

THE WESTERN GENRE AND GUN VIOLENCE IN
UNITED STATES CULTURE:
USING THEATRE AS A LABORATORY FOR
SOCIAL CRITIQUE

by

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The contemporary theatre director has the opportunity to encourage socially critical thought during the production process and in theatergoing audiences. This study seeks to demonstrate how the Western genre, which has mythicized the way of life on the United States frontier during westward expansion, can be used as a framework to understand the prevalence of gun violence in the contemporary United States. Moreover, the project endeavors to explore the theater as a forum to address this issue. This paper's methodology incorporates an application of my synthesis of Bertolt Brecht's dialectical theatre to my direction of *Afterlife*, a Western genre play by Nicholas J. Maurer. The play suggests parallels between the issues of gun violence in the Western genre and present concerns regarding gun violence in our contemporary society. Following each performance I conducted post-show discussions with audience members to qualitatively assess how they critically engaged with the cultural norms of gun use and gun violence. This study presents an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on theatre directing theory, performance studies, history and sociology. This thesis' central argument is that a socially conscious approach to theatre directing—drawing attention

to how characters' choices impact their environment and providing the impetus for critical reflection—will encourage audiences to engage cultural questions and recognize their ability to transform society. This research hopes to contribute to ongoing investigations that articulate the significance of theatre as a tool for social critique and social change.

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1. DVD Recording of *Afterlife* by Nicholas J. Maurer (Filmed by Julia V. Reihls and edited by Ariella Wolfe, April 2015).

Introduction

The Western film genre provides a framework with which to examine the omnipresence of gun violence and attitudes towards guns in the contemporary United States.¹ As a theatre artist, I chose to direct a play, *Afterlife* by Nicholas J. Maurer, as the primary focus of my thesis research, because it was inspired by the Western film genre and allows for a critical discussion of gun use in the media and society. I incorporated an interdisciplinary approach to this research, with the hopes of creatively engaging the socio-cultural economic issue of gun violence from a new perspective. The current dialogue about gun use presented in mainstream media characterizes the issue as a conflict between gun control and gun rights activists, but my research endeavors to show that a concern as complex as gun violence requires a much more nuanced approach than the dichotomized stances currently under consideration. This thesis will draw from and contribute to the academic fields of performance studies, sociology and history, with a special emphasis on theatre for social change and the context of gun violence in terms of the myths of the Western genre and its corollary in contemporary society.

Originally serving as the primary editor for *Afterlife*, I have worked on this piece through multiple drafts and directed a staged reading of a past draft in May 2014.² Following this production, I searched for a motivation or methodology to pursue as the foundation for a fully staged production. Because I was familiar with the play before I selected it for my thesis research, I was able to achieve a significant depth to my

¹ The terms “Western genre” and the “Western” when utilized in this document refer to the style of art, which has mythicized the way of life on the United States frontier during westward expansion.

² This term refers to the performance of a play in which the actors read from scripts, yet fully embody their character and move around in the space as if they were in a fully staged production.

analysis that came from almost two full years of familiarity with the characters and their environment. I have explored the topic of gun violence in the United States due to the issue's social relevance as a cultural icon and implication in acts of terrible violence within the country, which I will explore further in this document; I have investigated questions of audience engagement and social critique because of my belief that the theatre, as an art form, holds immense social significance and influence. Subsequently, I determined that gun violence is a topic that would encourage discussion and reflection.

I was personally inspired to pursue gun violence as the epicenter for this research and as my lens through which to examine the play *Afterlife* due to my subjective reaction to the Isla Vista shootings at UC Santa Barbara in May 2014, during which a young man killed four students and injured eight others. This act of violence occurred on May 23rd, the day before the staged reading of *Afterlife*. In the following days, the media reported on a number of other school shootings and reminded the public of the other recent mass shootings in United States history.^{3, 4} During the heightened awareness on social media about guns and gun deaths in the contemporary United States following these events, I found myself wondering what I could do to change the climate of silence surrounding gun violence discourse and play my small role in effecting positive change. Once the media turned their attention toward the violence in the Gaza Strip and the international crisis surrounding the outbreak of Ebola, discussions on social media about shootings and gun violence decreased and all but

³ 13 killed and 23 injured in Columbine, CO in 1999 (Delisi 19); 32 killed and 17 injured in Blacksburg, VA in 2007 (Hauser 1), 12 killed and 70 injured in Aurora, CO in 2012 (van Krieken 4-5); 27 killed in Newtown, CT in 2012 (Barron).

⁴ For example, on June 5th, 2014 a shooting took place at Seattle Pacific University, where multiple students were injured and a 19-year-old student was killed ("Gun Violence Archive").

disappeared. Nevertheless, according to the “Gun Violence Archive,”⁵ gun deaths in 2015 have already exceeded 4,390 as of the date of this work’s publication, and the politicized and polemic divide on issues of gun usage is far from resolved. Therefore, the absence of a community dialogue on gun violence does not indicate that the problem has disappeared, but rather that there exists a dearth of spaces in which this dialogue can take place. Sensing that the national government and the large majority of citizens are unwilling or unable to fundamentally address gun use and gun control (Gambino), I felt compelled to develop a project that could bring to conversation back to the local sphere.

In the play *Afterlife*, a young man named James comes West on a train seeking something—adventure, freedom, discovery—and he is drawn into a decaying town against his will. He becomes trapped between different moralities and must make choices about who he wants to become. I view the piece as a fragmenting of the mythical story of the American West and believe that it that asks us to engage with questions about glorified gun violence and its sustained presence in our lives today. The characters are flawed and contradictory and challenge each other’s ideologies and views of the world. At the beginning of the play, James, a newcomer, is almost hung without trial by the Sheriff Noble and his deputy, Ingram, but is saved by Virgil, the town marshal. Despite Virgil’s decision to save James, and despite his wife, Beth’s, objection to capital punishment, he defends the sheriff and deputy’s apparent efforts to reduce crime. Virgil brings James home to meet Beth and the couple argues over whether James should carry one of Virgil’s guns, with Virgil arguing in favor of the gun, and Beth arguing against it. This is the moment that arguably sets the rest of the play in

⁵ This website provides detailed statistics on all reported gun incidents within the United States.

motion, because James, now equipped with his own gun, is emboldened to track down the outlaw Mary and her partner Simon who are engaged in a corrupt business agreement with Noble and Ingram. Despite his best intentions, James is ultimately won over to their side by the promise of reward and freedom. Meanwhile, Virgil grapples with his reliance on the gun after Mary and Simon kidnap James; yet, as much as his wife urges him to stop carrying it, Virgil gives in to Noble's request for his help in apprehending Mary and Simon one last time. During the final train robbery, Noble appears to kill Mary, sensing that her indiscretion has put his power as Sheriff at stake, but in the altercation Mary must kill Simon and Nobel to save herself. Ultimately, Virgil appears to arrest James and Mary, but Mary shoots Virgil to preserve her own freedom and James kills Mary, both betraying the woman who offered him the freedom and opportunity of a life outside of the law and avenging the death of his father figure. Maurer has chosen to examine difficult philosophical perspectives on identity, violence, morality, and justice, which are compelling and challenging for a director, actors, designers, and audiences.

I conducted this research with the intention of creating an artistic production and an environment where social critique and dialogue could emerge. By analyzing my own synthesized approach to directing a theatrical production, I sought to show that the characters and their choices within a play can lead audiences to question our society's glorification of guns and the societal forces which have shaped the gun culture and related violence. As the director of this production, and as is the role of theatre directors in general, I provided the unifying vision for the piece, met with designers and held rehearsals with the actors, guiding them through the staging of the piece and their

development of character. Ultimately, I applied theories of social critique and audience engagement to my art as a director.

Beyond the specific issue of gun violence, this research elaborates on a methodology that may be applicable to other social issues and questions. Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the 20th century German theatrical theorist and practitioner who inspired my approach, provides many ideas for how to approach the theatre as a place for social inquiry and as a tool that encourages audience members to engage and take action, especially with regard to economic and labor inequality. Though my approach to *Afterlife* does not specifically emphasize the economic inequities that play into current gun violence issues, Brecht's investment into galvanizing the possibility for societal change in his audiences is applicable to my objectives for this project. Some of the most relevant aspects of Brecht's theories are that individuals are shaped by their environment, and that this particular approach to theatre should teach audiences not what to think, but how to think.

Throughout this thesis, when the Western genre is discussed, I refer to a specific style of storytelling, which has mythicized the way of life on the United States frontier during westward expansion. Though my social and artistic investigation uses the medium of theatre, it plays upon and challenges Western tropes and archetypes explored primarily in film. Western films emerged nearly at the same time as the American cinema in the early 20th century, and they were able to capture audiences' imagination of the frontier with sweeping landscapes and larger-than-life adventures. These works initially enjoyed great commercial success, and banked on the popularity

of early American “Wild West Shows.”⁶ Hollywood began producing hundreds of Western films based on the adventures of stock-characters like the “good” cowboy and “evil” outlaw, with story lines, which varied little, and film sequences that were recycled and used in multiple movies within the genre. Not until the 1950s, arguably, did the urgency for a new analysis emerge as “film-makers found a new confidence in using the Western to explore social and moral conflicts” (Buscombe 291). These new films were an ideological departure from earlier Westerns, abandoning a fully romanticized portrayal of the West exposing the harsher aspects of frontier life. One such example is *Cheyenne Autumn* (John Ford 1964), which portrays Native Americans in a more human light than prior films, which presented native peoples as the enemy. As the genre evolved within the United States, it also gained international significance, with film production of reimagined Westerns spanning from Italy to Argentina to Japan.

The American Western genre also provides an intriguing context in which to understand the emergence of hegemonic cultural identity on the United States frontier, specifically with regard to gun use. In his introduction to the Spanish translation of Jean-Louis Rieuepeyrou’s text on the Western film genre, Andre Bazin suggests that hegemony, here, refers to the dominance of white, Anglo-Saxon, Christian men over the other minority groups within the United States (10) and the prevailing mid-19th century ideology of “Manifest Destiny.”⁷ Though the cowboys and pioneers colonized the Western territories, the frontier was a region of unique cultural fusion and conflict; the

⁶ These spectacles brought romanticized portrayals of the West back to audiences in the American East and in Europe, often also parading members of Native American tribes alongside and in battle against traditional cowboys. (Buffalo) Bill Cody was most famously associated with these shows (Rieuepeyrou *El “Western”* 38).

⁷ This ideology conceptualized Westward expansion as a divine mandate from God (O’Sullivan qtd. in Zinn 114).

elite ruling class in New York Washington D.C. funded and determined the political policy for endeavors such as the transcontinental railroad, attracting the immigration of minority groups to the region including freed slaves and Chinese and Irish immigrants, and expansion brought about the displacement and massacre of native tribes. This context is intriguing in that the original Western genre was inspired by a particular perspective on history, yet any departure by the genre into fictional representations maintains the suggestion of historical accuracy. Portrayals of the “Wild West,” that demonize Mexicans and regard Native Americans as either savages or uneducated children are responsible for perpetrating many damaging stereotypes about the “ideal” America. Nevertheless, this genre has effectively conceptualized the United States’ westward expansion (from the late 18th century to the turn of the 20th century), one of the most glorified and mythical periods of American history. In the face of this discrepancy between history and myth, I believe that further research on popular representation of the United States frontier is imperative if Americans hope to ever understand the origins of the violence and land-based economic conflicts at the root of the country’s colonization of its Western territories. Though the issues of gun violence in the United States are complex and multi-faceted, gaining a deeper familiarity with the mythical and cultural context may allow for a discussion that brings the country one step closer to reducing incidences of gun violence.

The fundamental questions that I have explored in this research are: what is the theatre director’s responsibility to address social issues and cultural concerns; what is the connection between the Western genre and the presence of guns in the contemporary United States culture, and, with that in mind; how can the theatre

encourage critical thought and dialogue about social structure and social concerns? In order to best address these questions, this document consists of five primary sections: 1) the context of gun violence in United States history, Western films, and the present day, 2) an analysis of the Brechtian theory I used in my direction of the play *Afterlife* and my methodology, 3) an analysis of my application of this methodology in my directing work, 4) an analysis of the performances of *Afterlife* and the subsequent post-show discussions, and to conclude 5) my analysis of the project and its implications as a whole.

This thesis emphasizes, first and foremost the way that the theatre can encourage critical thought and discussion about gun violence in the United States, in particular, but the methodology that I explore in this document may be applied to other social issues. I have, independently of other scholarly research, determined four criteria that establish gun violence as a valid social issue to be addressed through a theatrical approach: 1) ideologically polarized, 2) related to social justice, 3) implicated in legal measures and social control, and 4) intersecting other identifiable social concerns. My methodology for choosing these characteristics is based on my analysis of the most salient features of gun violence as it appears in society and then cross-referenced these qualities as they might relate to other issues (e.g. racism, sexism, homelessness). Therefore, the purpose of this list is two-fold: the following may also be used to identify other issues that would benefit from being address through the theatre, or demand critical reflection and candid public discussion. The theatre is a particularly appropriate space for including nuanced perspectives and ideologies in the discussion of an issue, which challenges the way that an issue is dichotomized in the media. When an issue is related to social

justice, it has a dramatic impact on the quality of life of human beings and often has dire consequences; this makes for a compelling theatrical performance because there is a great deal at stake. A significant social issue that is related to legislation and social control merits addressing through the theatre, because the theatre gives a human face to the issues at hand and prevents them from being abstracted to the point of inaccessibility. Finally, an issue that intersects other relevant concerns is ideal for exploration through the theatre because the intersection increases the likelihood that the audience members will feel implicated in the concerns and there will be a wealth of directions in which to pursue discussion and critical thought. Subsequently, similar features should be considered when determining other topics suitable for socially critical theatrical study. In the section on *Contemporary Relationships to Gun Violence*, I will address how gun violence specifically fits within these categories. As an additional component of social commentary, cultural knowledge of Western genre sets a precedent for discussions of gun violence using that stylistic form. Discussions of guns and gun violence are also intricately connected to United States identity, per the inclusion of the second amendment in the constitution. Incorporating these factors as points of reference can help to frame the dialogue in a socially relevant way.

Social critique should be central to the role of theatre in a society, and, conversely, society needs the theatrical setting in which to explore difficult questions of structure and identity. In the words of Brecht: “if I choose to see Richard III, I don’t want to feel myself to be [him], but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility” (*Brecht on Theatre* 27). An emphasis of my directing practice will be questioning the larger phenomenon at play in the production, rather than seeking

the ideal empathetic connection with the audience. This vein of theatrical approach runs somewhat contrary to the realistic and naturalistic notions of theatre championed by directors such as Russian actor, director and theorist Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938). This thesis incorporated synthesized methodology of directing, whereby the question of gun violence in the United States may be addressed with a contemporary audience, encouraging further thought and engagement in the issue. More broadly, I hope that this piece will inspire a willingness to question social structures and the way that they shape values and identity. I fundamentally assert that the interaction between artist and audience, within a theatrical setting, allows intellectual reflection and productive discussion to occur about significant social issues.

I. An American Relationship with Guns – Myths and Realities

As a director embarking on creative work that involved socio-cultural issues and critical reflection, it was first necessary to conduct contextual research about elements of the history of guns in the United States and of the history of guns in American Western film. Upon examining these two contexts in which gun use is documented, a clear distinction emerges between them, in terms of how and why guns are integrated into society. Historically, guns are longstanding symbols of power, and have been used to both oppress and empower groups and individuals, but the Western mythology is built on the understanding of guns as symbols of freedom, morality, and justice. “Successful myths, much like successful genres, are capable of adapting their defining conflicts for new eras, social concerns, and audiences,” (Peppard 264) and therein I found the Western extremely suitable to address the issue of gun violence in the contemporary United States. The following section incorporates information that was useful to me as a director in developing a director’s concept for *Afterlife*, in working with my actors and designer, and in developing the post-show discussions. Furthermore, this section seeks to extrapolate the relationship between gun use in United States history and film, in order to justify the use of the Western as an effective tool to discuss and address gun violence from a contemporary perspective.

Guns as Symbols of Power in United States History

The issue of gun violence is crucial to consider through a theatrical lens, because it is both deeply rooted in the United States’ history and identity. Politically, culturally, and economically, the events of United States history have set the stage, so to speak, for the current state of the discussion on gun violence. The United States has a relationship

with firearms that distinguishes the country from most other developed nations,⁸ making the issue of gun violence one requiring critical engagement on an interpersonal level.

In terms of the founding and expansion of the colonies that would become the United States, guns were used for utilitarian purposes, such as hunting and protection, but they also were initially controlled in order to maintain power for the majority European settlers. For example, the first colonists often restricted gun use “to selected upper-class males” (DeConde 17). This meant that Native Americans and other minority groups—especially black Americans—were denied the right to own weapons legally or to be included in militias. One reason provided for such exclusion for African Americans was for fear of slave rebellions; colony governments passed laws preventing gun ownership by minority groups and cautioned: “slaves when armed might become our masters” (qtd. in DeConde 22). Such information suggests that guns, as symbols of power were already present at the start of the colonial period and set a precedent for the way that guns would be viewed in subsequent decades.

The history of law and order in the United States is also a factor that contributed to the mythology of vigilante justice in Western territories. The archetypal sheriffs of Western fame do bear some resemblance to American paramilitary groups such as The Regulators (1767-1769) who established three precedents: 1) “when law and order failed, private gun-keeping seemed justified”; 2) “private guns had become essential tools for vigilantism”; 3) “vigilantes could and would use the weapons in policing

⁸ According to research by Harvard professor of health policy David Hemenway, “Americans have more private guns per capita, and particularly more handguns, than citizens of other developed countries” (1). Moreover, author Alexander DeConde asserts that in most developed nations, the struggle to reduce gun violence has been dominated by gun control advocates, whereas in the United States, the NRA blocks most fundamental gun control efforts (299).

people they deemed undesirable” (DeConde 23).⁹ Some scholars such as Udall, Dykstra, Bellesiles, Arks, and Nobles, advocate strongly against depictions of guns as somehow integral to the American psyche, and they locate the primary factor contributing to American gun violence in films and violence in the media. They warn against “lamenting that frontier violence was as American as apple pie, [and Udall suggests that if...] western violence become a full-scale political myth” (284) it will be particular difficult to excise. Nevertheless, DeConde suggests that these values embodied by vigilante justice did influence American culture in the coming decades and underlie the special relationship that the United States possesses with firearms in the justice system. The historical events perhaps provided the fodder for Western mythology, and even if “The West was not won by guns. It was won by shovels and sweat” (Bert Fireman qtd. in Udall), guns have remained a powerful icon in the American canon. In critiquing the origins of the American relationship with guns, an overlap between history and myth emerges, and neither should be underestimated. I would argue that Western violence is already a political myth, and that advocates seeking to reduce gun violence must approach the problem from this perspective.

Examining the relationship between economics, class, and guns is also significant in approaching the use of gun in the play *Afterlife* and the role of theatre as a tool for social critique. As colonists engaged in encounters with Native American tribes and traveled farther West, they sold firearms for a significantly elevated price because of their power as both an offensive and defensive tool (DeConde 21). Economic factors

⁹ According to Alexander DeConde’s text on gun violence in the United States, the Regulators embodied a reaction to a particularly violent and crime-filled summer in the backcountry of the Carolinas. During this period there was insufficient law enforcement present to contend with gang violence impacting the region (23).

also help to explain the proliferation of guns in the United States. For example, manufacturers such as Colt and Remington, that supplied arms to the military during the Civil War, found themselves without a market in 1865, and subsequently needed to diversify. A product of this diversification was the creation of cheap civilian hand guns, (DeConde 79) which played a significant role in the growth of gun culture and violence both in the South and as Americans moved from East to West. One of the persistent myths associated with gun use came from expansion of the gun market: “God created men; Colonel Colt made them equal” (DeConde 60).¹⁰ The character Virgil in *Afterlife* also articulates this myth in scene 11 when he says that the gun is “a great equalizer, where neither strength nor brawn is necessary to stay alive.” This statement draws attention to both its truth and limitations. When considering an approach to directing *Afterlife*, I found the economic context of United States gun culture to be significant in helping to dispel myths about guns and the need to reexamine national narratives of gun use.

Historically, there has been little emphasis on education and social reform in order to address issues of gun violence, and efforts have been focused on legal measures. Social and political organizations that opposed the use of firearms by civilians have supported gun control measures in an attempt to curb both violence and firearm usage. According to Alexander DeConde in his book *Gun Violence in America*,¹¹ the Second Amendment was not always viewed as applying to individuals; initially this clarification to the United States constitution was meant initially to protect

¹⁰ This quote refers to a popular saying, the use of which allegedly originated with gun users on the Western frontier, not as a product of Colt advertising or the enterprising of Mr. Samuel Colt.

¹¹ This 300-page text was the most useful historical analysis and compilation of data that I encountered during my research. Therefore, I have incorporated additional sources quoted in this book in addition to DeConde’s own interpretation of events and documents.

the rights of states to have an armed militia and therefore protect themselves from the government (265). That some interpret “the right to bear arms” as a fundamental individual right and others do not has contributed to a sharp divide between gun control activists and gun lobbyist such as the National Rifle Association (NRA). For example, the NRA supported Douglass Ray Hickman’s appeals to carry a concealed handgun, a request, which the ninth circuit court in Pasadena, California heard in the case *Hickman v. Block* (1996). The majority decision declared that the second amendment does not apply to individuals in the case of “concealed carry” in this instance and establishes “a right, not a duty” (DeConde 265). This contradiction is central to addressing the social issue of gun violence with audiences through the theatre. Historically, bids for laws that permit concealed and open carry suggest that guns are viewed as a tool of significant power, in terms of self-protection. In the play *Afterlife*, the characters exist on the continuum of attitudes on guns as a method of protection, and help to raise dialogue about the validity or necessity of this approach in distinct contexts. English jurist William Blackstone articulated this necessity for guns as being an issue of “self-preservation” on the one hand, but the necessity of gun control as an issue of maintaining “public peace” (DeConde 24). Acknowledging the historical rationalizations behind gun use can help to put the issue into context and illuminate some of its inherent complexities. By understanding how the gun has manifested as a symbol of power throughout United States history, new frameworks may be adapted to approach this controversial topic.

Gun Myths and Social Critique in Western Films

Myths about the American West, and subsequently gun use, were born of the landscapes, legends and true stories, crafted and constructed by story-tellers and artists, and sustained by popular media and tributes to the original history and Western genre. The Western genre may prove particularly useful for a production that seeks to encourage social critique of American gun culture, because it serves as an allegory for Anglo-Saxon American frontier values.¹² When this allegory is fragmented and questioned, new perspectives on gun culture can emerge. This thesis project is not a commentary on the history of gun use during Westward expansion, but rather a commentary on the myths and glorification of guns in the Western genre, and how these processes are immortalized in Americans' contemporary national identity. In Frederic Jameson's *Brecht and Method* he insists: "theatre is [...] a peculiarly privileged space for allegorical mechanisms, since there must always be a question about the self-sufficiency of its representations" (122). This example suggests that the theatre can lay bare for audiences the construction of stories and encourage them to examine the social foundations of the representations on stage. Therefore, though Brecht does not explicitly reference the Western genre, he makes the argument for the use of allegory in the theatre. This helps to justify the importance of adapting the culturally significant Western genre for the stage, which is full of allegorical references (e.g. The conflict between cowboy and outlaw as an allegory for the fight between good and evil, or the conflict between settler and native tribe as an allegory for the fight for civilization in the

¹² Though this research does not directly study race and ethnicity, analyses of frontier culture in the United States in this thesis will avoid regarding the society as "traditional," which is oppressive toward minority groups, people of color, and Native American tribes.

face of perceived savagery). Ironically, where the Western film sweeps audiences away to an arguably realistic fictional world, a Western play constantly reminds the audience that they are sitting in a theatre. Moreover, the characters in Maurer's *Afterlife* have the opportunity to both incorporate the archetypes of traditional Western film mythology but also a consciousness of influential historical factors and their own awareness of current socio-political issues. Therefore, the actors help to present a narrative that may deviate from traditional expectations of Western films and allow for more critical reflection. I believe that audiences are capable of looking beyond the allegory of the Western and examining the values upon which it rests. In order to do so, this work requires the representative and immediate qualities of theatre.

Symbols and myths, for example those found in the Western, are deeply significant within a culture because they provide a "basis for communication" (W. White 18). Based on this shared understanding, a person may understand their place in the conceptual "hierarchy of power, prestige, importance, and value" within their society (18). Will White, in his text on the structure of the filmic Western, asserts that the binary structure of these works and of traditional myths, which "depends on simple and recognizable meanings [such as good vs. bad]," are not meant to challenge societal norms, but rather to reinforce them (23). White establishes that "a myth explains social interaction" (129). For example, the myth depicted in the classical Western narrative—characterized by the stranger entering a town to save it from criminals and win the love of the local virtuous woman—addresses the conflict between bourgeoisie society and the realities of a capitalist market; this, instead of leveling the playing field, encouraged the emergence of "the self-interested individual" (135) still lauded by contemporary

United States culture. Therefore, the Western has already proved itself a tool to address social structure. I have endeavored to acknowledge that these myths exist, which are meant to maintain the cultural status quo,¹³ while creating a socially critical version of the Western that is able to fracture these mythic narratives. Will White acknowledges the presence of a distinct mythology of the United States, or a set of “popular stories that serve to locate and interpret social experience” (185). These stories are the tales that are most familiar to those who have grown up with the United States’ dominant culture, though other minority groups have grown attached to the Western’s romanticized, and later dark and gritty, portrayals of the frontier.¹⁴ To fracture the Western narrative is also to challenge underlying assumptions about the cultural significance of violence and territorial expansion. This may help to explain why “legends of the West are many and hard-dying,” according to bold-printed text in James McNutt’s compilation of National Geographic’s *Greatest Photographs of the American West*.

According to Western genre scholar Douglas Brode in his text *Dream West*, The Western literary tradition in the United States began with Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902) (55), but scholars believe it may have international origins. In Greek mythology, Athena in armor “stood for both wisdom and war [and...] brought the secret of taming horses” (55), and “‘chivalry’ originated as a French word from the early Renaissance that posits a man on horseback as the ultimate hero” (55). This global aspect to Western heroism creates a legend, where the two men dueling are not representing themselves or

¹³ White, Anglo-Saxon culture is culturally and economically dominant, and therefore is considered the norm.

¹⁴ For a scholarly text that references this paradigm shift in the Western genre beginning in the second half of the 20th century see Robert Perret’s text: “Wanted Dead or Alive? Western Genre Items in the 21st Century United States Library.” (2013)

even their respective towns or country, but “a universal joust between good and evil” (62). Brode’s description here of the ancient foundations of Western genre mythology suggest that the films, as cultural icons, represent a universal significance, as opposed to a merely American one.

American audiences have a long-standing relationship with the Western film genre, but this relationship has not always been one of critical thought. Using the identifiably Brechtian practice of directly addressing the public, the last scene in the first short silent film Western *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) “concludes as an outlaw turns his gun on the audience in an unconscious act of deconstruction, setting up an ongoing relationship between movies and audiences” (Brode 59). Interestingly, this has the opposite ultimate impact as Brecht’s theatre, in terms of critical thought and reflection. French film scholar Jean-Louis Rieuepeyrou suggests that this first foray into the filmic Western established “a bond of sympathy [...] which linked the Western and the audience inseparably” (“The Western” 116). I hypothesize that this sympathetic connection, at least in American audiences, strengthened the preexisting sense of cultural identity that was central to national expansion. As the frontier moved west, national pride was necessary to maintain a sense of community and justification for the struggle and sacrifice required of those who went west. The Western film genre harkened back to a not so distant past, where ordinary Americans could view clearly who was the hero and who was the Villain; in other words, there was a clear “us” versus “them” that belied the true underlying complexity and hardships of the time period and overwhelmingly resolved with the “good” American as the victor. In light of Rieuepeyrou’s analysis, written in 1952, the relationship between audiences and the

Western was first characterized by this emotional connection and suggests that, due to its relationship to national pride and identity, the Western holds more significance than other popular genres such as the Romance or the Thriller.

The gun is an object that has acquired significant mythological significance, and the theatre is a practical place to fragment those narratives. DeConde suggests that those “who perceived the arming of a people [...] as a virtue built a folklore about the social value of firearms and embedded that idea in history books and popular literature” (4). This research presents the possibility of bringing audiences into a space where the social value of firearms is questioned. This encouragement to question the value of the firearm comes into conflict with certain film narratives, such as those present in works such as *True Grit* (1969). In this film, a young girl’s father is murdered, and when the murderer flees, the girl, Mattie, tracks down the “meanest” marshal in Fort Smith to help capture him (Wright *Six Guns and Society* 92). “True grit” is the quality that Mattie ascribes to the marshal Rooster Cogburn, which is used as a compliment for his willingness to go outside of the law to punish criminals and serve justice. Guns are central to the characters’ victory in this story, and their use is largely unquestioned. This film is merely one example of the social value of possessing skill with firearms, and those who display these abilities in the name of justice are deemed heroes.

The mythology of the Western is not responsible for the United States’ problems with guns, but is merely a component to consider; DeConde proposes that the “glorified perspective of civilian gun-keeping [...] offered an appealing reason why private citizens should have easy access to firearms” (4). Nevertheless, this glorification came both from fictional representation and gun rights advocacy groups. Specifically, the

mythology of the Western offers character archetypes that are used to express cultural values; this mythology is both a product of society and an agent acting upon society. Establishing a simple and concrete impact of mythical Western gun violence on United States identity would be practically impossible, because we cannot study these issues in isolation from other historical, economic, socio-cultural, and philosophical influences. Rather, the process of fragmenting the archetypal imagery can provide new insight into the humanity behind preconceived notions of the West and the expansion of American gun culture.

Not only does the glorification of guns in the Western genre help to justify the use of a Western genre play to address these social issues with an audience, but there is also a precedent of using the Western as a platform for social critique. *Tombstone* (1993) is a film about the town sheriff Wyatt Earp's strong stance on gun control. Interestingly, Charles Heston, who portrayed a gun control ally in the movie, said in a 1997 speech to the National Rifle Association: "The Second Amendment is [...] America's first freedom, the one that protects all the others [...] the one right that allows rights to exist" (46). This contradiction suggests that Heston's mere participation in this film did not change his stance on gun control. As opposed to creating art that simply states an ideological narrative, I was motivated to direct a play that could lead individuals and communities to reexamine their own stances on guns and actively engage people in thought and discussion. These films provide examples of ideological contradictions and of how the genre might be used in the theatre to address the social issue of gun violence.

A significant way in which past Western films have challenged the genre has been in demystifying gun violence and eliminating idealizing conceptions of gun violence. *Wichita* (1955), another pro gun-control film, provides evidence of how the Western has been used to address the issue of gun violence in the past. When Billy asks the sheriff, Bat Masterson, what it is like “to kill a man [...] any romanticism is curtly dismissed” (Brode 47). This interaction appears to be an attempt to critique the assumption present in gun mythology that the gun is the protector of good and vanquisher of evil. In the Eastwood film *Unforgiven* (1992), the representation of the gunfighter William Munny also challenges preconceptions about Western gun violence. “He lacks the qualities of the Western gunfighter, [and is, instead,] an aging pig farmer, a mentally and physically weary ex-cowboy” (Platinga 71). *Unforgiven* is significant in allowing audiences to view Western characters as flawed human beings instead of as infallible heroes, an objective of my vision in directing the characters in *Afterlife* as well. These films did not tangibly change the way that the United States regards gun use and violence, but they play a role in counteracting previous glorification of guns.

In *Shane* (1953) the moral argument surrounds two opposing views on gun violence: “A gun is a tool, as good or as bad as the man using it [and...] we’d all be better off if there were no more guns in the valley.” (Brode 62) These perspectives echo the polarization of the gun debate in contemporary society. Realistically, the concept of eliminating all guns is impossible, because there is an equally powerful (if not more so) group of individuals and organizations like the NRA that would fight these restrictions. Though this film presents no tangible solutions to the issues of gun violence, it does begin to challenge earlier notions of the gun as an icon of freedom, and incorporates a

conflicting voice to the debate. The film *Shane* also identifies American gun use as a gendered cultural byproduct. Beyond standard tropes about violence, which are often male-centric, the Western mythology is heavily gendered; not surprisingly the male characters in *Shane* are more likely to support gun violence than oppose it. To this effect, when a young boy first encounters with a handgun in *Shane*, Brode describes it as “a moment of fetishization [...a] pre-adolescent [...] Freudian fascination with [the] object of male power, modeled ages earlier on the phallus” (61). Brode’s analysis highlights the association between the gun as a symbol of violence and the gun as a symbol of masculine power or virility. Therefore, *Shane*’s approach to issues of gun violence both challenge traditionally romanticized depictions of the West, while also reinforcing normative gender roles.

My production of *Afterlife* seek to challenge the existing myths about gun violence, but it also builds upon a lineage of filmmakers who began to use the genre as a tool for social criticism, starting as early as the 1950, as mentioned in the introduction. With this understanding and bolstered by a trend of increasing support for revisionist history and historiographical work, I felt that audiences could be expected to at the least be familiar with narratives that reject a wholehearted idealization of cowboys and gunslingers. In fact, Brode asserts that “the vast majority of Westerns portray guns in an unfavorable light” (48), yet films explicitly in favor of gun control, such as those about Earp and Masterson, are often seen as “some unique subgenre [...or] an aberration to the generalized form” (48). I would argue that, while admirable, the power of these potentially culture-altering films and their tangible cultural impact are limited in their direct engagement of audiences. This limitation may be overcome using the theatre. As

opposed to in film, theatre actors are in the same room as audiences and the energy of a direct connection between them can be palpable. The energy of the audience and their responses also has a direct influence over the actors' performance each night, while in a film the events have been recorded and edited to appear the same exact way at each showing. Finally, the theatre provides a space for a post-show discussion, whereas traditional film screenings do not typically include this feature. Though the context of Western stories is quite distinct from the economic, cultural, social, and ideological context of the contemporary United States, these myths survive in our cultural lexicon, in terms of the words we use and connotations that Western genre symbols have.¹⁵ By bringing the Western into the theatre as a tool for social critique, audiences can begin to envision similarities between the issues presented in these stories and their own lives, if they do prove to exist.

Contemporary Relationships to Gun Violence

As established in the introduction, gun violence is a valid social issue that deserves to be addressed through a theatrical setting, and understanding gun violence through its mythical, historical, and current perspectives helps to establish its significance based on the previously stated criteria: 1) ideologically polarized, 2) related to social justice, 3) implicated in legal measures and social control, and 4) intersecting other identifiable social concerns.

Presently, the discourse on gun violence has been polarized between gun control activists and gun lobbyists, but neither extreme is a viable option for addressing this

¹⁵ E.g. the gun and the man on horseback have connotations of Westward expansion. Whether or not they are perceived with a positive valence depends a great deal on cultural heritage and ethnicity (i.e. native tribes are more likely to view these symbols negatively as representing the cultural and physical genocide of native tribes committed during the United States' territorial expansion).

issue. There is also a polarization of what the gun symbolizes. Drawing a connection between myth and contemporary society, Wyatt Earp's statement in the film *Tombstone*—"If men don't have guns [...] they can't shoot each other" (46)—is in direct opposition to the NRA slogan that "Guns don't kill people; people kill people."¹⁶ A specific issue that this research seeks to address is how polarization of a social issue can lead to gridlock because discussion between citizens becomes impossible. For example, an NRA member may be unwilling or unable to imagine their life without a gun, meanwhile, the organization Everytown for Gun Safety, advocating for "common sense" gun laws and restrictions on gun purchases and use, has launched a campaign called "Stop Crazytown," which encourages activists to view NRA members as mentally unstable. In contrast, organizations like Sandy Hook Promise, founded as a result of the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT, focus on education and intervention as ways of reducing gun violence ("Our Approach"). Moralizing the issue of gun use or basing decisions on a firmly fixed ideology has been a central way to address the topic in the media, but challenging the discourse on gun use is a crucial way to incorporate new voice, perspectives, and potential solutions to gun violence.

In order to better understand the polarization of the debate on gun use, Attorney Laura Cutilletta, who has worked for twelve years as a lawyer and advocate for gun violence prevention in San Francisco at the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, shares relevant insight surrounding the challenges of misconceptions about "gun control" and "common sense" gun laws and the often unbridgeable gap between gun advocates and

¹⁶ An NRA-backed bumper sticker, referenced by scholar Philip J. Cook in his text "The Great American Gun War: Notes from Four Decades in the Trenches" (2013).

anti-gun advocates. Especially since the mass shooting in Newtown, CT (Sandy Hook Elementary) in December of 2012, she has noted a large influx of people into the movement, especially on the grassroots level. Cutilletta commented that the debate on gun violence has only recently gained active support from citizens in favor of background checks and other similar laws, whereas previously there was an overwhelming amount of passive support from those who indicated support for gun safety laws in polls but were not engaged enough to call their legislators or attend meetings. On the contrary, the NRA has long been vocal and active in expressing their views. With more involvement on the national level by organizations advocating against gun violence, Cutilletta reports more collaboration and coordination between groups, though she explains that the organizations are quite diverse, as opposed to the monolithic NRA.

In relationship to my research with the direction of *Afterlife*, Cutilletta highlights the importance of discourse and language, surrounding these issues. The Law Center and other like-minded organizations have begun to eschew the term “gun control” in recent years because it has an overwhelmingly negative connotation of meaning the forcible removal of a citizen’s gun rights. The state of Oregon recently passed a background-check law, and overwhelmingly, the polls demonstrate the voters, even members of the NRA are in favor of background checks, yet “gun rights” are more popular than “gun control” when phrased in that way, according to Cutilletta’s understanding of Pew Research Center data. The Law Center’s work supports background checks, waiting periods, and legal measures that would prevent gun purchases by mentally ill individuals and domestic violence perpetrators, but all too

often their work is misconstrued as being opposed to all gun use. This addresses the particularly strong misconception that “gun control” advocates want to get rid of all guns; as a result of these negative associations, Cutilletta considers “gun control” a “bad word,” and Mark Glaze, the director of Mayors Against Illegal Guns, (“Loaded Words”), prefers the term “violence prevention” to “gun control.” In considering the significance of language in issues surrounding gun violence, I believe that this characteristic serves to emphasize the importance of the theatre in offering a constructive space to discuss gun violence without the pressure to adhere to polarized scripts. The theatre allows for the deconstructing of events within their cultural and historical contexts, without needing to present two ideological sides, as is common found in the media. Cutilletta explains that when she is interviewed by a news organization, almost always there is someone interviewed from “the other side,” meant to balance the perspective, but in reality it serves to separate activists from a common goal, which would be to prevent the loss of innocent lives.

Gun violence is related to social justice in that it infringes on the freedom of individuals and communities within the United States, while laws controlling gun use, from the perspective of NRA members, restrict the rights of American citizens. Marie Crandall, M.D., a trauma surgeon at Northwestern University Hospital testifies that, the gun violence statistics in Chicago “vastly discriminate against people of color, particularly African Americans and Latinos.” In general, scholar Philip J. Cook asserts that gun use and the resulting violence “degrade community life” (28). On the other hand, a gun advocate might suggest that private possession of guns is the only way to

ensure the safety of society and to protect justice.¹⁷ The connection between the issue of gun violence and social justice is multilayered: the NRA is well-known for its interpretation of the 2nd amendment as a literal protection of all rights to bear arms, yet social justice for gun owners and social justice for those who are victims of gun violence holds different significance.

Legal measures and concerns about social control are of deep importance in relation to gun violence, a few of which were addressed in the section regarding guns in United States history. The Supreme Court case *The District of Columbia v. Heller* rejected the constitutionality of D.C.'s ban on handguns, establishing the legality of owning a firearm for personal protective use in a federal enclave. While the fundamental rights of citizens to privately own guns are being defended, there remains the issue of elevated gun violence even where the strictest of gun control laws are in effect, such as the nation's capital. Another instance of social control, the Brady bill, initially enacted by President Bill Clinton and reintroduced by Democratic congressmen in 1993, caused particular contention between the NRA and gun control advocates.¹⁸ The foundations of this law instituted requirements for a "waiting period" before purchasing a handgun and basic "background checks," where potential gun owners are vetted to ensure legality of the purchase. After seven years of contention, the bill was signed into law, but unfortunately many loopholes remained that made it difficult to fully enforce (DeConde 251) and difficult to ascertain the depth of its success (Cook 51). To this date, the NRA keeps close surveillance on the state of gun laws in all fifty

¹⁷ In Maurer's play, the character Virgil states: "If we were safe from murderers and thieves, I would drop the gun in a heartbeat. Our world is not perfect. It's not even safe sometimes. Yet this gun is a light in the darkness" (61).

¹⁸ Charles E. Schumer (NY) and Howard M. Metzenbaum (OH)

states, in order to ensure the freedom of their constituents (“Welcome to the NRA”), while Every Town for Gun Safety tracks the states where intrusive gun laws have been rejected that would have allowed concealed and open carry in public spaces such as schools. Many organizations, such as the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence advocate for “common sense” gun laws (“About Us”). The majority of organizations for gun violence prevention have emerged following discrete instances of gun violence, while gun rights organizations were established for the protection of 2nd amendment rights.

Though guns have been the subjects of legal and political debate—suggesting that decisions regarding guns remain in the hands of powerful institutions—this does not diminish the importance of addressing related issues through the theatre. Indeed, Paul Helmke, in his legal perspective on “Targeting Gun Violence” concludes that, “policy makers need to be willing to discuss and debate these issues, and the public needs to encourage this process. Stoking a climate of fear—not just of gun violence, but of discussing gun violence—does a disservice to our country and our communities” (552). Therefore, even though gun violence is an issue deeply implicated with legal measures and concerns of social control, this means that actual dialogue must take place.

Finally, gun violence intersects with many other significant social problems. One such issue is that of hyper-masculinized gender roles and violence in general. Of the individuals who the Northwestern University Hospital treats for gunshot wounds, 90% are male, and 95% percent of perpetrators are male (Duff and Franklin). Furthermore, gun violence can have a negative effect on mental health and physical health; depending on the degree of violence in a child’s neighborhood, they may

experience the deaths of peers to gun violence or be “scared to go out and play,” according to pediatrician Ricky Choi (“The Law Center’s Role”). Certainly mental health is also a concern when examining contributing factors to gun-related suicides and mass shootings; gun advocates frequently reiterate that “guns are not the problem,” and posit that if the United States was more effective at addressing mental health issues that there would be less gun violence. There is, as of the present, no clear understanding of precisely how these issues intersect, yet statistical research has indicated that gun violence is almost never an isolated issue.

II. The Theatre Director and Social Critique

The director is tasked with unifying the vision of a theatrical production, and therefore has the responsibility of articulating the overarching questions or issues that their art hopes to address. In my recent experience as a theatre student and as a consumer of popular theatre, the majority of productions make a statement about human nature or the importance of entertainment, but I committed my work to the possibility of turning a production into the impetus for further discussion.

Theatre as a Laboratory

As the title of this thesis suggests, the theatre can be utilized as a laboratory, thus experimentation is a key element of my directing strategy. Laboratory is a word traditionally associated with the empirical sciences, yet artistic endeavors like the theatre can benefit from using a laboratory-like model. My use of the term laboratory as applied to the theatre derives from Brecht's writings on "theatre for the scientific age." The German word for "science," *Wissenschaft*, has a much broader definition than that found in the English language, "embracing [...also] history as well as the natural sciences" (Willett 29); this led me to consider that the underlying motivation for science and laboratory work is to ask and answer the question "why." Theatre can function as a laboratory for social critique in two distinct manners: a laboratory, in rehearsals and the production process, where artists explore their craft and approaches to shaping a piece of theatre that challenges audiences' notions of social structure and identity, and a laboratory, during and post-performance, in the sense that the audience engages with the play and may experiment with different ideas that ultimately extend to discussion, relationships, and action.

A laboratory is a place that can be conducive to experiments that use trial and error. If the theatre director's objective is to create a theatre that inspires social critique and awareness, the rehearsal space is the laboratory where the ensemble can establish an objective that they work to accomplish. This understanding of theatre as a laboratory is similar to Brecht's career; over his lifetime, he adapted his theories and methodology based on what did or did not support his vision of the theatre. Nevertheless, whether or not the results are pertinent to the original objective, they are still significant. Using the theatre as a laboratory can mean having the possibility to explore ideas and to make discoveries.

The laboratory model also incorporates the interdisciplinary interests of this research. In popular entertainment and in academic settings, theatre is classically viewed as popular entertainment. However, I hypothesize in this research that work within the theatre would benefit from an exploratory model that acknowledges the connections between theatre and other areas of study such as history, sociology, and cultural anthropology. In the article "Theatre and Performance at a Time of Shifting Disciplines," theatre scholar Marvin Carlson asserts that "theatre, with its potentially broad range of interest in human activity from many cultures and many historical periods, has a natural relationship with intercultural research [...yet, historically,] theatre studies had to renounce certain obvious areas of concern already claimed by existing [academic] disciplines" (Carlson 140). Instead of adhering to the preexisting divisions between theatre and other fields of study, my research and process directing the play *Afterlife* sought to draw upon connections between the theatre and other

disciplines. The laboratory framework for my theatre-based research is an act that reclaims these intersecting subjects and their relevance to theatrical study.

Fundamentally, this work is a collaborative effort with each designer and actor; each individual is tasked with a responsibility to a certain aspect of the production, but all must communicate and ensure that these ideas fit together and build off of one another. I valued the actors' artistic contributions and collaboration in terms of shaping this piece, and I impressed this upon them. Each week, I explored a different component of the synthesized directing theory. This theory emphasizes an awareness of the audience, an understanding of moments of choice, social consciousness on the part of the actor, and the incorporation of staging and design that allows for moments of intellectual and critical reflection for the audience.

The goal of this study was to raise awareness and inspire dialogue, not to cause a specific change in opinion regarding gun violence. For that reason, this research attempts to establish the importance of theatre as a laboratory for social critique, without indicating a desired ultimate outcome. This document incorporates an analytical reflection on the directing process and performance experience. Additionally, I have analyzed my process of organizing a post-show discussion with the cast and audience following each show and the implementation and outcome of this endeavor.

Why Brecht?

The writings of Brecht and analyses of his work provide the grounding for my directing approach to *Afterlife*, and have guided me as I work toward a better understanding of crafting theatre that encourages social critique. In order to realize a play like *Afterlife*, inspired by a well-known "American" film genre and addressing the

still-relevant issues of gun use and national identity, I wanted to question these social structures, not merely present them as fixed and unchangeable. As a theorist, playwright and practitioner of the theatre, Brecht offers useful commentary on the purpose of a new kind of theatre, which, in parallel with my own objectives as a director, advocated for an engaged and socially critical audience.

Initially, in reading about Brecht and attempting to understand his own work, I found it difficult to abstract his thinking from his own philosophy and environment; he was a Marxist and a German, exiled to the United States during and following the Second World War, before returning to establish his own theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble. In light of these influences, Brecht's insights and practices are most applicable to my research in synthesis with a contemporary perspective. This approach is articulated by Elizabeth Wright in her text *Post-Modern Brecht*: "Would it not be better to read, teach, and stage Brecht as a source of discontinuous insight, extracting from his theory and practice what seems most valuable at the time" (21). So it was, with deep respect for Brecht's original ideas, that I used only what felt most relevant and appropriate to my work. Furthermore, Michael Bloom reminds students in his directing handbook "that a personal connection to an author does not guarantee a vibrant production" (14). Therefore, it should also be assumed that the mere act of imitating an artist's approach to directing would be insufficient and ultimately ineffective. Despite my own temporal and political distance from Brecht, in many ways, my work on *Afterlife* does align with some of his theatrical goals. Much of Brecht's work rejected "American theatre's compulsive need for a comfortingly unquestioning form of realism

combined with obligatory happy endings” (J. White 189), and I too rejected this form of art, but in the context of my own social, historical, political background.

Brecht’s style of theatre is often referred to as the Epic theatre, but the methodology through which he set out to achieve his evolving vision is often misunderstood. Perhaps one of his most controversial methods is called the *verfremdungseffekt* or “alienation effect.” Before beginning my research, I was hesitant to incorporate Brecht’s own methodology and instead examined his motivations and objectives for creating his theories on this topic. In simplest terms, Brecht observed that audiences must be distanced from an issue in order to be able to think critically about it; this assessment helps to explain why Brecht emphasized logic and avoided moments founded on empathy between the audience and the artists. It is most appropriate to think of this philosophy in terms of its objective, as opposed to the ways in which Brecht attempted to implement it during his lifetime. As the director of *Afterlife* my purpose was, in the words of American Conservatory Theatre artistic director, this: for my audience to “walk out of the theatre with a sense of being alive to things that we’ve seen every day, but we had never experience the way we’d experienced it until it was “defamiliarized” for us on the stage” (Perloff “How Theatre Keeps Us Human”). If “defamiliarized” is considered a synonym for alienation or estrangement, it is meant less in a forceful sense and more in the sense of having distance from a topic, a conflict, or a question. The reason can be explained through this passage from Brecht’s play *Buying Brass*: “everything in [Stanislavsky’s] theatre seemed far too natural for anyone to stop and examine it. You don’t usually examine your own home or your own eating

habits” (“Brecht on Performance” 44).¹⁹ All this avoidance of naturalism or realism should be in the service of asking the question “why.” Ruth Berlau, an artist who often worked with Brecht, explained that he relied heavily on this question in all of his rehearsals. Scholar David Barnett suggests that Brecht focused not on answering the question “why” in rehearsals, but rather training and adopting technique in order to suggest answers to these questions in their performance. Trying to answer the question “why” is both essential to understanding social issues like gun violence and an action that makes us uniquely human. Therefore, though Brecht’s approach to the theatre can be misleading, the most effective way to utilize his materials is to return to his initial objective and develop the most effective way of realizing it.

The themes of identity and the relationship between myth and cultural were driving forces in my endeavor to direct *Afterlife*, and therefore I sought a theorist and practitioner who could help me invite the audience to question and investigate their own identity. Brecht proposes: “a theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense” (*Brecht on Theatre* 7). As opposed to unequivocally sharing his opinion, I would posit that a theatre that makes no contact with the public is of no use to me in my approach to directing *Afterlife*. There are many ways to “make contact” with the public, and based on Brecht’s writings, I extrapolated that to mean acknowledging the audience’s presence and implicating them in the conflict and relationships. Furthermore, Brecht provided appropriate material for my direction of *Afterlife* because he believed in the audiences’ capability for critical thought. His assessment that “one tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent” (Brecht *Brecht on Theatre* 14)

¹⁹ *Buying Brass* was never published during Brecht’s lifetime. It is a compilation of scenes and exercises that scholars believe were meant to expose audiences to his own philosophies and theatrical practices.

suggests that a director should not overtly state the message of a piece, but rather invite the audience to parse it out and consider it themselves. Brecht's theatre is political "because it asks audiences not to accept the status quo, but to appreciate that [...] structures can be changed if the will for that exists" (Barnett 3); Brecht's theatre is also interventionist because "it encourages spectators to pick out contradiction in society and seek new ways of reconciling them" (Barnett 4). I determined that Brecht would be the most appropriate theorist for my work because of his emphasize on audience engagement and audience empowerment.

Brecht's theories suggest that he was an artist who comprehended the full potential of art to shape a society. This is a quality on which I hoped to build with my artistic investigation regarding audience engagement in addressing issues of gun violence. Brecht asserted "art is never without consequences" (Barnett 11). At first this may seem a dubious claim. Even so, the artist must always assume that their work will ultimately affect someone's life. With regard to the possible consequences of a piece of theatre, Brecht believed that "one has to step back and ask what one is actually doing when staging a play, particularly with respect to the relationship between the way one represents the world and the effects that may have on an audience" (Barnett 11). Whether the work challenges or reinforces the status quo is still a consequence in itself, and in my work on *Afterlife* my objective has been to challenge the status-quo surrounding gun violence and gun use. For this reason I investigated the history and context of the Western genre in order to better understand the myths, societal norms, and context with which I would be interacting.

Brecht is known for removing his audiences from the present moment, in terms of the setting of his plays, which functions to engage his audiences intellectually rather than encouraging them to identify with the characters. Of significant importance, also, is his aversion to idealizing the past or romanticizing certain historical periods or cultural groups. As opposed to Shakespeare and Homer, who set their stories in “glamorized versions of past periods, that more likely were horrible in the daily lives of ordinary citizens,” (Brode 56) Brecht is eager to point out systematic corruption and weakness in the societies he depicts. The traditional Western genre embraces the American myth of origin, yet this directing project seeks to identify the fissures and faults around the glorification of gun violence found in these idealized Western environments.

Brecht’s understanding of history and societal structure are also conducive to my work as a director. He elaborated on the Marxist theory of dialectics in his theatre work, a theory, which views events in history as the opposition of two ideologies in conflict, which ultimately resolve into a new social structure or ideological framework. I found Brecht’s view of dialectics to be particularly useful because it draws upon a consciousness of societal forces; a human being, or a character in the theatre, can never be wholly isolated from their environment, and the actors and director must acknowledge that the actions unfolding onstage are products of the conflict of societal norms, values, and morals.

Developing a Director's Concept for *Afterlife*

Afterlife was originally written as a play about guns in the United States, but the piece has evolved to address many more aspects of society and the human condition.²⁰

In beginning my research, I established my relationship with the script as one of practicality, as opposed to service to the playwright. Brecht articulates this approach in his play *Buying Brass*, in which the Philosopher character explains: “you can partially ignore the playwright’s interpretation, you can insert new elements; in short, you can use plays as raw material” (Brass 23 qtd. in Barnett 179). This choice is intended with no disrespect to the playwright, rather the acknowledgment of the untapped power of the play when used to pursue specific objectives. In the case of my production, I was engaged in inquiry about the role of gun violence in United States society and ways to engage audiences in critical thought.

This research investigates the director’s role in developing theatre with a consciousness of the larger societal structures at play. In contrast to productions based in the model of commercial or nonprofit theatre, *Afterlife* was not beholden to the same requirements for selling tickets and appealing to the artistic sensibilities of its audiences. Though *Afterlife* was not intended for commercial profit, I strived to be aware of the public who would attend the production. I aimed to appeal to a wider demographic of individuals and allow for the integration of many diverse perspectives within the audience. To that effect, one of my goals, outside of the research and production process, was to reach out to various groups in the local community. Particular groups of interest included the Eugene and UO Police Departments,

²⁰ Conceived in 2013 in response to a play competition calling for scripts that addressed issues of gun violence (Kistler).

employees and customers of The Baron's Den & Shooting Range in Eugene, OR, and the University of Oregon ROTC. In terms of this publicity and outreach effort, I drafted a formal letter to these organizations within the Eugene community to encourage them to attend and participate, rather than simply observe.²¹ If my ultimate intention is to encourage critical thought that shapes the way that we understand our culture and society, I am obligated to make this production accessible to those who might not regularly attend the theatre and those who may bring differing opinions on the issues surrounding gun violence.

Maurer's play script engages with the conflict between romanticizing the gun and acknowledging its fatal power. As a director, I believed that the real consequences of gun use needed to be part of the subtext for all actors in the play, especially James and Virgil. I determined that, as a director, if I did not choose to actively challenge preconceived notions about the symbol of the gun, the production would fail to engage audiences in critical thought. Furthermore, though I consciously chose not to make a political statement for or against gun use, I had to be prepared for audiences to interpret the events of the play freely. I also understood that my refusal to rely on previously polarized viewpoints was, in itself a political statement. Professor Claudia Holguín-Mendoza, affirms this idea by asserting: "Everything is political. Even apathy about politics is a political statement" ("Class Lecture"). A deeper analysis of this statement reveals that every decision we take as citizens contributes to a political agenda, whether that agenda is one of intense activism, or one of passive acceptance of societal norms. Brecht too was very conscious of the political implications of his theatre that primarily

²¹ See Appendix D.

grappled with oppressive institutional systems of economic power. On particular articulation of Brechtian theory establishes the theatre as a tool to either challenge or reinforce the status quo.²² These examples suggest that art that doesn't challenge the norm works to establish and reinforce it; I sought for *Afterlife* specifically to challenge the societal norm that gun violence issues should be treated as a dichotomy between gun rights and gun control.

In my vision for this play, I endeavored to challenge some of the specific imagery of the first Western films, which depict the Western landscape as romantically violent, male dominated, and morally unambiguous. I found parallels for these fractured representation of the Western narrative is the aforementioned films,²³ and reacted against stereotypical philosophies espoused in these films as well.²⁴ For example, the characters of Mary, an outlaw, and Ingram, a deputy, were both women who relied on gun use for their livelihood. The extreme views on guns presented in films like *Shane* parallel the conflict in ideology between Beth and her husband Virgil in *Afterlife*. Yet, in order to deconstruct this dichotomized mythology, Beth's anti-gun and Virgil's pro-gun sense of morality is questioned; instead of suggesting to the audience that one is to be preferred over the other, both are the subject of inquiry and criticism. In my direction of *Afterlife*, I also sought to challenge the notion of "good vs. evil," and instead attempted to situate the story as an examination of choices and their consequence. James is a key example of *Afterlife*'s moral ambiguity, because he arrives in the town with specific ideas about morality and justice, only to end the play as an outlaw who has

²² I will address this theory in further detail in the section "Preparation of Theory and Practice."

²³ E.g. *Unforgiven* (1992)

²⁴ E.g. *Shane* (1953); *True Grit* (1969)

embraced the profits of crime. Nevertheless, I did not want the James to represent corruption of the innocent, rather he is constantly grappling with how to deal with his present circumstances, stay alive, and find fulfillment. To challenge the historical underpinnings of this genre is not something to be taken lightly, and I was aware before beginning this project that I might be met with a certain degree of resistance in my quest to encourage a social critique of the mythology.

Paul Helmke's aforementioned request for public conversations surrounding gun violence speaks to the relevance of my vision for the direction of *Afterlife*. My objective to encourage critical thought and hopefully reduce the stigma implicated in discussions of this issue is an attempt to reclaim this public agency that Helmke feels is lacking. In the legal approach to gun violence there remains the dichotomy of "more control" vs. "less control," but for any social issue, my primary question was (and remains): how do groups and individuals deconstruct that divide? Theatre is an appropriate space to do so, because it advocates for a less linear way to address the issue and different ways of posing and resolving key questions. Specifically, the theatre promises no dire consequences. Furthermore, theatre raises the question of whether a linear solution to issues of such complexity exists.

Returning the more artistic components of this piece, I worked to establish a theatrical world that was not realistic, nor tied firmly to the limitations of historical accuracy. This is reflected in the playwright's note:

The play lives in a realm between reality and fiction, where the rules of phantasmal western films meets modern science and philosophy. The characters live in a small ranching community far past the borders of any larger government. The rules of this land are dictated by the few people who live in it. There are echoes of mid 19th century Western America with some semblance of Dante's *Inferno*. (Maurer 1)

The world ultimately feels like purgatory, but not in the traditional sense, perhaps. At the end of the play, James walks through an unidentified gate; I feel that what awaits James within the gate is torture, but of a mental, not a “fiery hell and brimstone” kind. I consciously made this choice in order to challenge audiences’ perceptions of consequence and punishment.

In order to express the significance of this piece to my audience, I wrote a note for the program that was handed to audience members as they entered the theatre.²⁵ This message summarized specifically my desire to fragment the national Western myth, the polarization of the gun debate, and how I believe that a theatrical representation could provide a more constructive and multifaceted approach. This director’s note is an important way of inviting the audience into the theatrical world and into the thought process behind the creation of the work. In light of my objectives for this production, I explicitly encouraged audience members to think critically about the role of guns in the Western and in contemporary society.

Current Methodological Approach

The introduction to *Brecht on Performance* elucidates three key concepts believed central when understanding Brecht’s own practice of theatre: 1) the audience is a central participant, 2) the story should present a world in which the trajectory of events is alterable, thus depicting audiences as capable of shaping their society, and 3) the audience becomes aware of these possibilities by interruptions in the flow of the play, allowing them moments of intellectual reflection (Kuhn et al. 3).²⁶ Some specific

²⁵ See Appendix E.

²⁶ Adapted from Brecht’s “A Short Organum for the Theatre” (1949).

ways in which I planned to implement this theory were to: 1) have the actors break the metaphorical 4th wall that separates the actors from the audience,²⁷ 2) emphasize moments of the play where the characters make choices that alter the trajectory of the story, and 3) experiment with disrupting the flow of the action and emotional realism surrounding moments of violence and in between scenes by the manipulation of silence and music.²⁸

I established a week-by-week breakdown of the work that needed to be accomplished by the date of the first performance on April 17th.²⁹ I ultimately incorporated a synthesis of Brechtian theory and practice in my directing preparation, rehearsals, and performance. This study was not empirical and certain variables could not be controlled. Therefore no causation can ultimately be attributed to my directing approach.

This methodology is also rooted heavily in the analysis of post-show discussions with the audiences. Before the show, our assistant stage manager greeted audience members at the door and informed them about the post-show discussion and an online post-show survey,³⁰ which they could access using a URL printed in their play program.³¹ I qualitatively analyzed the audience members' response of to a discussion of the production based on an outline devised for the gauging of socially critical awareness.³² I developed this outline by examining my own research questions and methodology in the rehearsal room in an effort to ask the audience questions that both

²⁷ Another term for this artistic action is "direct address."

²⁸ See Appendix C.

²⁹ See Appendix A.

³⁰ See Appendix G.

³¹ See Appendix E.

³² See Appendix F.

aided my intellectual inquiry and provided a safe space for audiences to discuss issues related to the play and gun violence. Finally, I have incorporated my own post-show reflection on the effectiveness of these elements toward the goal of social critique.

Preparation of Theory and Practice

The primary investigation unfolded in the rehearsal room, and in order to prepare for that I investigated different perspectives on Brecht's theories and practices. There was a limited amount of work that I could do before actually interacting with my cast, due to the laboratory like approach of my work. Once in the rehearsal room, we would regularly make discoveries that led me back to Brecht's writings in order to best understand how to draw out the potential for social critique in *Afterlife*, but before entering the room, I prepared via production meetings with my designers, by analyzing the script, and by reading further about the Western genre of film and watching selections of films such as *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) and *True Grit* (1969). As a director, my initial research supported my decision to implement exercises that allowed for the exploration of social questions through characters' choices.

In the aforementioned production meetings, for some designs we had to wait until rehearsals were underway before I began to collaborate with them to develop specific concepts. In general, we established a conceptual framework early on of that the play existed in a purgatory-like, non-romanticized but unrealistic landscape, working with the inspiration colors of dusty dark blue and faded orange. Our scenic design went through a number of initial proposals, which were ultimately simplified in the interest of budget and spatial capabilities. The theoretical framework, inspired by the work of Canadian designers, Michael Levine and Ken MacDonald, that underlay my

director's vision for the set was the following: the designs should characterize the stage as an "interactive space" (Rewa 121), which creates a relationship between performance elements and the audience, "encourag[ing] active viewing that breaks through the concept of the stage as a screen" (122). I felt that this conceptualization of scenic design reflected Brecht's belief in an intellectually engaged and socially critical audience. Ultimately, the scenic design depicted a cracked earth floor and a western landscape as indications of place, not as a literal representation of where each scene occurred. As the rehearsals progressed, I collaborated with my lighting designer to create visual moments that would accentuate points at which the actors made choices in relation to their use of violence. Before rehearsals began, I determined that this accentuation would be applied with the intention that it should appear as a confluence of factors, stemming from a desire challenge contemporary understandings of gun culture and encourage the deconstruction of these norms that historical events, Western myths and mainstream American culture have established.

There was a distinct divide between the logistical work, academic research, and creative work required of me as a director. I endeavored to bridge this gap appropriately in the execution of this project. In preparation for rehearsals, my daily duties in addition to script analysis and blocking preparation included printing script copies, scheduling rehearsals, discussing project logistics with professors and reserving rooms for rehearsals, among other publicity requirements surrounding the performances of *Afterlife*. In my academic research, I established a strong foundation of research about the Western genre, gun violence in the United States, and Brecht as a theoretical and practical reference. These three veins of research were essential to my creative process;

my academic preparation informed my creative work, and the discoveries made in the laboratory setting of our rehearsals informed by subsequent research.

My preparation to direct *Afterlife* led me to examine beyond Brecht's practices in order to reconnect with his more fundamental objectives. David Barnett, in *Brecht in Practice* by effectively articulated how Brecht's work sought to challenge societal norms, which helped me to maintain my perspective on the work I was undertaking. Brecht's works engage the question of how to make the invisible visible. Whereas Brecht attempted to make the struggles of the proletariat class visible, I wanted to make visible the issues surrounding gun violence, and I needed to understand the ways in which the more mainstream forms of media tend to normalize it. For example, "[television soap operas] do not draw our attention to the absence of swearing, but pass it over [...therefore the "normalizing behavior"] is invisible to the viewer" (Barnett 13). For this reason, the theatre must be made more "strange," according to Brecht, and subsequently I devised my own methods to make the instances of violence found in *Afterlife* appear more odd or unusual. Regarding my own research, the Western genre ultimately functioned as a setting in which the audience would be distanced enough from the conflict in order to think critically about it.

Finally, a copy of my digital director's journal is included in this document to further illustrate portions of my preparative process.³³ I also utilized a paper journal, which is excluded from this final document for the sake of clarity and pertinence, since most of these notes were made very quickly or as reminders to myself about logistical responsibilities.

³³ See Appendix B.

III. Analysis of the Directing Process

From the beginning to the conclusion of directing the play *Afterlife*, I implemented a methodology for applying social critique to a theatrical setting and have explored new vocabulary and objectives that may be applied in the future to other directing projects. During my research, I also experienced personal growth. Previously, I was hesitant to discuss gun-related issues with intense gun activists, but in working on *Afterlife* I realized that the conversations cannot wait, and that my work in the theatre could help provide a forum for people who were uncertain of how to begin these conversations on their own. I connected via Facebook, for example, with an old friend who works at a gun range and store in Arizona; the conversation was productive and respectful. The most valuable product of this conversation was the insight into someone else's perspective that is different from my own. This conversation also established a personal baseline for how open-minded I needed to be in my interactions with my production team and actors regarding the social issues of gun violence and the Western mythology surrounding guns. The directing process was a constant balance of implementing my chosen methodology and making sure that our production included standard logistical requirements to ensure we were prepared to perform on April 17th.³⁴

Theory and Practice in Rehearsal

Necessarily, many of my approaches meant to achieve a socially critical theatre inspired by the methodology and practice of Brecht evolved throughout the rehearsal

³⁴ These logistical requirements included ensuring that actors memorized their lines, holding a "paper-tech" (where the stage manager, director, and lighting and sound designers discuss where changes in lighting and sound will take place and write them in the stage manager's script so that the stage manager can accurately implement the sound and lighting features of the performance), holding technical and dress rehearsals, and scheduling run-through rehearsals (in which the director does little more than give notes afterwards, giving the actors an opportunity to practice what the flow of the show will feel like).

process. In general, the beginning of rehearsals were used to introduce guiding ideas, the middle weeks were spent attending to logistics such as blocking (actor movements on stage), ensuring that actors were off-book (memorized), and determining scene transitions, and final weeks were spent refining acting choices, moments of interaction, and characterization on the stage, and reestablishing the intensity of what is at stake for the characters.

At the first rehearsal, we sat in a circle and read through the play, and I presented the actors with their scripts and an introduction to the investigation. I placed primary emphasis on the role of theatre as a laboratory within the rehearsal room. Each person in the room shared what had attracted us to the theatre and to this project. For the most part, no one explored what the role of theatre should or could be; this led to my observation that we infrequently consider the potential answers. Even without explicitly asking the question now that the production has concluded, I have observed that my actors are more likely to consider societal factors that may influence their characters' choices than they were before this project.

By the time of our first rehearsal of the full play, I began to question the relevance of some of Brecht's approaches. He was working with professional artists, arguably some of the best in Germany at that time, longer rehearsal periods, and the luxury of government funding, which illustrate some variables that distinguish his work from my own. This was not enormously problematic, because I was not attempting to imitate Brecht, but these challenges impacted our production. Sometimes logistical or actor coaching questions required precedence over artistic and socio-cultural vision, and I struggled at times to remain connected to the social and political questions of the

piece. *Afterlife* is far from a piece of political propaganda, but even so, I think that my objective to engage audiences in critical thought was a foreign concept to my actors. I felt that they were initially more inclined to approach the presence of guns as normal, as opposed to the product of specific social and economic conditions. In order to be able to make the gun an object worthy of critical reflection, actors needed to understand, specifically, their relationship with it.

In examining the Western genre on the stage, questions about humor, death, and violence arose. There is a fine distinction between comedic violence and sincerely threatening violence, and I was committed to preventing the play from becoming a spoof.³⁵ Instead, I chose to embrace comedic moments, when they arose, because that made the tragedy all the more stark.

Beyond my directing approach, the production called for the use of prop guns, which I used as a moment for education and critical reflection. Respect for the guns and awareness of their significance was essential to my vision for this production. We had a gun safety conversation with our fight choreographer John Elliott, who helped teach the actors 1) how to wear their gun belt and where to place the gun 2) how to draw the gun, both with a jacket on and without, and 3) proper stance and safe aiming techniques. We laid the official ground rules that guns are never to be pulled on the audience, no one points a gun at someone, only toward them, and to make sure that no one else takes your gun. Afterward, we had an impromptu conversation about the role of guns in culture. We agreed that the issue is multifaceted. Someone contributed that the United States has 45 times more gun violence than any other developed country, a statement

³⁵ The most appropriate definition of “spoof,” in this context, is a “work that satirizes a particular genre” (Oxford English Dictionary).

for which I could find no supporting citation, and is therefore, for the purposes of statistical analysis invalid.³⁶ We talked about the distinction between guns as a hobby, as compared to guns for self defense. Someone offered the opinion that, logistically, guns are incredibly interesting—the fact that a relatively small piece can propel a piece of metal so quickly. I wonder, in retrospect whether it is more difficult for someone to invest in issues of gun safety and control if they have never personally experience their negative effects; even then, many people who have lost friends to gun violence do not speak out. I am glad that one of the actors asserted that someone who enjoys guns in a safe and controlled range could still advocate for more control.

This endeavor taught me a great deal about building community. Because I invested in building a laboratory-like space for creative and social investigation, I wanted to build trust and strong relationships with my actors. I found it important and useful to warm-up with my actors whenever possible, or to ensure that they warmed-up together if I was otherwise occupied. Additionally, I developed an original exercise, meant to motivate connection, spontaneity, and energy: the actors stand in a circle, one makes eye contact with another and says one of their lines; that actor takes in the energy, and they make eye contact with another actors and says a different line. I placed emphasis on actors maintaining the energy from line to line, and also infusing some sense of spontaneity, because how someone says their line to you will influence your energy and how you say the line you pick. Finally, it is a way to engage with the

³⁶ Though there is no scholarly source establishing that gun violence in the United States is 45 times that of other developed nations, it does highlight the sensationalism found in gun violence-related media that attempts to share the most shocking statistics to captivate viewers.

character's thought process, because the actors can choose any of their lines they say throughout the show, regardless of order.

Directing Character

This component of rehearsals was most fundamentally connected to my objective of raising the actors' consciousness of how their character interacted with the issues of gun violence and how their environment impacted their choices. The first concept that I implemented in my directing approach was that the actors be aware of the difference between themselves and their characters. Brecht presents this idea of distancing between actor and character, such that the actor is able to engage in social critique about their own character. Thus, if the actor is aware of the differences between themselves and their character, the audience should also experience the play in a defamiliarized way, where they are more predisposed to critical thought. For example, during one of our rehearsals we worked through a scene with Mary and James where she has captured him and tempts him to follow her, and some scenes between Virgil and James as James comes to develop his relationship with the gun and how he conceives of crime, justice and punishment. I directed a few exercises with the actors and asked them to think about how they as individuals feel about the presence of guns in contrast with their character. In scene 10, with Mary and James, I had them switch characters and then explain to their partner what it was like to live inside the other person's head. Later in that same rehearsal, we rehearsed scene 8 with the actors speaking as if they were themselves.³⁷ This did not have any particularly novel effect in that instance, but

³⁷ In which James and Virgil have stopped to camp during their attempt to find the outlaw, Mary.

perhaps over time it would have a more dramatic impact in increasing the actors' awareness about the influences of environment and differences of ideology.

With respect to creating distance between the actor and character, Brecht suggests the potential usefulness of "bad acting" in his play *Buying Brass*, with the assertion that this will help audiences to avoid passively empathizing with the story. In the case of my direction of *Afterlife*, this theory was only applicable in a limited way. I have concluded that when Brecht suggests "bad acting," he is referring to a style opposite to that of realistic acting, though Brecht's acting style would require just as much technique and skill as the more traditional form. In my rehearsals, my actors were not sufficiently prepared to execute the more presentational or declamatory style for which Brecht advocated, and therefore our scene work was lackluster at times and lacked a complete understanding of the logic or stakes implicated in an interaction.³⁸ Additionally, it took some time for the actors to be comfortable reflecting on the social structures implicated in *Afterlife*, and therefore, this approach was only somewhat successful and difficult to discern in terms of its ultimate impact.

Secondly, I endeavored to incorporate and embrace elements of contradiction within the characters. Brecht asserts that, "Even when the character behaves by contradictions, that's only because nobody can be identically the same at two unidentical moments" (*Brecht on Theatre* 15). His speculation invites the audience to consider what is different between two moments that cause a character to behave in distinct ways. In rehearsal, we discovered some central moments of contradiction. In

³⁸ "Stakes" is a term used by actors and directors to refer to "what is at stake" in a play or in a moment of action or dialogue; for example, in an argument between a married couple about the husband's betrayal of his wife, the "stakes" would be that, if the husband cannot convince the wife that he still loves her, their marriage will end in divorce.

scene 10, we created a silent moment while James leaves and decides whether to follow Mary and Simon. They have a moment to themselves, and Mary appears almost painfully vulnerable. Throughout the entire play she has her guard up, and there is something striking about her presence in the space as something other than her stereotypical “outlaw” character. In encouraging the actors to live in the contradictions of their characters, with the capability to be many things and have different opinions on the same issue that arise at different times, depending on the situation, I also found relevance for Brecht’s assertion that characters are a product of their society and their environment. I worked to implement this first concept by asking David (Noble) to avoid letting his first scene establish him as purely the antagonist; yes, he has deeply evil attributes, but he himself is not evil. For example, in scene 9 he says: “I won’t risk other lives to save one outsider.” This could be played as villainy, as simply his own logic, or as compassion for the lives of the other town members. I thought that a more compelling choice would be to let his compassion appear in some scenes, allowing the audience to begin to question why he appears to be a villain in some circumstances and not others.

Thirdly, I explored the concept of transformation, both with the actors and cursorily with costume design. In my director’s note,³⁹ I stated that my production of the play was primarily about choice and identity, and I believe that those two themes are the catalyst and product of transformation. James was the character whom the audience follows through the entire journey, and thus the ways in which he changed were most significant to my vision as a director. I encouraged him to embody this transition

³⁹ See Appendix E.

primarily physically. In terms of costume transformation, James arrives in a large overcoat (which he abandons after scene 6), gains a gun and gun belt in scene 4, exchanges shoes for cowboy boots (before scene 8), and finally dons a vest, like his fellow outlaws in scene 12. In terms of the other characters, I considered how Virgil and Beth's experience throughout the play affect their physicality. At the beginning they are vital and in control, but as the play continues, Virgil loses James, he questions his morality, and Beth watches, helplessly as her husband loses his conviction, and eventually his life. Though the last the audience sees of Beth is her rejection of Virgil's belief in the moral rectitude of gun use⁴⁰—saying “cowardice is all that's required” (Maurer 61)—she both must find the physical strength to refute her husband's philosophy, but also reflect the loss and pain she has suffered through losing her own son.

I chose to approach the direction each character by considering them a product of their environment, based on David Barnett's analysis of Brechtian theory. In order to build this context, I utilized a few inspiration photographs depicting some of the more barren and imposing pictures of Western landscapes. In the future, I would spend more time with the acting ensemble to make choices about the world of the play as a collective, which I hypothesize would help to convey the sense of environment more concretely to an audience. During a warm-up exercise, as the actors walked freely around the room, I prompted them to think about the three most formative moments in their character's past. I intended that this awareness of past influences would help to justify for the actors the choices that their character makes. Movement and gesture were

⁴⁰ See Appendix H 18

also clear ways to incorporate character, choice, and societal influence over the characters. Physicality can reveal a great deal about a character, and this required continual attention, especially for the less experienced actors. Early on in the rehearsal process, I encouraged Christle to think about how Mother and Beth's life experiences would change their physicality. I feel that it is very important for she and Virgil to appear to be carrying a heavy weight, and I hoped that physical work would help Beth to find deeper strength, passion and sense of loss, when appropriate. Through my personal life experience, I have observed a positive correlation between violence and loss and aging; having the actors embody the physical qualities associated with these characteristics can draw attention to the differences between James and Beth and Virgil and how their environments have shaped them. Additionally, early on, there was something a bit too cheery about Ben M. Jones, the actor playing James; subsequently I worked with him and Aimee Hamilton, the actor playing Mary, to find an appropriate energy for their relationship. This involved a series of physical exercises that were meant to focus on non-verbal communication and grounding, because Simon is a character who is described as having no tongue, and therefore no scripted lines. Additionally, costume design is a significant way to illustrate power dynamics and a way to deconstruct myths about the Western film genre. Our costume designer, Leila Ozeran, contributed the insight that Mary has gone through a lot of fluctuations between having money and not. In the script, she also says, when trying to convince James to join her and Simon: "Don't let my appearance fool you, it's not pretty. It's not easy either." We discussed that this might lead to some layering in her costume. In this production, we were somewhat limited in that we had a small budget and could not

permanently alter or distress any of the costumes we were renting. Under different circumstances, the costumes could be designed to specifically reflect the relationships between characters.⁴¹ With restricted resources the actors are required to incorporate these power dynamics into their physicality instead.

Audience Connection

This aspect of my directing approach received slight resistance from my actors. I did not initially anticipate this hesitation, but through rehearsals I began to comprehend how it stemmed from a lack of training in the use of “direct address” and a general unfamiliarity with how I hoped to implement it in the production. Communicating to actors that they were truly embodying the same space as the audience required the deconstruction of contemporary definitions of “good theatre” and demanded specific technical abilities.⁴² The sustaining of energy through the end of each line and through the end of each physical action is essential if the actors are to communicate to the fullest extent with each other or with the audience; because my actors are first and foremost students, I acted as a coach and tried to diminish their habits of not carrying the energy through the full thought or releasing a gesture before it was fully extended. This work is extremely important, because the audience is experiencing the play for the first time, and especially when it deals with significant issues such as gun violence, they need to be able to understand the impact of each interaction. I incorporated the motivation for the breaking of the 4th wall early in rehearsals, but I realized that the actors needed to feel more secure in their characters and relationships before they invited the audience

⁴¹ See Appendix H 10: six of the characters’ costumes under stage lighting.

⁴² In which actors portray their characters the conflicts on the stage, ignoring the presence of the audiences and treating the stage action as if it were reality.

into the moment. The work required a delicate balance between requesting a certain approach by the actors and allowing them to find moments of connection on their own. As a director, I had to examine places where I felt that the actors could or should connect with the audience, and this was both in non-verbal and verbal interaction.

We discovered moments for audience connection through experimentation, through intellectual decision, and through choices the actors made independent of my direction.⁴³ Some rehearsal exercises were conducive to finding moments of actor-audience connection. Through an exercise that asked the actors to perform the scene without acting as their character, one moment that stood out to me was James' line: "where's the justice in killing them." Because he spent a moment in silence before speaking, the line felt as though it held the potential for reaching out and appealing to the audience. I find it to be a provocative question, though ultimately the actor chose to direct it to his scene partner. Despite their inexperience using direct address, the actors, for the most part, were interested in the approach. I felt very fortunate that all of my actors were willing to create a relationship with the audience, even if sometimes they seemed doubtful at first.

In scene 11, where Virgil returns to Beth after James has been kidnapped, we tried an exercise with the actors where they both delivered their lines as if giving a lecture. This worked well for Virgil, as it increased the sense of connection with the audience, and his reasoning flowed out very clearly. In contrast, Beth's lines fell a bit flat, and it seemed that she lacked conviction. The rationale for using this exercise was that both characters' lines are rooted in their personal philosophy, and I wanted to

⁴³ One instance of this was when the actor playing James chose to wave at the audience as he exited scene 3, as if to say, "hello."

engage the audience by encouraging them to think critically about whether they agreed or disagreed with their arguments.

The connection between actors and audience in this piece was meant to be one encouraging critical thought and discouraging unquestioning empathy, and I determined that inviting the audience into the world of the play was a more effective way to impress the conviction that these issues of gun violence remain relevant today. One such example was the decision to have the main character, James, begin the play in the audience and for the audience to physically see him being dragged out of his seat.⁴⁴ Additionally, when Mary and Simon enter in scenes 1 and 16, the entire theatre is the train car.⁴⁵ By staging the scene this way, ending the scene as Deputy Ingram pulls James offstage, the audience becomes implicated in the story. As opposed to encouraging passive empathy, this blatant deconstruction of theatrical norms is meant to catch the audience off-guard and invite them to question why one of the individuals sharing a seat beside them is now implicated in the story.

Three moments about which I was adamant that the actors' engage with the audience were not explicitly written into the script. The two moments at the end of scene 10 and one moment at the end of scene 13 involved the characters sharing their personal philosophies and perspectives on life. This revelation is for their scene partner's benefit, but it is also for the benefit and the engagement of the audience. James ("but then I realized how horrendous "fine" was"),⁴⁶ Mary ("if you want a life of pain, misery and suffering, by all means, walk out that door"),⁴⁷ and Sheriff Noble ("as

⁴⁴ See Appendix H 2.

⁴⁵ See Appendix H 1.

⁴⁶ See Appendix H 15.

⁴⁷ See Appendix H 16.

soon as [your pet monkey] starts playing her own tunes, you have to politely remind her who's in charge") all appeal to the audience's sense of morality and agency in the context of society's existing power structures.⁴⁸ The actors have the privilege of presenting a variety of different perspectives on life, and the audience is presented with the responsibility of assessing which they agree with, which they do not, and for what reasons.

Moments of Choice

In certain respects, I approached the directing of *moments of choice* as an extension of the disruption of flow, because treating moments of choice as non-naturalistic draws the audience's attention to the fact that something requiring additional thought is occurring. Most of my emphasis on these moments was added through visual elements and was not initially indicated by the playwright. One of the most crucial elements of building a "moment of choice" during our rehearsal process was pacing. The actors had to learn how to maintain an energized "give and take" in their verbal and physical communication so that when they slow their movements or words in order to emphasize a choice being made, it is distinguishable from other moments. Moreover, they must learn how to hold their focus and intensity even in moments of silence and stillness, which is an ongoing process of growth and development for student-actors such as those with whom I worked on this play.

Early on in the rehearsal process, I discovered that scene 10 held a few different possible ways to stage James returning to join Mary and Simon, and each would imply different explanations for why he did so. One explanation was because he had made up

⁴⁸ See Appendix H 20.

his mind, and a different one was to return because he realizes that Simon has taken his gun. In this second scenario, which I ultimately chose to use, James goes back to get it, and in that moment of exchange is when he decides to stay. The staging of this moment was an excellent example of actor-director collaboration. Previously, I had articulated that the actors should be aware of each moment in which they made a choice, and therefore they knew that the end of scene 10 would be significant, particularly from the perspective of James' journey. In one rehearsal, the actor playing Simon moved as if he was about to give James the gun, but at the last second pulled it away.⁴⁹ This gesture, which on the surface was playful and spontaneous, spoke to the deeper meaning of James' choice: James, as a character, had to make two bids for the gun in order to prove that he was conscious of this choice. Moreover, I hypothesized that the sharpness of the gesture would attract the audiences' attention to the interaction, and perhaps encourage them to inspect it more closely.

Another important moment of discovery and choice is in Virgil's decision to give James the gun and James' reaction to his proposal. We worked through a couple striking power dynamics that were possible for that moment. With both men standing regarding the gun on the table, there was a sense of admiration, but with one sitting and one standing there is an uneven power dynamic, showing that Virgil and James are distinct in their relationship with the gun at that point in the story. A few moments later in the scene, Beth enters and establishes the ideological tension between her warning that James should not take the gun and Virgil's assertion that James will need it.⁵⁰ One way I could have physicalized James' choice between these two primary options by

⁴⁹ See Appendix H 17.

⁵⁰ See Appendix H 7.

placing James in between Beth and Virgil and the gun. Upon further examination, though, that would have only reemphasized the dichotomy between guns as a necessity and guns as harbingers of death. Instead, Beth and Virgil are both on the same side as one another. This is particularly significant because they are married, meaning that they have a partnership. As another physical element that indicated the importance of the moment to the audience, a spotlight appeared on James as he made his choice. The use of the spotlight was a recurring visual marker that appeared two more times during the performance.⁵¹ Though this staging decision was subtle, I intended for it to elicit thought from the audience in considering the forces behind James' choice to ultimately pick up the gun.

The third most significant moment of choice is in relation to the power dynamic between the Sheriff and his deputy. Initially, when she demands that he give her a fair share of the pay, he threatens to shoot her, and she has to make the deliberate choice to not relinquish her demand. In order to indicate this to the audience, she steps forward into his gun; merely standing her ground is not sufficient, and therefore she physically over-states her intentions so as to make them obvious to an audience.⁵²

A moment of choice that was not successful was the moment before Sheriff Noble calls for the execution of the alleged adulterer, Hope. I had intended to direct Noble to look at the audience and pause before giving the order, but other moments took priority in the direction of the piece. Not every moment can be of equal importance, and because this choice came at the beginning of the play, I did not want to

⁵¹ The spotlight appears again on James as he takes his gun back at the end of scene 10 and it appears on Virgil as he takes his gun back from Sheriff Noble after being convinced to help apprehend Mary one last time.

⁵² See Appendix H 11.

confuse audience members into thinking that it was of a larger significance than moments, which would come later in the scene. Instead of accentuating the moment with jarring sound or movement, we designed exaggerated lighting; this illuminated the actor such that her shadows appeared on a piece of muslin cloth and obscured everything else from vision, even though the scene took place in mid-day. From a director's perspective, I felt that this emphasis was sufficient to draw attention to the violence, and also use it as a disruption in the flow of performance. Therefore, some stylistic choices that fell under one particular theoretical application morphed into effective tools to achieve alternate objectives.

Disrupting the Flow of Performance

This aspect of my application of theory was most challenging, because it required the conceptualizing of choices that did not disengage audience members entirely, but more so led them to reflect objectively within the play on the actions and relationships. We ultimately decided against using silence and music to disrupt the flow and realism of the performance, and instead chose to use lighting, primarily. The motivation for the choice to utilize lighting was to create a sharp contrast between moments of violence and all other interactions. These moments of violence included Hope's hanging, Simon knocking James out with a gun, Noble shooting Ingram, Mary shooting Noble and Simon, Mary shooting Virgil, and James shooting Mary.^{53, 54, 55} In the first two moments, a dramatic change in lighting served to suggest that something unusual was about to happen, and in the last four examples we synched the sound cue of

⁵³ See Appendix H 4.

⁵⁴ See Appendix H 14.

⁵⁵ See Appendix H 23.

the gun firing with an immediate change in lighting. This change was meant to characterize the moment as strange in order to challenge audiences' perceptions of violence as normalized. There was also one example of a change in sound disrupting the flow of performance. The final scene takes place on a train, and the sounds of the train are audible in the background until the moment that James kills Mary, at which point the train sounds stop abruptly and a heartbeat sound and ringing fill the theatre. This change in auditory landscape challenges the audiences' understanding of where they are physically, and of the potential psychological effects that this murder has on James and may have on him in the future.

One aspect of disrupting the flow, proposed by Brecht, is making the audience aware that they are in a theatre. I attempted to engage with this idea through building relationships more on logic than emotion, another of Brecht's theoretical suggestions. Specifically, he believed that the theatre should "appeal less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason" (Brecht qtd. in Willett 23). In my attempts to help strengthen the relationship between characters, sometimes the actors had difficulty in maintaining the logical through-line of their interactions. Nevertheless, I attempted to better understand how logic is useful in helping actors to understand their relationships with other characters. My blocking of scene 2 also functioned to bring audiences' awareness to their presence in the theatre and not in a facsimile of real life. Maurer's script calls for a scene that functions as the "credits," like those of a film, and I attempted to blend that style with a use of space and props that were distinctly theatrical. I structured this scene by creating tableaux of two or three actors, which were frozen moments of choices made throughout the play: Virgil choosing to reject Beth's advice and hunt down Mary,

Noble's choice not to shoot his deputy, yet, and James' choice to take his gun and join Mary and Simon.⁵⁶ Additionally the actors brought on the chairs and tables that would be used during the play themselves, giving a tangible expression to the construction of the theatrical world. This functioned as a type of foreshadowing, which takes the suspense out of the action and allows the audience to focus more on questioning why the choices are made.

Using blocking that is more performative presents the opportunity to look for a deeper significance in the movements, which requires disrupting the play's realistic qualities. Brecht, through his extreme attention to detail, expressed that "bits of action must last long enough to mean something" (Jones 88) and that "the blocking should be able to tell the main story of the play" (90).⁵⁷ In scene 4, we experimented with having Virgil drag Beth far upstage on the line "Do we have to do this now?"⁵⁸ This serves a double purpose, as Virgil is both trying to keep embarrassing himself and their guest, but also because he would rather avoid having to defend why he is complicit with the sheriff. We also found a powerful choice for scene 7 in that Virgil does not face Beth for the entire exchange, until he feels forced to confront her. The physical handling of the gun itself also played a significant role in actor movement, both personally and in any exchange where an actor passed the weapon to another actor. This extra attention to the gun served as a way to raise awareness both of the gun's significance as an object and as a way to acknowledge the gun's relationship to power dynamics and questions of morality and justice. Though the blocking and overemphasis on moments in which

⁵⁶ See Appendix H 3.

⁵⁷ Brecht is well known for implementing these "bits of action" that held deeper significance in terms of political and economic power structures. These were often part of a larger set of physical characteristics that the actor would embody; the German word for Brecht's technique is *Gestus* (Trevis 124).

⁵⁸ See Appendix H 6.

actors handled their guns may have at first appeared jarring, my fundamental intention as a director was to encourage audiences to pay attention to the physical interactions that may have been overlooked if the director utilized a more realistic directing approach.

One of the most inventive implementations of a disruption of flow that I helped to develop was intended for use during the pre-show music. After meeting with Gabe Carlin, my sound designer, we conceptualized a design where quotes about gun violence were layered underneath more traditional Western film music. The motivation for this design was to challenge traditional associations with the genre and urge people to reconsider the societal implications of these myths. This design was particularly meaningful because the pre-show music is the first thing that an audience hears upon entering the theatre and will set the tone for their experience during the performance. Unfortunately the design was complicated to adjust and we concluded the rehearsal process uncertain of whether the music would function as intended. Despite these technical difficulties, I feel that the other approaches that I used to disrupt the flow of performance were sufficient to encourage critical engagement by our audiences.

Of the four aforementioned components of my methodology, all presented unique challenges and moments for discovery.⁵⁹ Ultimately, they proved to be interconnected both in their purpose to encourage critical thought, and in the way in which they were implemented. For example, a “moment of choice” required the disruption of the flow of the play in order to draw attention to the exchange or decision,

⁵⁹ Initially I intended to apply three practices in my investigation, but the direction of character was inextricably tied to understanding moments between the actors and audience, moments of choice, and moments of critical thought and reflection encouraged by disrupting the production’s sense of realism. Without taking character and relationships into account, there is less motivation to engage in social critique, and therefore I worked to use character as a tool to inform the other aspects of my methodology.

and the actors' understanding of their own characters' philosophies and place within their environment and social hierarchy profoundly influenced when they chose to address the audience directly. Given more time, we would have been more detailed, precise, and impactful in our performances, but under the constraints of time and skill level, we developed a performance that effectively implemented the primary objectives of my investigation.

IV. Analysis of the Performance Process

The following section provides insight into the performance process, which occurred at 5pm on April 17th and at 2pm and 5pm on April 18th. I discuss here the effectiveness of the three directing approaches: having actors break the 4th wall that separates the actors from the audience, emphasizing moments of the play where the characters make choices that alter the trajectory of the story, and disrupting the flow of the action and emotional realism surrounding moments of violence and in between scenes by the manipulation of silence and music. Additionally, I will analyze the specific content and structure of the post-show discussions in light of my objective to engage audiences in critical thought and social awareness.

Theory and Practice in Performance

Performance 1

In watching the performance, I witnessed an overall softening of the more intensive methods and ideas we explored throughout the rehearsal process. The lights, scenic, sound, and costume design served to highlight the choices made by the actors, their relationships, and the conditions of their world.

We were adjusting technical elements up until the last moment. Samuel Fleig and Nicholas Hewitt, our technical director and scenic designer, were finally able to install the gates the James walks through at the end of the play, and we taught two of the actors to open them. We also brought in the swinging saloon doors at the last minute, which I decided to leave on the side of the stage, such that they could be used in scene six (the bar), but would not have to be moved during the show. Ultimately I was

pleased with the visual images we created on the set; after developing the set based on my initial vision for the world of the play, Hewitt discovered the name of a style that aptly described the design, “abstract organicism,” through which he suggested the quality of a dream-like western landscape through the use of components that were part of an interconnected whole. Logistically, there were some elements of the play that could have been smoother and probably would have increased the artistic quality and effectiveness of the dialogue on gun use. Nevertheless, the scenic and technological variables, to a certain extent, were out of my control. This was partially due to personal scheduling issues and space restrictions. If we had been able to complete the scenic elements by the beginning of our technical rehearsals, we could have practiced with them more, in order to ensure smoother transitions. Unfortunately, my scenic designer and technical director were occupied with other priorities and responsibilities that delayed the construction of specific scenic elements, such as the black gate. A correlated factor was that the Pocket Playhouse and the University of Oregon Theatre Arts department—who generously donated the use of the space and their technical equipment—restricts when productions can begin to store props and scenic pieces. Furthermore, they all must be able to collapse and fit behind the back curtain, since classes are held in the theatre space during the daytime. These factors made me, as a director, feel less in control of the technical elements and visual impact of the production, though I was still very pleased with the performances and overall impact.

During the play, there were three transitions, before scene 4, after scene 8, and around scenes 14 and 15 that did not go as expected. Scene 4, would have been a key place to develop something that disrupted the flow of the play, but I think that even with

a slight pause between scenes there is an uncomfortable moment where the audience is made aware that they are in a theatre. The transition between scene 8 and 9 was supposed to be longer and be an actual moment devoid of action, but Erica brought the lights up too soon, so the camp scene was struck in the light. Finally, the actor playing Virgil came on too early for scene 15, and the actor playing James, knowing that it wouldn't make sense to do his scene with the other actor on stage, let their scene go first. It was a bizarre experience for me, seeing them out of order, but it illustrated the following: the two scenes are almost interchangeable, and their value lies in the power dynamic within the interactions; also, a play should be structured such that, even if something goes wrong, the piece still makes a statement and has purpose, even if it is not the one originally intended.

Performance 2

This performance experienced technological difficulties and human miscalculation, which completely changed the ultimate image. Without consulting with me, the stage manager decided to call the final light cue earlier than normal, and the lights went down on James before he had go through the gate. When the lights came up for curtain call, the actor playing James was still in character, as the dead characters sat up on stage. One audience member told me after the performance that they felt it was intentional, and therefore would not have detracted from their experience because it would be just as worthy of critical reflection.

A couple of the actors adjusted the lines where they turned out to the audience in this performance, or simply chose a different point of focus. Interestingly, after this performance, one audience member commented on the use of direct-address, and

entered into a short dialogue with a fellow audience member on this subject (see *post-show discussion* below).

Performance 3

Unfortunately, the sound design for pre-show, using the layering of Western genre music with contemporary sound clips of opinions on gun violence could not be implemented, due to technical difficulties, which cause the sound clips not to play. Now, I can only speculate on how audiences might have reacted to this design, but it is included in the DVD of the performance for documentation's sake (see back cover of thesis document).

Audience Response

Performance 1

During the first show, the audience seemed to be engaged in the play. There were soft chuckles, and a couple of louder laughs. I felt a palpable tension at times that made me wish there was something to laugh about that would release the tension. In terms of assessing whether the audience perceived the fragmenting of the Western genre, there was noticeable laughter in bank robbery in scene 12; the actor playing James enters with Mary and Simon and is clearly uncertain of how to do so, both relying on and deconstructing the self-assured "Western" cowboy archetype.⁶⁰ There was hearty applause at the end, and no one laughed when people died, which I feel was an important accomplishment. Brecht suggests that the audience should laugh when the actors cry and cry when the actors laugh (*Brecht on Theatre*), but in the context of

⁶⁰ See Appendix H 18.

Afterlife, I feel that that would have devalued the importance of the moment. If the audience had laughed, I would have been interested to ask them why, because as a director that is useful information about the impact of my work.

Performance 2

This performance had the smallest audience and certain audience members laughed at the deaths in the final scene. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to ask them why they laughed because they did not stay for the post-show discussion; I hypothesize that it was because they were friends with the actors or because they found the scenario uncomfortable or startling and therefore ridiculous. The audience was patient during the first scene when a sound cue did not play and the actors remained offstage for one minute, because that had been their signal to enter.

Performance 3

The playwright was in attendance, and his audible laughter and the relatively full audience seemed to elevate the amount of in-show engagement. My family was in attendance as well, and they continued to discuss the piece even after the post-show discussion. My mother felt that she connected with each of the characters. This empathy is not necessarily an indication of passivity, but my directing approach may have led to a less catalyzing result and more of an approachable atmosphere for audience members.

Post-Show Discussion

Performance 1

The house was about 90% full during the performance, and about 50% of the theatre was full for the discussion.⁶¹ There were about three people who consistently responded to every question posed, and in total, at least 10 people contributed to the, roughly, 20-minute long discussion. The answers to my questions and the questions and reflections posed by the audience were, for the most part, in line with my prediction that *Afterlife* presents ideas and scenarios that are useful material for a discussion of the social implications of gun use in the present day. Those responses that weren't expected were valid contributions, and even brought insights that had not occurred to me previously.

The following are some of the questions that I posed to audience members, improvised based on a post-show discussion outline,⁶² and the general responses and comments posed by the audience. All quotations that follow are drawn from the "Afterlife Post-show Discussion Transcript," elaborated from the video recording taken on April 17th, 2015, and may be cross-referenced in Appendix F, using the links provided in Appendix I, or using the DVD included with the Clark Honors College library copy of this thesis.

"What, if anything, does this play have to do with us today?"

One of the audience members mentioned instances of police brutality, specifying the killing of Michael Brown and the violence and riots in Ferguson,

⁶¹ Theatre professionals use the term "house" to refer to the space in which the audience sits to watch a performance, as opposed to the lobby or stage space itself.

⁶² See Appendix F.

Missouri. She identified a connection to *Afterlife* in that, in “the final scene where everyone is just shooting each other [...they may have done so] because it is their mode of defense, [and is] an easy way to kill somebody.” Both in terms of current events and the action on the stage, she added, “they don’t seem to respect its power.” The cultural concern of not respecting the power of weapons was also identified in the post-show discussion during the third performance, which is addressed below. Another audience member at the first performance mentioned the moment when Sheriff Noble says, “it takes a lot to organize an execution” and related that incident back to the flaws within the justice system. For example, she added the realization of “how expensive it is to defend yourself, even if you are innocent.” Someone else contributed that they felt the play reflected on the current debate about lethal injection. Though my approach to directing *Afterlife* did not specifically incorporate an analysis of capital punishment, the audience members were receptive to discussing it. Perhaps as an area for further inquiry, the plot of the Western film *True Grit* (1969), which addresses topics such as public hangings and vigilante justice, could be a useful tool in encouraging social critique of the death penalty.

An audience member commented on a long-standing myth about the American West—“in the West, everyone had a gun”—presenting the opportunity for me to explain how, sometimes what we know about history is not always presented the same way in media. The potential reification of this myth, though, was a concern for me in directing *Afterlife*, yet I was also able to challenge this assumption by emphasizing Beth’s rejection of the gun.

“Where is a moment in the play where a different decision could have been made that would have changed the trajectory of the story?”

On of the most meaningful observation that an audience member made was that James picked up the gun was a “pivotal” moment depicting a clear choice that changed the story. This comment was meaningful because it directly reflects my intention as a director to emphasize the importance of this moment. As a follow-up response, an audience member remarked that James acted as an “audience-surrogate.” This audience member made that assessment based on the connection between Virgil and James, stating: “Virgil [represents an] elongated version of [James’] story, where he has [already] been transformed via using weapons as his means of life.” The latter half of this comment also indicates that the audience member recognized the influence of guns in shaping Virgil and later James’ identity. If an audience member interpreted James as an “audience-surrogate,” it also suggests that the person felt directly implicated in the events and actions. Based on this comment, I had the necessary foundation to ask: “if you were in [James’] shoes, why would you have taken the gun,” the responses to which are explored below.

Among other moments of choice identified, an audience member also mentioned James’ choice to join Mary and Simon and Virgil’s choice to not confront the sheriff directly about his corrupt actions. Interestingly, as I director I paid a lot of attention to the moment of James’ decision to join the outlaws, because it revolved around his decision to take or leave the gun. In contrast, Virgil’s decision to not confront Noble was a passive choice of inaction, and therefore I was uncertain of how to emphasize that moment. The audience member’s comment suggests that audiences are very perceptive

and will pay attention to subtle details about a character's actions if they are invited to do so.

The questions about decision and choice led to a discussion about environmental influences and how trauma might impact action. I took the opportunity to question audience members about why, for example, James picked up the gun. In this production, I think that the audience began to become aware that the theatre is a way to engage with why choices are made and how we would go about changing them.⁶³ One audience member observed that James was experience a type of cultural pressure, which they identified as the “when in Rome” thought process, and the assumption that “everyone has one, so I might as well.” Beyond environmental pressure, an audience member addressed the fact that James had come “into a strange town, [and] he was almost hung”; theatre actors and directors often call this the “given circumstance” (coined by Stanislavsky), the events that directly precede an action and inform it. Following this comment, another audience member remarked that, “there was a lot happening that shows how what’s happening around you can affect you. [...James] was alone, kind of trapped, and if something so horrific happened to you, it might make you change what you would have done on a regular basis.” This was an important dialogue because it ultimately builds compassion towards those who are otherwise demonized.

Based on my direction of character and the actors' own choices, the audience identified how the personal trauma in an individuals' life might have influenced their choices. One example was when an audience member noted that Virgil had lost a son,

⁶³ For a deeper understanding of methodology and theoretical approaches that prioritize audience engagement, see interventionist approaches such as Forum theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed, which encourage the audience to suggest alternative choices and join the actors onstage in performing them.

possibly to a “death by violence. [She] had a feeling that [the loss] was part of [his] motivation because he had experience a death that had been really emotional and had been really connected.” In contrast, she perceived that “the sheriff didn’t seem so connected to death [when he] shot [...] his own sidekick[, and it] didn’t seem like there was any emotional connection to death.” Throughout the rehearsal process, I was interested in exploring the more humane aspects of the sheriff’s character, but ultimately the actor determined how he would portray his role. The actor playing Sheriff Noble presented him as the most hard-hearted or cold, so I asked him during the discussion what his justification was as the Sheriff for his actions or for why someone would abuse their power for personal gain. The actor explained that he based the character on his understanding of the Western archetype, “where profit, and getting the money from the train robbery, and getting money from killing people, [was] really what drove him.” Despite his reliance on the mythical Western characteristics, the actor felt that there was a parallel between Sheriff Noble and “the lobbyist side of the government, [that] seem[s] to care more about profits than they do about human life.” As a director, my vision was more concerned with depicting the contradictions within this character, but I could only influence his choices to a certain extent, and the script was also written such that the most obvious choice would have been to depict the sheriff as a villain. All this considered, my insistence that the actor consider the sheriff’s logic behind his corruption helped to create a fully articulated human, as opposed to a two-dimensional caricature.

One audience response that made a connection between the moment of choice where James joined Mary and Simon in scene 10 and the moment when James chose to

pick up the gun in scene 4 indicated the success of my directing strategy, which emphasized depicting moments of choice. The audience member commented:

It seemed a little off to me that James would join Mary and so I was thinking, Virgil gave him the gun in the first place, and I think that, as a mentor or a father figure, he's not bad, but just introducing that as part of a societal norm, just having that in his mind, James started to warm up to the idea. [...] It seemed like his heart was in a really good place, most of the time, but [James] was more apt to make that decision to join [Mary], because of what he had already seen, even though it wasn't necessarily a bad thing right up front.

This response contains some significant characteristics. First, the audience member stated that they were “thinking,” which supports the hypothesis that audience members are capable of critical reflection during a theatrical performance. Second, the audience member considered the societal forces at play that would both lead Virgil to give the gun and lead James to accept it; Virgil commanded a certain amount of respect from James, and therefore James was more likely to consider his suggestions valid. Third, they acknowledged both the positive and negative potential of a gun as a tool and how intentions do not ultimately determine the outcome of a person's actions. Without recognizing the two moments of choice in scene 4 and scene 10, this audience member might not have fully examined moments and come to the conclusion that one decision was in fact the consequence of an earlier choice.

The audience was able to identify the ways that trauma could make someone do something that they wouldn't ordinarily. In response to their comments and perspectives, I shared with the audience my own critical response to working *Afterlife*: I think that people have a social responsibility to reach out to those who may have experience trauma. Even considering those individuals who have grown up with guns as a part of their culture and don't see them as a problem, other people may be in a state of

crisis and turning to violence as a way to cope with their experiences. An impactful message of *Afterlife* for me is that it does not address gun violence from the ideology of “crazy person” versus “sane person.” The play presents a spectrum of individuals at different points in their lives, demonstrating that someone who is otherwise normal, like James’ character, could pick up a gun and kill someone, because of past experiences.

“How does the play Afterlife challenge the stereotypical representations of the traditional Western?”

The audience feedback in response to this question supported my hypothesis that a socially conscious directing style utilizing a fragmentation of the Western genre could draw attention to issues of gun violence presented in the Western genre. To this effect, one audience member commented that the play treats violence in a more empathetic way than many glorified depictions of violence. She noted that, instead of shooting people without discretion, it was clear that every act of violence or death had a relationship attached to it, and that there were consequences of these actions that the characters had to face. In addition to humanizing the violence, another audience member agreed that the consequences of violence perpetrated by each character were much clearer than in classical Western films. They explained that, “as opposed to all lot of older Western films, [*Afterlife*] played a lot more with the idea of personal responsibility and accountability for what you’re doing.” This audience member in particular also articulated that, in contrast to the cartoonish violence of the older Western films, which makes the violence appear “totally insignificant,” *Afterlife* demonstrated “that anyone who was inflicting violence or had the intention to had to then personally deal with what was going on afterwards.” I think that audience members

who can freely identify how characters are subject to dealing with the consequences of their actions are also capable of comprehending their own agency as actors within society. I further interpret this audience member's response as evidence to support the effectiveness of my attempt to resist the normalization of violence by disrupting the flow of performance and avoiding realism in my stylistic approach. They recognized that the violence in *Afterlife* was, in comparison, significant, and therefore worthy of critical examination.

In addition to recognizing the ways in which past experiences can inform choices, another audience member also identified the ways in which the play challenged romanticized representations of gun violence. She commented that some instances of gun violence in *Afterlife* were "interwoven into the romanticized Western, where 'bang bang' you're dead and you fall over, [and] there's not really a visceral reaction to it," such as the moment where Noble shoots his deputy, whereas "[Virgil] struggle[ed] more with [the violence], and James began to struggle and got caught up in it." As a result, this challenging of romanticized gun violence allowed the audience member to consider the gun related violence to be "pretty relevant to today and the conflict, 'to [use a] gun or not to [use a] gun.'"

I endeavored to establish with my audience that there is sometimes, objectively, no "bad" or "good" choices, and that putting too much stock in archetypal villains can reduce the ability for social critique. The playwright also challenged specific gender norms present in Western mythology through his writing, which I incorporated into my staging of the piece. This approach was effective in that an audience member commented: "there certainly wasn't the usual 'white hat' [hero], 'black hat' [villain]

and the ‘white hat’ riding off into the sunset with the woman, who was the reward. In this case, Mary is the villain.” When audience members are not presented with a clear villain and clear hero, there is more potential to objectively examine the characters. Furthermore, as opposed to Western mythology, in real life there aren’t always clear sides to an issue. This may be a reason, in part, that mythology exists—to help us learn about morality and societal expectations.

As opposed to the iconic symbol of the hero riding off into the sunset, an audience member remarked: “violence does away with everybody, except for poor Virgil’s wife.” I had considered this dynamic prior to my direction of the piece; at first, I associated her survival with her rejection of violence, but later I realized that she never actually leaves the home. Her inability to engage with society at large demonstrates the extent to which she had withdrawn from connecting with others and negates my initial assumption that she was a morally principled woman. Examining Beth as a character helps to reveal that, even if a person objects to violence in the extreme, it does not necessarily mean that they are living the fullest life that they could be. Additionally, an audience member offered the assessment that “there’s no justice and no profit from guns, because [they] just bring the same reaction, one after another.” This commentary is significant in contrast to the traditional Western myth of the gunslinger that saves the town from outlaws. Furthermore, the observation suggests that *Afterlife* builds upon a social critique of gun violence that exists in *Shane*—his “estrangement [from society] emphasizing the cost of violence, while not necessarily questioning its efficacy” (Peppard 264)—and goes so far as to question the value of the gun as a tool. In this case, the depiction of guns as symbols of loss as opposed to symbols of justice is one

way to fragment the mythology of the American West. On the whole, I don't feel that *Afterlife* fully addresses the potential of non-violent resolutions to crime and unrest, because Beth freely discusses her philosophy with Virgil without having the agency to change her society. I understand this limitation as a product of her station in life: the wife of the Marshall. All the other women in the story have gained their power by behaving like men; Mary operates outside of the law and manipulates people to gain her power, and Ingram is constantly standing in the shadow of Sheriff Noble and is shot when demands an equal say in their partnership. If Beth, the character with the most anti-gun philosophy, had possessed sufficient agency, non-violence could have been a legitimate course of action, but when combined with other potential courses of action.

*“What did you think about the ending? [James walks offstage through a black gate into darkness after killing Mary] Did it have any significance to you?”*⁶⁴

In general, the audience seemed to be intrigued by the ambiguity of the ending and not resistant to it. One audience member suggested that “with so much focus on the issues that we’ve been talking about, [like] capital punishment, gun ownership, and gun violence, to see that when these conflicts aren’t resolved, everyone’s going to suffer for it [...is] a theme” he drew from the final moment. A different audience member noted a circular framework in the play, “where James comes into the town alone [...and] everyone he had basically met dies, and he exits alone.” I find this observation meaningful, because the issue of gun violence is a vicious cycle.

One audience member paid particular attention to the symbolism of the black gate, suggesting that the visual design of the pieced sparked an analytical thought

⁶⁴ See Appendix H 24.

process. They felt that it might have represented the “afterlife, going into the future, leaving—was it real—going to something better, or being consumed.” They suggested perhaps that now that James experienced such loss and violence he “is now consumed in it and is going to a really dark, [...] into darkness or [that it] is sealing his future.” The fact that the audience member was able to articulate those diverse perspectives on the gate indicated that I had accomplished the objective of encouraging critical reflection in at least one member of the audience. I believe that a provocative performance should leave the audience with more questions than answers. The gate raises questions about what happens afterwards, because life is continuous. There is no end to James’ story, yet, and even in the last moment the audience member who remarked on the symbolism of the gate felt that he had made a choice to pass through. I dealt with this in the directing process as well, and having the audience comment on this moment suggested that their reaction would have been different had I chosen a different way to direct the ending. A play contains a great deal of depth beyond the text itself; for example, James could have left the gun, he could have taken the money, or he could have not gone through the gate, but that begs the question of whether there was anything left for him. Most significantly, the imagery of James passing through the gate draws attention to what happens after those acts of violence, leaving the moment unresolved and open for the audience to consider its meaning and take responsibility for engaging in their every day lives in writing the story that they want to see.

Based on audience responses, I can establish the effectiveness of my approach and methodology in encouraging critical thought and reflection about actions related to gun violence and the influence of societal forces. Not only did the play encourage

reflection about the norms of presented in Western films, but the audience also established connections between the piece and contemporary society. For example, by examining the relationship between James and Virgil, an audience member noted that there was a clear youth-mentor relationship between James and Virgil, and that James progressed through the story alternately needing advice and rejecting guidance from Virgil. This audience member asserted that their relationship resembled the ways in which adolescents are extremely receptive to outside influences and found their relationship relevant to current concerns about youth engaging in violence and gun use in the present day. After addressing the ambiguity of the piece, an audience member shared, without prompting, the observation that “it’s amazing what a strange place can do to you.” By and large, this response evidences the effectiveness of this play in combination with my directing approach. Demonstrating the characters a product of their environment was a key aspect of my directing approach; this audience member acknowledged that, if the environment were different, the story might have been different. Even so, another audience member responded noted that the environment might not have changed the events that occurred. In the context of the discussion, I do not think that she was disregarding the power of environment, but rather was noting similarities between the forces that led to violence in the play and the forces that lead to violence in reality. The ability to critically acknowledge the power of environment over the choices we make and who we are as human beings requires a certain distance from an issue, which we might not be able to achieve merely interacting with the issue of gun violence from our own homes or through the media.

Two young men stayed after the production to discuss some of the issues of gun violence with me, suggesting that audiences had more material they would have liked to address, had the post-show discussion been longer. Our conversation ranged from racial discrimination in Ferguson, to violent video games, to how much education should be required, if any, to possess a legal firearm. The discussion was productive, but I am left wondering: what would be the next course of action? We came to the consensus that “guns for all” and “strict gun control” won’t solve issues of gun violence and that there is need for more collaboration, but the next step is conceiving of what that collaboration would look like. Overall, I appreciated their feedback that the play was sufficiently ambiguous in its stance on gun use. This is significant because the ambiguity allowed for someone who considers themselves either pro-gun or anti-gun to engage with the play and with others in discussion without feeling invalidated. Furthermore, the ending of the play is also ambiguous, which parallels real life.

In concluding the first post-show discussion, the audience’s responses reinforced my hypothesis that a play like *Afterlife*, directed from the perspective of social critique, can give people agency and the knowledge that their choices have consequences. Instead of saying “there is nothing we can do,” like Virgil, the audience gave examples of different choices that could have been made. Yet, the audience also identified larger social structures at play that may have restricted the characters’ choices. To a certain extent, the individual is responsible for their choices, but society at large is also responsible for taking steps to change societal structures that are unjust or that coerce individuals to resort to violence when it would have otherwise been unnecessary. Before coming to the theatre, each individual did not have the answers to a lot of the

questions that *Afterlife* asks, but the production brought them together into a shared space. Moreover the production brought these questions to the audiences' attention so we could talk about them, about how a person might deal with them, and about what the consequences of their actions might be.

Performance 2

Ten people stayed for the post-show discussion, but we sustained the full 20-minute discussion. One of the most interesting moments was when an audience member suggested that *Afterlife* gives us a reminder of who we are as humans. He appeared to feel that human beings have not changed much in the last 200 years, and that we should recognize what characteristics are inherently in our genes. I countered his comment by asking him if he believed that humans have agency to make the world better, and he suggested that it is far too difficult to come to any sort of conclusion about what "better" means.

One of the actors explained that the quality of spontaneity in the violence felt relevant to her, in terms of some of the gun violence reported in the United States today. She elaborated that a person may be surprised when an act of violence occurs with a gun, because they never expected that the act of owning a gun would lead to an unexpected injury or fatality. I think that this comment relates back to the issue of personal responsibility within a community and demonstrates that, regardless of politics, someone who owns a gun must be prepared for this type of violent event to occur and do everything they can to prevent it.

As one of the final questions, an audience member, who had attended the Friday production as well, asked about my intention when using the technique of breaking the

fourth wall. I decided to first present her with the question, and I asked what it made her feel or think. As she was processing this concept, another audience member offered the conclusion that she knew, from a theatrical standpoint, that it is employed to make the audience feel included and implicated. This same young woman continued to say that she originally felt that she cared little about gun use, but after watching the play she had found her considering questions like: “am I ok with gun violence?” and “how do I feel about the idea of owning or handling a gun?” This type of response may be considered evidence of how my employing of this technique in directing *Afterlife* served to both engage audiences in the story and encourage them to reflect critically on the relevance of gun violence and gun use in their own lives.

Performance 3

A very interesting dialogue about gender roles and the role of education in gun violence prevention emerged during the third post-show discussion. This interaction was interesting because audience members were not necessarily in agreement with the observations that others made, but they communicated their disagreement in a cordial and clear way, such that the audience as a whole became more aware of their own biases and assumptions. At one point, an audience member shared a personal experience of walking through a park and seeing a few young children, one of which was playing with a very realistic looking handgun. She then asked one of our actors if he would, as a potential future parent, allow his child to play with guns. After some initial deliberation, he said that he would not want his child to handle a weapon until they were capable of understanding and respecting its immense power; he clarified that this is not always determined by age, but rather by maturity and awareness. This comment spurred a few

responses along the lines of “young boys always seem to gravitate toward gun play,” and one audience member who has a young son expressed that she felt it necessary to address issues of gun violence if and when children start to play that way. A young man in the audience spoke up, at that point, and mentioned that we should consider our biases when we assume that only young boys play with guns. He shared that he is one of many sisters, and he felt that they would be just as likely as any boy to pick up a toy gun and shoot him. This conversation led to the productive point that, although statistics report that the majority of perpetrators in acts of gun violence are men, women too should be included in prevention and education efforts. Furthermore, we may find some difficulty in teasing apart what is a biological predisposition toward violence and what is a product of gendered societal norms.

An audience member also asked our actors what their experience had been handling the weapons. Ben, who played Simon, shared that he had found a greater respect for the guns and of what they are capable. David, who played Sheriff Noble, had handled guns before and said that he still views them exclusively as a tool. In contrast, Christle, who played Beth, the character with the most anti-gun philosophy, shared that she felt uncomfortable handling them, and that she really disliked the experience. I think that this draws attention to issues of gun safety, education, and adequate training; while understandable that someone who has never trained in weapon-use would feel uncomfortable handling them, it is also likely that someone who may feel comfortable using a gun may not have received enough training to keep them one hundred percent safe and immune from accidents.

From this point, we proceeded to discuss education and the role it could play in reducing gun violence. In response to a comment shared about teaching about gun safety in schools, Michael, the actor who played Virgil, responded that there should be more responsibility on the part of parents to educate their children and to keep them safe.

Taking into account all three post-show discussions, each followed the same outline, but all were distinct. The outcome was moderated by such variables as the individuals in attendance, their reactions to the performance, and their reactions to the comments made by other audience members, cast members, and myself as a moderator. I did not feel beholden to following the post-show discussion outline verbatim; whereas one audience was eager to discuss how the characters' choices impacted the outcome of the story, another audience was more interested in discussing real-world issues related to gun violence, for example. These results serve to demonstrate audiences' agency in engaging in acts of social critique and their willingness to contribute their own unique voice and perspective.

V. Post-Production Analysis

The theories applied and methodology implemented were, accounting for uncontrolled variables, generally effective. The theory and methodology implemented in the rehearsal room, the design concepts, and the post-show discussion created a piece of theatre that engaged audiences in critical thought and discussion. Through qualitatively assessing audience responses through a post-show discussion, I have documented evidence to support that the audience recognized their role as a central participant. The audiences engaged with the play, recognizing the story as having a trajectory of events that is alterable, depending on the characters' choices. As a result, I believe that the audiences' responses revealed an awareness of their own responsibility in shaping their society. The audiences' responses after the show also demonstrated an awareness of societal forces and possibilities for change that occurred during the performance or immediately following, indicated that moments of intellectual reflection occurred as a result of experiencing the performance.

One particular indication that critical reflection occurred was that in discussing guns, the audience engaged with many different issues. For example, over the course of three post-show discussions, we addressed the death penalty, racial discrimination, education, gender roles, the justice system, environment influences on crime, cultural identity, the challenges of adolescence, violence in the media, and a host of other topics. The audiences also responded positively to questions about why the actors made the choices they did, and the audiences engaged in assessments about these motivations and rationales, which was gratifying for me as a director.

I feel that having the actors directly address the audience was an effective way to ensure that audiences engaged with the issues presented. Emphasizing moments of the play where the characters make choices that alter the trajectory of the story, were sometimes difficult because of actors' penchant toward realism. These efforts were achieved with specific attention to physicality and lighting that highlighted the moments, and they worked concurrently with efforts to disrupt the flow of action and both make audiences aware that they were in a theatre and recognize their ability to think and reflect critically on society and issues of gun violence. Ultimately, this experiment was intended as an exploration of raising social consciousness through theatre, and not in trying to encourage action directly. In that respect, the results of this investigation were successful.

The element of "disrupting the flow of performance" was most problematic, because my ideas of using silence and music and of using violence to divert momentum were less concrete than "breaking the 4th wall" or emphasizing moments of choice. Ultimately, I deemed that using music and silence to provide space for audience reflection was not the ideal approach for my objective, but had I had more time, I would have spent more time experimenting with the use of music in the moments of violence. In terms of the "moments of choice," those surrounding the transfer of the gun—whether that was the offering, the accepting, or the rejecting, were very clear and effective, but those founded on mental processes were harder to establish. I was fortunate that the issue of gun violence has a clearly identifiable symbol, but for future research on a different issue, the director will have to articulate a more reliable and consistent approach.

One significant limitation in this study was the inability to accurately assess audience responses after the post-show discussion. I must also acknowledge the influence of my own commentary after the play and the commentary present in the play program that may have influenced the audience members' experiences and emotional and intellectual responses.⁶⁵ Problematically, as of May 2nd, 2015, no audience members have completed the post-show survey. I hypothesize two primary reasons for this failure: 1) audience members feel that they would receive no great benefits from completing the survey, and therefore rank its completion as a low priority, and 2) they did not keep their program or forgot where they placed it after the performance, and therefore could not access the online link to the survey. In the future, I would alter my approach to this element of analysis. One possible change would be to ask, with audience permission, that they fill out a paper version of the survey directly following the performance, yet this would not adequately assess the long-term implications of the performance. Another option would be to solicit audience members' email addresses and send them follow up emails encouraging them to complete the survey, possibly including some other form of incentive or motivation for doing so, such as being entered into a raffle for a gift-card. I am disappointed that acquiring survey responses might require bribery, but my new awareness of that reality is useful and informative for future investigations.

Moreover, I was limited by the amount of time in which the research needed to be executed; directors like Brecht worked to develop their approach with actors over a long period of time, a luxury that I did not have. Given more time, I would have been

⁶⁵ See Appendix E.

particularly interested in exploring the embodiment of socially significant movement and characters' physical characteristics, which Brecht called *Gestus*.⁶⁶ Not only did I implement a synthesized methodology, but the actors also had to reformat their approach to acting in response to my direction. The acting styles to which I have grown accustomed are, by and large, realistic and founded on empathy, but I was consciously seeking to challenge that. At times, the actors willingly played with new artistic ideas, and at other times they were resistant, mostly due to unfamiliarity with other approaches to acting not based in realism or naturalism.

Technologically, our design for the pre-show music could not be implemented because the sound files that were supposed to play downloaded opinions about gun violence. An alternate edition of this sound design is included in the recording of *Afterlife*,⁶⁷ because the aesthetic and psychological impact of that design may be useful in future theatrical projects.

In future research, it would greatly benefit the artists to have at least one person responsible for outreach and personal relations coordination. As mentioned in my approach to this play, I wanted to invite specific members of the community to attend, as a way to increase the diversity of opinions and perspectives present at the production. In response to my outreach letters to the University of Oregon Police Department, I received an email stating that the invitation had been passed on to the staff and employees. After sending a formal email and poster to the Eugene Police Department

⁶⁶ Starting two weeks before our performances, I began to work with the actor playing Ingram on ways that she could embody her lower status in relationship to Sheriff Noble and then embody her transition to demanding more respect and challenging the power dynamic. *Gestus* was not a central element of my initial three-part methodology (emphasizing actor/audience relationship; articulating moments of choice; disrupting the flow of performance), but it falls under the category of character direction, and would merit further study in future research.

⁶⁷ See Appendix I.

and visiting their campus office, I was instructed to reach them by phone to explain the invitation; I ultimately did not do so, due to time constraints. I heard no response to my formal messages sent to The Baron's Den & Shooting Range in Eugene, OR, and the University of Oregon ROTC. I hypothesize that my efforts at community outreach would have been more effective if I had worked with someone who had had more time at their disposal to brainstorm effective outreach techniques. Additionally, for poster distribution, I passed quarter-sized flyers out in the staff boxes both at the Robert D. Clark Honors College and in the Teaching and Learning Center on the University of Oregon campus and distributed full sized posters in a number of buildings on campus. I have posters to my actors and designers and requested that they put the poster up somewhere in town or on campus, but my distribution process was fundamentally limited and therefore, less effective. This is a much larger issue within the realm of student theatre, where audiences are most commonly comprised on friends and family members of the actors or production team members.

As a director, I will continue to learn from each project about my shortcomings and successes, and this production process has helped to illuminate areas for self-improvement in terms of organization, preparation, and artistry. This research would have coalesced more effectively had I begun my research on Brecht's theories and practices at least a year before seeking to implement them. Additionally, I should have prepared more thoroughly as a director to fully articulate my understanding of the play and each characters' objectives and relationship to society in my directors book; I engaged in significant intellectual work, but without proper documentation these discoveries are more difficult to demonstrate in a work of this academic caliber. I am

still ambivalent about whether I should have revealed more to my actors about the theories behind my approach. As previously mentioned, most actors were more than willing to experiment with non-traditional approaches and explore some of the social issues inherent in the play, but some were hesitant, or seemed not to fully comprehend the motivation for my choices.⁶⁸ Perhaps some of this complication could have been avoided by working with a dramaturge,⁶⁹ or by serving in more of a dramaturgical role myself. In terms of my directing approach, at times I may have overemphasized character traits, which distracted actors from focusing on the conflicts in which their character engaged. I was intending to use character as a way to understand the influences of environment; for James, that commentary was very clear by the nature of his transformation from outsider to outlaw throughout the course of the play. On the other hand, relying too heavily on character sometimes made character objectives unclear for Sheriff Noble and for Mary. To help remedy this problem in the future, I would begin the rehearsal process by focusing more on the environmental and social pressures that inform actions. In sum, I have a greater awareness of my own need for organizational standardization and script analysis, for deeper dramaturgical study, and for further clarification of my objectives to the actors.

At times I found difficulty in ensuring that my practical applications of theory reinforced Brecht's vision of the theatre, as opposed to the realistic, narrative-based theatre of Stanislavsky. I believe that the production I created used actors that created

⁶⁸ Such as was the case with the actor playing Sheriff Noble, who ultimately did not fully communicate the contradictory aspects of his character, portraying him more as an archetype, and had difficulty implementing the practice of "breaking the 4th wall."

⁶⁹ A term of European origin that refers in English to the individual responsible for conducting research on the content, context, and concept of a play and serving the actors and production team by providing key information on these topics.

characters with which the audience empathized, though that was not my original intention. For example, during the post-show discussion, audience members seemed to connect emotionally with Vigil and Beth regarding the death of their son. The script was partially responsible for establishing this connection with the audience, but as a director I was not intent on removing all emotion from the experience, either. At the very least, the emotional connection between actor and audience member seemed to further engage audiences in the post-show discussion and they appeared invested in discussing the issues at hand because they felt personally implicated. Furthermore, in terms of visual elements, one might suggest that audiences would interpret lighting meant to disrupt the flow of the performance (Brecht) as a creating more of a subtle psychological effect (Stanislavsky). Though my primary inspiration lay in Brecht's theories, I would have considered consulting Stanislavsky's writing, had I thought it would contribute to my objective of engaging audiences in critical thought. I feel that some of our lighting choices, especially in moments of violence, served to disrupt the flow more effectively, which changes in lighting during scene changes and during the montage in scene 12 played a larger role in emphasizing mood. Additionally, given the opportunity to direct this production again in a theatre with a greater capacity for multiple lighting dimmers and space for scenery,⁷⁰ we might have envisioned more elaborate designs that would have facilitated the disruption of flow using moving scenic pieces and more fine-tuned lighting shifts.

⁷⁰ The technological feature in a theatre responsible for controlling the brightness of lights; in a theatre with a limited number of dimmers, many lighting channels must be patched to the same dimmer, meaning the each of these lights cannot be dimmed or brightened individually from the others patched to that dimmer.

The impact of a theatrical performance is a difficult variable to measure, because it can manifest in a number of ways and at any time after a performance from the minutes to years afterward. I had hoped for the discussions about gun violence present in our rehearsals and post-show discussion to extend into the days and weeks following the show, yet this research had limited success in that respect. However, the first step of encouraging critical thought and dialogue within the theatrical space is itself significant. My objective to link the creative and critical experience of seeing a play with the rhythm and demands of every-day life would best be saved for future inquiry.

One of the greatest benefits of holding post-show discussions was having the opportunity to challenge the polarization of gun rights and gun control ideologies and being able to humanize the topic. All participants in the discussions remained civil and respectful, and even those who initially seemed biased toward a particular perspective sat and listened to other audience members speak. I remain convinced that a solution to issues of gun violence will not result from eliminating all guns or giving everyone a gun. I articulated to my audiences that an unbridgeable gap remains between the two extreme ideologies, where people haven't approached one another to collaborate or even understand one another. As long as someone in the NRA still says, "you take our guns, there'll be a revolution," and as long as gun control activists say that those with guns are "crazy" there can be no true resolution to the issue. My vision for the future of this issue, and other related issues, is that being able to talk about guns in a setting like the theatre can help people recognize that the extremes are not working. Through this project, I have researched the possibility of what could happen if people joined together in neutral public space to discuss actual steps that could be taken; in fact, the practical

potential of collaborative work has not fully been broached yet. Using the theatre as a collaborative space and a laboratory where this issues and concerns can be addressed, may be the first step toward humanizing others on the opposite side of the debate as ourselves, and ultimately being able to work toward a better understand of gun violence and how to reduce it.

Conclusion

Based on my experiences directing the play *Afterlife*, I have gathered evidence to suggest that the theatre director is responsible for many decisions allowing for audiences to address social issues and cultural concerns. My use of a Western genre play to suggest a connection between the presence of guns in these cultural myths and gun use and violence in the contemporary United States culture was effective in spurring conversation and critical reflection on how these stories and imagery have shaped identity. Through experimentation-based rehearsals, actors worked to adopt a new stylistic approach to their work, inspired by my research on Brecht's theories of dialectic theatre. Ultimately, Audiences engaged freely in discussion following the performances of *Afterlife* and served to establish concrete connections between the issues presented in Western mythology and the issue of gun violence, as it exists in the United States in 2015. Subsequently, I am confident that the theatre can serve as a laboratory to encourage dialogue and social critique, though much research on the topics of audience engagement remains unexamined.

The significance of producing *Afterlife*, by Maurer, as a play that encourages social critique is many-fold: it gives an example of how art and the fragmentation of myth can lead to critical thought in audiences, it emphasizes the importance of giving audiences the agency to interact with stories that are relevant to their own lives, and, beyond the theatre, it suggests that non-moralized socially critical dialogue can help to bring people together in spite of differences of opinion. This conclusion is useful for those engaged in other approaches to gun violence prevention advocacy that may be seeking a complementary component to their preexisting work. In this vein, my

production has helped to establish that issues, which are ideologically polarized, related to social justice, implicated in legal measures and social control, and intersecting other identifiable social concerns are both important for public dialogue and suitable for engagement in the theatre.

This research necessitated engagement with difficult questions both by the artists and the audience, and I was more invested in the audiences' willingness to engage with the issues as opposed to whether they themselves believed that my approach was appropriate. Based on their responses during the performances themselves and the post-show discussions, I was able to establish connections between my approach and the ways that it manifested during the production. The primary issue that this research addresses is the prevalence of gun violence in the United States, and the results of this investigation demonstrate that the theatre can help bring new voices and perspectives to this discussion. In the United States, gun deaths are a common occurrence, but the debate has either been relegated to the periphery, or has been deeply polarized. In contrast, there was very limited polarized language during the discussions, and most audience members appeared open-minded to the ideas and comments of others. In terms of my objective to assess the extent to which they were willing to critically engage with the story, the audience successful met and surpassed my expectations.

In developing my artistic vision, theoretical framework, and methodology for my subsequent direction of the play *Afterlife* by Maurer, I have emphasized how the theatre is a collaborative space. In this environment, relevant social issues can be addressed, but they require an exerted effort to draw attention to this issues and

methodology that encourages reflection and discussion. I have acquired skills, both in the rehearsal room and in post-show discussions that consciously engage artists and audience member in dialogue about the social issues that a creative piece presents, specifically with regard to gun use and violence in the United States. Since completing this project, I now identify myself as a director willing to challenge the normative styles of Realistic and Naturalistic directing in order to accentuate moments on stage that provoke critical thought. The traditional model of European and American theatre developed in the late 19th century, which envisions the audience as silent individuals in a dark room, does not take advantage of the full potential of the creative and communal space. Instead, my methodology sought to draw upon the prospective ability for social critique and reflection present during the preparations for *Afterlife* and after the production in discussions with the audience and turned a passively implicated audience into one with valid opinions and agency.

In using the theatre, both in rehearsal and performance, as an environment in which to explore the process of choice, I hope to impress upon the audience their ability to engage with society and the choices that alter the way that guns impact the world in which we live. Social critique within contemporary theatre requires fundamental knowledge of the audience with which the artists are engaging. Not all audiences will be equally receptive to engaging with difficult social issues, and there exists the perpetual risk of engaging with those who already consider themselves to be advocates, otherwise know as “preaching to the choir.”

Theatre has been, since ancient times, a place to gather and remind us, the human collective, of who we are. This project also speaks to the diversity of the human

experience. When one audience member expresses an opinion or realization in response to a play, it is not necessarily indicative of the other audience members' experiences, though there may be striking similarity in these experiences because these individuals now have had a shared experience. Our identities are deeply enmeshed with the stories we heard growing up, but without the possibility for social critique, we may never examine ourselves as actors in a larger social fabric and power dynamic. In order to effect social change, we must recognize the factors influencing the choices we make and the consequences of our actions, and theatre is a medium through which to achieve this awareness.

In sum, the breadth of scholarly research on American Frontier history and Western cinema reveal a deeply intertwined relationship that intersects both with identity and conceptions of ideal cultural values. Issues of gun violence in the United States cannot and should not be confronted without taking into account the context of the mythologizing power of the Western genre. Where politics and policy may not leave room to fully explore the contradictions of human nature and society, a theatre that is developed to raise social consciousness may be able to fill this role. Thus, this research hopes to contribute to ongoing investigations that articulate the significance of theatre as a tool for social critique and social change. The theatre director must be prepared to collaborate, as the shaper and communicator of vision and purpose, to make their craft socially relevant beyond the end of the performance. In turn, the artists pass the audience the baton and ask what reality it is that they would like to envision.

Appendices

A. Sample Directing Plan and Sample Calendar

- Weekly Monday evening production meetings
- Other design meetings scheduled as needed
- Rehearsals on Sunday – Wednesday evenings

Preparations – Feb 9-Mar 1

- First reading
- Distribute script

Theory: Experiment with more logic, less dependent on emotional compassion to carry the work.

Practice: Analyze characters to characterize their perspectives on gun violence.

Week 1 – Mar 2-Mar 8

- Defend Prospectus
- March 1st 7-8:30 – Table Work
- Monday Mar 2nd in VIL 104 8-9pm – James, Mary, and James
- Tuesday Mar 3rd in VIL 102 6-7:30pm – Beth, Virgil, and Noble
- Wednesday March 4th in VIL 102 4:30-6pm – All except Beth
- Blocking
- Relationship games (Actor-Actor/Actor-Audience)

Theory: Begin to incorporate history of violence and justice in genre and history

Practice: Ask actors to maintain their consciousness of issues of gun violence from their own perspective, as well as their characters.

Exercise: Rehearse a section of the play first as solely from their character's perspective, then from the actor's perspective, then as a combination. Though the words remain the same, the difference in intention should change the energy and meaning.

Week 2 – Mar 9-Mar 15 – Dead Week

- Finish rough blocking
- Monday March 9th Start Stage Combat
- Tuesday March 10th 7:30-9:00pm – Safety Talk and First Run/Walk-Through

Theory: Breaking the 4th wall

Practice: Exercises through blocking, trial and error. Make direct connections in certain moments with the audience, both through sound, gesture, and silence.

Exercise: Address gun and combat safety with Theatre Department staff member John Elliott.

Week 3 – Mar 16-Mar 22 – Finals Week

- Ask that those who handle guns stay to work 1-2 days with John
- Off book 1st half Monday
- Off book 2nd half Thursday
- Off book March 17th 2015
- Sunday March 15th VIL 102 8:30-10pm – Work blocking and transitions. All called.
- Monday March 16th VIL 102 4:30-6pm – Polish fight choreography. All called (except those with conflicts) to run lines while we work fight choreography

- Tuesday March 17th VIL 102 7:30-9pm – Off-book speed through
- Stakes exercises with Beth and Virgil (and James)
- Moments of CHOICE EXERCISES
- Wednesday March 18th VIL 102 4:30-6pm – Physicality and relationship exercises with Simon and Mary (and James)
- Explore scene-work with those still in Eugene

Theory: Emphasizing moments of choice to show audience that the world is alterable and social structures may be altered.

Practice: Explore staging “moments of choice,” where actors make a decision that changes the outcome of the story.

Week 4 – Mar 23-Mar 29 – Spring Break

- Director’s research
- Ashland workshops
- Theory: TBD
- Practice: TBD

Week 5 – Mar 30-Apr 5

- Walk-through review blocking
- Off-book run through
- Stage Combat review
- Begin working with prop weapons
- Sunday March 29th: All called - Run through
- Monday March 30th: All called - Gun safety and stage combat review
- Tuesday March 31st: All called - Scenes 1-8 - 4:30-6pm

- Wednesday April 1st: All called - Scenes 9-16 - 7:30-9pm
- Friday April 3rd: 8am Paper Tech

Theory: Gestus (gesture) - Each gesture should be justified, revealing deeper significance about social structure and gun violence. This is also connected to the character's morality or philosophy.

Practice: Explore character movements to discover if each character has their own identifying movement regarding gun violence.

Week 6 – April 6-April 11

- Polishing work
- Digging deeper
- Run through
- Review experimental exercises
- Conclude the week with tech
- Monday April 6th: All called - Run through - 4:30pm-6pm
- Tuesday April 7th: All called - Run through - 4:30pm-6pm
- Wednesday April 8th: All called - Run through - 7:30pm-9pm
- Thursday April 9th: All called - Scene/vocal/physical work in VIL 104 - 4:30-6pm - (Title of Show Opening)
- Technical: Dry Tech on Saturday April 11th 6pm-9pm

Theory: TBD

Practice: TBD

Week 7 – April 12-April 19

- Spot work

- Fight calls
- Sunday April 12th: All called - Q2Q with SOME TECH and actor - 7:30-10pm
- Monday April 13th: All called - First full tech rehearsal - 4pm-7pm
- Tuesday April 14th: All called - First dress rehearsal - 4pm-6pm
- Wednesday April 15th: All called - Second dress rehearsal + Post-rehearsal talk-back -7:30pm-9:30pm
- Thursday April 16th: All called - Final Tech Rehearsal - 4:30pm-6:30pm - (Sila Opening)
- Friday April 17th: OPENING! - Call time: 4pm - Go time: 5pm
- Saturday April 18th: SHOWS! - Call time: 1 pm - Go time: 2 pm - Call time: 4 pm - Go time: 5 pm - Strike Post-Show

Theory: Plan post-show talkback session. Develop the possibility of using forum theatre?

Practice: TBD

As of 28 March 2015:

The following is my tentative schedule for the April 2015 production process:

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
29 All called Run through 4:30pm-6pm VIL 102	30 All called Gun safety and stage combat review 4:30pm-6pm	31 All called Scenes 1-8 4:30-6pm	1 All called Scenes 9-16 7:30-9pm	2 NO REHEARSAL	3 NO REHEARSAL	4 NO REHEARSAL
5 NO REHEARSAL	6 All called Run through 4:30pm-6pm	7 All called Run through 4:30pm-6pm	8 All called Run through 7:30pm-9pm	9 All called Scene/vocal/ph ysical work in VIL 104 4:30-6pm (Title of Show Opening)	10 NO REHEARSAL	11 Q2Q rehearsal No Actors TECH ONLY 6pm-9pm
12 All called Q2Q with SOME TECH and actors 7:30-10pm	13 All called First full tech rehearsal 4pm-7pm	14 All called First dress rehearsal 4pm-6pm	15 All called Second dress rehearsal + Post- rehearsal talk-back 7:30pm-9:30pm	16 All called Final Tech Rehearsal 4:30pm-6:30pm (Strike Opening)	17 OPENING! Call time: 4pm Go time: 5pm	18 SHOWS! Call time: 1 pm Go time: 2 pm Call time: 4 pm Go time: 5 pm Strike Post-Show

Info

Tech Week

All actors are called to these rehearsals, unless otherwise agreed upon with both the director and stage manager.

Performances

Friday April 17th at 5pm and Saturday April 18th at 2pm and 5pm. Call time is 1 hour prior to start of show, and following each show we will hold a short talk-back with audiences.

Strike

All actors are required to stay following the final show to break down the set, help organize costumes, and clean dressing rooms. Technical Director, Samuel ~~Elleg~~, will release you, following completion of strike.

B. Excerpt from Directing Journal

22 January 2015

Upon Dr. Mossberg and recently graduated directing student Michael Sugar's (indirect) suggestion, I have decided to keep a record of my directing, logistical, creative, and research process. This week I have been reading *Brecht on Theatre*, edited and translated by John Willett, and want to keep a record of some of the interesting and challenging ideas that he explores.

These quotes caught my attention due to their relevance to my project:

“A theatre which makes no contact with the public is a nonsense” (7).

“One tribute we can pay the audience is to treat it as thoroughly intelligent [...] the audience has got to be a good enough psychologist to make its own sense of the material” (14).

“Even when the character behaves by contradictions, that's only because nobody can be identically the same at two unidentical moments” (15).

“The works now being written are coming more and more to lead toward that great epic theatre which corresponds to the sociological situation” (21).

Somewhat coincidentally, I am looking for a second reader outside of the theatre department, and thought about going to the office hours of a Sociology professor at the UO, and I found this quote from Brecht: “The sociologist is the man for us” (21). [Note 4/22/15: I found Professor Matthew Norton, of the sociology department to be my Second Reader, and he has been immensely helpful in supporting my articulation of the issues and hand and the framing of my inquiry and methodology.]

Not all of Brecht's writings about the Epic theatre are relevant to today's world, but their relationship to logic and thought are intriguing and significant to consider. The Epic theatre:

Appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience, the spectator must come to grips with things. At the same time it would be quite wrong to try and deny emotion to this kind of theatre. It would be much [like] denying emotion to modern science. (23)

Willett translates Brecht's statement that: "If I choose to see *Richard III* I don't want to feel myself to be [him], but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility" (27). The phenomenon—one of many—that I am examining in *Afterlife* is the prevalence of gun violence. According to Brecht, the intention is to remove oneself from the emotion and examine the sociological context. I would like to partner the sociological context of gun violence with an analysis of the gun as an object, as it is regarded in the play. Though the story focuses on James, Virgil is the one who grapples the most with his relationship to guns. The text presents different imaginings of the gun, and I want to emphasize these understandings through my directing and to encourage my actors to create their own understandings of its centrality. There is a fascinating juxtaposition created by Beth's statement that the gun is an "instrument of death," while to Virgil, the gun is "a great equalizer, where neither strength nor brawn is necessary to stay alive." [Note 4/22/15: One other understanding of the gun brought in by some of my cast members was the notion of the gun as a tool.]

[Note 4/22/15: The following is a contrast, presented by Brecht of his "Epic theatre" vs. the (Dramatic theatre)" (Willett 37). This was a useful framework for helping me decide where, as a director, I wanted to challenge the dramatic structure articulate by Aristotle in Ancient Greece, and where I could use traditional theatre to my advantage and exaggerate it to make a statement or encourage discussion]:

Epic Theatre	Dramatic Theatre
Narrative	Plot
Turns the spectator into an observer	Implicates the spectator in a stage situation
Arouses his capacity for action	Wears down his capacity for action
Forces him to take decisions	Provides him with sensations
Picture of the world	Experience
He is made to face something	The spectator is involved in something
Argument	Suggestion
Brought to the point of recognition	Instinctive feelings are preserved
The spectator stands outside	The spectator is in the thick of it*
Studies	Shares the experience
The human being is the object of the inquiry	The human being is taken for granted
He is alterable and able to alter	He is unalterable
Eyes on the course	Eyes on the finish
Each scene for itself	One scene makes another
Montage	Growth
In curves	Linear development
Jumps	Evolutionary determinism
Man as a process	Man as a fixed point
Social being determines thought	Thought determines being
Reason	Feeling

[Note 4/22/15: Bringing the spectators “into the thick of the story,” I felt was an appropriate adjustment of Brecht’s theory, in order to expand the audience’s relationship with the actors and draw upon the contemporary relevance of gun related issues.]

28 February 2015

Tomorrow, we are beginning our regular rehearsals. I have been reading a good mix of texts that incorporate Brecht’s theories and approaches to directing, analyses of the Western films that address gun violence, and a book that incorporates fascinating historical information about early gun use in United States history. I also watched a couple of TEDx talks, which take my ideas of social critique a step further to actively incorporate the audience in the storytelling itself. There is also a TEDx about “Preventing gun violence without just talking about the gun” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFSw5Zri_o0).

1 March 2015

Today was our first rehearsal. Usually the first rehearsal would be everyone sitting at a table and discussing the play text and characters, but I decided to create a hybrid of that strategy by asking everyone to get up on their feet. They essentially improvised blocking for the whole show, and they had energy and made some excellent acting choices, as well. I felt so relieved to be in the room with my actors, and getting to propose things, pose questions, and hear their opinions. I also found Nick’s presence there very helpful, as the playwright.

We began the evening with a slightly different exercise than the standard version where, actors walk through the space while relaxing, focusing, and acknowledging their fellow actors. In my version, the cast was instructed first to think about letting go of the last character they portrayed with each exhale, then to be with themselves in the moment, then to think about their new character with each inhale, and finally to layer themselves and their own personality and thoughts over the thoughts and needs of their character. Then we continued with some movement variations that engaged their bodies (walking in a hurry, finding stepping stones to get somewhere, greeting the other actors in the space). My hope is that we could begin to build a repertoire of character identity/actor identity language that can lead to a continued awareness of the self and the individual's place in the socio-cultural circumstances.

The rehearsal went smoothly, and by the end I could see a real play taking shape. I feel that I am fighting against realistic impulses. As much as I would like to use my art to “shape the world,” the acting styles to which I have grown accustomed are, by and large, realistic and founded on empathy. I hope to find a balance in urging my actors to consider logic and social critique, while not losing sight of what their character needs to give and receive.

2 March 2015

[...] During our rehearsal this evening we worked through a scene with Mary and James where she has captured him and tempts him to follow her, and some scenes between Virgil and James as James comes to develop his relationship with the gun and how he conceives of crime, justice and punishment. Playing with the diagonals, we discovered some compelling stage pictures, I think. I ran a few exercises with the actors

and asked them to think about how they as individuals feel about the presence of guns in contrast with their character. In scene 10 with Mary and James I had them switch characters and then explain to their partner what it was like to live inside the other person's head. I feel that it will take some time for the actors to be comfortable reflecting on the social structures implicated in *Afterlife*. I wonder how Brecht's plays are different depending on the directing style. We also made the discovery that, in the silence while James leaves and decides whether to follow Mary, she has a moment to herself, or between she and the audience that is almost painfully vulnerable. Throughout the entire play she has her guard up, and there is something striking about her presence in the space, or in her presence with Simon in silence. On a related note, I think the scene holds a possibility in that James could either return because he made up his mind, or return because he realizes that Simon has taken his gun. He goes back to get it, and in that moment of exchange is when he decides to stay. I think that another important moment of discovery is in Virgil's decision to give James the gun and James' reaction to his proposal. With both men standing regarding the gun on the table, there are a couple striking power dynamics that are possible. Finally, we tried running the camping scene with the actors speaking as if they were themselves. This did not have any particularly novel effecting, and as much as Brecht talks about wanting "bad acting," I don't think that this is the type he is thinking about. The one moment that stood out in this alternative approach was James' line: "where's the justice in killing them." Because he took his time getting the thought out, the line feels as though it holds the potential for reaching out and appealing to the audience. Following the rehearsal, Michael who plays Virgil commented that I seem to be interested in Breaking the 4th Wall, and that he liked

it. I feel very fortunate that all of my actors are willing to play (even if sometimes they make doubtful faces at me first).

Leila was not at our production meeting this evening, but I plan to speak with her tomorrow on color schemes and how and when we reference the icons of the genre.

As the play develops, I am more certain that the world is not realistic. The world ultimately feels like purgatory, but not in the traditional sense perhaps. I do feel that what awaits James within the gate is torture, but of a mental, not a “fiery hell and brimstone” kind. James is the only character who kills for revenge and the only person who walks through the gate. On one hand, it could be that he is the character the audience becomes and he is only one who sees a gate, while the others have their own gates. On the other hand, there could be something distinct about James’ killing that causes his suffering. Or, it’s not the fact that he killed, but rather that he has brought about the deaths of two people who had taught, guided, and protected him. If the only way to escape is to “die a good death,” what does that mean? Then only living people go through the gate? Discovering the logic behind this is more complicated than I ever anticipated. Before, when the gate represented treachery, it was much easier. But then again, Mary didn’t kill Simon before, and now she does—but he died trying to protect her from Noble.

3 March 2015

I wonder if I can alternate Western Themed music with statistics on gun violence during pre-show music.

Yesterday, we blocked six scenes between Virgil and Beth and Virgil and Noble. I found one specific issue with the division of the space: it would not make sense

if Noble's office was in the bar, but it would make even less sense if his office was in Virgil's house. I want the split scene in scene 6 to be on a diagonal, preferable, instead of a triangle.

In scene 11, I tried an exercise with the actors where they both delivered their lines as if giving a lecture. This worked well for Virgil, as it increased the sense of connection with the audience, and his reasoning flowed out very clearly. In contrast, Beth's lines fell a bit flat, and it seemed that she lacked conviction. I need to support Michael and Christle in finding a strong choice for the end of that scene, and I'm not sure if pity is the best one. We did do a brief vocal exercise, as well, to help Christle get more volume out on her lines. I may have to do some stapling feet to the floor, to keep her from shifting. I think that I want to pay specific attention with how Virgil and Beth's transitions in the play affect their physicality. We found a very powerful choice for scene 7 in that Virgil does not face Beth for the entire exchange, until he feels forced to confront her. Looking backwards at scene 4, we tried having Virgil drag Beth far upstage on the line "Do we have to do this now." This serves a double purpose, as Virgil is both trying to keep embarrassing himself and their guest, but also because he would rather avoid having to defend why he is complicit with the sheriff.

5 March 2015

Today Jessie and I went down to prop storage and found a good deal of items that will serve us in the production. I also picked up the book *Brecht in Practice* by David Barnett, which I am very excited to incorporate into the upcoming rehearsals.

Yesterday was a somewhat less fulfilling day, in terms of my work. We blocked scenes 1, 6 and 10 (adding in Mother, Gwen and Simon), which still leaves 2, 3 12-14

and 16 to block on Sunday. I am comfortable being slightly behind on my blocking schedule, because I have built in more time, and I want to make sure we address certain concepts and experiment before settling on things.

One of the greatest challenges yesterday was hitting a good rhythm for scene 1. There is something about the way that the actors are carrying themselves that feels awkward. This is the first impression that the audience gets of the production, and I think there is a risk of setting the tone too comically, or maybe that irony would be effective. We are definitely running into a bit of a traffic jam in scene 6, but when I have more time, I think I have a pretty good insight on how to clean up the blocking. The actors have good impulses too.

I gave Christle some homework to think about how Mother and Beth's life experiences would change their physicality. I feel that it is very important for she and Virgil to appear to be carrying a heavy weight. There is also something a bit to cheery about Ben, and I want him to find a good place for Simon's energy to sit.

I was feeling a bit of anxiety over the questions I haven't answered about my directing and blocking, but I was able to sit with the feeling, accept it, and mostly let go of it and continue moving forward. I think that sometimes I expect too much from my actors too soon, and I know that patience is a virtue that I could develop further. [...]

9 March 2015

This weekend I had time to read *Brecht in Practice* by David Barnett and actually do some in-depth script analysis. Though it sounds obvious, the work made me feel much more prepared for rehearsals this week, and we have blocked the whole show (except scene 2). The logic behind blocking the show early on is to be able to run the

whole piece early on and look for flow and spacing. As we do that, the actors will continue to refine their choices and learn their lines. I hope to work with them on specifics of political and socially conscious theatre as the rehearsal process progresses, and additionally, some of that will be highlighted with sound, lighting, and music.

Yesterday and today were, I feel, our most efficient and effective rehearsals.

Yesterday, we blocked scenes 3, 12, 13, and 16, having actors standing in for those that weren't there. Something that I love about this process is the actors' willingness to help out for the betterment of the entire project. Today, we had a gun safety conversation with John Elliott, who helped teach them 1) how to wear their gun belt and where to place the gun 2) how to draw the gun, both with a jacket on and without, and 3) proper stance and safe aiming techniques. We laid the official ground rules that guns are never to be pulled on the audience, no one points a gun at someone, only toward them, and to make sure that no one else takes your gun. Afterward, we had an impromptu conversation about the role of guns in culture. We agreed that the issue is multifaceted, but someone contributed that the United States has 45 times more gun violence than any other country. I don't know where that statistic came from, but in general terms, it is true that the United States leads the "developed" world in gun violence. We talked about the distinction between guns as a hobby, as compared to guns for self defense. Someone offered the opinion that, logistically, guns are incredibly interesting—the fact that a relatively small piece can propel a piece of metal so quickly. I wonder, in retrospect whether it is more difficult for someone to invest in issues of gun safety and control if they have never personally experience their negative effects; even then, many people who have lost friends to gun violence do not speak out. I am glad that one of the

actors asserted that someone who enjoys guns in a safe and controlled range could still advocate for more control. Outside of my official research, I also began speaking to an old friend who works at a gun range and store in Arizona. It has been an incredibly fruitful conversation so far, and even if she doesn't want to continue the conversation, I think that she has given me a very wonderful perspective, different from my own.

Part of my directing goal for this week, besides blocking, is to examine places where the actors can connect with the audience. We are on our way with incorporating that, and I am also finding that I don't want to over-do it. I don't want to appear heavy-handed. Or rather, I want moments to feel justified and have elegant simplicity to them.

10 March 2015

We had our first run-through today, and everything went more or less according to plan. I am starting to question the relevance of some of Brecht's approaches, because he had both greater talent and longer rehearsal periods. As we continue our work to give life to this piece, I don't want to lose sight of the social and political questions. If I do my work well, the more we achieve with the acting, relationships, and storytelling, the more we will communicate these questions to the audience.

The arc of the play did not read well tonight, but at least I know that the base structure of the story is there: James transforms, and he transforms the town, and there are "life-and-death" consequences.

My primary goals about which I feel most urgent are 1) understand which is requires for someone to kill without becoming physically distraught and ill (and this connects to the questions of why there is humor in violent death) 2) Developing

Simon's story and physicality (I may have to meet with him and Amy to work through this) and 3) Finding Beth's strength, passion and loss. [...]

12 March 2015

Looking at my ideal schedule for this past week, I laid the foundation for the breaking of the 4th wall, but I am realizing that I need my actors to feel more secure in their characters and relationships before we add the audience into the occasion. I am getting the impression that some of my actors have never played within such a high-stakes world before, and that may make the process of developing a world on edge of hell more difficult. I feel that there is always a temptation to turn moments into a comedy. I want to honor the humor in the piece without letting fear keep the actors from fully embodying the weight of their character's situation. I find that I am worried about losing sight of the logic of the pieces, but maybe I can use the logic to help the actors understand their relationships.

14 March 2015

Professor Najjar [...] gave me some suggestions of exercises I might do with my actors to help engage them in the stakes of their circumstances and the investment and logic of their character and relationships. He also reminded me that, until your actors are off-book, you can't know for certain what kind of energy they are giving you.

This week, I hope to focus on polishing blocking (scene 4 specifically), tightening up fight choreography (and re-setting the final train fight sequence to see if Simon can enter from the audience Right stairs), and running stakes and physicality exercises.

15 March 2015

I read some fascinating insights about Brecht's theories and methods last night. The two biggest ideas that stuck with me were: 1) the actors should live in the contradictions of their characters (meaning that they may be many things and have different opinions on the same issue that arise at different times, depending on the situation), and 2) the characters are a product of their society and environment which is in a constant state of change. In light of the first concept, I asked David (Noble) to avoid letting his first scene establish him as purely the antagonist; yes, he has deeply evil attributes, but he himself is not evil, and I believe a more compelling choice would be to let his compassion appear in other scenes, and to begin to understand why he appears to be a villain in some circumstances and not others.

Tonight we worked on transitions. I am happy that we were able to work any scene shifts we will need into the flow of actors entering and exiting. I said, "if only this were a show taking place in one room," but having this much movement keeps me on my toes, and it is interesting as a problem-solving exercise.

I see Ben playing a bit with Simon's gestures and noises, but neither he nor Mary has begun to find the grit and toughness that they need.

I am going to work with Marion to make sure that her bartender and bank teller (especially because they have very few lines) have backstories and attitudes about the world and the other characters around them.

17 March 2015

Yesterday we reviewed fight choreography and I worked through some scene exercises with Christle, Michael, and Evan. John Elliot will return on Monday March

30th or Tuesday March 31st to bring us the weapons and to give another training and safety session.

I tried a variety of different approaches to scenes 4, 7, and 11, which are the only moments we see Virgil and Beth together. When all was said and done, I think we all felt a bit worn out. In order to leave them on a concrete idea for future work, I asked them to focus on developing the depth in their relationship. Christle also has an issue with shifting her weight and flapping her arms as a bit of a nervous habit; we are working to encourage her to stand her ground, and we did discover some deeper emotions through the exercises I will mention below. I am trying really hard not to micro-manage, but there are moments where I am looking to see a reaction, a shift, or choice, and it's hard to sit back and let the actors work it out (even if I know that they will eventually). I have my own personal answers to all these questions, but I need the actors to make their own decisions. Some of these specific moments are:

- BETH: Hi. I'm Beth. Nice to meet you (what is her reaction to meeting James? – first impression – what does this bring up for her about her lost/dead son?)
- BETH: Wouldn't want anyone to think you were dead. That would be worse than dying (again, what is Beth's attitude about death. Is she compassionate? Hardened? Spiteful?)
- BETH: Are you hungry James? (Why does she choose to change the subject)
- VIRGIL: [Exits following BETH: Dead men have no guilt] (Why and how does he choose to exit at that specific moment)
- JAMES: [Picks up the gun] (Evan has been playing this as cocky. What makes him so self-assured, though he almost got hung? And how does James react to Beth's jab of "I will not have swords at the dinner table," which causes him to choose to put it away).

The exercises we used were:

- Young and old: I asked James to play the scene as a young child, eager to impress, and Beth and Virgil as an elderly couple.
- Physical exaggeration: Choose a body part or gesture to exaggerate in the scene (James chose a wide stance that made him look like a cartoon cowboy, Beth slumped her shoulders, and Virgil massaged a hurt knee)
- Speak, think, respond: I had the actors dial the speed down to 1 to really think through why and how they would respond to each other. I think this would have worked better if it hadn't completely zapped any energy in the scene.
- I love you/I hate you: The exercise entails each actor adding either "I love you" or "I hate you" after each of their lines. We used this in scene 7, before Virgil leaves Beth to go hunt down Mary. It succeeded in deepening the relationship between the couple significantly, and it worked particularly well to bring out the subtext present in the scene.
- New choice: Having actors repeat lines spontaneously to look for a different approach to them or different emphasis. Sometimes, even with the impetus to make a "new choice" the actors got stuck in a rut. It may be better to find the choice more organically, building it based on what the other actor brings to the interaction.

I still need to figure out how to shape the ends of scene 7 and 11 so that they are not too similar. I think that the fundamental difference in 7 is that Beth agrees to let Virgil continue with his "justified" violence, but in scene 11 Beth has condemned his choices. In the latter scene, Virgil is brought to his knees and apologizes, refusing to use the law to justify violence, but still will not give up the gun.

Today I met with Leila at UO Costume Storage. We talked a bit more about how to bring the characters' contradictions into their wardrobe. Specifically, I felt it was time to talk more with Leila about her impressions about what story she wants to tell with each character. We came back to the initially idea that the story revolves around James' transformation. Most interesting was her insight that Mary has gone through a lot of fluctuations between having money and not. In the script, she also says, when

trying to convince James to join her and Simon: “Don’t let my appearance fool you, it’s not pretty. It’s not easy either.” We discussed that this might lead to some layering in her costume. We are somewhat limited in that we cannot permanently alter or distress any of the costumes. [...]

18 March 2015

I held a workshop with Ben and Aimee today to work on Simon’s physicality, voice and relationship with Mary. Ben is a very intellectual person and deeply understands his character, but sometimes he is unable to express it. My greatest difficulty is that Ben just looks like a tall proper British string bean, but something Brecht speaks about in his writing is that you can transform a young woman into an old lady. Therefore, just because Ben doesn’t look like a wild bandit outlaw bodyguard, doesn’t mean he can’t be one.

We went through a few interesting exercises, (some were more useful than others): *Heavy object*: the actor imagines they are holding a heavy boulder and sees how that affects their physicality. Then, they begin to roll the boulder and observe how that changes their body and movement as well. *Gibberish game*: one actor tries to get their partner to do something without using real words or movements. Then we progressed to letting them use gestures, and then to try to get something from the other person. Another variation was having one actor tell their partner a short story using only gibberish. *Translation game*: One actor tells a story in a gibberish language, and the other translates for them. *Emotion transition*: Both Brecht and Stanislavsky would probably object to this exercise, but I was curious how “playing emotion,” as it is called, would change physicality. The gist was that the actor came down the theatre

stairs, starting very overjoyed and slowly became sadder and more depressed, and finally they opened the door on stage and found the best thing in the world behind it.

Contact improvisation: I had the actors move in an improvisational manner, maintaining contact with some part of their body. The actors are not athletes, and they do not seem completely comfortable communicating using their bodily energy. *Repeated action:* The actor repeated the action of picking up a block, moving it to the center of the stage, and saying “hey.” They did so in response to cues to do so “as a bear,” “as your character,” and “as a bear moving in the body of a human.” *Non-verbal communication order:* The task was for one actor to get the other to do something, without using words.

29 March 2015

I would like to ask the actors to consider and apply more deliberate movement choices this week. I think that there is a positive correlation between violence and loss and age. Maybe this can draw physical attention to the differences between James and Beth and Virgil. [...]

I created an exercise where actors stand in a circle and one makes eye contact with another and says one of their lines, that actors takes in the energy, and they makes eye contact with another actors and says a different line. This is a way for actors to get the energy moving from line to line; it also infuses some sense of spontaneity, because how someone says their line to you will influence your energy and how you say the line you pick. Because the actors are still uncertain about their lines, there was minimal listening and responding today. [...] I haven't been able to get a good time on the show yet, because the transitions are tricky, but if anything, we'll have three rehearsals next

week to tighten up the pacing. There are moments were I want the dialogue to move, and that leaves more space to breathe and think in the moments of choice.

30 March 2015

[...] I believe that this process would be quite different if I had a marketing assistant and if I had a dramaturg, but some of the joy and purpose of this project is to get as much experience in this field as possible.

Picking up where I left off yesterday, I want to emphasize connection because we are telling a story not just to each other, but also to the audience. I also want the actors to start imagining the world of the play, and I gave them an inspiration photo to encourage everyone to be on the same page. Below is not the image I used, but I will have to scan and upload the image which I am using (a landscape that transitions from orange-amber dust to dark blue light and mountains) [Note 5/7/15: the second image is the picture I used with the actors; it appears decidedly less vibrant when scanned]





[...] One of my biggest note for the actors as they move off-book is that they begin to recognize when to let the audience in on their story or point of view. I have a few explicit places in scenes 3, 10 and 13 (which I will address individually), where it is either written into the script, or I feel strongly that the actor connect with the audience at that moment, but I don't want to completely dictate each of these moments, allowing the actors to feel more responsible for the communication.

[...] I emphasized to Christle, who plays Beth, that there are a few moments that need specific focus to add physical and emotional depth: How does she react to seeing James for the first time? How does she shift back and forth between her communication with Virgil and her attempt to be hospitable? [...] Beth did a good job with her approach to the last line of scene 4, which layered the conflict with James choosing the gun into the moment. [...] One of the times that David (Noble) says "if you ain't cheating, you ain't trying" should be out to the audience. I think that addressing the audience can be used as a way to evoke their critical, as opposed to passive, attention. In the play *Fingersmith* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the breaking of the 4th wall

was used mostly for narration and dramatic effect, but in *Afterlife*, I am focusing on whether the characters share key elements of their own philosophy. David (Noble) alludes to the fact that dying a good death is the only way to escape this place. If Noble wants to escape, but can't, I think that adds some interesting depth to his character, especially because he dies threatening Simon. Ben (Simon) is really coming along with his physicality. He was experimenting with having a wider stance and keeping one leg bent, which I think works well. What I hope to have him avoid is crossing his legs over each other when he walks, because that sometimes causes him to trip a little and get ungrounded. I don't want to micromanage his physicality at this point, so I am giving him general suggestions. [...] Kelsey (Ingram) is doing good work with following through on her intentions to get more money from her work with David (Noble). She made a choice that I want to keep: when Noble pulls his gun on her in scene 6, she walks into it. I asked Michael (Virgil) to think about what it means when he says "I don't have a choice." Since this piece has to do with the choices that the characters make and how that shapes their relationship with guns, I want him to know whether he actually feels hopeless, or if there is another reason underlying that. [...] Aimee (Mary) has been 95% playful in rehearsals, and I think it would be helpful to layer in more of the darkness. She seemed to find it in moments in scene 10 and scene 16. In rehearsal today (3/30), John Elliott noticed that she was not grounded, which made her look less powerful. I asked her if she could focus on creating a more stable base for Mary, so that she could then consciously choose to be more playful and swing her hips in other moments. I want David (Noble) to decide whether, when he says "I won't risk other lives" in scene 9, whether that is villainy, or whether it is simply his logic. I gave a

private note to Christle about her weight shifting habit: I asked if she could focus on keeping her weight evenly divided between each leg. To avoid floppy arms, I asked her to think about transferring energy with each movement, and to make each deliberate and purposeful. I think there is a lot of meaning in her more tense interactions with Virgil, and I want her to be able to show her love through touch. Sometimes it is very difficult trying to be a director and an acting coach. [...]

Evan (James) has made two different choices at the end of scene 10. In one, he makes the decision to join Mary and Simon while he is outside. In the other, he comes back to get his gun, and once he gets it back, he decides that he wants to see what they have in store for him. I think this second choice is stronger, because the audience gets to see the actual moment of choice, and then the action of choosing the gun becomes tied to his decision to become an outlaw. [...]

I reemphasized to the actors that the montage is not a clown act, and that it should be as clear and direct as possible. If it were in the beginning of the play, perhaps it could pass for comedy, but there is something serious about James seeing their version of heaven.

2 April 2015

This journal entry contains my reflections and notes on March 31st and April 1st. [...]

On Tuesday, we worked and ran through scenes 8-14. On Wednesday, instead of running scenes 1-8, we worked scene 1, 2, 15, 11, 10, and 8. This would be a very different show if we had more time to rehearse; I have so many details that I would like to discover with the actors, which we won't have time to implement. The second half of the show is significantly more complex than the first half, in my mind. The scenes are,

on average longer, and the intensity needs to build consistently. The actors are still unsure about certain lines, which distracts their focus. We did make some important discoveries this week:

- The gun is used to tempt characters and shows a parallel between James and Virgil, ultimately requiring that they make a choice.
- Virgil offers James the gun in scene 4, and when James chooses it, it signifies his choice to accept the gun as a way to solve problems.
- Simon offers James the gun once in scene 10, and he rejects it. James changes his mind and returns to claim the gun, at which point Simon pulls the gun away, testing his choice, and James stands his ground. Here, the gun represents the choice to live with the supposed freedom of being outside the law.
- Noble offers Virgil the gun, and he too refuses, but when Noble says that there is no one to help him catch Mary, Virgil accepts the gun as a way to bring about justice. Ironically, the gun can bring about justice just as easily as crime, deception, and treachery.
- There are important non-verbal moments in the play
- There needs to be loving physical contact between Beth and Virgil
- Mother would likely use a kiss or a touch to say her final goodbye to James
- Simon and Mary have to noiselessly communicate about what happens next at the end of scene 10, assuming James has chosen a different life.
- During scene 11, we found that a possible strong choice is to have Beth physically distance herself from the guns, and to look away from them.
- James' physicality changes from energetic and cocky in scene 12 to exhausted and beaten down in scene 14, demonstrating the passage of time and the roughness to the otherwise glorified life of the Wild West
- The bartender and the bank teller communicate primarily through non-verbal moments and physicality. Marion chose to make the bartender compassionate towards James, which is communicated in silent moments. I guided her through the choice by encouraging her to live in each moment and not to rush through the choices.

- This comes back to Brecht's assertion that "bits of action [...] must last long enough to mean something" (Jones 88).
- This is also true of a moment in scene 16 where Simon reaches for Noble's gun, and Noble shakes his head at him.
- As the bank teller, Marion and I experimented with the physical reactions of fear, and how they contrast with the bank teller's initial attitude when James enters the room. We explored both the petrification of fear, and the hurried franticness. There is also the element of eye-contact, wherein her eyes could stay glued to the gun pointed at her, or could dart back and forth between the individuals demanding her attention.

While reading the script tonight, I wrote in my vision for sound and light cues.

A few important ideas occurred to me. James will be sitting in the audience, on the train from the start of the show, after which Ingram must come to the audience and put him on trial. Another possibility is that Hope also comes from the audience. They could come straight onstage, or they could leave through the DSL door and enter SL, where they have been, to get behind the muslin. James represents the connection with the audience, and the relationship between present, past, and myth. In considering the last moments of the play, I wonder what happens to the dead bodies. Did they truly die and escape the hell of that town, or did they, as Noble suggests, remain stuck there, because dying a good death is the only way to escape. Or do some of them move on and others come back? The metaphorical significance is that these myths and characters live on, no matter how many times they have died on screen and on the page and stage. [...]

6 April 2015

[For the run through today] My goal is to pay attention to: relationship with audience, moments of choice, character contradictions, gesture specificity, and the possibility of adding space following violence, holding energy, pausing

Here [is a selection of] my notes in response to the actors' work today:

- Important: This is not realism and you should always be aware of the audience. I have seen you making beautiful and strong choices to this effect, but I would like to urge you to make more.
- Try not to say lines to yourself: either say them to the audience or to your scene partner. Besides losing out on an interesting interaction, we actually lose the sense of the line because you get quiet and we can't see your face.
- Noble: try taking the first part of your speech in scene 13 out to the audience, as if to explain to them why you had to shoot Ingram.
- Cast: I would like to experiment with the possibility of adding a pause after all moments of violence. This is a moment to hold your energy and focus in the state of mind your character is in when they engage in it or are acted upon. Think of it as a pause in movement, not a pause in energy. Please try this tomorrow.
- James and Ingram: I would like to experiment with having James start in the audience, and have Ingram grab him as she exits in scene 1.
- Virgil and James: Can you spend some time working on their father/son relationship. Instead of focusing emotionally, you can think about their physicality and vocal quality, if you like, in order to emphasize the significance of their relationship.
- Noble: stay with the audience for your line at the end of scene 6 (don't throw it away).
- Ingram: Keep that step into the gun blocking you had in past rehearsals at the end of scene 6 when she says "why wait?" It is a very clear way to illustrate her choice to stand up to Noble.
- [...] Ingram: Can you try making a physical change (a strong turn to face Noble, or something to that effect) when you shift to accusing Noble in scene 13?

7 April 2015

Today was a rough day, with a significant amount of starting and stopping.

Regretfully, there are still significant sections where the actors are not off book. My

strategy is that they can no longer call line starting tomorrow, and hopefully that will lead them to do more independent work and make sure that they are secure. [...]

Here [is a selection of] some of my notes from tonight:

- A general note: we need to pick up the pace a tad, so that when there are larger pauses, to create an intentional effect, we can tell the difference.
- Scene 3 (Noble): Can there be even a greater amount of suspended energy in the pause after Hope's execution?
- Scene 4 (Beth): Would Beth reach out to touch James to suggest that he sit down? Right now, the gesture seems half-hearted and non-committal.
- Scene 4 (Beth): Can you play with the contrast even more between caring host for James and verbal sparring partner with Virgil. You are really finding such depth to Beth, and you are communicating it much more clearly now. Especially taking your line: "don't worry, it just happens" to the audience I think is an excellent choice.
- Scene 5 (Virgil): What would change if the line "have you ever fired a gun?" was to the audience *and* James? How can you include them both in that question?
- Scene 6 (Noble): What would change if one of the "if you ain't cheatin' you ain't tryin'" lines was out to the audience? Can you let them in on your philosophy/engage with them. [...]
- Scene 8 (James): You did an eerie foreshadowing of exactly where and what angle you would kill Mary when you say "It's all over." Let's keep that. [...]
- Scene 10 (Mother): Can you give that final line *with* the physical contact? The touch was beautiful, but you let the line trail off in energy when you said "just go." Continue giving energy through the very end of the line. [...]
- Scene 11 (Beth): In the last moment and in the transition can you take Virgil's gun belt off stage, as if to put it away for good.
- Scene 6 and 12 (Marion): Good work with the bar tender and banker tonight. Your choices were clear. Can you make sure to give you final line in scene 6 *before* you exit? (I'll be in the back). It reads as much stronger if you speak then exit. [...]

- Scene 13 (Noble): What would change if you said the first part of your speech to the audience? I would like to see you connect with the audience in this scene. Also, keep thinking about why Noble laughs about shooting Ingram. I am getting *angry* and *threatening* after you shoot her, but then the laughter makes me think he is happy that he gets pleasure from shooting her. Is there a different choice that explores Noble's *humanity* instead of his *villainy*?
- Scene 16 (Mary): Beautiful "what a shame" and moment when James looks his gun and then at you after you shoot Virgil. [Note 5/7/15: I liked the actor's choice because she demonstrated a sense of loss; despite her crimes, she had just killed three people, and to show her as callous and unaffected would make her seem as if she was not capable of compassion. The playwright describes her as a sociopath; I felt that portraying her as a two-dimensional stereotype reduced the complexity of her character] [...]

10 April 2015

[A selection from my] Notes from the April 8th rehearsal:

- How can we hold the energy after Hope's execution?
- Does Noble share a moment with the audience?
- David had the idea to say "Next" to the audience, and I think that the emphasis on the audience speaks to their responsibility, socially, for the system of executions. [...]
- How does James physically change before and after the gun?
- Please HOLD the moment when James takes the gun for the first time. Suspend it ever so slightly too long.
- What if Virgil holds the sketchbook, or James hands it to him when he says "someone drew some...." Does it have emotional significance only?
- How does Ingram physicalize her lower status?
- Why does Mary say "Don't you ever give me an empty threat?"
 - Threats=Power=Trust
 - An empty threat is a betrayal of trust and an unjust assumption of power

- At the end of scene 6, Noble and Virgil should come from opposite sides of the stage and walk slowly toward each other, as if balancing a scale. [...]
- Note to self: Brecht does not propose a utopia or a solution to social problems—neither does *Afterlife*
- How is Mother physically different than Beth's?
- Let the audience into your speech please, Noble, in scene 13 [Note 5/7/15: the actor was *very* resistant to this note (I had to give it four times). He never expressed a reason or discomfort about it, so I felt unclear as to whether he disliked the choice or forgot to implement it].

Notes from my meeting with Professor Najjar and the April 9th rehearsal:

- A status game you can play is to put cards on your forehead and the task is to keep your head lower than anyone who is of a higher number than you. You begin to physically feel the difference that status can make on your sense of self.
- I can build this in to my directing of Ingram's character that is subservient to Sheriff Noble. This means that she can either stay back, behind, or lower, in comparison to what he is.
- I have been working diligently to emphasize moments where the gun is chosen, and not forced.
- Don't forget, you will learn from the audience.
- I need to emphasize that my framing of this issue is neither the beginning nor the end, but rather a snapshot or another stone in the path.
- Humor is necessary, Brecht was a showman, and he believed in entertainment
- In *Afterlife*, a driving commitment for me is to emphasize that there are no "bad guys"
- If you do extreme exercises in rehearsal, there will be shadows of them in the final work.
- Scene 3: Noble, your connection with the audience can last longer
- Scene 3: James, how shaky physically can he be in order to contrast the sense of bravado he gains later?

- Scene 6: Use the line “Do you play,” Noble, as either a way to assert your power, or as a way of renouncing your power to James because you actually need something from him: companionship, maybe. [...]

15 April 2015

We have one more rehearsal left. I am searching to find the core of this piece in the product—what I sought to bring out in the first place. The project has grown and changed, and has demanded a great deal, physically and mentally. I am thrilled to be opening our doors to an audience on Friday, to really understand what we have created:

- Kelsey: In scene 6 – Keep playing with the shifts between low status and fighting for high status. Ingram has depth. I appreciate your explorations thus far. In scene 12 – Share your lines in this scene with the back row; it is still not quite getting the power and breath behind it that it needs.
- David: In scene 16 – Give Simon time to reach for the gun *before* you saying “uh uh uhh” and saying “Your move, Mary.”
- Michael: In scene 4 – The line you had spoken to the audience on was “he might need it.” I think that this is a powerful argument for Virgil.
- Evan: [...] In scene 6 – How many drinks will you allow yourself to have? I think that the choice *to drink* is justified *but* don’t play “drunk” because it muddles your objectives and makes it look like James isn’t in control of his choices. Instead of “drunk,” think about *why* being drunk might be a strong character choice for James. [...]. In scene 10 – How can James raise the stakes in the hideout? I would caution against trying to appear too nonchalant, because you risk looking bored. [...] In scene 16 – Sometimes you over-exaggerated expressions on your face, which ends up distracting from the fundamental connection between James and the other characters. Don’t feel like you have to *muscle* the state of mind or emotion; your energy, objective, and commitment to listen and respond are enough. [...]
- Gabe: The (preshow) music and the gun information did not fade, even after the train cues started. This was also true after Scene 2. It looks like you have a super long fade on those two cues, because the auto-follow fade was not bringing them down. [...]

[End of Digital Director’s Journal]

C. Excerpts from Play Script with Director's Notes

1

Gunshots off
SL

Gunshots on
SR

AFTERLIFE
D15

Characters:

MARY(W) - A lead outlaw -
SIMON(M) - A disciple
JAMES(M) - A wanderer
VIRGIL(M) - A marshal
BETH(W) - A mother -
NOBLE(M) - A sheriff
INGRAM(W) - A deputy
HOPE(W) - A victim
BARTENDER GWEN
TELLER MOTHER
GUARD

Printing Programs - Monica Lee
73
3 \$30
219 pages

Setting:
The play lives in a realm between reality and fiction, where the rules of phantasmal western films meets modern science and philosophy. The characters live in a small ranching community far past the borders of any larger government. The rules of this land are dictated by the few people who live in it. There are echoes of mid 19th century Western America with some semblance of Dante's Inferno.

Playwright's Notes:
There should be a gate onstage throughout the play. It should be a choice for the characters to enter or exit through, but none of them choose the gate until the final scenes, when James walks through the gate. *

(what would change if it were a ranching fence gate?)

- ① Possibility Pauses - PP - choice
Social commentary - SC
- ② Breaking the 4th wall
- ③ Intellectual Reflection
 - music
 - interjecting current events information over laying scenes
 - Make more bi-partisan
 - directors notes, education (not advocacy) - bi partisan information, lobby display.

* Actor exercises

- As - character
- you
- social critique

Improvise what would have happened if made other choice.

Act scene - narrate scene

All serve purpose of consciousness raising

Monday + Tuesday
6:30 9:15
7:30 9:00
Wednesday
8 9:00
7:30

The gate:

Imposing
Villainy
Torture
Suffering
That which follows

Scene Objective:

Mary and Simon make
a living by robbing trains,
but Mary (at least)
takes pleasure in it
(Ingram) The deputy
is chasing down criminals.

Scene 1

Setting: As the preshow theme music climaxes, the audience is placed on a train. There is
a gate onstage and a door onstage. DSL door

At Rise: MARY and SIMON enter through the door. MARY shoots her gun into the air.

MARY

Sets the tone for entire show.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is a train robbery. ↳ Holds powers

② This is a theatre performance

(SIMON tries to rob an audience member) ← ②

No, Simon. The cash. The cash.

How do you make someone give you their money

up audience (SIMON runs directly to the chest full of bags of money. SIMON
grabs several and holds them up for MARY to see.)

Wonderful!

back of house?

(Gunshots can be heard outside of the train.)

Talk to Simon in the back

Right on time. We've overstayed our welcome, Simon.

(SIMON exits out the back. MARY follows, but stops.)

as an afterthought

It's been a pleasure.

②

(MARY exits. INGRAM enters in the front of the train car.)

INGRAM

The audience doesn't know yet that Ingram may be looking for their cut of the loot.

Where is she?

②

(INGRAM discovers MARY went out the back. INGRAM exits

out the

out the back in pursuit.

Grab James

Back of train car is up and out audience ↳ stairs

1) How do you, as people feel about your scenario

- large bag for Simon?

2) sinister vs. comical

Immediate shift into scene 2

(house to half)
L1 - Preshow
L2 - blackout
SA - Preshow + end with "theme"
L - on train crossfade
S - Train ambient + noise + music volume down

S - offstage gunshots (Mary)
S - offstage gunshots (Ingram)

Baccano - de ja vu moments

Kill Bill - flow

Batman
Spotlight

* Without access to a projector, how important is sharing their name?
* Does the space have to be undefined
Scene 2

Setting: The music picks up where it left off. The train car dissolves, leaving an undefined space.

At Rise: The credits begin to roll. During the credits, characters come onstage for short silent snippets of action, which are not necessarily from the show. The characters could also form stage pictures, while the character and/or actor name is shared with the audience. *

David
- Flashlight

Scene Objective: Introduce the audience to the characters and world of the play.

a) what if we used this scene for the actors to set their part of the stage. As they finish, they freeze under a pool of light.

L - lights shift to pool of light + USL + DSL + DSR + CS
S - music volume up
Ingram

End of montage brings them to their places

* This would establish this this is a performance, not trying to represent a particular view of reality
* I like the idea of watching the actors "assemble" their characters

Monday + Tuesday 7:30
6:30 gate
Wednesday 8:30
7:30

audiences

curriculum or mixer

value in showing what will happen

- Silent Moments of choice
- 1. hope walking to be hung ->
- 2. Beth allows Virgil to leave
- 3. Noble shoots Ingram
- 4. mary shoots Simon/Noble
- 5. James with gun between Mary and Virgil

Musical moment (3)

- 1 Hope in the noose
- 2 Simon and Mary interrogating James
- 3 Virgil deciding to leave Beth to catch Mary
- 4 Noble pulling the gun on Ingram

- 3/2/3
- 1 Hope in the noose
- 2 Virgil choosing to leave
- 3 Noble shooting Ingram
- 4 Simon + Mary give James his gun



Scene Objective:

Noble and Ingram want to keep order and profit from it. Virgil believes in saving lives when we can, and

3

Scene 3

Setting: In the town center, NOBLE is executing criminals. The gate is still onstage.
 At Rise: NOBLE, INGRAM, HOPE are onstage. HOPE has a noose around her neck and is set to be executed. *he's mired himself in.*

already on stage
 For the crime of adultery, by the power vested in me—
 I haven't done anything—
 By the power—

NOBLE
 HOPE
 NOBLE



I'm innocent! I demand—
 Shut up! By the—
 Not until I've seen a judge and—
 Ingram. Shut her up.

HOPE
 NOBLE
 HOPE
 NOBLE

S - music cross → crow
 L - Shift to hanging scene
 L - narrow in on hope
 L - hanging light
 S - hanging sand

What! This isn't right! You ^{can't} do this! Where is my right to—

HOPE

[Ingram and Noble turn to audience]

Hope gives up and James keeps fighting (INGRAM gags HOPE with a bandana. HOPE attempts to speak, without success. Then HOPE resigns herself to her fate.)

Much better. By the power vested in me, you have been sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. Any last words.

NOBLE

[choice] ←

know it.
 (HOPE mumbles something unintelligible.)

Profoundly stated, thank you. Ingram.

NOBLE (cont.)
 (laughing) what happens in this silence

choice
 (HOPE is executed. Silence.) *

③ MUSIC

→ Light
 → Sound

Ingram
 choice

How long is this silence

Contrasts
 • is it valid to do something jarring and disjointed here?

[Give space / Hold Energy]



~~Ingram, next.~~ — Flash light

NOBLE (cont.) * Pull James from the audience

(INGRAM exits. INGRAM reenters with JAMES and a noose.)

BEAT

JAMES behind the muslin

I'm telling you. I'm not the guy, I'm not the guy! You have— Does Ingram stay behind?

(INGRAM places JAMES a noose around JAMES' neck, then gags JAMES.)

NOBLE reading from poster later

Now Simon, for a list of crimes that would take far too long to repeat, you have been sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. Any last words?

JAMES (muffled)

I'm not the guy.

NOBLE

Ingram.

BEAT

(INGRAM goes to the gate. Before he opens it, VIRGIL enters.) she hangs him

VIRGIL - shadow CS

Stop! What do you think you're doing?

NOBLE

My job. (as he answers, Virgil comes around)

VIRGIL

What part of "No executions" did you fail to comprehend?

NOBLE

That order never came across my desk.

VIRGIL

I told you last night.

NOBLE

I thought you were joking.

VIRGIL

Who'd joke like that?

NOBLE

~~I don't know.~~ I would

← flash light out

What does it mean when a society wrongly executes innocent people?

Backstory

James
^

VIRGIL

Well even if they get the right person, it's the wrong punishment.

Virgil doesn't believe in capital punishment

JAMES

What about for the wrong person?

VIRGIL (to Audience)

② What the hell are you still doing here? I said go home. Come on, James.

If we give the audience a chance to leave and they stay, it implies that they want to be there

(VIRGIL and JAMES exit.)

↓
DSL

③

* Up until now, nothing is challenged?

Ignore her. She's just upset.

[These are two different sides of Virgil's philosophy

- He defies the Sheriff in public
- But defends him at home.

Just upset. Just upset.

BETH

[How'd you get here James?]

Trying to change the subject

VIRGIL - sit

BETH

I refuse to believe in executions. In fact, I believe that there is no punishment lighter than death.

Virgil doesn't believe in them either

VIRGIL

Protecting Noble because he knows what it's like to make difficult decisions

Now—

BETH

Anyone who truly deserves death would gladly accept it.

Philosophy

VIRGIL

Death is not a sweet release.

BETH

Dead men have no guilt.

End

(Pause. VIRGIL exits.)

BEAT

What brought you here James?

choice

JAMES

I was on a train. I never planned on getting off here. It stopped for service. Of course, all the sane folk get off the train for a stretch. I had hardly even muddled my ~~boots~~ shoes before the deputy grabbed me. -milking in

BETH

What? That's ridiculous. You have to do something honey.

(VIRGIL enters with a third chair.)

BEAT

VIRGIL

I'll talk to him tomorrow.

BETH

That's not good enough.

VIRGIL

That's all I can do.

BETH

Are you hungry James?

(BETH exits.)

BEAT

She always gets worked up on this subject.

VIRGIL

~~I've~~ noticed. I can imagine

JAMES

So when will you leave?

VIRGIL

The next train isn't for a few days.

JAMES

Is this all you brought with you?

VIRGIL

Beat

My luggage never came off the car.

JAMES

choice

(VIRGIL takes off his gun belt and puts it on the table.)

Take it.

VIRGIL

What? No.

JAMES

Look. If you are going to stay out here, you need a gun. End of story.

VIRGIL

Sure, maybe, but I can't take yours.

JAMES

he does save him, but causes a murder. (his)

I'm not saving you from an execution, just to send you out to be killed. I have other guns. Better guns. But she's been good to me, and she'll be good to you.

VIRGIL

Are you sure?

JAMES

- taking power

It's the least I can do. I insist.

VIRGIL

L - narrow to table
S - music underscore?

BEAT

(BETH enters with soup.)

what do you suspect

BETH
Insist on what? VIRGIL HENRY MORRISON, WHY ARE YOU GIVING THE POOR BOY AN INSTRUMENT OF DEATH!

He may need it.

VIRGIL

You don't need it.

BETH

It could save his life.

VIRGIL

So he can kill someone and rot with the rest of us.

BETH

James, you'll need it. Trust me.

VIRGIL

If you touch that thing you're as good as dead.

BETH

choice
(Pause. JAMES picks up the gun.)

BEAT

[gun and belt]

BETH (cont.)
Fine then, but put it away. I will not have swords at the dinner table.

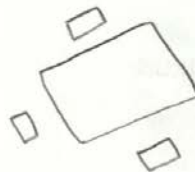
(JAMES puts away the gun.)

You must be hungry.

BETH (cont.)

(Music swells.)

*Noble
Ingram
set
open spa*



subtext play

Right.

VIRGIL BEAT

You should come.

(to reach out)

No thanks.

JAMES (does not want to be pitted)

He's a really sweet man.

VIRGIL

I don't have a horse.

JAMES (are they genuine or excuses?)

We'll walk.

VIRGIL

I don't have a gun.

JAMES

What's that on your belt?

VIRGIL

Oh... yeah...

JAMES

Have you shot a gun before? (2)

VIRGIL BEAT

It can't be that difficult.

JAMES

Easy in theory. Hard in practice.

VIRGIL

Proof. Is that what you need? Fine. You see that... post. Yea that post.

JAMES

(JAMES points his gun off in the distance. Cock. He squeezes the trigger. Click.)

VIRGIL

You can't shoot an unloaded gun.

JAMES

Give me a second.

Punishment.

JAMES

For what?

NOBLE

I got caught accepting payments for "favors".

JAMES

What?

NOBLE (2)

If you ain't cheating, you ain't trying.

JAMES

So they stuck you here?

NOBLE

It was either that or find a new career.

JAMES

You had a choice.

NOBLE

It's not about what you do but who you know.

JAMES

That makes me sick.

NOBLE

It's not like I was killing people.

JAMES

You just were.

NOBLE

They don't pay me enough to play fair. That's all I'm saying.

JAMES

Those days are behind you I hope.

NOBLE

They've sent Virgil to watch me, if that's what you're asking.

JAMES

Good. Two.

BEAT

JAMES - stand
We have to do more. Talking isn't action.

VIRGIL - go to bar and get drink
We start with talking and proceed to action.

(The scene splits. NOBLE and INGRAM enter into NOBLE's office.)
x DSL → DSR ing

BEAT

NOBLE
Damn it!

INGRAM
I'm sick of her.

NOBLE
Always at the most inopportune time.

INGRAM
That's what she wants.

NOBLE
God, and now the kid knows about her. Damn it! Fuck! Shit! Balls!

(The scene splits again. MARY and SIMON enter MARY's hideout.)
Enter SR from back of hideout

BEAT

MARY
Did you see the look on his face? Absolutely wonderful. I think I'm in love Simon. No, not with the Sheriff, the other one. The boy. What's his name? James. I need to know who he is. Where he's from. What he likes. What he does. He could be anything. A duelist. An entrepreneur. A doctor. A thief. Do you think he's a thief, Simon?

(SIMON shakes his head no.)

What do you know anyways? not a mime

BEAT

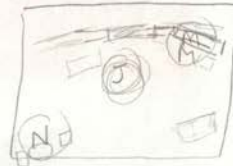
(Focus moves back onto VIRGIL and JAMES.)

JAMES
Why take small steps? Don't baby the idea. Do something clean and effective. Fire them. Arrest them. Get rid of them.

VIRGIL
How could we ever catch them in the act, I couldn't do anything. Not without proof.

JAMES

L - wash shifts to Noble's office
L - shift to the hideout
L - shift to bar



Scene Objective:
virgil wants Beth's approval of his life choices
Beth wants to keep virgil from killing in the name of justice

bottle + glass on table

Scene 7

Setting: In the Morrison's home, VIRGIL is packed to leave without BETH discovering him.
At Rise: VIRGIL paces. He glances to the window to see if JAMES had arrived. Rifled, VIRGIL pours a drink and quickly downs the drink. There is a knock at the door. VIRGIL grabs his gear. BETH enters.

Stylize drink pouring

BEAT

Where are you going?

BETH

(Another knock at the door.)

In a minute.

VIRGIL - don't face her?

I thought you were done.

BETH

DSL
DSC

~~I thought I was too.~~ So did I

VIRGIL

< choice

Why would you get him started?

BETH

It was his idea.

VIRGIL

You can't just support every idea.

BETH

I'm not! We just need to ~~take care of things.~~

VIRGIL

~~He looks up to you. If you go out killing outlaws, you'll create a murderer.~~

BETH you're

creating

~~He'll be fine.~~ I was half his age when I went on my first.

VIRGIL

~~And~~ how many names have you erased?

BETH

It's my job.

VIRGIL

VIRGIL
They are fine examples of justice.

parallel to Brecht's conversation with the philosopher

JAMES
They get the work done.

VIRGIL
At what cost?

JAMES
Their style is unique—

VIRGIL
~~There is no style in punishment. It's supposed to be~~ concrete and direct and consistent.

Style? Justice is

JAMES
That's your interpretation. It could be flexible and indirect and

amorphous fitted to the context of the crime.

VIRGIL
Don't mock me.

JAMES
~~I'm not mocking you~~
~~It might not be as cut and dry as you make it out.~~

BEAT

VIRGIL
~~You're not~~
I don't think you're ready for this. You're not mature enough.

JAMES
(JAMES gets up.)
~~I am not a boy. I'm a man.~~ Why did we stop this early anyways? ~~Are you getting to old to keep up the hunt?~~

VIRGIL
(Trying to calm JAMES down.)
This is a good place to stop.

JAMES
Every hour we wait is a step we fall behind.

- stand
x US?

VIRGIL
We'll catch up.

JAMES
I am starting to doubt that.

VIRGIL

Relax kid. (Returning to his relaxed position.)

How can you relax? JAMES

It's easier in silence. VIRGIL

(Silence.) - Sit on block

BEAT

JAMES
What do we do in the end? You know, when we finally find them. What happens then?

VIRGIL
Well. You have a gun. I have a gun. They have guns.

JAMES
Yea, but what do we say? What do I say?

VIRGIL
You won't have time to say anything.

JAMES
We can't shoot first ~~and then ask questions later.~~

VIRGIL
We won't get a chance to shoot second.

To the audience [Where's the justice in killing them?]

VIRGIL
A moment ago, you were eager to.

JAMES
It's not that simple.

VIRGIL
Complexity is part of the job. If you want simple, go ~~be a number puncher.~~

JAMES
handle
I can ~~do~~ it. *crunch numbers*

VIRGIL
There's no shame in turning back.

NOBLE
You're not as sharp as you use to be, Marshal. →

~~I am plenty sharp.~~
~~VIRGIL~~

NOBLE
Or at least give up on these excursions. ~~Just~~ you can police the town, but the county? That's
~~seems a little big.~~ a little much

VIRGIL
I can handle it.

NOBLE
I'm not saying you can't, but should you?

VIRGIL (sitting down)
~~Maybe you're right. It's just~~ I can't leave him out there.

NOBLE
Forget him. It's not worth dreading.

VIRGIL
How do you know?

NOBLE
Even if he is alive, it is better to give up now and be genuinely surprised later than to drag out the
suffering. waiting for him to come home.

VIRGIL
~~But~~ the boy's so young.

NOBLE ← where is his compassion
Forget him, Marshal. He would have left anyways.

(hear up report)
(Blackout.) - exit SR

L - fade
shift to
James' dream
S - dream
music?
or city scape?

1) Reverse roles, now tell the other person how it feels

Five maybe ten. MOTHER

Days? JAMES

Minutes? What's wrong with you? MOTHER

Mom, I left. I left town for good. JAMES

Ten minutes ago? MOTHER - play with physicality
- this is your assignment.

How do you not remember? JAMES

(GWEN enters.)
Gwen! Tell mom how I left.

He left through the door like every morning. GWEN

Yea— wait what? JAMES

You left for work this morning. Through that door as opposed to... the window. GWEN

No, I quit my job. JAMES

You quit?!? MOTHER and GWEN

Not today. Before I left. JAMES

What the hell are you thinking? You can't quit. MOTHER { motherly love
Economic need

What's wrong with you? GWEN

Act on the lines

Lots of things. MARY

Such as/ JAMES

You already know what they are. MARY

Remind me. JAMES

Should we give him a hint? Yes? No? I'm just not sure. MARY

wait for their reaction

Are you going to kill me? JAMES

Possibly. MARY

If you are going to do it, just stop playing around. JAMES

You're no fun. MARY

I can't stand it. JAMES

choice

Alright. I've decided to help you. On one condition. MARY

Which is? JAMES

We'll get to that later. MARY

That's unfair. JAMES

That's your only choice. MARY

JAMES

JAMES
What?

MARY
No one is making you go.

JAMES
What do you mean?

MARY
I can't give you your old life. I can't feed you the comforts of home. I can't promise you green grass. But I can give you the jagged rocks under the cliffs. The torrent seas of wheat. The line in the sand. Don't let my appearance fool you, it's not pretty. It's not easy either. But follow me, and you can have the riches promised to you.

JAMES
What are you proposing?

MARY
If you want a boring life, full of pain, misery, suffering. A life of hard work in sweltering heat. By all means, walk out the door. You can exhaust your poor desert of a plot or return back home and do the same. You'll lay awake at night knowing you are just another lonely worthless piece of scum, inhabiting this small dismal world. You will live a fair and just life outside the gates of Dis. Or you can come with me, get your hands dirty, but walk through the kingdom of heaven upright.

(Pause. JAMES exits. Pause. JAMES enters.)

Magnificent.

(Blackout.)

All exit SR

comes back for

L - narrow
on James
and Simon
and Mary (usc)
L - shift to
Virgil's house

1) out to audience
-Didactic
- from SL

Scene 11

x B Setting: In the Morrison's home, things are in more of disarray. BETH is at the table with a glass of whiskey.

v x [At Rise: BETH takes a drink. She waits for VIRGIL. VIRGIL enters. BETH gets up to speak. VIRGIL kisses her. @ table

x CS VIRGIL - where is he going, what does he want
I'm so sorry. I was wrong. I was so wrong. No more badge. No more killing.

H v g BETH - what does she expect
You're okay. -(take off the belt,)

VIRGIL B X x V
No it's not. It's too late. They killed him. They killed James. It's happening all over again.

(Silence.) Sit
I turned my back for a minute and then he was gone. He'll never leave.

BETH
You're okay. You're okay.

VIRGIL
I feel guilty.

BETH
Forgive yourself. Forgive the world. Forgive them. There's nothing you can do now.

(VIRGIL cries into BETH's shoulder.)

VIRGIL
I wish there was something I could have done.

BETH > shift choice
You could have left the steel. Turn away to audience

VIRGIL
It wasn't the gun's fault.

BETH
The tool tempts the person.

VIRGIL
He wouldn't have had a chance without it.

BETH



Scene 12

Setting: A TELLER and a ~~GUARD~~ sit in the local bank. The TELLER sits behind the counter. ~~The GUARD sits by the door.~~] ← cut
 At RISE: SIMON, MARY and JAMES enter. ~~SIMON immediately points his gun towards the guard.~~ MARY and JAMES approach the counter.

no gun ↓ MARY Enter SL

Just like we practiced James. Start with something snappy.

JAMES

I need to make a withdrawal.

MARY

Good.

TELLER

Certainly. All I need is your name.

(MARY pulls out her gun and points it towards the TELLER.)

MARY - sit in DSR chair

I don't think you understand. We would like to make a withdrawal. Ambiguity is key James, let the victim fill in the blank. Give him the bag.

(JAMES gives the TELLER the bag.)

You can't just give it to him. What do you want?

JAMES

The money.

MARY

More specifically.

JAMES

The bag. Fill it.

MARY

I'm sorry. It's his first day on the job.

(TELLER starts filling the bag with money.)

* I know you're nervous. Just relax. You're doing fine.

JAMES

It's more difficult than I imagined.

- Turn out
to audience
give him
space

You can't trust a criminal.

NOBLE

where is the line?

INGRAM

A criminal has nothing to hide. Why would they lie to me? Everything's already on the table. "I'm a murderer and a thief who could kill you at any moment," that blatant honesty is comforting. Who you can't trust is a sheriff who deals with criminals [DSC]

BEAT

choice

NOBLE

Are you sure you want to draw this line?

INGRAM

~~No. But hell,~~ I know how to run ^{this} gambit. Why is there any sense in keeping you in the equation?

NOBLE

Simple. BEAT

(NOBLE draws his gun and shoots INGRAM in the kneecap. INGRAM falls to the ground.)

L - dramatic light shift
S - gunshot

NOBLE (cont.)

Silence

while Ingram screams

- choice

She plays the accordion. once she starts singing her own songs, you in charge. Now, there are two roads ahead of us. The first is, you quit. Then I kill you. I find another pet. And I go on my merry way. Or accordion and stop asking questions.

(INGRAM lets out a painful response.)

NOBLE

(writing a note)

I thought as much. Now, I'm going to take care of this. If anyone hears of my intentions before I am done, I will shoot you again. Now I think you should take the rest of the day off. You seem a little queasy.

(Pause.)

Well don't just lie there.

(NOBLE exits. INGRAM attempts to come to her feet. She collapses. She attempts to stand again and collapses. Desperate, INGRAM crawls out of the room. INGRAM exits. Blackout.)

Exit DSL

Scene 14

Setting: In the secret meeting spot between the Disciples and Ingram.

At Rise: JAMES is waiting in the cold for INGRAM. NOBLE enters.

^{from SR}
Fancy seeing you here. We all thought you were dead.

NOBLE

I did too.

JAMES

Are you okay?

NOBLE

I'm a little beat up, ~~but I'm handling it well.~~

JAMES

Still on the next train out of here.

NOBLE

If I can help it.

JAMES

Are you sure? Because, the next one is loaded with cash ~~reserves.~~

NOBLE

What.

JAMES

~~Really?~~

NOBLE

I figure a man like you would want some funds to start a new life.

JAMES

Yea. I probably would.

NOBLE

Tell you what, if you and the Disciples rob that train, I'll give you my cut.

JAMES

Really?

NOBLE

Think of it as a going away gift.

from SL
- explore other side of his character
- surprise reaction
- shift, physically in James.

L - shift to meeting place (same is scene 12)
It is cold/night
S - ambience?

For some it is. NOBLE

~~Do they deserve it?~~ VIRGIL
Is it just?

~~Only a high power~~ NOBLE
We can't
can answer that.

I just don't know. VIRGIL

If you won't come, you won't, I'll simply deal with it myself. NOBLE

There's no one else? VIRGIL

No one. NOBLE

~~Are you sure?~~ VIRGIL

~~Positive.~~ NOBLE

(Pause.)

This is the last time. Promise me that. VIRGIL

I swear upon my mother's soul. NOBLE

Don't you dare tell anyone. VIRGIL (whispers)

My lips are sealed. NOBLE

(VIRGIL quickly grabs his gear. VIRGIL and NOBLE exit.)

L - narrow to gun (these could be all thematically the same)
L - scene shift
S - train + music

Marion strikes blocks
Kekey Christie strike office
David Michael strike hose

DSL

In a blackout, music plays, train noises add in - all available actors remove set furniture

Scene 16

Setting: The audience is on the train car. DSL
At Rise: MARY, SIMON, and JAMES enter. MARY fires her gun into the air.

enter + then speak MARY
We've come for money or blood. You can decide what we walk away with. James, watch the back. Simon. Grab the cash.

Audience L
(JAMES runs to the back of the car. SIMON grabs the bags of cash out of the chest.)

Now what? JAMES

We leave. MARY

Doesn't that seem a little too easy?
BEAT

DSL m-start wal N-enter Stand 2 sec
(NOBLE sneaks through the front door. He points his gun at toward MARY. SIMON tackles NOBLE. A fight ensues. JAMES rushes down to join the fray, but MARY holds JAMES back. At one point, NOBLE has SIMON in a chokehold, while using SIMON as a shield at the same time.)

Your move Mary.
BEAT

NOBLE share a look ①
(MARY shoots NOBLE through SIMON, killing both of them. Pause.)

What a shame.

MARY
(Grabbing the money.)

What the fuck.

JAMES

Let's go James.

MARY

Not until I know everything.

JAMES

S - music down
L - up on train
S - gun shots offstage
L - fight light shift

I'll tell you on the way. Let's get out here. MARY

We can't just leave Simon. JAMES

I can't carry him. MARY

You shot him! JAMES

He made a mistake. MARY

Are you always so heartless? JAMES

Do I look heartless? You can either get yourself killed, or come with me. MARY

What's happening! JAMES

Get it the fuck together and get out that fucking door. (Hysteria or not?) MARY

Fighting back tears?

DSL (VIRGIL enters, gun already drawn.) BEAT

VIRGIL DSL

Drop the money. BEAT

(MARY drops the money. VIRGIL notices JAMES.)

Danny? moment

No it's James. I'm alive. JAMES

~~What?~~ VIRGIL

BEAT MARY

Why are we here James? Go on. Tell him.

~~JAMES~~

forget dimmer +
L - what is
with each
gun shot/
death [and enough
to see
James]
lights go off *
and all we're
left with at the
end is the gate*

Move!

VIRGIL

James!

(VIRGIL drops his guard. MARY shoots VIRGIL.)

BEAT

MARY

At least that's over. Thanks.

③ Should have music until he shoots her (music cuts out with the shot?) or fades
② Looks back

James. James?

(Pause.) BEAT

1) Mary on grand picking up money
2) on one knee

① (JAMES shoots MARY. Pause. JAMES shoots MARY again. Silence. The gate opens, beckoning to JAMES. JAMES walks through the gate. It shuts behind him. Silence. Blackout.)
(End of play.)

At curtain ideally
a completely blank
set

1) what do these stories teach us

* I am interested in, through out the play, stripping away artifice, but the montage makes that difficult

* Or maybe I can just show that's artifice.

S - gun shot

S - gun shot

S - gun shot
S - heartbeat

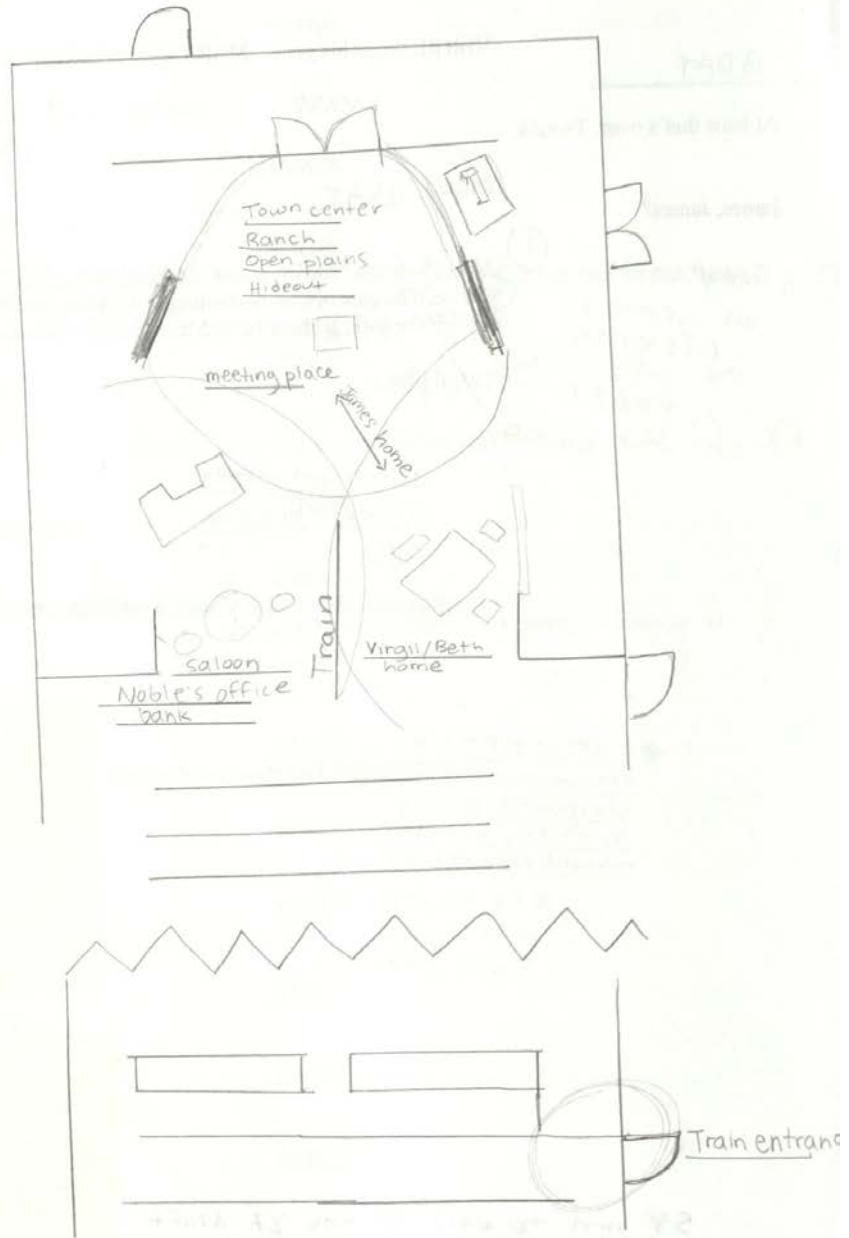
what if the characters come back to life?

L - light shift
L - blackout

58 min to edit to Feb 27 draft

Notes for Nico:

- Do we need train benches, because no one will be sitting on them?
- Can we just have the bar and 2 stools in the bar (no extra table/chairs)



D. Sample Letter of Invitation to *Afterlife*

April 8th, 2015

University of Oregon Police Department
[REDACTED]

Eugene, OR 97403-6220

Dear Chief Carolyn McDermed,

My name is Ariella Wolfe, and I want to personally invite you and your officers and staff affiliated with the UOPD here on campus to attend the production of a new play called *Afterlife*. I am in my final year of undergraduate studies as a Theatre Arts major at the University of Oregon, and I have directed this play, inspired by the Western film genre, in an attempt to address issues of gun use and gun violence both in popular media and in our communities.

Following the show, we will have a short discussion, and in light of the contemporary relevance of issues of gun violence, it is my objective to reach out to diverse groups of individuals with differing political beliefs and attitudes about gun use in the United States. Furthermore, our student developed theatre productions here on campus often fail to attract those outside of the theatre arts department; I believe that the theatre should be a more inclusive and engaging environment that can draw people of many backgrounds and interests.

Performances will be held on Friday April 17th at 5pm and Saturday April 18th at 2pm and 5pm in the Pocket Theatre on campus, located in Villard Hall Room 102. Admission is free of charge.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email or by phone at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Ariella Wolfe

Ariella Wolfe

E. Afterlife Play Program

A poster for the play 'Afterlife'. The title 'Afterlife' is written in a large, white, serif font on a dark brown background. Below the title, the text 'A new play by: Nicholas J. Maurer' and 'Directed by: Ariella Wolfe' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the poster, the dates 'Friday April 17th, 2015' and 'Saturday April 18th, 2015' are listed, followed by 'The Pocket Playhouse' and 'Robert D. Clark Honors College Thesis Production'.

Facts and Figures

- *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) is widely considered the first *Western* film: <http://youtu.be/8ofcPKBE0Y>
- According to the Gun Violence Archive, there have already been 12,696 reported gun-related incidents in the United States in 2015.
- The 2nd Amendment to the U.S. Constitution states: "a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed."

Contributors:

The Pocket Playhouse
The Robert D. Clark Honors College
The University of Oregon Theatre Arts Department
Swordplay Unlimited
Grant Thackray - Poster design

Special Thanks to:

The cast and crew for their vision and dedication;
Nick for the hours spent brainstorming, writing, editing various drafts, and for entrusting me to direct your work;
Julie Hochman and Greg Wolfe for their love and support;
Professor Michael Najjar and Professor Mark Carey for their academic guidance;
Janet Rose for accommodating our production in the University Theatre's busy schedule;

The audience is invited to stay
for a short post-show discussion

Production Team

Director ----- Ariella Wolfe
Stage Manager ----- Erica Hartmann
Assistant Stage Manager ----- Dian A Suhaimiee
Costume Designer ----- Lesli Ozera
Lighting Designer ----- Echo Johnson
Props Designer ----- Jessie Workman
Scenic Designer ----- Nicholas Jules Hewitt
Sound Designer ----- Gabe Carlin
Technical Director ----- Sam Fleig
Assistant Technical Director -- Wesley Barnes-Moran
Fight Director ----- John Elliott
Playwright ----- Nicholas J. Maurer

Cast

James ----- Evan McCarty
Virgil ----- Michael Teague
Mary/Gwan ----- Aimee Hamilton
Simon ----- Ben M. Jones
Sheriff Noble ----- David Etchepare
Ingram ----- Kelsey Ketcham
Beth/Mother ----- Christle O'Neill
Hope/Bartender/Bank Teller ----- Marion O. Rosas

Director's Note

Aferife, to me, is a play about choice and identity. Within the myths of the American West, we are familiar with the stereotypes of the Crooked Sheriff, the Outlaw and the Heroic Cowboy; I believe that these characters you will meet today are fractured versions of their original archetypes and bring a distinctly flawed and human struggle to the stage. I am honored to share this piece with you, and I hope that it can open up a new dialogue about gun violence in the United States. My two primary motivations for this work have been the exploration of theatre as a laboratory for critical thought, and the investigation of what mythical representations of The Wild West can teach us about our current attitudes toward guns.

Though this play is arguably about James' transformation, Beth and Virgil represent the polarized conversation about guns that dominates the public sphere. Virgil urges: "[the gun] could save his life," to which Beth responds: "if you touch that thing, it will kill you." In light of recent incidences of gun violence, we must consider solutions beyond "gun control vs. arming the citizens." This play urges us to look beyond a purely dichotomized discussion of guns, and encourages an examination of our own cultural history, attitudes, and humanity.

Continue the Conversation

You are invited to complete a survey at any time following the performance by following this link:
https://oregon.quackix.com/SE/?SID=SV_Bj1Wsr0QqgR9r

Trigger Warning

Prop guns and gunshot sound effects are used in this performance (no blanks will be fired).

F. Post-Show Discussion Outline and Transcript

Discussion [20 min]

1. Introduction
 - a. This discussion is meant to be more about the arguments and ideas of the piece.
 - b. I hope that we can discuss and process these responses together
 - c. Gun violence is an issue I chose as the focus of this production, but this work in no way could fully encapsulate the history or implications; it is merely a starting point.
2. Questions to the audience – If anyone has questions for the group, feel free to pose it
 - a. Is there a difference in the way this production addresses the issue of gun violence as compared to the Western genre movies you are familiar with?
 - i. [Glorifying vs. inviting social critique]
 - b. What did you think of the ending?
 - i. [Why do you think that James keeps the gun at the end?]
 - ii. [What exactly does the last moment tell us?]
 - c. What is a point in the play where a different decision could have changed the ending?
 - i. [If Virgil hadn't offered the gun]/[If James hadn't taken the gun]
 - ii. [If James hadn't urged Virgil to go after Mary]
 - iii. [If Beth had convinced Virgil to choose a different instrument than the gun]
 - iv. [If Noble hadn't asked James to rob the train/Virgil to help apprehend Mary]
 - d. In the case of gun use and gun violence, what do you think are some ways to both talk about the issues and take action?

- i. In the bar, James and Virgil get in a fight about whether Virgil will “do” anything about the corruption, and whether “talking” is “action.” In the end, they chose to act instead of talk.
 - ii. On the one hand, talking is safe and does not require much risk, but acting is perilous and can result in missteps and tragedies.
 - iii. This play doesn’t present answers, but asks us to imagine them.
- e. Does this play have anything to do with us today?
- i. Entrusting police with the responsibility of lethal force
 - ii. Not being able to keep guns out of the hands of “the wrong people”
 - iii. School shootings, terrorism, rage killings
 - iv. Continued disagreement in interpretation (infringements?) of the 2nd amendment
 - v. Extremely elevated incidences of gun violence in the United States.
3. In the program (Insert)– If you would like to participate in a survey about your experience today and you responses to the play:
https://oregon.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_bJlWsvQOqJgFt9r
4. Conclusion – Thank you so much for coming. I hope that this production has given you a new perspective to consider and will give you the opportunity to discuss issues of gun violence in a new way.

*Transcript elaborated from the video recording taken on April 17th, 2015 by Julia Reih*s

Ariella: What relevance does *Afterlife* have to our lives today?

Audience member: Recently, there have been issues with cops shooting people and being “gun happy.” This play, especially the final scene where everyone is just shooting

each other, because it is their mode of defense, it's an easy way to kill somebody, but they don't seem to respect its power. And in the West, everyone had a gun.

Ariella: It's an interesting that you bring up: everyone in the West had guns. And there's a lot of myth that goes into that too. So, sometimes what we know about history doesn't always go with what we see in media. This play was inspired by Western film, but we don't always see a matching up between that history and the stories that we hear. Does anyone else have anything that they were thinking about, about what this play might have to do with the present day?

Audience member: Well, I read the pamphlet, and it mentions gun control, between Virgil and his wife, and she kind of took the stance of "guns are dangerous," the more gun control side, while Virgil was more of the other side, the second amendment, so to speak. It was clever.

Ariella: What do you mean by clever? If you don't mind me pushing that.

Audience member: Well, I read this [the program] before the show. It was clever how you did that. I probably would have never caught that. It was clever how you handled it in there. All these different things.

Ariella: Did anyone else have anything that occurred to them abo—yeah?

Audience member: I don't remember the line exactly, but I think: "it takes a lot to put on an execution" and how actually going through with an execution [...] and our justice system, and how expensive it is to defend yourself, even if you are innocent.

Audience member: Actually, now that she mentions that, it brings up the point of the death penalty in the United States and how it's such a big controversy right now, especially with lethal injection. So it kind of brings up that point.

Ariella: I don't know if you all had considered this before, but how talking about guns often leads to many different issues. For example, in about two responses, we got suddenly to the death penalty or to racial discrimination, and a lot of people talk about the problems of keeping guns out of the hands of people who shouldn't have them and how that leads to questions about how we deal with mental health issues in this country. I was curious, what you thought of the ending. The last moment. Whether you felt that it had any significance to you.

Audience member: I really liked the ending. I mean I think it reflects... I think it was really appropriate to what was happening in the play. With so much focus on the issues that we've been talking about. Capital punishment, gun ownership, and gun violence. To see that when these conflicts aren't resolved, everyone's going to suffer for it. That's a theme I see, coming out of the ending.

Audience member: James comes into the town alone. And then everyone he had basically met dies, and he exits alone. [...] This weird, not like twilight zone, but this weird. He just shows up randomly in this town, and he's trying to get out. Then he gets involved with these outlaws. And it just ends, and they're all dead, and he's alone again. I thought it was interesting. I can't really think of significance, but it's just interesting.

Ariella: What I like about this play is that it leaves a lot open ended, it's ambiguous, it's sort of like how in real life we don't have answers to a lot of these questions, but it

definitely brings up these issues so we can talk about these things, and talk about how a person might deal with it, and what the consequences of their actions might be.

Audience member: It's amazing what a strange place can do to you.

Ariella: Yeah, that's something that drove my direction in this, you know, how they're all a product of their environment, and how if the environment were different, for example, if this were taking place in a modern city, how the series of events might have changed.

Audience member: Or not.

Ariella: Or not, right. So, that actually brings me to another question: as you watched the play can you think back and think was there any moment where they could have made a choice that would have made the events turn out differently? There are no wrong answers, there may be no right answers either.

Audience member: Well, James didn't have to join up the robbers. Virgil could have taken a stronger stance on what Sheriff Noble was doing. Those are the two that popped into my head, and those would have changed the ending.

Ariella: Anyone else?

Audience member: James picking up the gun is like the pivotal moment. We see in Virgil an elongated version of the story, where he has been transformed via using weapons as his means of life. And then we have James as the audience surrogate going through the entire emotions in this short period of time. That's the one change that would have changed everything.

Ariella: Going off of that, what do you guys think made him pick up the gun? I think using the theatre as a way to pass through the steps. Like you said, audience surrogate,

it's totally a plot device, but it's also really interesting to think about, if you were in his shoes, why would you have taken the gun?

Audience member: There's the "when in Rome" thought. James saw that it was a pretty common thing, and going off of Virgil's point that "everyone has one, so I might as well."

Audience member: He came into a strange town, he was almost hung...

Ariella: Yeah, let's not forget about that.

Audience member: There was a lot happening that shows how what's happening around you can affect you. And he was alone, kind of trapped, and if something so horrific happened to you, it might make you change what you would have done on a regular basis. And, can I just ask a question for clarification?

Ariella: Yeah, absolutely

Audience member: So the end, when you come out, and Virgil, when you call James by a different name, was that your son's name. And that made me wonder, whether that was a death by violence. I had a feeling that was part of your motivation because he had experience a death that had been really emotional and had been really connected.

Whereas the Sheriff didn't seem so connected to death, shooting his own sidekick. Didn't seem like there was any emotional connection to death, so death wasn't really real, as real as guns. Which was interesting. It was sort of interwoven into the romanticized Western, where "bang bang" you're dead and you fall over, there's not really a visceral reaction to it. Whereas you were struggling more with it, and James was began to struggle and got caught up in it. It felt pretty relevant to today and the conflict, to gun or not to gun.

Ariella: She brought up a really good point about how trauma can make someone do something that they wouldn't ordinarily, and I think, you can agree or not, but maybe we do have a social responsibility to reach out to people who may have experience trauma, because, yeah, there are people who've grown up with guns and that's part of their culture, and they don't see it as a problem, but other people may be in a state of crisis and turning to violence as a way to cope with that. And, I guess what I'm trying to say, and I don't know if you [looks to the cast] would agree with me, but it's not a matter of "crazy person" versus "sane person," it's this whole spectrum of people at different points, and that someone who is otherwise normal, [gestures to James] could pick up a gun and do a horrible thing, because of what's happened to them.

Audience member: Where you referring to Virgil and Beth's son? [made a connection about Virgil and Beth's son] "he's in a better place," "it's happening all over again."

Ariella: Were you going to say?

Audience member: No that was my only question.

James was referred to as a boy, and I thought that Virgil represented maturity, and James was looking for direction, but as a boy he kept rejecting it. Virgil represented, well they all represented cultural stereotypes. Process of adolescence and maturing calls for looking for leadership or rejecting it, and finally resolving what the difficulty was.

Ariella: Or not resolving it as the case may be.

Audience member: But violence does away with everybody, except for poor Virgil's wife.

Ariella: I think that is a really interesting point. That out of pretty much everyone, the bar tender and bank teller survive just barely, but Beth is left. And I didn't think of this

at the beginning, but after working on this play for a while, she never actually leaves the home. At first I was thinking that she was so noble [...] this really principled woman, but at the same time, she never ventures outside. I think it helps us to see that, if you're on either extreme, it's not living maybe the fullest life that you'd want to, and that isn't much discussion about balancing in the middle these two polar opposites, about how do you deal with violence and how do you deal with guns. So poor Beth is left to cope with all that.

Audience member: It seemed a little off to me that James would join Mary and so I was thinking, Virgil gave him the gun in the first place, and I think that, as a mentor or a father figure, he's not bad, but just introducing that as part of a societal norm, just having that in his mind, James started to warm up to the idea, which, it seemed like his heart was in a really good place, most of the time, but he was more apt to make that decision to join her, because of what he had already seen, even though it wasn't necessarily a bad thing right up front.

Ariella: Yeah, I think she brings up a good point, they're not necessarily bad or good. Sometimes, Sheriff Noble comes off as the most hard-hearted or cold, and I think something interesting to think about, and maybe I could ask you [David Etchepare], if you don't mind, what was your justification as the Sheriff for doing the horrible things that you do? Do you think there is some justification for why a person might turn to that?

David: The way I was playing it was kind of from the Western, where profit, and getting the money from the train robbery, and getting money from killing people, is really what drove him. Kind of off of that, the lobbyist side of the government, if you

were to compare it to that metaphor of “oh, people seem to care more about profits than they do about human life.” That’s kind of what I was shooting for.

Ariella: I was curious if you picked up on anything that was significantly different from any of the more typical Western films that you have seen or heard of in the past. What did this play with in your mind?

Audience member: It seemed, as opposed to all lot of older Western films, this played a lot more with the idea of personal responsibility and accountability for what you’re doing. As you said before, violence in a lot of Western films is so cartoonish that it comes off as totally insignificant. Whereas in this show, it seemed that anyone who was inflicting violence or had the intention to had to then personally deal with what was going on afterwards.

Audience member: There certainly wasn’t the usual “white hat” “black hat” and the “white hat” riding off into the sunset with the woman, who was the reward. In this case, Mary is the villain [you did a good job with it].

Ariella: I think that brings up a good point, that there aren’t always clear sides to an issue. Yes, we have the issue of gun rights or gun control as very polarized, but I think that something I took away from working on this play, that maybe you guys will think about over the next couple days is how that solution probably won’t come from doing all one thing or all the other. And that there is this huge gap in the middle where people haven’t really come together to collaborate, and people can’t see eye to eye. For example, the NRA says, really extreme people say “you take our guns, there’ll be a revolution,” or other people say that those with guns are crazy.” And by saying they are crazy, they are sort of devaluing them as human beings. What I hope is that being able

to talk about guns in a setting like this, we'll say "the extremes don't work." What could happen if people come together in the middle to discuss actually steps that could be taken, because I think that there's a lot of work there that hasn't even been broached yet.

Audience member: The black gate. There is a lot of symbolism there. That could go into a lot of different directions. I think afterlife, going into the future, leaving – was it real – going to something better, or being consumed, having experienced this James is now consumed in it and is going to a really dark place that is like into darkness or is sealing his future, or is it leaving it behind. That was interesting to me. When you're talking about the bigger picture. If there's anywhere where there's choice in here, that was it, he kind of stepped over.

Ariella: I am so happy that that spurred all those thought in your mind. I'm of the mindset that it's good to leave with more questions than answers, but I'm sure there are people who would disagree with me. You make a good point: what is it that happens afterwards, because life is continuous, there is no, besides literal death, an end. And there is, like you said, a choice he could have made: he could have left the gun, he could have taken the money, he could have not gone through the gate, but what was left for him? It really draws attention to what happens after those acts of violence, but leaves it open for the audience to fill that blank in, and to go on, and take responsibility for maybe writing the story that we want to see. Because, I think that a play like this can give people agency and the knowledge that their choices have consequences. Instead of saying "there is nothing we can do," like Virgil, I think it's pretty clear that there is

something that could be done, but it's up to us to decide whether we want to do it or not. I'd love to have one or two last comments.

Audience member: There's no justice and no profit from guns. Because it just brings the same reaction, one after another.

[End of tape]

G. Post-Show Survey

Welcome to the Audience Response Survey for productions of *Afterlife*
(director: Ariella Wolfe and playwright: Nicholas J. Maurer)



Q1

Which performance of *Afterlife* did you attend?

- Friday, April 17th, 5pm
- Saturday, April 18th, 2pm
- Saturday, April 18th, 5pm

Q2

Did you attend the short discussion following the performance?

- Yes
- No

Q3

What was your lasting impression of this theatrical event?

Q14

Did you engage in a conversation about the Western genre or gun-related issues, either historical or current, as a result of attending *Afterlife*? If so, what did the conversation entail?

Q5

How, if at all, has this experience changed the way that you think about gun violence in the context of your own life and in your community?

Q6

What do you feel is the place of social issues and social critique, if any, in contemporary theatre?

Please fill out the following demographic information, if you would like. All information will be kept anonymously and separately from your other responses.

Q7

Which best describes your age range?

- 0-17 years
- 18-30 years
- 31-60 years
- 61-100 years

Q8

How do you self-identify, with regard to gender, race, economic status?

Q9

How did you hear about this production?

- A friend or family member
- Facebook
- A poster
- Other

Q10

How often do you attend theatrical events?

- Regularly
- Occasionally
- Infrequently
- This is the first production I have attended

H. Photographic Stills from *Afterlife*

1. Scene 1: Mary announces to the audience that “This is a train robbery,” and Simon approaches James in the audience, demanding his cash.



2. Scene 1: Deputy Ingram grabs James out of the audience/off of the train and takes him away.



3. Scene 2: Photograph taken during rehearsal on March 15th, 2015 and during the performance on April 17th, 2015 of the tableau.



4. Scene 3: Illustrating dramatic change of lighting as Sheriff Noble calls for Hope’s hanging.



5. Scene 3: Virgil asks the audience “What the hell are you still doing here? I said go home” after James is almost hung.



6. Scene 4: Virgil pulls Beth Upstage Right of James as they debate their views on gun use, and Beth announces to the audience sarcastically (re: gun violence) “Don’t worry, it just happens.”



7. Scene 4: Virgil offers James his gun, saying he will need it. Beth counters, “if you touch that thing, you’re as good as dead.”



8. Scene 5: Virgil gives James the sketchbook that belonged to his son.



9. Scene 6: James experiences his first gun confrontation.



10. Scene 6: Light and blocking delineate three spaces onstage: Sheriff’s office (L), saloon (C), and hideout (R).



11. Scene 6: Ingram steps into Sheriff Noble’s gun, accepting his threat to kill her if she continues to demand an equal share of their illegal profit.



12. Scene 6: Sheriff Noble and Virgil square off in a silent bid for power.



13. Scene 8: James explains, (re: killing someone) “one slight squeeze, and it’s all over,” foreshadowing his stage placement when he later kills Mary.



14. Scene 8: Demonstrates a change in lighting as Simon knocks James out with his gun.



15. Scene 10: James speaks to the audience, saying that realizing “how horrendous *fine* was” spurred him to get on the train West.



16. Scene 10: Mary warns that audience that if they come with her, life won’t be easy or pretty, but “come with me, and you can have the riches promised to you.”



17. Scene 10: James returns for his gun, and Simon pulls his hand back, making sure that James is committed to his choice.



18. Scene 11: Beth moves away from the guns, physicalizing her rejection of her husband's dependence on them.



19. Scene 12: James adopts a false bravado, in the style of the Cowboy caricature, during his first bank robbery, as Mary apologizes to the audience "I'm sorry. It's his first day on the job."



20. Scene 13: Noble addresses the audience after shooting his deputy. Lights changed dramatically as he fired the gun.



21. Scene 15: Sheriff Noble begs Virgil to return to work, and Virgil physically rejects the gun.



22. Scene 16: Mary urges James to shoot Virgil to keep him from arresting them during the final train robbery.



23. Scene 16: James shoots Mary in an act of revenge for killing Noble, Simon, and Virgil.



24. Scene 16: James walks through the gate at the end of the play, with his gun, in utter silence as lights fade to black.



I. External Links to YouTube Videos of *Afterlife*

1. <http://youtu.be/y7hVPNCe4HA> (Pre-show music/Credits/Scene 1/Scene 2/Scene 3)
2. <https://youtu.be/TLO2SUJK6BA> (Scene 4/Scene 5)
3. https://youtu.be/3Ofa-v_SENE (Scene 6 part 1)
4. https://youtu.be/faYVyRivh_E (Scene 6 part 2/Scene 7/Scene 8)
5. <https://youtu.be/tC9iyVMFz8k> (Scene 9/Scene 10/Scene 11)
6. <https://youtu.be/V3tKAVX5VdE> (Scene 12/Scene 13/Scene 14/Scene 15/Scene 16)
7. <https://youtu.be/sPTrS1QBmKw> (Curtain call/Post-show Discussion part 1)
8. http://youtu.be/zYvHHjW_Lck (Post-show Discussion part 2/End credits)

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