance through Moment Work. Many of these techniques developed significantly and will be traced in this section. Additionally, new techniques were discovered during this process such as conducting in-depth company discussions concerning form, graphing the binaries of form and content (in terms of themes) on butcher paper, and participating in post-show discussions.

### An Eighteen-Month Workshop: Chronology

Not only are no two Tectonic productions created in exactly the same manner, but they are also created by different people. Company members come and go depending on Tectonic’s and the members’ personal needs and interests, operating on a floating, per project basis. However, the longevity and intensity of The Laramie Project workshops came as close to a permanent company as Tectonic has ventured to form. Company members devoted two-and-a-half years of their lives to the project from the first

workshop to the last performance in Laramie. LaHoste states, “It did feel extraordinary to me in that way, that we had never built this intense and intimate a relationship with a group of people. That’s wonderful now, because Moisés, in new projects, can call on some of them and bring them in and they have this history together, this vocabulary” (11 Dec. 2002).

The only document that traces the factual content of the workshops is Stephen Belber’s unpublished article “Listening to Laramie: Trying to Understand the Town Where Matthew Shepard Died,” which he has permitted to be a source for this dissertation. Barely a month after Matthew Shepard was beaten to death by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, ten members of Tectonic Theater Project arrived in Laramie on November 14, 1998. Belber writes, “The premise of our trip was to determine whether this event could be investigated and discussed in theatrical terms. Could we, as artists, provide a more complex interpretation and understanding of how and why this horrific event occurred” (“Listening”). After returning from Laramie, the first workshop took place at the Atlantic Theatre Company in New York in January of 1999. Company members were still unsure if the material they had gathered would generate a play, and many wondered if they even had the right to create a theatrical work around a horrific murder, especially without gaining the permission of Shepard’s parents. Towards the end of the first workshop, the company decided to continue forward with mounting a production and Kaufman contacted the Shepards personally to inform them of Tectonic’s intent. Belber writes, “By the end of the first workshop, it began to become clear that following the townspeople of Laramie as they sought to grapple with their

conflicted feelings about homosexuality, the media, culpability, tolerance, and acceptance was indicative of the struggle many Americans had been or are still going through” (“Listening”). By the end of the three week-workshop, a rough draft of the play had been written by the ten members who traveled to Laramie. After this first workshop the writing group, consisting of Belber, Fondakowski, Pierotti, Kaufman and Wangh, was formed.

The second trip to Laramie occurred in April of 1999 during the Russell Henderson trial. The company had gathered information regarding the events leading up to the crime and what had followed. They also knew that they needed to choose the kind of play they wanted to write from the enormous amount of material gathered. They had collected the facts, but now they needed to dig deeper to discover the emotional and intellectual responses of the townspeople they had interviewed on their first voyage. It was on this second trip that Greg Pierotti interviewed Reverend Fred Phelps, a Baptist from Kansas who runs the web site [www.godhatesfags.com](http://www.godhatesfags.com). Phelps had returned to Laramie to protest outside the Henderson trials; he had already protested Shepard’s funeral. During the interview with Pierotti, Phelps provided him with a speech that went directly into the play: “If God doesn’t hate fags, why does he put ‘em in hell?” (Laramie 79).

During this trip, company members also observed Romaine Patterson, a twenty-one-year-old friend of Shepard’s, leading her group of anti-Phelps protestors as they performed what she called Angel Action. Edited segments of Patterson’s interview from this trip were also included in the play, including the following monologue:

ROMAINE PATTERSON. I decided that someone needed to stand toe-to-toe with this guy to show the differences. And I think at times like this, when we're talking about hatred as much as the nation is right now, that someone needs to show that there is a better way of dealing with that kind of hatred. So our idea is to dress up like angels. And so we have designed an angel outfit – for our wings are HUGE – they're like big-ass wings – and they'll be 10 to 20 of us that are angels – and what we're gonna do is we're gonna encircle Phelps ... and because of our big wings – we are gonna COM-PLETE-LY block him.” (Laramie 79)

Belber writes, “Documenting Romaine's evolution from college kid to national activist was one of our most thrilling adventures in Wyoming and provided one of the most inspiring (and theatrical) moments in the play” (“Listening”).

After a second workshop at New York's Classical Stage Company, Tectonic's third workshop was held at Robert Redford's Sundance Theatre Lab in Utah during July of 1999. The goal of this third workshop was to use Moment Work to investigate the material collected and discover theatrical forms to depict those interview experiences. Sundance will usually only invite a director and writer to workshop new material, but after discussions with LaHoste, who emphasized the company's collaborative nature, they agreed to fund a three-and-a-half week workshop for all twelve collaborators. After transcribing the interview tapes from the second Laramie trip, company members would edit and present the most compelling sections to the group. Belber writes that by the

middle of the workshop “each member was a veritable expert on a handful of ‘characters’ and, consequently, in a position to argue (often quite passionately) for their right to be heard. As actors, it was incredibly exciting and liberating to be granted such domain over characters that one would (hopefully) be performing” (“Listening”). By the end of that Sundance workshop, the first two acts were roughed out; they were further developed later that summer at Dartmouth College.

In August, the New York Theatre Workshop sponsored a one-week residency for the writing team at Dartmouth College and all attended except Stephen Wangh. The goal of this workshop was to look at material that had already been cut from the script. As an exercise held at the end of the week, Kaufman, Fondakowski, Belber and Pierotti did a reading of a whole new version of the play based entirely on that cut material. Belber recalls, “I think only a few of those things got into the play in the end, but we needed to hear them in front of people” (10 Dec. 2002). Most importantly, the Dartmouth workshop taught the writing team that the interview list was heavy on academic characters and lacking in non-university townspeople, which dictated a return trip to Laramie in late August of 1999.

It was during that trip that Fondakowski interviewed Marge Murray, a career bartender in Laramie who turned out to be the mother of Reggie Fluty, the policewoman who responded to the 911 call and found Matthew Shepard at the fence. Once a restraining order had been lifted, Fluty herself agreed to be interviewed for the project, partly because the company had established a relationship with her mother. Fluty spoke with Kaufman and Fondakowski and recounted her six-month wait to learn if she had

been infected with HIV, during which time she was treated with AZT causing her to lose ten pounds and most of her hair (Shepard was HIV positive and Fluty had open cuts on her hands at the time she untied him from the fence). Her story eventually became one of the play's more emotional through-lines.

The company's final trip to Laramie was scheduled for November 1999 in order to be present during the Aaron McKinney trial. The final workshops and rehearsals were held in Denver, Colorado where the play premiered at the Denver Center Theatre Company in late February of 2000. It moved to New York and opened at the Union Square Theatre on May 18, 2000. It ran for over six hundred performances. It is clear that the long workshopping process had a lasting effect on all those involved. Comments from Barbara Pitts sum up the responses from many company members:

I went to do a play right after Laramie was done, and I thought, "How am I going to go back to just doing a play? It seems silly, pointless." And I got cast in this play and in a three-and-a-half week rehearsal process I had to figure out who this woman was . . . So I had a lot of that traditional kind of work to do and somewhere in the first week I thought, "Oh shit, I don't have two years to do this. I have to represent right now." And that's a stupid way to make theatre; it's just a stupid, stupid way, but it's all about economics. Moment Work is really an impractical way to do things because it's really inefficient [economically, not artistically]. (9 Dec. 2002)

Now that a chronological structure has been established, the workshops included many details that need greater clarification, beginning with the structure of the workshops themselves. At the end of each workshop, which usually lasted for three weeks, Kaufman invited an audience to listen to a staged reading of the work, which consisted of the company members sitting around a table and reading the play despite the fact that

they had been staging the piece as it was created through Moment Work. During these readings, hats, glasses, or other minimal props or costume pieces were often used in order to help the invited audience recognize characters, but the majority of the staging they had created through Moment Work was not included. The purpose of the staged readings varied from inciting the interest of potential investors to gaining feedback from other theatre artists on the status of the script.<sup>12</sup> After each workshop, the writing team worked to revise the script based on their own response to hearing the reading and the feedback they received from others. In addition to the workshops' structure, the different roles of the designers, actors, and writers, all working together as collaborators, warrant detailed discussion.

### The Roles of Collaborators

Before discussing the different roles The Laramie Project collaborators played by the end of the creative process, one must clarify that at the onset no company member had a designated role (except Kaufman as the artistic director of Tectonic Theater Project). Those who would emerge as actors, designers, and writers originally left for Laramie with the open title of dramaturg, not knowing if a play would even be created which would necessitate the delegation of distinct roles. It was only during the process of

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<sup>12</sup> This raises an important question about Kaufman's theory of form and content copulating. It seems that in the back of Kaufman's mind a script/text exists that is separable from the process of creation (i.e. the forms discovered through Moment Work). Here we see the balance between the pragmatic businessman courting the marketplace in order to fund the next phase of his artistic project.

development during the following eighteen months that different roles began to emerge. Obviously, each member came into the project with certain areas of skill, specialization, and background that they maintained throughout the project. However, it was Kaufman's idea that going into the project with the equal title of dramaturg reinforced the collaborative nature of the work.

One Tectonic technique that remains with Kaufman to this day is to include designers in the workshops from the very beginning. The designers' presence is paramount to Kaufman's approach because their involvement in the creation of Moments supplies the actors with the necessary theatrical elements to present each Moment in the languages of theatre. This technique stems from Kaufman's theoretical foundation in "horizontal theatre." For the creation of The Laramie Project, Kaufman invited lighting designer, Betsy Adams, and scenic designer, Sarah Lambert, two colleagues who had worked with him previously on Gross Indecency, to accompany the group on their first trip to Laramie. Lambert eventually left the project (she is credited as a dramaturg) and was replaced with scenic designer Robert Brill.

Adams, however, was involved from the beginning and proved to be a valuable asset to the company, both during the creative process and through her final designs. She recalls the importance of being included in an investigatory trip to Laramie: "I was really able to absorb the environment out there. We weren't trying to recreate it, so for me it was important to internalize all of it, which helped me move forward even though there's nothing in the show that is realistic" (11 Dec. 2002). Another valuable result of that trip was the development of a universal language amongst the company. To be able to refer

to a place or character with Kaufman or other company members proved beneficial to Adams, who viewed her role as helping the actors create Moments that would make a play for their characters. Before the first workshop conducted at the Atlantic Theatre Company in New York, Adams hung a basic light plot, which she would supplement throughout the workshops with additional, often non-traditional, stage lighting – such as the use of an actual hospital light for the scenes with the doctors. Adams was present everyday to help actors, respond to the Moments during discussions, and to take design notes. She explains:

It was, “Here is what we’re doing, can you help us?” It was a lot of fun. It was a unique experience, unlike anything that I’d ever done before. It was great to be part of the production from the beginning, to be that involved in the process. I felt like I was making more of a contribution and on a completely different level. (11 Dec. 2002)

When scenic designer Robert Brill joined the group, the company had already been working on the project for over a year; he was the last member of the collaborative team to come on board – within two months from his arrival the group was in a theatre in Denver. The day after his first meeting with Kaufman to discuss visual and aesthetic ideas, Brill found himself on a plane to Laramie. He states, “It was important for me to go to Laramie not only to visit specific locations that might be represented in the play, but more importantly to experience that town, that environment – whatever I needed to get a sense of Laramie as a community. It was an invaluable trip” (12 Dec. 2002). As a new member of the company coming in late to a long-term creative collaboration, Kaufman had to carefully select his new scenic designer. He chose Brill in part because he had a similar background in collaborative creation, so he would be more prepared to

fulfill the company's needs and respond in a flexible manner. Brill continues, "My goal was to develop a toolbox of elements from which to create a production, knowing that the design scene-by-scene would evolve over the course of the actual rehearsal process." He attended the remaining workshops as sources of inspiration, developed ideas in his studio, and then presented them in model form to Kaufman in order to inform the next workshop. Brill describes the effect of their process: "Given that the play was still in composition, it was certain that both form and content would continue to inform one another."

Costume designer Moe Schell was also present for the duration of the workshop process. Because Kaufman wants his collaborators to create Moments using all the elements of theatrical language, he needs his designers present to help provide those materials. Schell states, "They would quickly say, at this point we are using Aaron Kreifels (the character who discovered Shepard's body) we need a vest or shirt. Then they would reach someone else they wanted to add and would need some other piece. They didn't have a stock of costumes to pull from, so I was there from that first workshop to create a stock of looks that they could pull from, or tell me what they needed" (22 March 2003). In short, Schell, like Brill, provided another tool box that the actors could access while creating Moments, which leads to an important distinction between the roles of designers and performers in Kaufman's workshops.

As described, the designers operated as support for the actors who were writing performance. The designers often gave their input in the creation of Moments and often responded to Moments as they were presented, but their main purpose was to provide the actors with the necessary tools to support or compliment the writing of performance – not

to create individual Moments on their own and present them to the company. Yet, on rare occasions, designers did bring in their own Moments. The dominant paradigm in the workshops was, however, that the majority of the Moments were composed by the actors with theatrical support from the designers.

By having visual theatrical elements present during the workshop, Kaufman further enhanced the ability of the company to encourage the copulation of content and form and to continue to explore the town of Laramie through all the available languages of theatre. In fact, some workshops were dedicated solely to exploring those different theatrical elements, in order to spur the discovery of new forms, which empowered the intuition of actors and designers alike. Pitts states, “Sometimes it was about creating a Moment using as many elements as you had available, and that’s really a gift when you get to do that” (9 Dec. 2002).

The actors who were not on the writing team (Pierotti and Belber served as both performers and writers) fulfilled the roles of dramaturges, becoming the company experts on the specific characters they had interviewed. The actors were responsible for transcribing and organizing the text from the interviews so that they could quickly locate specific content as it was requested by the writers or other actors as Moments were created. While the dramaturg/actors did transcribe and edit their interviews, the bulk of that textual work of transcribing and editing was done by the writing team. The creation of Moments constituted the actors’ primary contribution, through which they became directors, designers, and writers – Kaufman’s writers of performance. The actors were also responsible for maintaining the memory of their Moments in order to make them

available upon request, as the workshops dictated. Pitts clarifies, “That’s how this becomes writing performance – that you have, in your body, a Moment. It’s like you’re a folder that he can open, and it might be a mess. It’s an outline, like you’re drafting in real space” (9 Dec. 2002).

The writers served their most significant role during the final phase of editing and compiling the script. They worked closely with Kaufman to “further organize and edit the material, conduct additional research in Laramie, and collaborate on the writing of the play. This group was led by Leigh Fondakowski as head writer, with Stephen Belber and Greg Pierotti as associate writers” (Laramie ix). It was Fondakowski especially who transcribed the bulk of the material, a process which gave her a better understanding of the larger picture and organically evolved into her role as head writer. She states, “I think it put me in a good position also to be an advocate for the ensemble. I had Moisés’ ear in a way that the whole company couldn’t because it would just be too much. So a lot of what was important to them got filtered through me” (13 Dec. 2002).

Like Fondakowski, Belber and Pierotti edited interviews in search for the essence of each text – what rose to the surface. Belber explains, “It was so fun to take forty pages of transcript and make it a one paragraph monologue. People will talk and sculpt their way towards a truth. That was fantastic to be a part of” (10 Dec. 2002). A transcriber also hears things differently than one does in regular conversation, and because the Tectonic writers were also present during the workshops, they were always transcribing with an ear towards the piece they were creating. This allowed them to easily identify

text that could be added to pre-existing Moments, or that could act as a non sequitur transition between Moments.

Like the designers, the writers also assisted the actors in creating Moments (as actors both Pierotti and Belber also created Moments) by supplying textual resources. Actors not only searched through their own transcripts to create Moments, but also approached the writers and requested textual content that could be added to their Moments. The writers kept a firm grasp on what content was available and where it was located within the piles of interview text. The writers, like every collaborator, also offered feedback to Moments after they were presented. In addition to her responsibilities as head writer, Fondakowski also acted as Kaufman's assistant director. At times her response to a Moment came as a writer searching for additional content to add to a Moment, while at others she responded as a director, restaging the form of a Moment, or asking to see another Moment performed to help recontextualize that initial Moment.<sup>13</sup>

Towards the end of the workshops, in August 1999, additional changes were made to the writers' group. In the introduction to The Laramie Project, Kaufman writes: "As we got closer to the play's first production in Denver, the actors, Stephen Belber and Greg Pierotti, turned their focus to performance while Leigh Fondakowski continued to work with me on drafts of the play, as did Stephen Wangh, who by then had joined us as an associate writer and 'bench coach'" (ix). Wangh served as Kaufman's dramaturg for

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<sup>13</sup> Fondakowski's contribution to creating Laramie must be noted. According to many of the company members interviewed, she evolved into Kaufman's co-writer and co-director of the project.

Gross Indecency, which makes him a good reference when tracing the distinctions between the creation of the two works. In some ways, the processes were similar in that “writing” consisted of documented text being edited and rearranged – original, fictional writing did not occur in either script. Yet, key differences also exist based on the nature of the different projects and their respective workshops. Referring to The Laramie Project, Wangh begins, “Ten people writing a script – that’s different” (10 Dec. 2002). Overall, the scripting process was much more complete for Gross Indecency before the workshops and rehearsals began, which meant less collaboration between actors and writers. Wangh continues, “In The Laramie Project, I was more directly involved with the actors. They would present something and I would react and Moisés would react and the rest of us would react.” Here the writers collaborated with the actors as they wrote performance, then took possession of certain Moments that sparked the company’s interest in order to reshape and edit them from a textual and formalist perspective. This process of continual give and take between actors and writers generated the script.

Assigning company members with dual roles of actors and writers, as Kaufman did with Belber and Pierotti, signifies another key advancement in Tectonic’s collaboration. It also produced a disruption within the company. Kaufman’s written statement in the introduction to The Laramie Project that Belber and Pierotti “turned their focus to performance” elucidates his perspective of the event. When the shift occurred, Kaufman, Fondakowski, Pierotti, and Belber had just returned from their intense workshop at Dartmouth College in August of 1999 – a workshop that some viewed as their last opportunity to convince Kaufman to include certain material. Belber recalls:

It was after that week, I think, that he fired Greg and I from being writers. It was definitely a turning point in Moisés needing to draw the line and think more towards performance. Greg and I had to concentrate more towards our acting than our writing because that was aiming in towards Denver. It was ultimately responsible of Moisés to say, “We have to start closing the door a little bit here.” (10 Dec. 2002)

Perhaps it was also a responsible decision because the dual roles of actor and writer in the creative process could become confusing through their inherent conflicts of interest.

Times existed when Belber and Pierotti were caught in a struggle between that duality; if they cut or added material, they would be affecting their own roles in the performance.

Pierotti explains:

There is a small-mindedness that comes into play as well, like, “Well, I want more material.” That was definitely a conflict of interest, but ultimately we all had to serve the play. But when you’re right in the middle of it and the size of your part is changed dramatically in a period of days . . . part of you is there because you want to do the right thing, you want to make art, but you also want to help make your career, so you can take care of yourself, have a future in your industry, and it’s really confusing. (12 Dec. 2002)

Again, the complexity of this creative process can clearly be seen in Pierotti’s reflective statement. The shift from writer to performer could not have been anything but difficult because they lost an element of control in shaping the final work. The complications of this actor-writer duality become more complicated when you consider that both Pierotti and Belber created original Moments. After having full collaborative input on the creation, compiling and arranging of Moments; editing transcripts; and making additional research trips to Laramie, both men had to entrust Fondakowski, Wangh, and Kaufman with the final script.

At one time or another, however, all of the performers were caught up in the struggle of being in a position to cut their own text, to let their Moments go, or cut entire characters. This element of the process was ever-present in the workshops and final rehearsals all the way up to performance in Denver. LaHoste recalls one such occurrence in Denver:

The play was running very long and we had to open it and it was just long. It felt long. Moisés asked everybody one night to go home and he said, “We have to cut fifteen minutes out of the play.” And he asked them to slash, essentially their own parts: things they had written, things they were performing – not things that were bad or badly written. And they all slid cuts under his door that night, slashing their own parts because they had learned what it was going to take for this thing to work. That’s invaluable for an actor, or for anybody involved in the theatre. (11 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman’s collaborators had to learn to let their self-interest go, or at least to suppress it for the sake of the work – not an easy task for any performer. But their focus on the work, and the importance of the project, sustained their will to work collectively to tell their version of Laramie’s story, even when that meant making difficult cuts.

### Obstacles to an Eighteen-Month Workshop

In addition to artistic sacrifices, the company members had to make financial and career sacrifices as well. The actors were originally contracted as work for hire and paid three hundred dollars per week for the workshops. When it became apparent that the company would pursue the project and that the actors were being called upon to do more

than just readings, they re-negotiated using an Actors' Equity workshop contract as their model. Knowing that the work could not progress at the Equity pay scale, the actors conferred with Tectonic to reach an agreement. Yet again, their dedication to the company and the project sustained their commitment. "I mean it was hard," states Pitts, "there were times where I had to cash advance myself some money just to stay available to do this work. And everyone has their own stories about that. I knew very clearly that I would do what I had to in order to be in that room. That's what my whole career had been building to" (9 Dec. 2002). The two-year commitment also called for the actors and writers to remain available to the work, despite not being paid between trips. They rarely took other theatre work because a trip to Laramie could come up at any time, so many supported themselves with supplemental part-time work.

The creation of The Laramie Project was also extremely costly to Tectonic Theater Project as an organization. The majority of the profits from the success of Gross Indecency funded the workshops, along with additional fundraising that LaHoste spearheaded throughout the process. In "Town in a Mirror," an article written by Don Shewey and published in American Theatre, LaHoste states, "To take 10 people to Laramie for a week cost \$20,000" (15). Tectonic spent nearly a quarter of a million dollars developing the work, which paid for the extensive workshops and readings and the six trips to Laramie for differing groups of company members. During that time, LaHoste focused his attention on the business efforts in order to allow Kaufman to remain focused on creating the script. He recalls:

We've had some foundations that have really come through for us, especially when we were finishing TLP. We were

really short of money, and a handful of people, Rockefeller Foundation among them, came through and said, “You don’t fit us, but we are going to help you do this.” But still to this day, many of the places that theatre companies go to for funding won’t look at us. (11 Dec. 2002)

Clearly, due to such high costs of development, this kind of work rarely produces commercial success. Yet, with their last two productions, Tectonic Theater Project has found a way to collaboratively create works that have reached an extensive audience. With the support of company members willing to make sacrifices and from the organization itself, Kaufman’s process of creating new works has been able to overcome some of the obstacles that often limit the success of collaborative creation.

#### Kaufman’s Approach to the Workshop Space

For each new piece, Kaufman first researches the subject matter and the possible approaches to form he may be considering to bring the piece to the stage, and then he invites his collaborators to immerse themselves in that research and continually add to it as the process of creation evolves. In addition to Brecht’s “Street Scene” essay, Kaufman exploration of form manifested itself in a research packet for each company member that included articles by, or about, Anna Deavere Smith, Emily Mann, George Wolfe, and members of the Wooster Group – all which focused on documentary theatre and/or performance. Andy Paris recalls the company watching Deavere Smith’s Fires in the Mirror together. In order to establish initial insight into Laramie, Kaufman also included

newspaper articles on Shepard's trials and Laramie, as well as general history books of Wyoming. Company member Kelli Simpkins recalls:

We were all finding things, anything pertaining to the story, Matthew, Wyoming. Moisés loves collecting books, so there were huge picture books about Wyoming, books on Laramie, cowboys, any music that remotely had a Western appeal. We even had a choreographer in Denver who taught us various dances, line dances, etc. that were of the West, but we never found a way to incorporate these dances into the play. So there was never a lack of immersion in the culture and history of Wyoming and of Laramie. (18 March 2003)

Throughout the workshops, the company members built "master books" of interviews and pictures collected during the trips.

In addition to this collection of source materials, Andy Paris believes "the best research was done with the people" (18 March 2003). Many of the company members stated that their immersion in the research for the project began the minute they arrived in Laramie and were surrounded by the town and people. Paris continues, "You got deeper and deeper as your relationships with these people grew - maybe to our detriment. We all had moments when we lost our objectivity." Paris raises the question of critical distance, the danger involved when the one reconstructing history becomes too involved in the event itself, which will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

To this day, Kaufman is still not sure what led him to the creation of The Laramie Project: "I don't always know why I do what I do. We don't choose stories, stories choose us" (11 Nov. 2002). All he knew was that Matthew Shepard's story touched him, and that he had a "hunch" to investigate the story of the town. The hunch propelled him to meet with his company and their interest inspired the first trip to Laramie and brought

them into a workshop space. Once the hunch takes Kaufman into a room, it incites new questions. He continues, “When we came back and we started listening . . . it’s a dialectical relationship. You see what you gather, and then you pose new questions that lead to new answers, so that becomes the conversation.” The impetus for that conversation was an attempt to compile a document that would act as an x-ray of the nation at the end of the millennium. After Shepard’s murder, the nation launched into a dialogue about how we think and talk about homosexuality, sexual politics, education, class, violence, privileges and rights, and the difference between tolerance and acceptance (Laramie vi).

Kaufman’s emphasis on this dialectical relationship of continual questioning, which leads to new answers, which leads to new questions, embraces “not knowing.” He goes into a workshop space and explores questions with his collaborators rather than arriving with answers. “I think that a lot of people think of ‘not knowing’ as a deterrent,” he states. “I think of ‘not knowing’ as the great mother of all invention” (19 March 2003). Embracing ‘not knowing’ gives Kaufman an open-handed approach with his collaborators, which instills freedom and openness in their collective exploration. In regards to this approach in the workshops, Pierotti states, “What’s great about Moisés is that he is very open; he’s not bound up by, ‘This is my technique, so we have to discover everything through this technique.’ You can do whatever you want” (12 Dec. 2002).

This freedom is invaluable for work dedicated to discovering new theatrical forms and languages. Specifically for The Laramie Project, it needed to remain open because each interview had the potential to lead the script in a new direction. Kaufman also

encouraged his collaborators to embrace “not knowing” as they were conducting interviews. He instructed them to try to ignore their preconceived ideas and stereotypes of the west and to focus solely on listening to the community’s stories. During the workshops, he allowed his collaborators to follow their intuition without placing many restrictions on their work. Finally, he encouraged the writers to listen to the script and to try and not force its writing down any particular path. “Moisés’ language was always about not dictating to ourselves what this piece was going to be,” recalls Belber. “So in the writing we let it evaluate itself and reveal itself to us. It evolved without our direction; he let us be constantly surprised up to opening night with new text” (10 Dec. 2002).

During the initial phases of his workshops, the hunch and resultant early explorations are restated as Kaufman’s organizing principle – the idea that directs the remainder of the process. For Kaufman, the organizing principle – the core dramatic event – of The Laramie Project was a town looking at itself in the year after Shepard’s murder. In his unpublished essay, “Revenge and Forgiveness in Laramie, Wyoming,” Wangh writes, “The real ‘action’ of the play is the progress the townspeople make as they move from shock and grief through disbelief and anger to... well, just what they *do* [Wangh’s emphasis] move to by the end of the play became a central question for us as playwrights” (“Revenge”).

The organizing principle established a guiding set of restrictions, a container, which became more particular in the creation of through-lines. After the company agreed on the three through-lines – the story of the town of Laramie, Matthew’s story, and the

company's story – they were written on large sheets of butcher paper and placed in the workshop space. Then the company discussed both themes and specific subject matter to place on each horizontally mounted piece of paper. Kaufman explains:

I'd write "the town." And ask, "What happened to the town?" And someone would say, "shock." And I'd write "shock." And someone would say, "the media descended on them." And I'd write "media descends." Et cetera. So, all of a sudden there were these maps on the wall, telling us what the stories were, what the through-lines were – what the themes were. (11 Nov. 2002) <sup>14</sup>

Similarly to the posted forms, the presence of the through-lines in the workshop space operated as a constant reminder and guide for the company, emphasizing what stories they were telling. They became an invaluable tool for deciding which Moments would be included and which excluded. Kaufman explains, "When an actor falls in love with a character and that character gets cut, we would always refer to that butcher paper and say, 'This is the story we are trying to tell. How does this character fit into this story?'" (11 Nov. 2002). The container of the through-lines did not make it easier on the collaborators; they still mourned the loss of their characters when Moments were cut or rejected – difficult because the company members were invested in assuring their characters' voices be heard in the play. Kaufman details how he used the through-lines during the creation of Moments in order to focus the company's work:

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<sup>14</sup> The list of structural through-lines and their themes posted during the workshops included: Matthew's Story; Tectonic Theater Project's Story – itinerary (event data) pragmatic account, meetings, conversations in preparation for trip, release forms, journals, meetings, phone conversations, email; Town's Story – media, history of town, response to event, stories of townspeople; Nation's Story ("Re: Structural Through-lines"). This original list contains the majority of the content in the final script, as well as a fourth through-line – the Nation's Story – that was dropped as the writing refined the final content.

I would never say, “That does nothing for me.” My job is to keep us all on the same page, to say, “That is an interesting Moment, but in terms of our through-line is it doing anything that already hasn’t been done?” I can say, “That Moment is good, but we already have a Moment that is very similar, or we have two moments that addresses that. Let’s keep it on the burner; we may come back to it.” I keep asking, “How does this further the story we are trying to tell?” That’s where I place my authority; it’s about saying, “How does this contribute to the story we’ve all agreed we want to tell?” But that’s only partially true, because at the end of the day I get to say, “Yes or no.” But by the time I say that, it’s usually a place we’ve all kind of gotten to. (9 Dec. 2002)

The result of the hunch, organizing principle, and through-lines all working together to guide the Moment Work, created a piece that presented more of a complicated social milieu than a re-enactment of a crime. Matthew Shepard is never represented onstage. “This choice ingeniously sidesteps sentimental images while at the same time giving the play a mysteriously satisfying spiritual dimension,” writes Shewey in American Theatre. “The unseen presence is much more powerful than the overly familiar depiction of a crucified figure.” Instead the play focuses on the citizens pondering questions they had never before been asked to address. The complexity of the script is a direct result of the complexity of its creation through Moment Work.

### Phase One: The Creation of Moments

Moment Work’s structure of “I begin . . . I end” stresses dramatic time. The actors writing performance knew that a lengthy Moment was less likely to be included in

the final script, so self-editing, refining the work down to its most essential elements, began during the creation of each individual Moment. “You are being asked to shave down,” states Belber. “It has to be essential. It’s essential theatre” (10 Dec. 2002). Once a Moment had been presented, if the company decided to keep it, the writing group often edited and refined it even more, honing the text to fit the character choices the company was making. Because sixty-plus characters are presented in fewer than three hours of performance, some characters were fully presented with only a short paragraph of text. For example, with only a one-half page monologue of text, Shadow, the deejay at the Fireside Bar where Shepard was last seen alive, communicates an essential bit of eye-witness information while vocally and physically reading as a full character during performance (especially as performed by Amanda Gronich in the original production). Fondakowski credits the collaborative creative process with the bare-bone nature of the text. “If Laramie had been written by one or two people, it could have contained lots of self-indulgent or tangential description that people thought was interesting but wasn’t necessary” (13 Dec. 2002).

In addition to creating bare-bone, essential theatre, Moment Work enables actors to become directors. In the workshops, actors were free to write Moments that enlisted the performance of other actors. Moments were brought in by actors who would then instruct their fellow actors on what needed to be done in order to make that Moment work. In order to contextualize their Moments, actors could also ask others to re-present their Moments, even requesting text to be delivered in certain ways. Through this process of contextualizing, actors were encouraged to direct others’ Moments in order to

elicit their intended meaning for their own Moments. Pitts clarifies, “You get to say, ‘Can you do that speech that you do? Can I ask you to do it this way?’ So there’s a real willingness, it creates a real willingness for you to reinvent something that you’ve done and try to serve someone else’s Moment” (9 Dec. 2002). With the help of their fellow collaborators, the actors were able to convey the intended meaning of their Moments.

Often in the workshops, actors did not wait to be asked to add their Moments. At times, Moments were added on to as the original Moment was being presented. When an actor’s intuition encouraged them to add on, they jumped up, said, “I begin,” and added either a pre-existing Moment or possibly a brand new Moment to clarify, complicate, or recontextualize the Moment being presented. This agreed upon openness to explore guided the creative process. Pierotti explains how the process affected his work:

I got to a point where whatever popped into my head I just said, or added on, or did. [. . .] I could just say, “That reminds me of this. Why don’t we say this next from this person’s perspective?” Or I could say, “This is Sergeant Hing,” and go. Basically it was like play. As the process moved forward, I felt less and less inhibited. I had already built a relationship with a lot of these people from working on Gross Indecency. I knew and trusted them already. So the environment just allowed me to trust my own impulses. (12 Dec. 2002)

Obviously, as directors, Kaufman and Fondakowski responded to the Moments as well. After watching a Moment, they often saw new ways to restage or reshape the original idea. At times, Moments were followed by lengthy discussions among the whole company. At other times, Kaufman or Fondakowski would instantly respond and redirect a Moment. Fondakowski recalls, “From a director’s mind, you go in and rework their Moment or restage their Moment; begin to build upon it to make connections” (13 Dec.

2002). It was up to the actors to adapt to this constantly shifting style of working.

Fondakowski continues:

I think the actors were accustomed to doing this free floating thing where they had all this license, and then they were being told where to stand and how to say it. It was kind of like dancing back and forth between those two ways of working. The difference between working with other directors and Moisés was that at anytime the actors could stand up and say, "This is wrong." (13 Dec. 2003)

Although Kaufman often asked his collaborators to bring in Moments based on thematic or character content, sometimes it was the Moment Work itself that led to thematic explorations by the entire company. The openness and freedom of the workshop environment lent itself to the discovery of new thematic ideas. Pierotti states, "Many times you bring something in front of the company and they are like, 'That is the stupidest thing I have ever seen in my life.' But it's safe to be bad, and that's a really powerful environment. Moisés creates that" (12 Dec. 2002). The importance of Kaufman's allowance to fail in his workshops can not be understated. That acceptance and encouragement to risk allows the actors' intuition to go outside of the box.

Sometimes Moments were presented that were not the right Moment, but contained a nugget of value that deserved further exploration. Pitts relates one such Moment that did not make it beyond its original presentation, but which inspired further thematic exploration:

I did an April Silva moment where I threw a deli cup of coffee against a big piece of butcher paper, because I wanted to get some violence into the piece, to show that this is a violent place. That was a Moment that no one was interested in, but it was certainly an idea worth exploring.

That sense of danger. Is this something we need to show,  
instead of telling it? That's what I was after. (9 Dec. 2002)

From that thematic idea of violence in Laramie, more Moments exploring the death penalty and the jury's willingness to put perpetrator Russell Henderson to death were requested, some of which appear in the final script.

Creating Moments had a significant effect on the collaborators during the workshops and eventually the performance of the play. Even when someone's contributed Moment did not make it into the text, being so empowered to create the play led to strong feelings of ownership in the work. Through this empowerment and their dedication to their characters, the collaborators brought intense emotional presence to the workshops. Pierotti explains:

I not only interviewed them; I established relationships  
with them. [ . . . ] I mean, you know these people are out  
there, and they're actually friends who trust and rely on  
you. It gives an emotional urgency to the work that I think  
is good for the work. It gets you out of the way a little bit.  
(12 Dec. 2002)

That ownership and emotional investment transferred to the performances as well. In fact, those feelings intensified in performance because the actors had spent so much time with their characters, physically in their presence interviewing them and also studying, editing, and reshaping their language from the interview transcripts. Belber describes the performance experience as being "organically ingrained. Even if I changed the way that they stand, I knew that I was getting across what they wanted to say" (10 Dec. 2002). But even after creating their stockpile of Moments, the collaborators would not reach the performance segment of their journey for quite some time. First, they had to face the

long process of working with the Moments they had created and collaboratively exploring the best order in which to arrange them.

### Phase Two: Arranging Moments

The amassed list of titled Moments was written on butcher paper to track their order as the company discovered new arrangements. The Laramie Project follows a chronological structure from the company's first arrival in Laramie a month after Shepard's death, to their final exodus from the town after the Aaron McKinney trials. The structure of the work traces the arc of all three through-lines during that period. The process of arranging Moments was one of thorough exploration. Because the Moments are self-contained building blocks, as each Moment's order was altered, new meaning was subsequently given to the preceding and following Moments through that context. In short, each Moment was recontextualized.

Concerns during this phase varied from altering the original meaning of an individual Moment through contextualization, to alternating between the different forms of large group collage Moments, duets, and monologues for the sake of varying the pace. The weight of the emotional content in each Moment was also an important element to consider in terms of the audience's response to difficult subject matter. The craft of playwriting became important in this stage of the workshops. For example, during one of the final staged readings, Kaufman and the writing team highlighted each section in the script that received a laugh. Then they reorganized the Moments in such a way that after

each content-heavy emotional build climaxed, a laugh Moment was inserted in order to allow the audience to relax before opening up to the next piece of content. Kaufman explains:

We were very keenly aware that there is a way in which this kind of material can really brutalize an audience. If you brutalize an audience, you lose them. So there was a desire to say, "How can we protect our audiences and allow them to keep listening?" The last thing you want to do is alienate them. Not to mention that it makes for bad work. It is only in bad art that tragedy lacks humor. (11 Nov. 2002).

Playwriting, meaning locating and arranging found text from the transcripts or other documents, also filled holes between Moments. When you create a work by rearranging Moments, inevitably you find a form you like and need to fill the gaps from one Moment to the next. These dramaturgical problems were often fixed through the expertise of the company, knowing where in their transcripts they could find content to fill in the holes. Either Kaufman or another member of the writing team would present the problem to the actors, relying on them to bring in material, or the writers themselves would locate the content and work collaboratively with the actors to create the form to embody the text. Through this process, entirely new Moments were created in order to bridge one Moment to another. The writers, however, were not creating transitions between Moments in the traditional sense of writing a linear narrative. This work relies on the audience to make their own connections between Moments. Rather, the collaborators worked to create new Moments that could bridge major gaps between existing Moments.

Another dramaturgical problem that had to be resolved centered on the Matthew Shepard through-line during the six days covered by act 2. Many events occurred in the town of Laramie during these six days – the descending media chaos, the Henderson hearings, the statements from Shepard’s parents – but the company felt that none of them kept Shepard present in the production. The company needed a single dramaturgical structure to hold Shepard’s story together. “It eventually became Rulon Stacey,” recalls Pierotti. “His being close to Matthew kept him there, otherwise there were too many things going on in those six days” (12 Dec. 2002). Therefore, the writers made the choice to include the Rulon Stacey update Moments, in which he intermittently appears in act 2 to deliver medical updates on Shepard’s health to the national media.

Perhaps the clearest example of the company working together to solve dramaturgical problems came during the creation of the elusive act 3 in Denver, after the company had already begun rehearsals for their first performance. Despite the fact that company members had been writing performance by creating Moments from the first workshop, many feel that the way in which act 3 was created symbolizes the culmination of their contribution to writing performance in The Laramie Project. While in Denver, the company (especially the writing team) spent long hours reworking the final script. According to Wangh, Kaufman was ready to give up on the third act. The company was having trouble determining how to connect the church scene and the Henderson trials. Wangh believed, however, that they could create the church scene and allow it to lead into the first Henderson trial, using Fred Phelps’ arrival at the trial as a segue between the two Moments. He recalls, “So Leigh and I said to Moisés, ‘Give us a few hours.’ And

he was reluctant but said, ‘Okay.’ Leigh and I worked, I don’t know how many hours, but essentially cobbled together what essentially became the third act” (10 Dec. 2002).

Due to Kaufman’s approach to working – showing the work through the languages of the theatre rather than intellectually discussing it – Wangh and Fondakowski knew that they had to enlist the company’s collaboration before their rewriting would be adopted into the script.

The company asked Kaufman for more time to rehearse the new version of act 3, and then presented it – the technique of presenting rather than discussing had been established from day one with Moment Work. Pitts recalls Kaufman’s reaction:

He came in to watch it, and it was like an audition. We were auditioning act 3. And it was roughly the shape of what act 3 is, where you have the funeral that turns into the courtroom that turns into the confession. He watched it all, and then we turned and looked at him, and he said, “It is going to work. I need to fix it, but it is going to work.” So that was pretty exciting. I think in terms of writing performance, that’s about as close as we actually came. And it makes sense that it would happen at the end of the process. (9 Dec. 2002)

Much to his credit, Kaufman’s trust in his company and reliance on their artistic creativity made the collaborative creation of act 3 possible. Yet, his initial reluctance and first response, “I need to fix it, but it is going to work,” communicates a complicated mix of willingness to embrace the creation of his company, coupled with a need to maintain an element of control – an important duality in his directing.

### Kaufman's Directorial Communication Style with Collaborators

The nature of the creative process of The Laramie Project led to much frustration and conflict among company members at varying times, because ultimately Kaufman held final veto power. It was his vision, and he initiated and financed the work which meant that he had the final say in its creation. The end product, however, was deeply influenced by the entire company's work – their thoughts, impulses and creations. Even though Kaufman's role as the final decision maker was clear from the beginning, strong tensions still occurred between Kaufman and his collaborators and amongst the collaborators themselves – especially when characters were cut. Wangh explains, “The battles were sometimes on the basis of character, sometimes on the basis of politics – we need this statement to balance that statement, or what's happened to the homophobia, or the perpetrator's friends? So there was a lot of pushing and pulling” (10 Dec. 2002).

Though this society tends to hold a negative perception of conflict, it can be of value, especially when working collaboratively. Without conflict, tough decisions are rarely made, and deeper questions are not asked or explored. So, while Kaufman maintained almost total control, he also constructed a workshop space in which conflict was accepted, cultivated, and encouraged – in an effort to dig deeper into the tough questions raised by the work. Often, those questions were raised by portraying the conflicting views of different characters. “You're fighting like hell, it's so beautiful like that, ten people there fighting to get their characters in, to represent them. It's territorial and intense” (Belber 10 Dec. 2002). Kaufman profoundly believes that The Laramie

Project would not be what it is today without those conflicts, which resulted in a diversity of various responses to the Shepard murder. He intended to set up a space where actors became strongly invested in the work in order to motivate their creative spirits and inspire the Moment Work. Simultaneously, he made sure that space was safe for actors to experience and express their feelings fully by continually listening to their input. He explains how he communicated in those times of conflict when Moments were cut:

You say, “I know that you are very angry, and I know that you are sad and mourning for the character that you’ve worked on for an entire year, and I will make room for that so you can go through what you need to go through, but right now we need to finish this rehearsal.” First of all, you respect their feelings. It’s terrible and heart breaking to lose your work. (9 Dec. 2002)

### Communication and Moment Work

Much of the company’s conflict centered on the inclusion or exclusion of Moments following their initial presentation to the company, and this process was organic and ever-changing. At times, Moments would receive great interest and attention from Kaufman and/or the entire company and get worked immediately through numerous means – adding to the Moment, Kaufman or Fondakowski restaging the Moment, lively discussion, et cetera. On other occasions, however, collaborators presented Moments and nothing was sparked for Kaufman or the company. Two important reactions occurred in these two instances: first, Kaufman’s specific communication to the Moment, and second, the company’s agreement that any Moment could be altered and reshaped at home and

presented again countless times in order to try to ignite excitement from Kaufman about that Moment. In the following quote, Kaufman details his specific verbal responses to the presentation of Moments and clarifies how the company collaborated to include or exclude a Moment:

After a Moment is presented, I often ask, “How did that go?” And they will usually say, “Well this part worked, and this part . . .” Because in the creating of the Moment, some things will go well and some won’t. If I’m not getting it, instead of saying, “I’m not interested.” I can say, “How did it go?” Then I can figure out what they were trying to do. Ultimately, it is true that it is my final decision if I’m not interested in something. But what would happen invariably is that we would keep talking about it until I was finally interested in it or I wasn’t. Although I was the ultimate arbiter, hopefully I created a world in which we knew where we were going. It’s a very delicate and interesting thing. Yes, it was my final yea or nay, but it hardly ever got to that point because it was clear when it was working or wasn’t working. (9 Dec. 2002)

A portion of this conflict involves the idea of “the right idea but the wrong Moment.”

Kaufman was not the only one subjectively responding to each Moment. The whole company took part in responding to and discussing the material that was presented. The company, as audience, also varied at any given time because some collaborators would be working on their Moments while others were simultaneously being presented. So the company audience, that day’s authority, shifted constantly. It was up to Kaufman and other members of the company to look within each Moment to find something of value that could be retained and worked. If the focus on a Moment did not interest Kaufman, he could still pull a segment out of it – a piece of text, a bit of action, or even simply a gesture or body rhythm. After the presentation of a Moment, any company member

could ask Kaufman's question, "How did it go?" in order to gain clarification from the performers' perspectives. Pitts explains the meaning behind this question:

That meant you had to explain what you were after because it didn't really read at all. I think that's a great way to create a dialogue and not go, "Well, that failed – next!" So it was always flattering when your moment got like twenty minutes of, "Let's try this or let's do that." So a lot of what he would do is give you free reign and then direct it. So then we would go after it again working on something else. (9 Dec. 2002)

The second significant characteristic of Kaufman's response to Moments is his willingness to see Moments presented over and over again. Because he was open to the diversity of his collaborators' interest in certain material and they were persuasive in their dedication to certain Moments, powerful character through-lines and thematic content made it into the script that may have otherwise been dropped. The company members had to employ both their intuition and dedication to their characters' voices in order to find the strength to incessantly reshape, rewrite, and re-present their Moments in hopes of having them included. This was especially true during the times when the rest of the company wanted to keep a Moment but Kaufman was not convinced. Pierotti recalls one such occurrence:

It's still painful when the entire company says it has to stay and he says, "You can keep trying . . ." That's another thing, he never said, "It has to go." You could bring it back in as many permutations as you wanted. He never just said, "No, I won't ever hear this again." Romaine Patterson wasn't even in the show for ages, and Leigh [Fondakowski] just kept reshaping it, reforming it, bashing away, and it finally got into the show. It's one of the high points of the show. And he just didn't have any interest in it initially. So, he's willing to listen for as long as you're willing to argue. (12 Dec. 2002)

It was difficult for many collaborators in The Laramie Project when they felt their power was being taken away. Wangh explains, “I’m not sure that’s what people signed on for, it’s a collaboration, but that doesn’t mean it’s a democracy. It’s hard because one has to make people feel that they have real input in order to have them be creative” (10 Dec. 2002). And yet, this difficult role of making choices, editing the material, and saying “no” is exactly the responsibility of the director working in a collaborative situation such as Tectonic’s. Kaufman often felt conflicted about these responsibilities, but explains their necessity:

Sometimes someone would come in with something and say, “I really think this has something to do with it.” And we would work and work and work and work. You have to understand, they’ve spent a year with this person and this is their text, they’re going to be invested in it. And sometimes it was very hard to have to say, “I understand, I am very sorry, but I am going to have to cut it.” But that happened very rarely because by that point we knew what story we were telling. (9 Dec. 2002)

In these instances, Kaufman returned to the organizing principle and through-lines, his tools with which he could measure the work, in order to decide on a Moment’s inclusion or exclusion. He continues, “The most important thing for the director is to say, ‘This is our organizing principle.’”

The creation of The Laramie Project signified a progression in technique for both Kaufman and his collaborators. The work forced Kaufman to clarify his directorial language when responding to Moments and his approach to justifying why Moments were included or excluded. The collaborators had to learn to find that delicate balance between coming into the workshops fully invested in their characters and the Moments

they created, while also being willing to let go of Moments that did not spark interest from the company or Kaufman – an extremely difficult process because no one but the initiator of the Moment knows how much time and labor went into its creation. Pitts states, “You’re coming up with all of your beautiful gifts, and then you have to just let them go. And that was hard” (9 Dec. 2002).

Situations also occurred where a collaborator was not willing to let go of her/his characters or thematic content. They continued to present the Moment in new forms, or with new content within previously found forms – constantly reshaping the Moments in order to spark some interest in Kaufman. The primary example of this situation was Leigh Fondakowski’s convincing Kaufman to include Romaine Patterson in the final script. Patterson is the young political activist who organized the Angel Action protest that blocked Fred Phelps’ hateful demonstration during the Henderson trials. Kaufman concedes:

Leigh was interested in Romaine Patterson and I wasn’t interested in her at all. I didn’t want her in the play and I kept fighting saying, “I don’t care, I don’t care. She’s not adding to the story.” And then she did “Angels” and all of a sudden I knew what she was doing in the story. And Leigh was right and I had been wrong all along. If you work in a group, you have to allow yourself to be wrong. (9 Dec. 2002)

Kaufman had to maintain a balance between conceding and remaining true to his intuitions, which was often difficult. Instances occurred where a collaborator took Kaufman to interview a particular character, in order to try to give him a personal, human connection to that character. Sometimes that convinced Kaufman of their validity in the

story, sometimes it did not. The key trait of Kaufman's approach is opportunity; collaborators always had the chance to convince him. Belber explains: "I give him full credit for not always caving in, and yet caving in when needed and certainly always giving us time. That's the beautiful thing about this guy is that he will air it out. He'll stay up until four in the morning to hear that monologue, and even if he's not listening he'll be in that room trying. It is really valid" (10 Dec. 2002).

### Questions Regarding Content of the Final Script

Kaufman based his decisions about what material to include or exclude on the organizing principal and through-lines, but he also made choices stemming from his wish to avoid brutalizing the audience, and one must question if that concern for brutalization extended to the cooperating residents of Laramie as well. Many critics and some of the creators of The Laramie Project feel that certain Moments and over-arching ideas, especially the issue of homophobia, were excluded at the cost of offering a more complicated look at the contradictions and darker side of Laramie, which presented a movement towards hope and forgiveness without critical questioning.

Wangh feels that the script brings many people to tears, accomplishing Kaufman's goal of the cathartic experience, but slides by some of the deeper questions regarding Fred Phelps and the two perpetrators – who these people really are and how society created them. Wangh questions the play's movement toward forgiveness through emotionality. For example, actor John McAdams was in the courtroom the day that

Dennis Sheppard read his now famous speech at the sentencing trial for Aaron McKinney. Part of the speech states:

DENNIS SHEPARD. I would like nothing better than to see you die, Mr. McKinney. However, this is the time to begin the healing process. To show mercy to someone who refused to show any mercy. Mr. McKinney, I am going to grant you life, as hard as it is for me to do so, because of Matthew. [. . .] You robbed me of something very precious, and I will never forgive you for that. Mr. McKinney, I give you life in the memory of one who no longer lives. May you have a long life, and may you thank Matthew every day for it. (Laramie 96)

According to Wangh, although both men witnessed Shepard giving his speech without losing control of his emotions, Kaufman directed McAdams to break into tears during the speech<sup>15</sup> – an action McAdams did not agree with but that was important to Kaufman in order to achieve a cathartic effect. Wangh believes that this catharsis helps bring the play to resolution, but states: “I think that there may be something dishonest about that. [. . .] For me the question is: are we actually deflecting the audience’s view from other things?” (10 Dec. 2002).

After this court statement by Dennis Shepard, the play concludes by revisiting the main Laramie characters. Jonas Slonaker pleads, “You know, it’s been a year since Matthew Shepard died, and they haven’t passed shit in Wyoming . . . at a state level, any

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<sup>15</sup> Kaufman and Wangh perceived Shepard’s speech differently. Referring to that day in court, Kaufman writes, “I thought Dennis did break down on several occasions” (“Re: Thoughts”).

town, nobody anywhere, has passed any kind of laws, antidiscrimination laws or hate crime legislation, nobody has passed anything anywhere. What's come out of it? What's come out of this that's concrete or lasting" (99). In response to the inclusion of Slonaker's lines, Alisa Solomon, in her article "Irony and Deeper Significance: Where Are the Plays?" writes: "To the extent that it gives voice to any call for action in response to the murder, the play offers the almost-last word to an uncontested plea for hate-crimes legislation, which does nothing to prevent queer-bashings and instead increases the already excessive imposition of mandatory sentences and the death penalty" (6).

The other Laramie characters, however, speak of hope and change. Jedadiah Shultz apologizes, "I just can't believe I ever said that stuff about homosexuals, you know" (98); Romaine Patterson states, "And whenever I think about the angels or any of the speaking that I've done, you know . . . Matthew gave me – Matthew's like guiding this little path with his light for me to walk down" (98); and Doc O'Connor paints a tragic, yet beautiful image of Shepard's final moments of life looking down upon the lights of Laramie: "Matt was right there in that spot, and I can just picture his eyes, I can just picture what he was seeing. The last thing he saw on this earth was the sparkling lights" (99). This bittersweet ending usually elicits an emotional response: "audiences have left in tears, moved, uplifted, even hopeful about the possibility that, as Dennis Shepard puts it, 'Good is coming out of evil'" (Wangh "Revenge"). This audience response prompted critic Robert Brustein to write, "Upon reflection, The Laramie Project may be more important as a purgative than as a performance, for it succeeds best as a rite

of exorcism for a lot of troubled people, as a kind of dramatized encounter group for the entire town” (30).

Some critics find the ending unnecessarily sentimental and overly neat, and they question its honesty. They ask what complicated elements of the story have been left out to end with a portrait of a community that has moved towards forgiveness and hope, without fully exploring the homophobia and the residents’ implication in raising the two murderers. Brustein continues, “Although the play is inspired by one of the worst hate crimes in recent American history, it draws back before the fact of human evil. For all the references to the killers, Russell A. Henderson and Aaron J. McKinney, by friends, family members, prosecutors, and police officers, we leave the theatre knowing as little about them as when we first arrived” (30). Why was this information not included?

For example, the judge prevented McKinney’s lawyers from employing a “gay panic defense” for which they had witnesses prepared to testify that McKinney had been molested by an older boy when he was a child. Due to the judge’s ruling the public never heard this part of McKinney’s story at the trial, but the members of Tectonic had. After the play had opened, Wangh asked Kaufman why they had not included that material in the final script. “The play that we wrote,” Kaufman replied, “is not the Aaron McKinney play . . . . This play is about the life of the town of Laramie. So . . . the decisions were made in the intersection of McKinney and that town” (“Revenge”). Kaufman followed his own rule of dictating the inclusion/exclusion of material by the through-lines established by the company. But Wangh persisted and asked Kaufman if he believed that McKinney’s childhood was not connected to Shepard’s murder. Kaufman replied:

The fact that his mother was murdered at a hospital because some idiot doctor malpracticed has something to do with it. . . . The fact that his father was a truck driver who came in on the weekends has something to do with it. The fact that he was attacked by a bully has something to do with it. What else has something to do with it? The fact that he was poor, the fact that he went to a horrendous school system, the fact that he lived in a society in which the kind of thinking that inspired this murder is accepted and encouraged, [and the fact] . . . of the church he went to saying that homosexuality is a sin. (Wangh "Revenge")

Yet, none of this information is dramatized or explored through the script, except the issue of religion's role in inciting homophobia, which forms a significant element of the narrative. Did the company fear this information creating sympathy for McKinney or excusing the homophobia that motivated his hate crime? Was his past just too complicated to explore during the time limits of the play? Perhaps a more thorough investigation into McKinney and Henderson's homophobia would have answered Brustein's questions that he felt the play avoided: "What kind of people could snuff out the life of a human being because he was perceived to come onto them in a bar? What does that tell us about the nature of the human heart?" (30).

Or did it stem from a concern for brutalizing Laramie? According to the script, the media had already condemned Laramie's national identity with its sensationalism. In the play Sergeant Hing describes one news report: "[. . .] and they've got: 'Murder in Wyoming,' and Wyoming's dripping red like it's got blood on it or something [. . .]" (49) and Jedediah Schultz states, "Now, after Matthew, I would say that Laramie is a town defined by an accident, a crime. We've become Waco, we've become Jasper. We're a noun, a definition, a sign" (9). Neither Kaufman nor the company wanted to recreate that

experience for the Laramie residents, partially because they had witnessed the humanity in that community first hand. Solomon writes, "The Laramie Project insists (in a vaguely amusing echo of the mainstream lesbian/gay/transsexual/bisexual/queer movement), these people are just like you and me. It offers down-home portraits of likeable folks invaded and misunderstood by an in-your face Yankee media" (6). The company's goal was to present the town's story in a complicated, unanswerable way that still allowed some catharsis for the audience.<sup>16</sup> The dispute, then, revolves around the question: How much of the story could an audience absorb? "One of the things about Moisés' work is that he wants it to be commercial," states Pitts. "His phrase was always, 'You can't do that. You're brutalizing the audience'" (9 Dec. 2002). During our interviews, Kaufman never stated that he aims to make "commercial" theatre. He did, however, stress that he wants his work "to speak to the largest population possible" ("Re: Thoughts").

Again, this raises the complicated question: Does The Laramie Project reconstruct the town's story by "deflecting the audience's view from other things"? The consideration of that question is apparent in the following quote from Fondakowski, which specifically addresses homophobia:

A lot of us were arguing for putting in more homophobe material. Moisés felt strongly that if you put people up there saying homophobic things, they'll be read like idiots, buffoons. And many among us, and I was one of them, were arguing that while that risk is there, if you don't put them in you're acting like there are no homophobes in Laramie. (13 Dec. 2002)

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that these intentions are incompatible. Catharsis springs from an answer – or at least from a perceived answer. Perhaps this conflict of aims helps to explain the play's popularity and also its criticism – the answer wins out, the catharsis alleviates the difficult questions just enough to allow the audience to leave with hope.

Note that Fondakowski says “a lot of us” and “more homophobe material.” Both raise more questions about Kaufman’s final decisions of inclusion/exclusion. And yet, homophobia is explored in the text. Referring to the Wyoming concept of “live and let live” character Jonas Slonaker states, “That is crap, you know? I mean, basically what it boils down to: If I don’t tell you I’m a fag, you won’t beat the crap out of me. I mean, what’s so great about that? That’s a great philosophy?” (59); and Zackie Salmon claims, “Yes, as a lesbian I was more concerned for my safety. [. . .] somewhere inside we know it could happen to us anytime, you know” (58). Kaufman also adds the voice of a blatant homophobe to the mix through Murdock Cooper, who states:

There’s more gay people around than what you think. [. . .]  
It doesn’t bother anybody because most of ‘em that are gay  
or lesbian they know damn well who to talk to. If you step  
out of line you’re asking for it. Some people are saying he  
made a pass at them. You don’t pick up regular people.  
I’m not excusing their actions, but it made me feel better  
because it was partially Matthew Shepard’s fault and  
partially the guys who did it . . . you know, maybe it’s fifty-  
fifty. (58)

Would more inclusion of this type of material explicate the homophobia in Laramie or would it allow the audience to distance themselves from the citizens of Laramie and feel no implication in creating a nation or personal community where homophobia exists under a thin veil of tolerance? Certainly, within these disagreements between Fondakowski, Wangh, Kaufman, and critics lay several truths and many more questions.

The Laramie Project deals with a contemporary issue, so Kaufman and the company focused the script around the premise that Laramie’s story is “us” not “them” – implicating its audience nightly in having created a world that raises Hendersons and

McKinneys. In the second act, Zubaida Ula, a young Muslim woman states, “And we have to mourn this and we have to be sad that we live in a town, a state, a country where shit like this happens. [. . .] And we need to own this crime. I feel. Everyone needs to own it. We are like this. We ARE like this. WE are LIKE this” (60). As directed by Kaufman in the original production, Barbara Pitts, playing Ula, turned directly to the audience and included each spectator as she repeated the line, “We are like this.”

The horror of Shepard’s murder, the degradation inherent in that crime, is unimaginable. It is difficult for many to understand the inhumanity of such a torturous and painful death, but because the event had inundated the national media, many people had already formed their opinions on the incident and on Laramie as a town. By implicating the audience in the crime, Kaufman hoped to force the spectators to deal with their personal evaluations of this community as well as their own, which was heightened by the self-proclaimed subjectivity of the actors telling the audience that the play is their personal interpretation of Laramie’s story. Arthur Bartow states, “The Laramie Project is not something you forget. You keep thinking about it – either agreeing or disagreeing. As a result of what he [Kaufman] did, you keep working it in your mind, which is a sign of really good theatre” (10 Dec. 2002). Kaufman and company made this link to all communities blatant through their use of Our Town imagery in the staging and structure of the piece. Like many critics, Ben Brantley commented on Tectonic’s twist on Wilder’s play: “[. . .] this is Our Town with a question mark, as in ‘Could this be our town?’ There are repeated variations by the citizens of Laramie on the statement ‘It can’t happen here,’ followed immediately by ‘And yet it has’” (“Brutal Act”). In addition to

these questions, maybe The Laramie Project has been welcomed into the mainstream cultural discourse because it reinforces what is positive in humanity through its ability to reassure and provide comfort in its hopeful message that, as Dennis Shepard says, “good is coming out of evil.”

### Directorial Communication with Actors

In addition to facilitating collaboration in the creation of new works, Kaufman’s approach towards working with actors also reflects his deep admiration for their art. Because each creative process varies for Kaufman, so does his coaching of actors. Initially on The Laramie Project, he directed the majority of his attention on the collaboration and final writing of the script. Once the company began more traditional rehearsals, however, he was able to redirect his focus towards the actors. When asked to describe Kaufman’s communication with actors, many company members discussed the freedom he encourages. Pierotti states:

Moisés would give me a note like, “You need to create the entire space for the audience. What you are doing right now is creating Wyoming for the audience.” Then that was my concern of how I would do that. [. . .] For him to say, “Greg, I need you to create Wyoming for the audience,” rather than tell me something else gives me lots of freedom as a performer. He’s a great director in that way. (12 Dec. 2002)

In this manner, Kaufman relies on his actors to be intuitive, creative artists who can help him solve problems. Clearly part of his success has come from working with intelligent actors who can see the larger picture during rehearsals. Partially because the actors had

written the original Moments, they took it upon themselves to adjust stage pictures, track costume pieces, and explore rhythm. Describing Kaufman in the rehearsal process, Pitts states, “It’s really not what he or Leigh want to be thinking about, how to coach you into getting the job done. I love directors who stay out of your way or help you think about something in a new way” (9 Dec. 2002).

Yet, Kaufman did hold individual acting coaching sessions with his actors and brought in exercises to help them explore their main characters. One such exercise involved instructing the actors to stand in front of a mirror and commune with their characters, to literally hold a conversation between the actor and the character. Kaufman asked the actors to visualize the characters they had interviewed in the mirror, to start an internal dialogue with the character (saying hello, bringing up a question from their interview, etc.), and then to ask the character to show them how they wanted to be presented to an audience. The actor then observed how the character wanted to be performed – in terms of physicality, vocality, and gestures. Finally, the actor performed the character’s body posture and gestures back to the character. Throughout this process, a dialectic exchange between actor and character was encouraged. The actor could question the character for more options if they did not like what the character offered up. The actor asked the character to approve or disapprove of their imitation. Together, then, actor and character created the performance of each role.

Kaufman and Fondakowski also worked with the actors to set parameters between presenting and representing their characters. Kaufman instructed some actors to stop listening to their character’s recorded interviews because their acting began to lean

towards “being” rather than “presenting” the character. As described by Andy Paris in his work on Gross Indecency, Kaufman works with his actors to find the “one thing” that drops them into the essence of each character. Kelli Simpkin explains, “We had this one exercise in Denver where we all met with Moisés personally, and we just went through our characters, doing some physical posturing of each. Then he’d say, ‘Okay, now Aaron Kreifels, and now this person, this person, this person’” (18 March 2003). Due to the rate of character transitions in Laramie, Kaufman needed the actors to instantly transform, physically and vocally, in and out of character.

Perhaps Kaufman relies so heavily on his actors to do the internal character work because he does not focus his attention on that level. Stephen Wangh has not only collaborated consistently with Kaufman over the past ten years as a dramaturg and associate writer; he also trained Kaufman as an actor in the Experimental Theatre Wing at N.Y.U. He states, “He’s an actors’ director in that he allows actors to do their work, and he then gives notes. But he’s not an actors’ director in the sense of being someone who understands acting very well from the inside, able to help an actor with the motivation or the questions of how to make something work” (10 Dec. 2002). This makes sense considering Kaufman’s background and training where physicality had been emphasized over internal motivation since his days with Thespis in Caracas where he studied Commedia dell’Arte and Grotowski’s plastiques. Theoretically, it also supports his interest in a Brechtian, presentational-style of acting, rather than a deeply emotional and psychological based approach.

### Directorial Communication with Designers

Kaufman's directorial aesthetic falls heavily on the visual side of the visual-auditory continuum, which means that communication with his designers, much like with his actors, deals with terms of specificity and imagery. Also similar to his work with actors, Kaufman relies on his designers to be consistently present collaborators who equally add input to the process of creation – a virtually unheard of expectation within commercial theatre in New York. "It's a truly collaborative process, which is the benefit of working with him," states scenic designer Robert Brill. "It's definitely something I would love to do more of. Projects like this exercise a different kind of muscle beyond the conventional theatre and feed the soul in a different way. It's definitely a different kind of artistic satisfaction" (12 Dec. 2002). All the designers interviewed for this dissertation spoke of the thrill they experienced from playing an active role in the creation of the work. Like the actors, designers were encouraged to exercise their creative rather than interpretive muscles.

Costume designer Moe Schell joined the project during the second workshop. The emphasis of her communication with Kaufman revolved around the importance of distinguishing the company of actors from the characters they presented in order to establish the company's look to heighten the actors' presence. She recalls, "I had to try to boil each company member down. It was all about boiling it down to the essence of who that person played" (22 March 2003). Their "essence" also had to form a base

costume in which the actors could add and/or subtract costume pieces; the character transitions allowed no time for complete costume changes.

Their collaboration was rather traditional. Schell continues, “I had poster board upon poster board of image collages, and he would circle what he liked and say what he didn’t like. [. . .] Moisés kept talking about how he wanted it to look like the world of Sam Shepard. So I would bring him pictures of his plays and Sam Shepard himself.” Like many of his collaborators, Schell also experienced Kaufman’s need to see design elements being used in the workshop before approval. “He couldn’t understand until he saw it on the body of the actor,” she explains. “‘Show me,’ is his vocabulary. I think that he was afraid that it wouldn’t work until he saw it.”

Schell’s process, however, progressed beyond the traditional director-designer collaboration because she designed with an entire company who was creating an ever-changing script. She compares the experience to working on film. By the first dress rehearsal for the Denver opening, Schell still did not know for sure which characters would be used or the order in which they would appear. Her process evolved into conceiving preliminary ideas after holding conversations with Kaufman and the actors in order to shop for numerous options to bring into the workshop for experimentation. These early explorations were often inspired by Polaroid photos the company members took of their subjects. When Schell presented her findings, “every single person could say what they wanted about the shirt or the whatever piece I brought to the theater,” she explains (22 March 2003). She quickly adjusted her strategy: “I loved working with the actors, but often I had to let go and learn not to bring around anything I didn’t want on

stage.” Schell’s presence in the workshop was essential because as new characters were introduced into the piece she often had to quickly respond to the collaborators’ question, “Can we have this?” This close collaboration with the actors created what Schell describes as “a familial relationship” – great caring and understanding coupled with conflict and negotiation.

Since lighting designer Betsy Adams had worked with Kaufman on Gross Indecency, they were able to begin the project with a short-hand language that only comes from previous collaboration. The Laramie Project, however, presented a whole new set of challenges in terms of lighting an open stage with multiple acting areas and numerous locales. She recalls Kaufman’s comments on their collaboration: “One of the things he said about Laramie was that he wanted to suggest the world of Laramie rather than represent it. And that’s a very evocative idea for a designer; it’s very specific” (11 Dec. 2002). In order to achieve this suggestion with specificity, Adams designed an elaborate light plot. They intended, however, to keep the lighting simplistic enough that the show could be pared down – its essence packed into a van to achieve maximum expression through minimal means, which is now being done as high schools all over the nation perform The Laramie Project with simplified production values, which sends the work out to a larger audience.

Kaufman and Adams spoke specifically about form and content during their discussions in terms of the staging of the work and the content of the piece overall, not specifically in terms of Adams’ design. In designing the actual lights for the production, their collaboration was quite traditional. Kaufman discussed the physical staging forms

and Adams complimented them with her lights. She explains, “I don’t think of lighting in terms of form. I think of light in terms of quality, the qualities of light, which all combine to create form of one sort or another. So I need to come up with the right combination of all of those things to create the appropriate form for the Moment” (11 Dec. 2002).

Their collaboration became more non-traditional during the first phase of the collaborative creation process. To reiterate, Kaufman wants his designers present in his workshops from the earliest days in order to marry content and form and focus on communicating and creating Moments through the languages of the theatre. The designers are embraced as equal company members and collaborators. During the creation of The Laramie Project, however, that process was only allowed to reach a certain point in regards to the designers. Adams recalls the point at which her input was no longer welcomed after originally contributing freely to the collaboration:

I think he felt that there were too many voices and too little time. He asked the designers to leave the workshop. [. . .] It felt like he was saying “I want to listen to everything you have to say, but only up to a point. [. . .] I really think it’s indicative of Moisés as auteur. He’s a brilliant man, and he has wonderful ideas, and he wants all the input, but there comes a point in the process where he doesn’t want input anymore; and that’s very hard for everybody” (11 Dec. 2002).

The removal of the designers from the collaborative process occurred at the end of the second workshop held at the Classic Stage Company in New York. And yet, according to Kaufman, Adams “came back to the work in later workshops and traveled to Laramie as well” (“Re: Thoughts”). Eventually, after the third workshop at the Sundance Theatre

Lab, the original scenic designer, Sarah Lambert, left the project all together. As previously mentioned, Lambert would not interview on the record for this dissertation which might have clarified her reasons for leaving.

Removing the designers from the workshops raises another complicated question regarding Kaufman's process of creation. When artists sign onto a project as full collaborators and they invest their passion into the creation of the work, a form of power that is not usually granted in traditional theatre, they feel betrayed and disempowered when that input is no longer sought or valued. On the other hand, as the work transitions from a period of creating a mass amount of Moments towards a more refined process of editing and selecting material that will form the final script, production deadlines can force the director to take more and more individual control.

Here the question of authority in Kaufman's collaboration is raised once again – a question that can not be resolved here because it has not yet been resolved in the minds of many of Kaufman's collaborators. Yet, the question itself identifies a key characteristic of Kaufman's approach to creating The Laramie Project. The first phase of creating Moments was highly collaborative and unique with equal input from all company members. Gradually, however, the process transitioned into a more traditional rehearsal process as collaborators were identified by their specific production roles (designers, writers, and actors) and actors were cast as specific characters. At that point, each artist's focus shifted towards their area of specialization, which meant that they were no longer giving input on the creation of the whole production. Kaufman took over the traditional

role of the director, the unifier of the production, as he shifted his emphasis to his specialized roles – director and playwright.

### The Laramie Project Aesthetics

Kaufman's directorial aesthetics in The Laramie Project follow the established characteristics from his previous work of creating a theatrically minimalist, sparse, non-realistic space in which the action of the story unfolds. Wangh describes Kaufman's aesthetic as "a very simple, straight-forward, presentational, proscenium view. His view is a picture, a very clear picture" (10 Dec. 2002). The clear images he creates present strikingly clean stage pictures that directly control the spectator's vision and reception of the work. Although he employs simultaneity with numerous images occurring on stage at once, he carefully directs the eye of the audience member through traditional picturization and composition to keep them from being visually or aurally confused. "He controls what the audience's experience is going to be very strongly," Wangh continues. He accomplishes this beauty and control through a keen awareness of specificity in spatial relationships. Pitts explains, "He and Leigh [Fondakowski] have both made me so sensitive to spatial relationships. He's like, 'Can you move that chair like two inches? Okay, back a little bit'" (9 Dec. 2002). His emphasis on visual pictures not only makes beautiful theatre but also clarifies story and character relationships. The following two examples from The Laramie Project are representative of the specific kinds of visual imagery Kaufman employs.

The first image occurs towards the beginning of act 2 in “Moment: The Gem City of the Plains,” when the media descends upon Laramie. The stage directions state:

Many reporters enter the stage, followed by media crews carrying cameras, microphones, and lights. They start speaking into the cameras. Simultaneously, televisions enter the space – in our production they flew in from above the light grid. In the monitors, one can see in live feed the reporters speaking as well as other media images. The texts overlap to create a kind of media cacophony. This moment should feel like an invasion and should be perceived by the other actors onstage. (Kaufman, Laramie 46)

The following stage image captures Rulon Stacey, the CEO of Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins where Shepard was hospitalized, delivering his first press conference. The form for the media invasion was collaboratively created in the workshop space under Kaufman’s direction. Andy Paris recalls that the original staging placed Pierotti, playing Rulon Stacey, facing down stage but the media personnel formed an obstacle between Stacey and the audience. Paris suggested turning Pierotti upstage, making his face only present on the monitors, which more clearly captured the television-media form. Kaufman agreed and restaged the image as printed below.



FIGURE 11. “Moment: Medical Update.” Photo courtesy of Ken Friedman.

The second image illustrates Kaufman’s use of the human body to create abstract symbolism through clean picturization in the space, and his use of simultaneity. The image occurs toward the top of act 3 when Romaine Patterson, played by Kelli Simpkins, describes the event of her Angel Action anti-protest. Upstage behind the “angels” one can view Fred Phelps, played by Stephen Belber, as he harasses those outside the McKinney hearings. Upstage right the umbrellas that remain onstage during all of act 3, recalling the unconscious collective imagery of Our Town, are also somewhat visible.



FIGURE 12. “Moment: Snow.” Photo courtesy of Ken Friedman.

Through his emblematic visual imagery, Kaufman uses his non-realistic spaces as storytelling devices, utilizing the set as a type of machine or narrative engine. Kaufman used the sparse stage in combination with his actors to paint beautiful, emotive images. In this manner, the goal of the set was to speak in combination with the actors, rather than create a realistic environment. “His vocabulary is very strikingly visual and it includes the actors and the set as one thing,” Wangh explains (10 Dec. 2002). As shown in both images, Kaufman directed his actors to use minimalist actions as well – a simple gesture, sitting, or just walking across the stage – to compliment the overall visual impact.

Kaufman’s respect for the workshop space shows itself in the scenic design of The Laramie Project. As the actors found and used objects during the creative process, they became essential elements in the workshops. During the initial workshops, the company started to work minimally with only tables, chairs and tape recorders, developing the notion of the stage as a work-space – all those objects found their way

into the final design. Additionally, the architectural characteristics of the space were also copied and used to inspire the scenic design. Brill explains:

Realizing that the theater itself is a forum for discussion, we decided instead to adopt a site specific approach to the design by embracing the theatre space in its raw form. This became a cornerstone of the design. For example, there was a loading door in the rehearsal space, resembling a freight elevator loading door. I mentioned to Moisés, that I thought that we should try to connect what is site specific about the workshop to what is site specific about the actual theatre. So it became that simple, melding the few elements of our workspaces. I think Moisés is the kind of director who can both appreciate and embrace that sensibility. (12 Dec. 2002)

In addition to the freight elevator door, used in the New York production to mask a large projection screen on an exposed faux rear wall of the theatre, the hard-wood floor was also copied directly from the workshop space. The faux rear wall itself was inspired by the brick pattern and color of the walls from the workshop space.

Once the design of the space was decided upon, essential objects were sought out. These objects had to be 'plastic', compact, and integral to the action of the staging, like the rolling cameras and lights for the media shown in the first image and the umbrellas in the second. Brill clarifies the objects' significance: "Even the one little strip of grass that suggested the vicinity of the fence, it was a process of distilling down to the essential elements, and then creating moments of beauty with those essentials, like the chairs creating the fence" (12 Dec. 2002). Throughout their interaction with these essential objects, the actors gave them life through object-transformation. When a row of chairs becomes a fence through the actors' placing of the chairs in the space and the context created by the content of the text, the objects live and "act." They speak and

communicate through the tension produced by the transformation, as the objects shift from “reality” to abstraction through symbolic visual imagery. The actors give them this life through their movements, gestures, and energy focus – how they touch and handle the objects. In this use of space and objects, Kantor’s influence on Kaufman is apparent once again. In A Journey Through Other Spaces, Kantor writes:

SPACE is charged with ENERGY.

Space shrinks and expands.

And these motions mould forms and objects.

It is space that GIVES BIRTH to forms!

It is space that conditions the network of relations and tensions between objects.

TENSION is the principal actor of space. (217)

For the staging of The Laramie Project, Kaufman collaborated with Brill to conceive a sparse, minimalist approach to stage design, maintaining the openness of the space, which Kaufman could continually change and reshape as he painted images in physical forms, using his actors and essential objects as his palette.

Another important element of Kaufman’s painterly sensibility comes from his use of lighting – his ability to hire skilled lighting designers who can help him shape and etch the images in the space. One of his strengths as a director is his ability to work with his lighting designers to meticulously determine the final look of a production and to subtly shift the focus of the audience. In The Laramie Project, hundreds of lighting cues existed, of which the audience was, most likely, not aware. “He pays an enormous

amount of attention to detail,” Wangh explains. “He can be fascinated with split seconds of timing and lighting, almost as if he were composing” (10 Dec. 2002).

Working with a director with a visual eye like Kaufman can be a nightmare for lighting designers, but having worked with Kaufman on Gross Indecency, Betsy Adams knew what to expect. “I knew that Moisés would want even more specificity than we had in Gross Indecency, and we needed the ability to make changes as quickly as the script and blocking changed” (11 Dec. 2002). For instance, they worked most intensely on the media sections which were the most complicated in terms of blocking, and Adams accomplished their goals of subtly directing the focus of the audience, etching the visual imagery in space, and isolating the specificity of each Moment.

Finally, Moe Schell’s costumes became a driving force behind the pace of the show and even dictated a majority of its blocking due to the actors transforming in and out of characters in mere seconds with the help of adding or removing a costume piece – a jacket, hat, glasses, et cetera. She explains, “It could have been a show about Velcro and changing costumes, but none of us wanted that. We all wanted it to be very organic from little pieces and not theatrical in that way. So the actor did the transformation not the costume” (22 March 2003). This called for intensely specific costume pieces which could visually define a character’s essence.<sup>17</sup> “I used to say that a shirt had to do back flips because it was such a concentrated piece of clothing,” Schell continues. “It couldn’t just be a shirt, it had to be distinctive, to represent a complex character.” The form of changing clothes in view of the audience visually supported Kaufman’s content of

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Belber actually asked Doc O’Connor for one of his hats to wear during the performance and Doc obliged.

keeping the actors' presence foregrounded in the piece through their Brechtian approach to acting. By emphasizing the work of the actor, supported by the costumes, Schell and Kaufman accomplished their objective for the costumes. "It took more time of my life than any other show and the costumes disappeared," she concludes, "and that was our goal. Our goal was to make the costumes recognizable but not to interfere."

### Conclusion

In reflecting on the collaborative creation process, directorial communication style (especially in dealing with questions of authority), and the directorial aesthetics that initiated and generated The Laramie Project, it is evident that Kaufman is interested in producing work that has different artistic muscle than is found in more traditional, commercial theatre. Kaufman's way of working centers on his approach of collaboratively creating theatre and aspiring to construct a company that has an established repertoire of visceral work, as well as a shared vocabulary, which is under constant development. His approach has enabled him to write works that are simultaneously experimental and mainstream.

Like Gross Indecency, The Laramie Project gives the impression of a theatrical conversation occurring between the stage and the spectators. In both pieces, the actors face straight out to the audience and address them. As Ben Brantley notes in his New York Times review, "As Mr. Kaufman demonstrated with Gross Indecency, he has a remarkable gift for giving a compelling theatrical flow to journalist and historical

material” (E1). Kaufman clearly wants to talk to people. Placing his actors in a direct discourse with the audience is a natural outflow from his need to communicate with others – using the theatre to speak his thoughts. “He doesn’t want to beat around the bush,” Fondakowski clarifies. “He wants to say, ‘This is what I feel. This is what I think. This is how I want you to see this.’ I think there’s nothing mysterious about it. He’s really stripped away, made the form as simple as possible, to communicate his ideas” (13 Dec. 2002).

Perhaps Kaufman is best categorized as a humanist. In addition to his theoretical questioning of searching for new forms and theatrical languages, asking who tells whose stories, and how theatre can reconstruct history, he is interested in the transcendent qualities of human beings, in their abilities to fight back, to feel and think deeply on serious issues, and to overcome and move forward. He wants to put that human struggle onstage as a gift for larger audiences to experience and respond to. In this regard, something is to be said for both a young, lesbian rights activist named Romaine Patterson and Oscar Wilde being among the people he has chosen to exalt.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND QUESTIONS

#### Introduction

In order to assemble an understanding of Moisés Kaufman's success with Tectonic Theater Project, I have tried to trace a few key questions that link theoretical influences and questions, practice, and an emerging aesthetic. The first of these questions asks: What, within Kaufman's background, theoretical perspectives, and practical techniques, might be argued as, at least partly, responsible for his success? Secondly, what constitutes Kaufman's aesthetic, and how might this resolve the question of his role as Tectonic's director? This leads to the final, and perhaps most important, question: Is Kaufman an auteur, directing with primary control even of authorship, or is he a collaborator, primarily interested in his company's collective creativity? As a result of this study, additional questions arose for areas of future research, such as: What is the history of American theatre creating plays based on historical accounts? Where does Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project fit into this history? How will Kaufman's

techniques, specifically Moment Work, continue to evolve? What lies ahead for Tectonic Theater Project as a company?

### Background and Theoretical Questions

Theoretical questioning lies at the heart of Kaufman's search for new theatrical forms and languages. He continually questions how the stage communicates differently than television and film. This exploration inspired the formation of his Tectonic techniques that generate work with a recognizable aesthetic. Kaufman bases his theoretical questions in the "horizontal theatre" approach of Mary Overlie and Tadeusz Kantor. Using their similar yet distinct theories, which remove text as the dominant theatrical element and place it equally alongside lighting, costumes, sound, blocking, set, and acting, Kaufman developed his "structuralist"<sup>1</sup> approach to making theatre. He views each moment on stage, each scene or act, as consisting of individual building blocks formed by these theatrical elements – blocks which can be pulled apart and experienced separately or rearranged to create new meaning.

What is most noteworthy, however, is how Kaufman uses this structuralist approach in the workshop space to generate new work through the "copulation of form and content." Kaufman's work relies heavily on text. Perhaps, some would argue, to the point of leaving text at the top of the theatrical elements hierarchy as displayed by the

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<sup>1</sup> I use the word "structuralist" here in reference to Kaufman's focus on creating narratives based on new forms and structures, distinctive from the more theoretical term associated with de Saussure. Tectonic is defined on the company's homepage as "related to the art and science of structure."

“vertical theatre” model in Chapter I. Tectonic’s binary focus on form and content in the workshop space where Moments are created, however, forces the two to copulate in the instant of creation. The theatrical forms are not simply serving a pre-existing text by working to clarify or dictate meaning through visual or aural means. Kaufman’s binary focus keeps the reciprocal relationship between form and content/text open and fluid in order to create individual Moments. So, while text is important in Kaufman’s theatre, his structuralist approach allows form to inform text and text to inform the theatrical form – placing text in an equal position with the other theatrical elements.

Through his works, Kaufman asks: Who tells whose stories and for what purpose? In Tectonic’s two most recent plays, this led him to emphasize different versions of the same story, allowing contradictions and multiple, subjective truths to replace the expectation of one, coherent objective truth. Kaufman’s work also questions the primacy of text by a postmodern reflexivity which reminds the audience of how the work was made, thus undermining the work as final, single truth or portraying it as objectively detached from the process of creation. Kaufman’s interest lies in reconstructing stories rather than focusing on their deconstruction. His emphasis on using structure to construct narratives, allows each spectator to author their own individual meaning of the relationships between Moments rather than using traditional, linear, storytelling devices. This structuralist approach results in a more complex and plural reading of his company’s work.

Kaufman’s theatre can not be easily categorized, but if there is a category which helps make sense of his work thus far, it may be this very old-fashioned category called

humanism. Kaufman wants to exalt humans by reconstructing their stories through complex means. With Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project he has been able to balance the dualities between humanist and postmodernist, and the use of catharsis versus an intellectual, Brechtian questioning. Will one side of these balances eventually win out, or will he be able to maintain them – and if so, at what costs? From Kaufman’s perspective, the answers to these questions depend on each future project.

Kaufman’s theoretical questions drive his search for new forms and theatrical languages. Crucial to the drive behind this search is his belief in marrying each creative process to the content of each new work, which forces him to discover new forms. Tectonic company member Stephen Belber states: “He’s not going to go out and do another Laramie now, because that’s not his mission statement – to find different ways of telling stories” (10 Dec. 2002). Despite shifts in the creation process for each new work, the Tectonic techniques discussed in this dissertation will most likely carry through to Kaufman’s future workshops, such as focusing on the binaries of form and content and exploring in the laboratory environment with his collaborators by using Moment Work to write performance.

I have attempted to track the development of Kaufman’s technique of asking his collaborators to “write performance” rather than “write text” through the workshops’ use of Moment Work. Actors, designers, dramaturges, and writers alike work equally as collaborating theatre artists to construct Moments.<sup>2</sup> Kaufman insists that the Tectonic technique of bringing all the artists together for the earliest workshops is paramount to

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<sup>2</sup> To reiterate from Chapter IV’s discussion, all collaborators work together but the actors carry more prominence in creating original Moments.

the copulation of form and content, in order for all the languages of the theatre to be used in creating Moments. But a discrepancy exists. As discussed in previous chapters, in both Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project designers and actors joined the workshop process at different stages of the work, which raises two questions: Is it necessary to have all the theatre artists present from day one, especially the designers? Is that the next developmental step for Tectonic workshops? Beginning with work on Gross Indecency and tracked through the Galileo and Laramie workshops, it appears there may be a progression towards this aim.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the Tectonic designers' involvement in the creation of Moments has increased. It also seems that earlier involvement in the workshops has led to greater creative license on the designers' part, enhanced by their interaction with the other collaborators.

I have also traced the development of Moment Work from an actor-centered, free-form, improv-based technique to the more structured and controlled creation of sophisticated Moments that require numerous theatrical elements for presentation. Kaufman's next step in the progression of Moment Work centers on an exploration of its ability to generate fictional work as opposed to Moments whose texts consist solely of citations from historical documents or verbatim interviews. This next step will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter under "Areas for Future Research." For now, it is sufficient to note that as a vehicle for the creation of work and dialogue amongst a company, Moment Work remains Kaufman's unique and most thoroughly developed technique.

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<sup>3</sup> This progression is, at least partly, due to Tectonic's newly established financial ability to invite all its artists to participate in the initial workshops.

Kaufman's theoretical questions and techniques shape the creation of work that displays a strong visual aesthetic. His stage worlds are minimal and bare and unique to the stage. He aspires to collaboratively create sets that operate as machines, or constructions, within the overall form of his works. The sets in his productions change and become an integral part of the storytelling through their interaction with the actors rather than simply working to establish a realistic environment. Robert Brill explains the effect:

I think he's interested in creating work that has a different artistic muscle than we find in more traditional theatre. For lack of a better term, it's a more European sensibility, and I'm certain he's more inspired by more European companies and their process of creating theatre than what is conventional in this country – companies that have an established repertoire and can develop a shared vocabulary where the resulting work is visceral and muscular. (12 Dec. 2002)

Brill's observation displays itself best through Brecht's influence on Kaufman, which has led to productions that focus on the transformation of the actor and heightened theatricality through a minimalist approach to design. In addition, Kaufman's expectation of developing work over long workshop and rehearsal periods, and his treatment of text, especially identifying sources through narration, displays his Brechtian influence.

Auteur and Collaboration

As the most collaborative of the arts, theatre is fraught with inherent tensions amongst the artists throughout its creation. When a collaborative ensemble creates theatre those tensions multiply, and when an auteur directs that ensemble the tensions can increase even further. Kaufman states:

I've always thought of myself as an auteur. I modeled myself on people who were thinking that way – like Peter Brook and Kantor – people who were really creating theatrical events. I think that these questions of language and form have always led to a certain authorial quality to the work because I was very interested in constructing the theatrical event in which the text was only one of the elements. That made me the author, hence the word auteur.  
(19 March 2003)

Yet because of his reliance on collaboration in creating the work, Kaufman falls somewhere between the auteur director and the “director” of collectives such as Split Britches, Touch Mime Theater, or Theatre de la Jeune Lune – collectives whose artists choose its membership. In contrast, Kaufman alone invites artists to participate in Tectonic projects, so it is not accurate to call Tectonic a “collective.” Balancing the director’s authority within a collective is a complicated issue. No correct way to find and maintain this balance exists; it becomes a process of trial and error that each collective must discover through experimentation. For example, Split Britches’ Deborah Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver all work equally together to create and direct their

collaborative creations.<sup>4</sup> No single, set “director” in the traditional sense of the word exists. In another collective, Sheila Kerrigan, the cofounder and co-director of Touch Mime Theater, used a collaborative technique of “rotating ogreship” to balance the authority of the director. Using the tool of “rotating ogreship” allows groups to share power equitably in order to “demystify, simplify, and equalize decision making” (Kerrigan 94) by rotating directors from within the collective of artists working to create a piece. Again, no single director exists, but the role of director is fulfilled. Also, when the Minneapolis-based Theatre de la Jeune Lune began, the three founding members co-directed. Founding member Barbara Berlovitz Desbois states: “We do not come into a production . . . and say, “OK, I’m directing. You’re designing. You’re acting,” and each person has their job. There’s overlap all over the place” (Kerrigan 103).

Although Kaufman is Tectonic’s director, and retains final authority over the collaborative process, his approach to working with his collaborators reflects some of the characteristics of these collectives. For instance, he shares his directing responsibility with his actors when they direct the initial presentation of their Moments. For Laramie, he also shared the role of director with Leigh Fondakowski, his assistant director. In addition, Kaufman’s current workshops begin without determining roles for the different theatre artists, placing them on a more equitable footing. With Laramie, all company members began the openly collaborative project as dramaturges, but as the process developed Kaufman assigned traditional theatre roles of designers, actors, and writers to

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<sup>4</sup> Although within this collaboration, each of the women bring their individual areas of strength to their rehearsals. Weaver’s primary function is that of director. Shaw is the group’s primary designer and technician, while Margolin is the company’s playwright (Donkin 133).

the collaborators. This movement towards the usual theatre model confines the artists' focus to an individual scale rather than engaging the whole project, which becomes the duty of Kaufman as the director.

This combination of collaborative and traditional models raises interesting questions. What tensions exist between Kaufman's need for his collaborators to create theatre and his simultaneous need to control the direction of the piece? From where do his authority and power come and/or how do they change as this process of creation transitions from collaborative creation in the workshops to the more traditional rehearsal? Kaufman has repeatedly stated that he fears being a playwright who sits in a room alone and writes a play, because he believes that method only leads to recycling established forms. He is convinced that his search for new forms should take place in the workshop laboratory with all the theatrical elements and contributing artists present. Therefore, he strives to find the balance between empowering his collaborators to create while simultaneously guiding and directing those creations. The tension, then, lies between controlling but not controlling the creative process. He begins a workshop by presenting his hunch to the company; he is the visionary of the piece. He does not, however, know what the piece will actually become until he explores that hunch with his collaborators and they create from it together.

Not only are Tectonic's works director-initiated in that they are instigated solely by Kaufman's hunches; but they are driven by Kaufman's questions, organization, workshops, and financial support. In short, they are his projects, and he retains the final authority for guiding the creation of the work. "It's always been clear that he is in

charge,” states company member Andy Paris. “He takes the most responsibility, risks the most, and therefore gets the most credit, which is the way it should be” (18 March 2003). This is a unique element that separates Tectonic Theater Project from many other collectives who create collaborative work where any group member is free to bring in ideas (or hunches) from which to create, and the financial responsibility is shared. What would happen if a company member brought a hunch to Kaufman? Would he take it on as a Tectonic project? Direct it himself or co-direct with the originator of the hunch? Or would he encourage them to create their own work outside the organization of Tectonic, which company members are, in fact, currently doing? When I asked Kaufman these questions, he replied: “All those options are possible” (“Re: The Hunch”). For Kaufman, it depends on whether or not the content of the piece resonates with him, who the company member is, and how the work fits into the company’s search for new forms. To reiterate, however, thus far this has not been the case; Kaufman has initiated all of Tectonic’s projects. And yet, the possibility for a company member-initiated work could lie in Tectonic’s future, which would further complicate this question regarding Kaufman’s role as the director of Tectonic Theater Project.

To date, Kaufman has not written a work alone; he needs his company to respond to his hunch, to flesh it out and unpack what lies inside. When referring to his theoretical questions, techniques he has developed within the workshop, and his last two plays, he often speaks in the plural “we,” as if he does not separate himself from the work of Tectonic Theater Project. Kaufman the stage director and Artistic Director have almost become synonymous with the entity of Tectonic, which raises the questions: Is there a

Tectonic Theater Project without Moisés Kaufman? How would we define this community of artists without the director who initiates their work? And finally, to what extent is his “we” like the editorial “we,” an arguably justified presumption of almost total group ownership? It may also signal Kaufman’s view of himself as another collaborator within his company, leaning more towards a member of a collective rather than the collaborative ensemble’s auteur.

Kaufman insists that his collaborators be both socially and politically aware and fully engaged in the content of the work, as well as interested in posing formal questions about the creation of theatre and willing to explore new forms. It appears that with the group who created The Laramie Project, he attained that goal. Yet he has never been interested in forming a permanent company. Why? In addition to the financial concerns of maintaining a full-time company, Kaufman cites artistic reasons for keeping his company flexible and operating on a per-project basis. Each new project requires a new group of collaborators who specifically fit the content and process of creation. Basically, Kaufman defines a Tectonic Theater Project member as “a person who has worked on a Tectonic Theater Project piece.” Thereafter, they remain a company member, which simply means that Kaufman may or may not invite them to work on future projects. Company member Kelli Simpkins explains her conflicting feelings about Tectonic’s definition of a company:

It’s a floating company as opposed to this very solid entity. We’re not really a “company” company. But I also see the beauty of the other thing, and in terms of commercial viability, it’s very difficult to maintain a company – financially and aesthetically. There are reasons for and against it. [. . .] New people and new ideas have more

possibility in a way, but the idea of a theatre company is really, really exciting to me. That's something that I would love to be a part of. (18 March 2003)

Would establishing a set company limit Kaufman's search? Would he become trapped in a similar process of creation that would lead to a single "type" of work, such as historical documentation for Gross Indecency or verbatim interviews for Laramie? The company members I spoke with have conflicting feelings on these questions as well. "Even though it kind of feels like he calls us when he feels like it, I think it's probably smart of him to do this in the long run," states Stephen Belber. "He doesn't have to use us. I wouldn't want to use the same actor every time I did something, because he's also not creating the plays the same way" (10 Dec. 2002). And yet, Kaufman often works with the same actors and designers because they have developed a shorthand language from working together. Too, his prior collaborators already understand and believe in the motives behind the laboratory's search. Working within this shorthand language can, however, trap returning members in a similar creative process. But the time away from one another and the freedom to participate in other projects refreshes the Tectonic members' creative intuitions for those times when Kaufman calls them back together to create new work. "I think that Moisés is extremely loyal and very supportive of everyone and what they're doing in a really beautiful way. He continues to call on everyone that has worked with him, and hopefully will continue to do so," states Simpkins. "He goes off and does his thing, we go off and do ours, and at points along the way we kind of meet up. Not in the same form, but in varying forms. I think that's a great quality of his" (18 March 2003).

Kaufman creates theatre with his company in the context of New York commercial theatre. Could his “floating company” be the answer to making collaborative creation financially viable in that costly market? Maybe his intuition for bringing together the right collaborators at the right time in their careers has been the key to his last two successes. Or, if we return to the question of his dual need for collaborators and control over their creation, the floating company could be viewed as a tactic to maintain the power within his collection of collaborators. In addition to seeking new company members, Kaufman invites back the artists he feels will most benefit each new project. In this way, he holds a traditional director’s hiring power over the actors and designers, which allows him to weed out company members he does not want to work with again. Yet his company does not follow the traditional theatre model of casting, rehearsing a play for four weeks, performing the run, and then moving on to the next project. Should the time commitment and emotional investment made by his company members to create new works over long periods of time warrant a secure artistic home in a permanent company? Simpkins continues, “After The Laramie Project people would come up to me and say, ‘What is Tectonic doing next?’ I think in their minds we were the entity that was Tectonic Theater Project, but that’s not the case” (18 March 2003). How does this question of Kaufman’s loyalty to his collaborators affect future collaborations?

The questions that arise upon examining Kaufman’s floating company are not resolvable, but interesting to consider as they relate not only to his practice but also to his theoretical questions. For example, a different actor other than Michael Emerson was cast to play Oscar Wilde during the initial workshops for Gross Indecency. According to

Kaufman, this actor was more interested in playing the character of Wilde than engaging in the laboratory's search for new forms. Kaufman recast the role with Emerson, who actively embraced the role and the workshops' explorative nature. When the company moved on to The Laramie Project, however, Emerson turned down Kaufman's invitation to participate in the trips to Laramie because, as a private individual, he was uncomfortable with the interviewing process. While Emerson remains a Tectonic Theater Project company member to this day, Kaufman decides which projects in which to include him, and Emerson chooses the work which interests him most. This same practice holds true for designers as well. Kaufman invites (or does not invite back) and the collaborators choose to accept or decline his invitation. In this manner, Kaufman and the company members together assemble their collaborative ensembles to best match the content and theoretical questions behind each new project.

### Kaufman's Directorial Role in the Workshops

The tensions of control caused by Kaufman's position – somewhere between auteur and collective director – necessitate a close examination. His art as a director lies in his ability to balance between the generous empowerment of his collaborators' creative intuition while at the same time guiding the work to fulfill his own artistic vision. In this role, control and power fluctuate constantly between collaborators and director. Kaufman willingly gives up directorial control to authorize his collaborators to create Moments. "He's an incredibly generous person, unbelievably generous," states Arthur

Bartow. “It’s that bounty of generosity that is part of the key to his success. Because he gives so much, others are willing to give to him” (10 Dec. 2002). At the same time, Kaufman, with input from the company, controls Moment Work by setting an agenda for each workshop day to focus the Moments around specific themes, characters, or geographical locations.

After the collaborators present a Moment in the workshops, control gradually shifts back to Kaufman. During this period after a Moment’s presentation, Kaufman’s language and sensitivity to his artists are paramount. The collaborators are highly vulnerable directly after presenting their creation to the group for feedback. Kaufman responds first by inquiring, “How did it go?” This nudges the control back to the collaborator rather than immediately becoming the work’s judge. This technique gives the Moment’s creator the opportunity to add information that may not have been received during its presentation. It also follows Joseph Chaikin’s advice to directors: “When criticizing an actor in what he does, the director must first understand what the actor thinks he is doing” (154). Next, as the whole company responds to the work, Kaufman loosely holds his authority, facilitating the group as it discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the Moment, as well as the new ideas it spurs. Simpkins explains, “I think Moisés creates a very collaborative space, a very gentle, generous space in which we can argue and fight and scream and find great joy together – a great value for people for whom that kind of work means something” (18 March 2003).

But after the discussion, during the possible working and/or redirecting of the Moment, or presentation of other Moments in conjunction with the original Moment,

Kaufman regains his authority to make the decision of whether or not the Moment remains or is dropped, which, of course, is the most significant aspect of authority and control. And yet his creative process complicates that decisive authority as well. If Kaufman does not find a Moment valid for the work, the collaborators are encouraged to rework the dropped Moment outside of the workshop and re-present it as often as they are willing (and as time allows). With this technique, Kaufman displays a willingness to keep the creative doors open, but in the end, he is the one that must be convinced to include or exclude a Moment. Despite the difficulties of this final authority, or perhaps due to them, many of his collaborators find great value in creating with Kaufman rather than being mere interpreters of roles. Simpkins continues, “In terms of his generosity, to have a person that wants to fully collaborate and allows the actors to have ownership is a thrilling and big thing” (18 March 2003). So even though Kaufman holds the final authority over the creation of the work, the ownership of generating original Moments carries through for the collaborators.

Through these techniques, authority in Tectonic workshops constantly shifts along the continuum between Kaufman and his collaborators. For instance, Kaufman also delegates the control of the direction of the total work to an extent by generating each piece’s organizing principle and through-lines with his collaborators. Because he includes the entire group in developing the structure of the piece, Kaufman can use these structural tools as arbitrators of his authority. His role, then, becomes the keeper and protector of the group’s organizing principle and through-lines. For instance, during the creation of The Laramie Project, Kaufman often referred to the through-lines posted on

butcher paper to remind his collaborators of the play's structure. When a Moment did not fit within that framework, the group's formulation of the play's through-lines supported his decision to drop the Moment. At the same time, however, Kaufman had to maintain a respect for questions, even as the creative process drove towards answers. In this way, Kaufman carried out the group's authority in addition to his own intuitive, subjective response to the inclusion or exclusion of each Moment.

Sheila Kerrigan discusses a similar technique as part of the "Web of Composition" in her book The Performer's Guide to the Collaborative Process. Instead of organizing principle and through-lines, Kerrigan uses the term "statement," which she defines as "a sentence or paragraph that says what the piece means," to determine the structure of a piece. She writes, "If everyone participates in crafting the statement, and everyone signs on to it, then everyone will commit to the hard work of giving birth to the piece" (51). Similar to Kaufman's posting of his organizing principle and through-lines during the workshops for Laramie in order to remind his collaborators of the work's structure, Kerrigan advises, "Post your statement. Whenever you get stuck making decisions, refer to it for guidance" (52).

In addition to the creation of Moments in the workshop, Kaufman's control also fluctuates during the final writing process of his works. Instead of writing Gross Indecency alone, he invited Stephen Wanhg to assist him as a dramaturg. This delegation of writing control expanded with The Laramie Project into a team of associate writers who worked with a head writer. In both cases, however, Kaufman retained final control over the writing because he initiated the works. After Laramie, it will be interesting to

see which direction Kaufman continues with his writing – if he chooses to explore further delegation of the writing responsibilities or to centralize the writing around his own efforts.

When I first approached Kaufman with the idea for this dissertation in September 2002, he hesitated because I initially expressed interest in writing about Tectonic Theater Project as a collaborative company. Kaufman later explained that his reservations centered on being identified with one process of creation used for The Laramie Project, only one manifestation of his Tectonic techniques. He also emphasized that his work focuses on theatrical form and language and how theatre speaks rather than collaboration. I include the following portion of an interview from 19 March 2003 to conclude my discussion on the dual tensions caused between need and control for an auteur directing a collaborative ensemble:

MOISÉS KAUFMAN. I am not interested in creating a theatre that is about collaboration. I think collaboration is a very important part of my theatre, my work.

RICH BROWN. Can you search for new theatrical forms and languages without a community of artists?

MK. I think it becomes much more difficult. I think you can, I mean, Beckett did it.

RB. But can you? Can Moisés Kaufman do it?

MK. I don't know. . . I don't know. So much of the work that I do is because of the community, the community in which I so believe. I know that I wouldn't have been able to do what I have done without the community. For me, there is a desire, a delight and love, a passion to work with this group that we have made together. There are companies that are all about collective creation, but that's not us.

RB. You use collective creation as a tool to get to your main focus of searching for new forms and languages?

MK. Yes.

RB. But from tracing your development, it's a very significant tool.

MK. Certainly.

RB. Is it that moment of exchanging multiple ideas that you love, have a passion for?

MK. It's the moment when I walk into a room and my friends are there. You know?

Plus I just can't write alone.<sup>5</sup>

### Potential Obstacles in the Future for Tectonic Theater Project

Success has a way of destroying collaborative companies, and the artistic and commercial success of Tectonic's last two works certainly places them in that dangerous arena. The Open Theatre and Living Theatre, two collectives Kaufman studied while at N.Y.U., dissolved from circumstances similar to what Tectonic is currently experiencing. Joseph Chaikin disbanded the Open Theatre in the spring of 1970 after ten years of collaborative creation out of fear of becoming entrenched in creating repetitive work solely for financial gain. He feared the institutionalization of his company. In a letter to his company members published in his book The Presence of the Actor, Chaikin writes: "Within this structure, at this point, all we can do is maintain the status quo; that's not good enough" (157). As the group's artistic reputation grew, the pressures to remain the same increased; their reputation warranted protection. In Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre, Theodore Shank writes, "By continuing to do similar

<sup>5</sup> In discussing collaboration, Kaufman reiterates, "The nature of the collaboration in Tectonic is entirely dictated by the formal exploration at hand. So it's a by-product of that mission – not a part of the mission" ("Re: Collaboration").

work there was a probability of increased financial rewards. Chaikin and some others felt they were being seduced by these pressures and the group decided to disband” (48).

Likewise, Tectonic’s recent commercial success has led to the largest financial rewards in the eleven year history of the company. This became supremely evident when Kaufman worked alone to adapt The Laramie Project into a screenplay for Home Box Office (HBO). Due to negotiations with HBO, who required the involvement of known film actors in order to produce the project, the company members who created the piece were not cast in their original roles for the film.<sup>6</sup> This lack of control over their work and questions regarding monetary compensation for creating the original play has caused significant rifts within the group. The price of delivering their work to a larger audience through the medium of film has been costly in terms of cohesion within the membership of Tectonic Theater Project.

The question of authorship of The Laramie Project also created controversy within the company partially because Kaufman and Tectonic were venturing into unexplored territory with that work. For the initial workshops, Tectonic did not hire actors, designers, or writers. Kaufman and Jeffrey LaHoste hired theatre artists whose “title” or “role” slowly emerged throughout the creative process. Kaufman recalls, “That was the source of great problems because we constantly needed to renegotiate what people would be called or not be called; how to really honor and respect them. It wasn’t only a billing issue but a monetary issue” (19 March 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> Upon Kaufman’s insistence, all the company members, however, did perform in the film version; a few performed the roles they originated for the stage.

These problems lead to complicated questions: How does one compare the efforts of collaborators to create individual Moments in workshop to the work a writer/director invests in transcribing interviews and rearranging and shaping Moments into a whole work? Who “owns” the artistic creation of a Moment that may instantly change upon being presented to the group who often reshapes, redirects, or recontextualizes that Moment? Is it the artist who originated the Moment? The writer or director who reshaped it? The company as a whole who responded to it, questioned it, and pushed it into new forms? Or is it Kaufman for organizing the workshop in which the work took place? Clearly, this complicated issue of ownership warranted discussion up front at the beginning of the creative process – discussion which did occur. The clarity of those discussions, however, is still in question. “I was never really clear on what my ‘rights’ were,” states company member Andy Paris. “I have an alarming ability to ask the wrong person for help. I think the people I was looking to for protection were the very people I should have been protecting myself against. I didn’t realize who was ‘management’ and who was ‘labor’” (18 March 2003). Despite these questions, each company member signed a contract during the first workshop that outlined their role and compensation for their work in the creative process. According to Kaufman, those contracts were renegotiated after almost every workshop thereafter in terms of salaries, billings, and titles (“Re: contracts”).

Will Tectonic workshops change based on the authorship conflicts during the Laramie collaboration? Already beginning work on his next collaborative project, Kaufman does not believe so because, as indicative of his work, each new project calls

for a new creative process. He states, “Nothing was learned because now we are doing the whole thing again and it’ll have to be a whole new discovery of how to do it” (19 March 2003).

Differing politics can also cause tensions within collaborative groups. The Living Theatre, for example, divided itself into four cells in 1970 due to political divisions within the group, such as the rejection of their elite privileged audiences, and their institutionalization in the established economic system (Shank 26). As discussed in Chapter IV, political divisions within Tectonic regarding issues of homophobia and forgiveness in The Laramie Project caused much conflict within the group. Adding politics to the conflicts discussed earlier concerning authority, authorship, and the pressures of success, the difficulties of maintaining a permanent company become evident. Anne Bogart’s discussion of forming her SITEI company in her book A Director Prepares begins with a response by Ariane Mnouchkine, the Artistic Director of Le Théâtre du Soleil, to Bogart’s inquiry about why she works solely with her company. Mnouchkine states: “Well, you cannot do anything without a company. Don’t get me wrong, companies are difficult. People leave and break your heart and the hardships are constant, but what are you going to accomplish without a company?” (15). Despite the difficulties inherent in maintaining a company, Kaufman’s search relies on his collaborators.

Amongst these obstacles and difficulties, it will be curious to see if Kaufman and Tectonic Theater Project can sustain the artistic and commercial growth they have accomplished over the past five years. It could be that Kaufman’s floating company will

allow Tectonic to avoid the pitfalls experienced by other collectives, making their continued success simply a question of time. Arthur Bartow concludes:

I'm waiting to see if Moisés can go the long distance. What he's doing is extremely difficult – having a company, having an aesthetic. Will it really remain a company? Will he become a movie director? Or use his incredible skills in a larger venue in the same way? I'm interested to see where that all leads. I'm sure that these two pieces have opened up a lot of opportunities. Moisés has a lot of integrity towards his work. Success has sidetracked other directors, but I don't expect that of Moisés. (10 Dec. 2002)

The question of where Kaufman's interests will lead him, whether to film or theatre, is an important one. LaHoste states, "We certainly will continue to be a lab for new works in the theatre." But he also continues, "Moisés is interested in directing other films. I think organically, if Moisés directs another film, he's going to want to experiment with that. We are certainly interested in doing that, and we now have relationships with film producers and film actors and so forth" (11 Dec. 2002). Will theatre lose another of its prominent artists to the film industry? Like Bartow, the theatre community will also have to wait and see.

### Popular and Critical Success

With Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project, Tectonic has achieved the kind of popular and critical success that has eluded other large American collaborative ensembles. Bogart's SITI Company, for example, and the long-established Wooster Group do not aim to "speak to the largest population possible" (Kaufman, "Re:

Thoughts”) as Kaufman does. During a time when most popular theatre in New York centers around the work of celebrity playwrights, how has Tectonic’s voice of collaborative creation gained such popularity? I believe the answers lie within the historical content and narrative forms found in the two pieces.

We Americans love witnessing our neighbors’ confession – the Puritans’ rite of measure and contrition for sin – especially through accounts of past and present real-life events. To witness this trend, one needs only to look to the influx of reality television shows in popular culture and the popularity of docudrama – autobiographical and social/political – in theatre and solo performance art. As a culture, we have become increasingly enthralled with the “theatre of testimony” (to borrow the phrase associated with Emily Mann’s work). With Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project, Kaufman tapped into this popular interest in witnessing other people’s sins, errors, and losses.

One of Kaufman’s driving theoretical questions asks: How can theatre reconstruct history? He is drawn to watershed moments in history that explore the human condition of today. He does not, however, always respond to events which he would qualify as watershed moments. Kaufman explains:

September 11<sup>th</sup> was a watershed moment; a historical moment and we’ll never be the same again. But that doesn’t mean that I want to record it, that I want to do something about it. I think there has to be a number of things that happen for you to take on a project that you’re going to spend several years of your life working on. Although I’ve recognized other watershed moments in our recent history, for one reason or another, they have not been moments that I wanted to pursue. The other thing, on a very personal level, is that I’ve spent the last six years of my life working on the destruction of two individuals. And I can’t do it anymore. I don’t have it in me. I need to do

something different. When September 11<sup>th</sup> happened, we got all these emails. “Are you going to go down there? What are you going to do?” I was like, “Absolutely not.” I don’t have it in me. In order to do this work you have to be involved. This is not the type of work that you can just go home and cut off. It becomes part of your life. (13 Nov. 2002).

For his last two plays, Kaufman was drawn towards two watershed moments which involved courtrooms, connecting also to America’s love of the courtroom drama. Evidenced in mass media by the popularity of television’s Law and Order and The Practice, as well as the constant flood of John Grisham novels and movies, Americans are drawn to the execution of justice in the courtroom. In theatre, Kaufman builds off the tradition of plays such as Inherit the Wind and To Kill a Mockingbird by bringing his trial-based narratives to the stage. Looking back over Kaufman’s entire career, trial transcripts have been a major component in the texts of Transit Mass, Machinal, Gross Indecency, and The Laramie Project.<sup>7</sup> This observation is not intended to posit the idea that Kaufman’s theatrical interests are limited to courtroom drama. Quite the opposite is true. His laboratory derives from the formal search for new theatrical forms, but it is interesting that these forms often revolve around historical content and courtroom drama. Clearly, the content of Oscar Wilde’s trials and the town of Laramie reacting to the Henderson and McKinney trials certainly influenced the popularity of these last two plays.

In addition, the process of collaborative creation and plurality in versions found in the reconstruction of the courtroom content has led to the popular success of Tectonic’s

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<sup>7</sup> The workshop on Brecht’s Galileo, which never resulted in a finished work, also involved text from Galileo’s trial.

last two plays. As quoted earlier, Kaufman states, “We live in a cultural moment when we are savvy enough that telling great stories is not enough, we have to address how those stories are constructed, created, and told. How we make the story is part of the story itself” (9 Dec. 2002). This belief led Kaufman to heighten the subjectivity of the many versions of both historical events (Wilde’s trials and Shepard’s murder) discovered through historical documents and interviews respectively. This approach allowed the different versions to clash as communities told their stories. Each spectator must weigh the different perspectives presented in order to draw their individual conclusions, effectively casting the spectators as jury members themselves.

Both works also heightened plurality and subjectivity through a postmodern reflexivity: including the process of creating the play in the final production. For example, by highlighting their individual journeys through the creative process, the actors in The Laramie Project simultaneously spark and satisfy the spectators’ curiosity regarding how the piece was made. After being told: “The play you are about to see is edited from those interviews, as well as from journal entries by members of the company and other found texts,” (Laramie 5), the skeptical audience member might not only receive what was included in the text but also ponder over what material was removed during editing – what are they not telling? Through this approach, the spectator is actively involved, not only in deciphering the narrative, but also in the journey from which the performance was created. This insight into the creative process has also contributed to Laramie’s popularity, as well as Gross Indecency’s.

The performers' subject-slippage in performance raises interesting questions of authorship: Where is Kaufman's own story in regards to his major part in the storytelling? What would be an exposed directorial "voice" in performance for Kaufman? How does he try or not try to question his own crucial authoring in performance? What we do not see in Gross Indecency or Laramie is the director/author's input in forming the story. As much as Kaufman strives for an up-front avowal of the storytelling's point of view in the foregrounding of actor subjectivity, his own justifying lens remains outside of the frame – despite being portrayed as a character in both scripts. His hunch, organizing principle, and through-lines are also important elements in how the stories were created, told, and who told them. Yet they are absent in performance, as are the final decisions of what text is included or excluded. For example, in Laramie the audience views the Moments generated during the first phase of workshop creation<sup>8</sup>, but phase two – the selection and arrangement of Moments – never becomes part of the final story.

How would a Moment that highlighted Kaufman's authoring have changed these final scripts? What if Laramie included a Moment which showed Fondakowski and Kaufman debating over the importance of including Romaine Patterson in the play – before her Angel Action anti-protest? And then what might happen if they followed that Moment with Patterson's monologue about battling Fred Phelps with her angels (Laramie 79)? It would certainly emphasize Kaufman's through-line of the company's story, but it would include his authorial role in the creation process. Perhaps Kaufman felt that

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<sup>8</sup> Although by performance many of these original Moments had been significantly altered to fit into the larger work.

accentuating his directorial and authorial roles in both works would distract from their primary focus, or would smack of vanity. But it warrants noting that calling attention to subject-slippage and authoring in both texts includes the actors but not Kaufman himself.

Kaufman loves stories, especially those concerned with the question asked by both Wilde and the citizens of Laramie: What kind of people are we producing? Theatre has a great responsibility to continually pose this question because it is particularly adept at exploring how character is established. Kaufman explains:

I think of character as a construct, which raises the question, “How are we going to survive one another?” That question has been very important to me over the last six years. Unfortunately, Oscar Wilde and Matthew Shepard were people who were unable to survive us, to survive our culture, as their peers, as co-inhabitants in this world. So this question of how will we survive one another is pivotal, which leads to the question, “What kind of children are we growing?” – like they ask in Laramie. (13 Nov. 2002)

This question of “survival” connects back to my earlier point regarding the confessional qualities found in Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project. Survival was a key concern in confessional solo performance during the 1980s, found in the works of artists such as Spalding Gray, Laurie Anderson, Tim Miller, Rachel Rosenthal and Eric Bogosian – as well as Emily Mann’s “theatre of testimony.”

Kaufman wants to create work that brings these questions of survival to a larger audience, and the majority of theatre audiences still desire strong narratives. His concern with brutalizing the audience that arose during the process of creating The Laramie Project, along with its ending message of hope, displays his desire for Tectonic’s work to

be accessible to a larger theatergoing public. Kaufman examines the negative aspects of humanity but also emphasizes the good. “I do think that there is a kind of romanticism in *Moisés*,” states Leigh Fondakowski. “It’s like he wants to exalt humans” (13 Dec. 2002). Through his fascination with the individual’s humanity, Kaufman may “exalt” some characters in his narratives as a tactic to emphasize hope in spite of the hatred, prejudice, and injustice explored in his works. This emphasis on the positive has, arguably, resulted in excluding some of the darker aspects of his characters’ lives, such as the Laramie residents’ homophobia, the questions surrounding Matthew Shepard’s rumored drug abuse, and the effect of Wilde’s lifestyle on his wife and children. These choices support an optimistic view of humanity, of coming together to overcome pain and hardships, without always including the faults and errors that make us fully human.

Likewise, playwright Emily Mann views her work as an effort to bring people together in this highly fragmented society. In reference to her testimonial plays, Mann quotes scholar Cornel West:

He said that the most important question at the end of the twentieth century was, “How to be fully human in America.” We have to start looking at those values that are not market-driven. We have to start looking at tenderness, love, intimacy. Part of that task is finding ways to have public conversations. We must see in our country that we are part of each other, that we are all in the same ship, as he put it: “We go on together or we go down together” (Greene 79)

Kaufman, as well, creates art that attempts to unite people rather than stressing their separateness, which gives way to an interesting aesthetic discrepancy. In *The Laramie Project*, for example, Kaufman wants to discuss community, but he also explores

alienation and individualism. Perhaps this tension led him to push for a slightly sanitized portrait of Laramie. Kaufman wants to believe a community exists where the work led to, and somewhat depicts in performance, extreme fractions within that community. Yet Kaufman emphasizes the community's ability to overcome the pain caused by the individual, much like Romanticism (to use Fondakowski's word) seeks universals for all humanity based on individual extremities and eccentricities as it valorizes the lone hero or victim. As long-time collaborator Stephen Wangh states, "There's some sense of being attracted to the emotional, not quite melodrama, but pathos – on the edge of tears" (10 Dec. 2002). Kaufman's works explore painful human experiences but end with a glimmer of hope that future generations will attain a human progression beyond this pain. And these endings, which focus on connectivity rather than separation, are also more acceptable to mainstream theatergoers.

#### Areas for Future Research

In addition to following Kaufman's future development as a theatre artist, I propose the need to closely examine and trace the use of historical account as content matter in American theatre beginning with the Living Newspaper of the 1930s to today's works by Anna Deavere Smith, Emily Mann, Kaufman, and numerous other theatre artists and collectives. By expressing, through theatre, what is remembered of these historical events, we participate in an act of re-description which generates new truths about our history, and therefore our present, based on our current beliefs and

observations. According to Bogart, all theatre is an act of memory and description. In A Director Prepares she writes:

There are plays and people and moments of history to revisit. Our cultural treasure trove is full to bursting. And journeys will change us, make us better, bigger and more connected. We enjoy a rich, diverse and unique history and to celebrate it is to remember it. To remember it is to use it. To use it is to be true to who we are. A great deal of energy and imagination is demanded. And an *interest* [her emphasis] in remembering and describing where we came from. (39)

By initiating a study of the ways in which American theatre artists have explored and re-described historical events in the past, we can trace the progression of techniques and approaches previous artists have made towards answering Kaufman's question: How can theatre reconstruct history? In this way, future theatre creators will benefit from the journeys of their predecessors. As Sir Isaac Newton said, "If I can see far, it is because I stand on the shoulders of giants." Many "giants" have preceded Kaufman, and hopefully, many more will benefit from his work.

As one of today's innovative theatre artists, Kaufman merits continued study to trace where standing on the shoulders of Kantor, Overlie, Grotowski, and Brook will focus the vision of his search. His technique of Moment Work continues to develop with each new creative project. Currently, Kaufman and a different collection of new and returning Tectonic members are working on a collaborative creation piece based on the lives of Beethoven and Rembrandt, specifically exploring the idea of obsession as demonstrated by Beethoven's thirty-three variations for piano and Rembrandt's self-portrait series. Their first workshop was held in December of 2002. Like all other

Tectonic projects, this work began with Kaufman's hunch – a question that begs exploration. He states, "I'm thrilled by this question: Why did Beethoven change his mind and decide to write thirty-three variations of this thing in four years, which became his biggest work for piano?" (19 March 2003).

As usual, Kaufman began this project with intensive research – books, slides, videos, and musical recordings about Beethoven and the variations and Rembrandt's self-portraits were collected and distributed to his collaborators. Based on this hunch and initial research, Kaufman assembled his collaborators in a room with a piece of music, some historical data on Beethoven and Rembrandt, and some characters he wanted to explore. From that, the search began to take its initial shape. Kaufman continues, "There is something there where he went from writing for one-hundred and twenty voices to writing for just one piano. It is something about his journey into those sixty-four bars. There is something in there that I want to explore" (19 March 2003).

Indicative of Kaufman's work, this piece requires a new approach to the creative process. Kaufman states, "The last thing I want to do now is a piece that uses verbatim interviews," (19 March 2003). The most significant difference in this current process lies in using Moment Work to generate fictional material rather than basing it entirely on historical documentation and/or verbatim interviews. Kelli Simpkins returns to Tectonic for this workshop, which thus far, has differed from her work on Laramie considerably. "For me, the questions are different," she states. "It's neither source material nor nonfiction journal entries. How do you create a fictional through-line with factual information?" (18 March 2003).

Using Moment Work to produce fictional material raises a whole new set of questions for Kaufman's performance writers. How can Moment Work influence fictional plots and through-lines to create story? How does one use the historical documentation as a point of departure to inspire Moment Work rather than using the documentation or interviews as the text itself? Kaufman's answer comes from his "Tectonic way of writing," which means bringing all the theatrical elements into the workshop with his collaborators to encourage the copulation of form and content. Kaufman describes the preliminary creative process of using Moment Work to generate fictional material through the following example:

We use the music as a theatrical event. The mother plays the music, and she looks at you, and she closes her eyes and listens. She says, "Vienna, early 1800s, a man by the name of Ludwig van Beethoven begins to tell a story. At the end he changed his mind and wrote not one, but thirty-three variations. This is the first one he wrote." So the one you have been listening to all along is the first one he wrote. And then she says, "This is actually variation number three, because after he was done, he reordered them in a very specific way. Listen. He had finished, and he was absolutely deaf." Pause. Then Kelli [Simpkins] walks in and she says, "That's what it was like having dinner with my mother." So it's the context. (19 March 2003)

This new process uses factual, historical information to inspire a narrative based on fictional characters and events constructed in the imaginations of the performance writers. Unfortunately, because this dissertation will be published before the new piece has been created, Kaufman is reluctant to divulge more information than this. Also, the company has presently completed only one workshop of the long process of a Tectonic creation, so the performance writing techniques will invariably change between now and

the time of completion. For now, knowing that Moment Work is taking its next step into the unknown of writing fictional material provides evidence that Kaufman's search for new forms continues.

The theatre public's access to Kaufman's work depicts another area of interest for future research. During our interviews, Kaufman spoke of his recent experiences lecturing at universities and hinted at the possibility of wanting to teach. LaHoste also spoke of Tectonic's interest in building touring productions of Gross Indecency and The Laramie Project, taking their work to an even larger, geographically diverse audience and generating more profits for the company to fund future exploratory workshops.

Kaufman began those lectures this past year. Referring to the joy discovered in speaking with young artists after his lectures, Kaufman states, "Different people get excited over different things, but overall, people are appreciating being forced to think in different ways. And I think that if change is going to come, it's going to come from those different places" (13 Nov. 2002). Will Tectonic provide those places by establishing a teaching component of the company, whether it be summer intensive workshops or a year round training program? LaHoste states, "Up until now, it probably would have been an over-reach to try to institute an educational component where members are teaching techniques and stuff like that. It is something that I'm interested in. I don't think it'll happen in the very near future, but it is a possibility. I think there's interest and people have the training to do it" (11 Dec. 2002). Establishing a teaching component has helped other collaborative creation companies, such as the SITI Company and the Dell'Arte Company, gain permanence and greater exposure in the theatre community. A training

component also provides the collaborators with a more secure sense of an artistic home, supported by the continual development and teaching of specific techniques. I will be curious to see if Tectonic adds a training component and how that change might affect the organization of the company.

Since its Off-Broadway run, Tectonic has toured the original production of The Laramie Project to the Berkley Repertory Theatre, the LaJolla Playhouse, and the University of Wyoming in Laramie. They also intended to remount Gross Indecency for a tour to this year's International Theatre Festival in Kaufman's home city of Caracas in March, but according to LaHoste, "the festival was cancelled due to political and social unrest in the country" ("Re: GI in Caracas"). Tectonic has been invited, however, to participate in the festival in the spring of 2004. Tours of both productions will likely occur in the near future. "Gross Indecency has been seen a lot in Europe, so we're hoping that enough time has gone by that they'd want to see the original production," states LaHoste. "The Laramie Project is the same way" (11 Dec. 2002). Touring a repertory of their works would cause a reorganization of the structure of Tectonic Theater Project. Would workshopping on new pieces occur during the tours or between them? Would new collaborators be brought into the company to create each new work then tour it specifically? Would the touring productions provide the funding to workshop new works? The future of Tectonic's development will answer these questions. Touring could also increase the artists' sense of an artistic home by taking their work to others in different countries, but always having their home-base in New York to return to. It could

also, however, just as easily become a potential divisive factor for the company, breaking it into different factions.

### Afterword

During one of our interviews on December 9, 2002, I asked Kaufman: What are you trying to achieve with the theatre you make? He replied:

I'm certainly not making theatre to try and make the world a better place, and I'm certainly not making theatre to make social change. I'm not interested in either of those things. Number one, because I don't think that that's what you can do. But I do think you can encourage a certain dialogue, and that does something. I think that culture has power and you can do things that influence cultural dialogue. That's what I hope to do, to keep addressing cultural dialogue in the profound belief that that can generate change. I don't mean change in a social-political context only. I mean change in the human context. I think art has a much higher domain than politics and social studies – with art you can do things you can't do in those other mediums. Oscar Wilde said that the great thing about art is not what it does for you but what you become through it. I think that is a sublime idea.

With Tectonic Theater Project, Kaufman has found the elusive balance between idealistic artist and businessman, auteur and collaborative director, and an artistic laboratory approach to making theater and popular theatre success. He has become the man in the middle who wants the individual attention given to authorship but must rely on collaboration. He has become a man who wants social change but does not believe his theatre can directly activate it. His work increasingly struggles for the more humane, or the more interested in humanity. He speaks beyond the naïve optimism of traditions of

theatre before him. But he remains optimistic. By “certain dialogue” he seems to mean we do and see theatre for our own hopes of community, not that we can conjure community through theatre. Out of all this, where is the pragmatism? Kaufman is certainly not Hallie Flanagan hoping for new legislation. He is in between notions of community, homophobia, and his own success. He is a man whose passion and faith lives in the transformative power of art – for himself, his collaborators, and his audience – and its power to incite cultural dialogue.

I met with Kaufman only six times, and telephoned or e-mailed him a number of times between. From this wonderful opportunity, I can only represent limited experience; my intuition can only represent my experience – limited or not. Kaufman inspired me, not just about theatre and learning, but about the necessary value of generosity in teaching, how what we know is best answered by our students who want to know otherwise. Kaufman makes each of his collaborators important because they have questions; they have perspectives not his own. Perhaps, this is what he means by “cultural dialogue.” Despite his constant state of exhaustion from the energy needed to run his theatre company, he was willing to passionately engage my questions, my not knowing. In Kaufman’s work, the “not knowing,” the “hunch,” seems to be exactly where he begins.

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