Gender Confusion, Genocide and the Apocalypse: Directing Moira Buffini's Silence

Dennis N. Henry
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, dhenryunl@gmail.com

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Gender Confusion, Genocide and the Apocalypse:
Directing Moira Buffini’s Silence

by

Dennis Henry

A THESIS

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Gender Confusion, Genocide and the Apocalypse: Directing Moira Buffini’s Silence

Dennis Henry, M.F.A.

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Advisor: Virginia Smith

This thesis contains the written documentation of the process of directing a theatrical production of Silence by Moira Buffini, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Master of Fine Arts in Directing for Stage and Screen at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

This documentation and analysis of the processes herein include: play selection, background research, concept development, casting, rehearsal process, development of design elements and evaluation based on critical response, audience reception and self-reflection.
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CHAPTER ONE: Play Selection

I keep a shelf in my home office on which the scripts for plays I want direct get special placement and, although my copy of *Silence* by Moira Buffini rests on that shelf, it was not among the three plays I originally submitted to the JCSTF season selection committee for consideration. The time allotted for the search was short and crowded with an intensive film project, two acting roles for Nebraska Repertory Theatre, and production work on *The Pillowman* for Theatrix (the UNL student run theatre company) that I was directing starting in August. I had to narrow things down for reading and my first impulse was to choose something with a large cast. Contemporary plays tend to have small casts to accommodate the tight budgets of regional theatres and I thought this would be an opportunity to work with a large cast since the University Theatre does not pay student actors. I also wanted something that was differed substantially from *The Pillowman*.

After I submitted my selections to the committee and my schedule became less frantic, I was able to reflect on my options. All the plays I considered animated me, but I began to second guess whether any would present the best challenge to my skills, or afford a solid projection design, nor reach a university audience in any meaningful way. For reasons that still remain unknown to me, there was no meeting of the selection committee for six months after our deadline. This curious delay turned out to be an unexpected blessing for my pursuit of a suitable thesis play.

One play, however, continued to intrigue me: *Silence*. As it sat on the shelf it
reminded me of why I was initially attracted to it. It is a modern play (1999), but set in 1000 A.D. Its language is heightened and sometimes poetic, but it is completely understandable for a modern audience. It is hysterically funny at times, yet it does not steer away from dark subjects such as torture, rape and genocide. It is full of surprise and adventure. It is the work of a talented female writer who is under-produced and features not only, excellent lead roles for women, but all six roles are dynamic characters who possess tremendous depth.

I could not immediately imagine how this play would look on a stage. Yet the absence of a solid vision was a signal to me that Silence was a wise choice for a thesis project. I knew that this play would stretch my directorial vision. Much of my previous professional work (whether for reasons budgetary or artistic) has been “minimalist.” I came to graduate school in part to explore the limits of what is possible for a stage play. Silence features twenty-eight different scenes in nineteen different locations. Some of those locations are static and simple such as castles, ships, and chapels. Still others are dynamic or unusual, such as a travelling cart that crashes, the middle of a battle field and the inside of ancient burial mound. The play even requires changes of seasons and a character to jump from the top of a great tower. The play has a cinematic nature, which I suspect contributes to the paucity of professional productions. Envisioning how I might overcome these challenges was daunting. These challenges, however, also made Silence an exemplary play for incorporating video and other projections into the staging, required for this thesis production. And what fool would pass up the chance to do a play
about a gender-confused Viking?

These attributes led to make a late pitch in the fall of 2012 to include *Silence* in my list of proposals. My advisor, Professor Virginia Smith and Johnny Carson School director, Paul Steger accepted my additional proposal and when the committee met in February 2013, *Silence* was a finalist along with *The Illusion* by Tony Kushner based on Pierre Corneille’s *L’Illusion Comique*. *The Illusion* was an early favorite of mine, but my *Silence* excitement level had long since overtaken it. Professor Smith also favored *Silence* and the committee was receptive to my preference. Associate professor and faculty costume designer, Janice Stauffer, noted that there had also been quite a few shows at JCSTF in the past few years that had the same 17th century setting as *The Illusion*, whereas only one in the last 30 years had a medieval setting. No strong arguments materialized for *The Illusion* while many commented on the desire to see something unique, like *Silence*.

It was a long selection process filled with lots of second guessing inside my head, but after the meeting was over and the rights were granted from Samuel French, Inc. a couple weeks later, I had zero regrets. I was convinced I had made the right choice. At that point, I was ready to confront the genocidal, apocalyptic, and gender confusion themes of the play while hoping that the same themes would not come to define the rehearsal process.
CHAPTER TWO: Historical and Fictional Sources for the Play

Good novelists, poets, and playwrights artistically pose the question. “What if?” Heldris of Cornwall, the author of the 13th century French romance, *Le Roman de Silence*, asked, “What if a valiant girl was raised to be a man?” He wrote a story about it. Several centuries later, Moira Buffini looked at the life of Emma of Normandy, wondered about how she became such an influential woman in a male dominated world and asked, “What if Emma of Normandy met Silence?” She then wrote a play about it.

On their surfaces, the fictional account in *Roman de Silence* and the true life story of the English queen, Emma of Normandy, have little in common. Moira Buffini, however, in her 1999 play *Silence*, combines these stories to create a moving, dramatic narrative that seamlessly combines themes of each tale. Both the 12th century romance and the 11th century history involve women who lead exceptional lives. Silence conceals her sex and chooses to live the life of a man, while Emma inserts herself into the affairs at court and obtains more power as a twice-crowned queen than many kings of that era possessed. Buffini saw the parallels and created a story with lessons for the twenty-first century.

*Roman de Silence* by Master Heldris of Cornwall

The plot of the twelfth century Roman de Silence goes a bit like this: during the reign of the mythical King Evan of England, a set of twin sisters inherit a great deal of wealth. Their respective husbands cannot agree on which sister is to bring to her marriage that wealth as a dowry. Rather than intervene during the dispute, King Evan gets involved only after the angry husbands had killed each other. Evan, never mistaken for Solomon,
decides to solve this problem by disallowing women from inheriting anything.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the kingdom, a brave young knight wins the king’s favor by slaying a dragon. The venom from the dragon’s skin, however, makes him quite ill. Luckily, a beautiful young maiden with amazing healing powers miraculously cures him. The knight and the maiden are soon married with the full blessing of King Evan. A child is born to them.

The parents are happy to have a girl, but realize that the new law forbids them to bequeath to their child any wealth they might accumulate. They decide, “We shall call her Silence, after Saint Patience, because Patience relieves anxiety.” They vow to raise her as a boy and not share their secret with anyone.

Silence grows up strong, agile and smart. His parents inform him that he was a girl and he vows to keep the secret. By the time he is 12 years old he becomes the most impressive wrestler, jouster, and boxer in his age group. It is also at the age of 12 that Silence has an internal debate. As her hormones develop, Silence needs to decide whether to continue living as a man or to live as a woman. Nature and Nurture appear as allegorical characters and join in the debate. After much reflection, Silence commits to living as a man in order to enjoy the freedom that male identity provides in their society.

A few months later, two travelling musicians happen to visit the estate of Silence and his family. Silence is intrigued by their playing skill and travelling lifestyle. Simultaneously, Silence has begun to doubt her ability to keep up physically with the other young men. He fears he will be discovered and be forced to live the life of the typical medieval woman: sentenced to remain indoors and perform menial tasks like cooking, gardening and producing as many children as possible. He reasons to himself
that, if he can learn to play the harp, “You will be less bored in your captivity.” Silence sneaks away with minstrels on their boat. His parents think the minstrels have abducted him and report their fears to King Evan who responds in his usual fashion. He overreacts and passes a law with no effect on the problem. He issues a ban on all minstrels in England.

Things initially go well for Silence as he becomes the attendant to the minstrels who teach him to play. By the time he is 16 years old, however, he surpasses the minstrels in skill and the paying customers soon only want to hear Silence. The minstrels plot to kill him. Silence discovers their plan and leaves the minstrels, but not before demanding and receiving a large sum of back pay.

Despite the ban on musicians, Silence heads to the court of King Evan where he is able to convince everyone of his true identity, or mostly true identity since his natural sex is still a secret. King Evan lifts the minstrel ban, Silence becomes the court musician, and he soon enjoys a reputation throughout the country for gallantry, handsome looks and exceptional musicianship. He’s joyfully reunited with his parents and, for a time, all is well.

King Evan’s queen, Eufeme, happens to be a woman with a lascivious nature. She becomes attracted to Silence and attempts repeatedly to seduce her. For reasons of honor, secrecy and biology, Silence refuses the advances. Eufeme thinks there can only be one reason that a man would turn her down. She says to herself, “I’m sure he’s a queer.” She vows to destroy him. She punches herself in the face, tears her own dress and claims that Silence has raped her.

The unsuspecting King Evan is horrified, but he wants to avoid embarrassment.
He doesn’t want the news of the rape to spread and likewise doesn’t want to be humiliated by having Silence be dishonored. That dishonor would reflect badly on him, since he has vociferously praised Silence. Eufeme, however, demands the public execution of Silence. Evan decides to cover up everything by sending Silence to his friend, the King of France, to learn proper courtly decorum. Eufeme does a *Hamlet* style letter switch, and gets a note to France that requests the death of Silence in the French court. The King of France, however, had already decided that Silence was a good guy before reading the letter and he sends a letter back to England looking for clarification. France not only refuses to execute Silence, but makes him a French knight who beats every other knight in the land in a jousting tournament.

Back in England, King Evan confronts a civil uprising. He asks Silence to return to help him put down the insurrection. Silence leads a team of French troops into battle who thrash the rebels. During the battle, Silence personally kills dozens of rebels, saves the life of King Evan and captures the rebel leader, thereby ending the war.

The above turn of events inflames Eufeme’s sexual desire for Silence now that he is a war hero. When Silence again rebuffs Eufeme’s advances, she pleads again with the King. Since she knows that Evan cannot publicly decry the new war hero, she repeats her charges against Silence, advocating an ingenious punishment. Eufeme convinces Evan to send Silence on a seemingly impossible quest. He is to retrieve Merlin the Magician from the forest. Eufeme knows that there is a spell cast that only a woman can locate Merlin, and thus Silence will forever disappear into the forest.

Silence predictably discovers Merlin and returns him to the court. As he is brought in, Merlin begins maniacally laughing. Merlin’s powers have allowed him to
enjoy dramatic irony like no one else. He says he is laughing at several things he has observed in route to court. First, there was a peasant who was excited about having new shoes, but who was going to die before he got home to put them on. The second incident was a man crying over his dead son at a funeral. This was humorous to Merlin because the real father of the boy was the priest who was leading the memorial service.

Finally, Merlin was laughing that two people at court had deceived the others. A nun at court was actually a man and the queen’s lover and Silence was a woman. King Evan realizes the Queen’s treachery, has her drawn and quartered and marries Silence. Everyone lives happily ever after?

**Emma of Normandy and King Ethelred the Unready**

The two historical characters portrayed in Buffini’s *Silence*, Emma of Normandy (called Ymma in the play) and King Ethelred the Unready, married in 1002. That same year Ethelred ordered what became known as the St. Brice’s Day Massacre in which he commanded his army to slaughter all those of Danish descent living in England. This order was a desperate attempt to stop the persistent Viking raids plaguing England. The attempted genocide was remarkable for its viciousness and audacity, but fascinating for the fact that Emma, Ethelred’s new wife of only a few months, was herself only three generations removed from Viking blood.

No one knows whether this attempted genocide of her cousins was the cause of Emma’s contempt for Ethelred, but after he was killed she not only married his Danish successor, named Cnut, but got Cnut to agree that her children by Ethelred would not become heirs to the crown. Emma outlived Cnut as well, and then she saw to it her son
with Cnut got the crown. When that son died, the only logical heir was her son by
Ethelred, Edward the Confessor, yet she maintained her opposition to his assuming the
English throne.

Emma of Normandy was impressive in her tenacity. She was the wife of two
kings and the mother of two kings, but she worked to become more than a pawn in the
royal game. She commissioned a book that detailed her connection with Cnut in an effort
to cement her legacy. How did this medieval woman become so autonomous and
powerful? Moira Buffini has a fanciful theory.

**Buffini, Emma and Silence**

Ymma of Buffini’s *Silence* (spelled with a “Y” to reflect the French
pronunciation) is at a turning point in her life. She finds herself alone in a foreign land.
After being sexually abused and humiliated by her brother, he then exiles her. Ymma can
choose to go quietly into her new life, submitting herself to the will of her new king. She
can become the mere political bargaining chip that her brother intended, or she can find
her natural inner strength and forge a new life.

Ymma, in Buffini’s characterization, could have remained mute in an attempt to
make her life easy. Instead, upon encountering Silence, she discovers means by which
she can assert herself as the most powerful European woman of her era. Like the
character Silence created by Heldris of Cornwall, Ymma has a realization: being in a man
in a male dominated society has advantages. Silence of Cumbria has benefitted from her
parents’ assignation of an alternate gender identity. Silence derives both power and
freedom from the ruse, exercising claims only a male prince can make. Ymma seizes a
similar opportunity Ymma helps Silence understand the truth of her biological sex, the gravity of the situation and the importance of continuing to conceal her identity. If they can get to Cumbria she can co-rule with her young female husband in a way that she never before dreamed possible. Ethelred’s dream of the apocalypse and subsequent ethnic cleansing of the Danes thwarts those plans. Despite the best efforts of Ymma, she is captured and made to marry the infamous Ethelred. Silence is presumed dead.

When Ymma finds that Silence is alive, she again takes aggressive action. Silence is still her inspirational figure. The emboldened Ymma demands her own rooms that Ethelred can visit only by invitation. She insists that her new young friend, the now feminine Silence, and she be allowed to attend court meetings. Ymma does not remain silent, but asserts herself into a life of action and involvement she has chosen for herself.

**Silence and Gender Roles**

Buffini’s Ymma and Cornwall’s Silence both learn that gender roles are optional, that Nature does not need always to defeat Nurture, and society can often err about what Nature actually has to say about what may be accomplished by people of either sex. Exercising temporal power, making important decisions, and enacting heroic deeds may be options for anyone who works toward achieving great things.

At the conclusion of the *Roman de Silence*, our heroine/hero changes her name. Here, as throughout the story, gender pronouns are interchangeable just as gender identity is a choice. The author tells us, “Once he was called Silentius, they removed the “-us” and added an “-a” and so he was called Silentia.” In this nomenclature, the quality and
properties of the root word are identical. The sound, meaning and connotative qualities of
the word are the same. Only the suffix dangling at the end is different- much like human
anatomy. “What if…” everyone thought this way?

The End of the World

In 1999, the world was in a mini panic about what would happen when computers
that had been programmed with two-digit year indicators, entered a new century. Would
the computers read the year as 1900 thereby setting off a chain reaction of confusion?
After hyperbolic media reports of a potential meltdown of world communication systems
and computer dependent financial markets, widespread panic began take hold in the
western world. As the date of January 1, 2000 approached various governments tried to
calm the people for fear that panic would cause greater problems that any computer
failures. There were no disasters, nor anything resembling a disaster, that occurred, but
the social atmosphere of 1999 was one of apprehension and uncertainty. It was this
atmosphere in which Moira Buffini wrote Silence.

The flag bearer of the apocalyptic fears in the play is the young priest, Roger, who
is haunted by apocalyptic visions even after leaving the priesthood. He views the violence
of the Vikings as a portent of the end much like many American evangelicals view each
new conflict in the Middle East. King Ethelred seizes on his own apocalyptic dreams as a
sign from God that he must destroy the unbeliever. He uses his new found religion to
galvanize his followers and justify his violence. This sad pattern can be found in leaders
all over the world.

This fear of the end is alive and well in America, today. An article in the
Washington Times on September 12, 2013, by Cheryl K. Chumley, reported that 4 in 10 adults in the United States believe that we are living in the “end times.” This is a remarkable number in a society that claims to be so enlightened. These forty percent of Americans, like their 1000 A.D. counterparts are wrong and Buffini strives to demonstrate that we aren’t all that different from our ancestors of the previous century.

Why this play? Why now?

Our generation, like every previous generation grapples both with the inefficacy of female rule in a male dominated society and visions of the apocalypse. Today, the western world, some 800 years after Heldris of Cornwall’s story, is still attempting to wrestle both with alternative gender identities and the role of women in the power structure. The United States Congress has an uber-majority of men, there has never been a female president of the United States and there are large sections of the population that bristle at the possibility. A large percentage of the most powerful nation on earth believes that God will soon destroy humanity and often elects leaders who believe the same. Silence is a vitally important play about “now” and about “here.”
CHAPTER THREE: Moira Buffini and Silence, Production History

Moira Buffini is the author of a dozen plays and six screenplays. Her most successful play is Dinner which premiered at the National Theatre of London and moved to the West End in 2002. Her 1999 play Silence was the winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Award for best play by English female playwright. Notable screenplays include the BBC version of Jane Eyre (2011) and the young adult film Byzantium (2013), which she adapted from her play A Vampire’s Story (2008).

Premiering in London in 1999, Silence has suffered a very limited production history. Its American debut was at San Francisco’s Magic Theatre in 2001. That was followed by New York’s Ohio Theatre in 2002 and Chicago’s Rivendell Theatre Ensemble in 2003. Two small Boston area productions and several minor British productions comprise the play’s limited production history. No major American regional theatre has yet attempted to produce Silence.
CHAPTER FOUR: Character Analysis

One of the outstanding qualities of *Silence* is that each of the six characters is fully developed and goes on a dynamic emotional journey. The characters have depth and are recognizably human despite the extraordinary and at times bizarre circumstances of the plot.

YMMA of NORMANDY

This play is Ymma’s story. Her journey is the one that is most important and her decisions drive the plot and affect the choices made by the other characters. She is deeply angry, but not because she has a misanthropic disposition or hates life. She is angry because she loves life, yet, because she is a woman in the 11th century she is powerless to direct that life. The thought of Silence’s alternate gender identity empowers Ymma to take charge of her own life. She is sensitive and kind-hearted when she can see beyond herself, but she allows her life struggles to prevent her from noticing the plights of others.

Maggie Austin, who played this role in this production, gave a great observation about Ymma when we did a radio interview together the morning after opening night. When moderator Genevieve Randall asked Maggie about the character on Nebraska Public Radio, Ms. Austin said, “There aren’t a lot of very strong female characters who are also allowed to be vulnerable and have weaknesses.” It was an astute observation about both modern entertainment and the character of Ymma. She is strong not because she shows weakness, but because she recognizes her weaknesses and vulnerabilities but refuses to be defeated by them.
SILENCE

This is an engagingly complicated role. Silence begins the play with abundant confidence, though a little baffled by the local Christians customs. His English greeting, however, is not as he anticipated. King Ethelred and Ymma demean him while the priest criticizes his faith. The experience of perhaps the most unusual wedding night in the history of dramatic literature renders his/her world turned upside down. The challenge of this role, beyond the gender dilemma, is finding the permanent imbalance of someone who was raised to be assured and confident, who then suddenly has diminished power. Events conspire to strip Silence of the male identity that gave him power and he can no longer identify with a large part of what gave him his confidence. She is only 14 years old, an age in which all of are confused in varying degrees, and put into an extraordinary situation.

ETHELRED

Ethelred’s journey is the biggest and most obvious of the characters. He is weak and depressed. He is supposed to be the most powerful man in the country, but he feels himself debilitated. When he finally decides to seize power, he goes completely overboard to the point of destructiveness. There is little subtext or mystery in what is going on with Ethelred. The challenge with Ethelred is to render the steps on his journey of discovery as incremental. If he jumps too quickly from the “Ethelred of inaction” to the “Ethelred of torture” the audience will lose interest.
EADRIC

This is a challenging character in that he is says so little. Eadric feels that words betray him. He uses “mind speech” to communicate ideas that are too personal or emotionally taxing. This menacing silence causes Ymma to perceive him as a threat and eventually leads to his death. A key element in understanding Eadric is discovering when the precise moments he chooses to use mind speech. He is a man of action and is unafraid to make decisions. His life events, such as being raped in childhood, have skewed his views.

AGNES

Although Agnes at first appears to be a minor character, Buffini does not ignore her. Agnes has a long back story. Agnes has descended from a poor family, nuns raised her then sold her to Princess Ymma. Agnes went through a crisis in her faith which she resolved on her own by becoming a primordial “protestant,” or even “transcendentalist” focused on God in relation to creation and existence rather than salvation and damnation. Agnes has a complicated relationship with Ymma. They have grown up together, but they do not share their deepest secrets. Agnes remains completely ignorant of Ymma’s rape by her brother. Agnes is cautious, wise and realistic, but she is brave enough to go out into the world with the priest and abandon the comforts of court life.

ROGER

He is a priest and frequently identifies himself as such. Having grown up in the church, Roger knows little else about the world. The opportunity to tutor Silence is an unexpected adventure that he had no idea was coming, but he embraces it as it comes. His
demons are those of the apocalypse and reconciling the idea of a benevolent God who would inflict the tortures of hell upon his creatures. This idea becomes particularly disturbing when Roger falls in love with Agnes, for how could God destroy something as precious as she? As his doubts grow, so too does his agoraphobia. This fear grows until Agnes is able to cure him through her perspective of finding God in creation, rather than an excessive focus on the deity himself. The sexual humor involving Roger is amusing and memorable, but his sexual confusion is a symptom of his metaphorical disease of doubt, not the cause.
CHAPTER FIVE: Concept

Unless you are doing a production with a significant resetting, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* set in Nazi Germany, the idea of concept is sometimes hard to define. I will stick with how I ask my own students to define the concept of the plays they direct. I ask them to address two questions: What is the play about? How are you going to tell the story?

The play is about a woman’s journey towards empowerment as she learns that identity is a choice. It is a story set long ago, but has a modern sensibility. We will tell the story through fluid design choices that allow the actors to connect with the audience and bridge the gap between the 11th and 21st centuries.

I opened my first production meeting with handouts that addressed those and other related questions. I gave the background of the story including Buffini’s synthesis of the Emma of Normandy and *Roman de Silence* stories. I asked them to imagine “What if..?” as Buffini had done. I emphasized that the play is Ymma’s story and that they should find themes of both empowerment and escape through alternative identity.

There is a structure to Ymma’s story. She is forced into marriage, captured, and escapes through the revelation of Silence’s sexual indeterminacy. The king captures her again with his threat of the annulment of her marriage to Silence, but she escapes on the open road. She faces capture a third time when she involuntarily marries Ethelred, but finally enjoys freedom through her pact of silence with Silence. Only after her third experience of freedom does Ymma learn she has the strength and power to forge her
own identity regardless of what society wants.

As encouraged by Virginia Smith and Tice Miller in my directing and script analysis classes here at UNL I created a “Top Ten” list for Silence as a way to break down the most important elements for putting on the play. The following is the “Top Ten” I presented to the design team at the first production meeting with additional comments to clarify meaning. The list is not in order of importance.

1. A DYNAMIC SET

Silence has 28 scenes and 17 different locations that need to fit in a black box theatre. The locations include castles, fields, caves, a forest in a snow storm and several crucial scenes in a wagon crossing England. Regardless of the type of set, it has to be mutable, yet still unified.

2. ZERO TRANSITION TIME

The play has a long running time and will suffer from lengthy transitions. I received a lot of negative feedback regarding my transitions in The Pillowman and I was determined to avoid making the same mistake again.

3. NO BARRIERS

Lights, sounds, projections and set pieces must not create barriers. I had the option of selecting the larger, proscenium Howell Theatre, but chose the black-box Studio Theatre for its intimacy. Any design element, therefore, that interfered with that intimacy would defeat the whole point of performance in that space. Designers must create castle walls, but they must be able to tear them down instantly.

4. LIGHTS
I wanted lights to achieve two things. Outdoors, the lights could be bright and open and help establish the setting. Indoors, the lights could be more expressionistic and help to set the emotional landscape.

5. A FEAST OF SOUND

With the challenge of a variety of locations comes the opportunity of using atmospheric sounds. Wind, birds, streams, the ocean, rain, snow, the echo of a medieval castle, a cart on the open road, the metal clash of war and the screams of torture all are possibilities. We can’t build real walls, so let’s build them with sound. The possibilities are endless.

6. MEDIEVAL (ISH) MUSIC

Music is an area where production can merge the setting’s time period and the contemporaneousness of the writing. Music that is modern, but feels old would complement the feeling of the dialogue. I suggested the band Enigma that has songs such as “Sadeness” that include Gregorian chants set to techno beats. Professor Smith immediately suggested the Medieval Babes, a modern band that records medieval songs, often in ancient languages. Sandy Veniziano suggested a video from Manheim Steamroller.

7. INTEGRATED VIDEO

I wanted video that was part of the set and the experience. If possible, I wanted to avoid projecting onto a screen and have the video/slides of the set itself. If a screen was necessary, I wanted something on it the whole time.
8. IDENTITY and TRANSFORMATION

This play presents abundant artistic opportunities for a costume designer. Each character goes through a journey and there is ample opportunity to express that journey through wardrobe. Silence and Ymma have costume changes involving gender identity written in and Ethelred goes from a bed-ridden filthy night gown to elegant royal armor. With so many internal changes in the characters, how can we express that on the outside?

9. MAKE HER A BOY!

With casting still several months away at the time of the first production meeting it is impossible to talk about the specifics of gender transformation. I knew that making a young woman of 18-22 years old convincing as a male to the audience would be impossible, but I threw that goal out there to my costumer. My real goal was to get the actress in the role to be masculine enough for the audience to buy into the other characters believing Silence was a boy. I also knew that being convincing as a boy would have more to do with the actor than the costume, but I wanted the costumer to believe that it was also her duty to create that illusion.

10. 1002 MEETS 2013

Although this is a Medieval story, with Medieval customs and mindsets, Moira Buffini has written it in a modern idiom, sprinkled with 21st century jargon and infused with modern attitudes. It is an entertaining blend, which everyone working on the production must embrace.
CHAPTER SIX: Working with the Design and Production Team

From the initial production meeting onward, the collaborative environment of the production was positive and productive. Since nobody asked me to provide input as to who would be on the team, I was nervous about the choice of collaborators. I don’t know what factors played a part in choosing the production team, but there were two things in particular about its composition that served the production well.

The first positive quality was that two graduate students occupied the most important positions: set designer and technical director. *Silence* has twenty-eight scenes, several of which require travel, and I knew that innovative creativity was going to be necessary for the set designer. A creative set designer would require a TD skilled enough to carry it out. Set designer Michaela Stein and technical director Matt Rightmire were not only skilled in what they do, but they also had a professional attitude that served as an example for the less experienced undergraduate members of the production team.

The second positive quality to the team’s composition was the number of women chosen. *Silence* is a play that is both feminist and feminine. It deals with gender identity from a female perspective. This sort of play needs women working on it and, although it was likely a happy accident rather than by design on the part of the faculty, I was pleased to see at the first meeting that the set designer, lighting designer, sound designer, costume designer and assistant stage manager were all women. They accepted Michaela Stein’s description of the play as “soft and curvy,” and these talented
women helped convince me we were serving this play well.

The most important quality both the women and men on this team possessed was a willingness to communicate their ideas openly and make changes when they were necessary. I had a different, but mostly productive relationship with each member of the team.

**STAGE MANAGEMENT**

My first choice of stage manager was Maggie Austin who was exceptional as my stage manager for *The Pillowman*, but I also knew that Ms. Austin was on my short list to play Ymma and I wasn’t willing to give up her acting potential to the production position. The stage manager assigned me was Fred Drenkow. I requested Mr. Drenkow, as he seemed to be the best choice as far as experience and compatibility of personality from who was available. Mr. Drenkow was an adequate choice and was moderately effective. He did many things well, but Mr. Drenkow has trouble focusing at times and often forgets things that a stage manager is supposed to do when distracted by some other task. One example was when actor David Michael Fox did not show up for a rehearsal one evening. Mr. Fox was proctoring a test in the biology department as part of his pre-med work. I hadn’t heard about the conflict until the day of the rehearsal and Mr. Drenkow insisted that he hadn’t known either, which was a claim that the actors later disputed. I hope that through more experience that he will be able to find a way to get a grip on the massive multitasking that goes with the stage manager position.

My biggest disappointment with his work was that I found out he had not been
giving actors regular call times. He had not posted them on the physical callboard nor on an online forum. Actors had a general overview schedule, but when Mr. Drenkow and I worked out the more specific calls, usually a week ahead of time, those times weren’t getting communicated efficiently to the actors. I didn’t find out about this shortcoming until we were in tech rehearsals and I was frustrated with myself for not having known.

There were, however, many positives to his performance. Mr. Drenkow’s heart was in the work and he always demonstrated a desire to serve the process. I could count on him to be on time and have the rehearsal room set up and ready to go. He furthermore always had a positive and upbeat attitude.

**SET DESIGN and TECHNICAL DIRECTION**

I chose to use the Studio Theatre, the smaller of the two performance spaces at UNL, in which to stage *Silence* in order to preserve the intimacy of the script. The Studio Theatre is a flexible, black-box theatre and I expected set designer Michaela Stein initial drawings to present a thrust configuration. Ms. Stein was aware that a prevailing requirement for the production included the use of projections and my brain didn’t consider the possibility of in-the-round. The semi-thrust, corner or “L” shaped configuration I have seen used in that space was never pleasing to me and I was hoping she wasn’t going to propose that configuration. Ms. Stein presented a design that was not only arena, but a true in-the-round configuration. The playing area was a perfect circle and so was the audience seating area surrounding the space. Upon seeing it, my thought was, “Of course.” I immediately accepted Ms. Stein’s design. I knew that staging
would be tricky. I had never directed in the round (aside from a classroom scene from *Medea*) and the twenty foot diameter of the circle seemed confining, but the upside of the intimacy between the audience and the cast (and among the audience members themselves) was worth any obstacles present in a true in-the-round space.

Since flats were not possible in this design, Ms. Stein solved the requirement of projections by designing three screens made of cheese cloth that matched the circle of the playing space. These screens were hung above the playing space and between three large arches that served as the entrances to the stage. Having had little background in projections, I wondered if it were possible to get good projections in such a small space. I decided to take a leap of faith and trust the design team to figure it out.

For furniture, Ms. Stein designed a bed that figures prominently in the first half of the play both for Ethelred and for the wedding night of Ymma and Silence. Ms. Stein also included a chair and a table that could be used in Ymma’s chamber. She designed a cart for the several significant scenes in which five of the characters travel across England. The design also included a couple rocks the production used for sitting. All of these pieces would be moved in and out for the scenes in which they were needed.

After receiving Ms. Stein’s model in May, I had the summer to ponder things. The longer I looked, my satisfaction with the overall artistic design remained, but I began to worry about some practical aspects. There didn’t seem to be adequate places for actors to sit or stand on and the bed; the cart presented problems with getting it quickly on and off stage without a bunch of crew members. I had let Ms. Stein and Mr. Rightmire know from the beginning I wanted to avoid crew members being visible to the
Ms. Stein solved the problem levels on stage by adding a second rock to the set. The bed became a central concern throughout the production process and, like the characters, underwent a major journey.

This cart had to get on and off stage easily and accommodate five people and their belongings. It had to convince the audience that the characters on it were travelling across England. The most difficult aspect of the cart, however, was that it had to suffer a broken wheel and then crash, creating a major plot event in scene thirteen. This was no small task, but Mr. Rightmire came up with several promising ideas. The most interesting was one in which an actor would release a lever inside the cart that would pop off the front, left wheel. The cart would not overturn, but it would hit the ground on the front left side.

Although I thought this solution was a good one, I worried about its complexity and repeatability. With the start of rehearsals approaching, I began to wonder if having an actual cart was the correct artistic approach. Perhaps it was my inexperience with quality designers, but I wanted the control over such a complicated moment to be in the hands of the actors. I approached Ms. Stein during auditions, less than a week before rehearsals were to begin, with the idea of cutting the use of a practical cart and instead using blocks covered with a tarpaulin to serve as the cart. This idea solved several problems at once, and Ms. Stein and Mr. Rightmire agreed with the change (though I suspect Mr. Rightmire had relished the challenge of building the cart). By using separate blocks, the cart did not need to be moved on and off, but the actors could reform it
while narrating at the top of the scenes that included the cart. An additional benefit was that we could now use different block formations in the playing space to establish a variety of settings. One of my other concerns with a stationary cart in an arena staging involved characters driving the cart while always facing the same side of the audience. By making the cart from blocks, either end of the cart could serve as the front depending on the scene. This style of cart also allowed for easy entrances and exits for the actors.

Typical of this process was Ms. Stein’s response, “Yes, and...” which led to her making something better than I had imagined. She designed four rocks, two rectangular and two square. These became places to sit and stand. They became an altar in the church, a stage for the wedding, and a fire pit in the barn. Most importantly, they made a convincing cart. When covered by a rough tarp the rocks fit the description Eadric provides when he says, “I’ve disguised it as a peasant’s cart.” Projections of scenery going by and the sounds of the clickety-clack of horse hooves were to help the audience imagine the travel in lieu of an actual cart with moving wheels. The crash, which Silence announces, “A cart crash. We’ve gone off the road,” was to occur with a flash of lights, in a burst of crashing sounds, accompanied by the actors doing controlled falls to the stage floor. Ms. Stein made one final addition selling the now-imaginary cart’s believability. This addition did not emerge until about two and a half weeks into rehearsal while observing a run-through rehearsal. Ms. Stein designed two sets of ropes to serve as reins. She designed one set of ropes on each side of the stage that we attached to the paneling located below the first row of audience. The cart driver was to
grab the ropes and pull them out when about to drive the cart. Meantime a crew member underneath the audience seats was to retract them as the scene shifted to a non-cart scene.

The final large set piece was a set of stairs. This set of stairs solved the challenge of Silence’s jump from the tower during scene twenty-seven. My idea was to have Silence do a jump into a blackout and then do a film sequence that depicted her falling on the projection screens. Stagehands were to bring on the steps during intermission and place them in one of the entryways. I twice found spots for Ethelred to use the steps as his ship during his monologues, thereby giving the impression that the steps weren’t there just to do Silence’s jump. A crew member was to place a pad covered in Duvateen, a black cloth commonly used for stage masking, underneath the stairs. After Silence jumped the crew member was to hand Silence another piece of Duvateen to cover herself, thereby being masked for a quick exit into the shadows.

A couple weeks before tech rehearsals Virginia Smith watched a run through in which some projections were used. She said that she was splitting focus between the screens and the stage because of the height at which we hung the screens. Ms. Smith recommended lowering the screens a few feet and after some reflection I agreed with her. I approached Ms. Stein about the idea and we talked it through. It seems that lowering the screens would inhibit lighting instruments already fitting tightly into the small circle of the stage. Ms. Stein also believed that the screens were at an ideal height for the audience who could easily glance up and then return focus to the stage whereas lowering the screens would make the images more prominent and, thus, invasive.
disagreed with her about the relationship of the screens to the audience, but I understood the negative effect on the light design of lowering them. I pursued that idea no further. Upon reflection, the screens would have functioned better had they been a few feet lower. Perhaps the arches could have curved back further above the audience, thereby making the circle wider for the lights, but we were too far along in the process to make a change that radical.

Working with Mr. Rightmire was a positive experience throughout. As noted above, he took the elimination of the cart in stride and strove to provide everything on time and workable. We received the circle of our stage and the audience risers early in the process. This helped me immensely as I was able to watch the show from every possible angle for most of the rehearsals, which is crucial in an arena configuration. He completed the rocks two weeks into the process and to the delight of the cast, they were light and easier to maneuver than the traditional acting blocks with which we had begun rehearsing.

Mr. Rightmire’s most impressive work was on the construction of the bed. I used the bed as Ethelred’s in scenes two, three and five and as Ymma and Silence’s bed in scene seven. Although Roger and Agnes were to bring on the bed in scene seven, there is nothing to motivate its other entrances and exits. In scene two, the bed enters for only a half-page of text as Silence recounts to Roger his first encounter with Ethelred and exits directly thereafter. Adding to the difficulty was that Ethelred had to be on the bed for each of his three entrances and exits. Allowing the audience to witness him getting in and out of bed would detract from their sense that Ethelred never leaves his
bed. With twenty-eight scenes in the play, I wanted to keep all transitions fast and I
didn’t want to interrupt the audience’s imagination by seeing a bunch of crew members
coming in and out.

The design team floated several ideas around to solve the bed movement
including everything from a motorized engine to a push stick. Mr. Rightmire was up to
the challenge and settled on what was an ingenious mechanism underneath the bed. He
installed casters under each corner below the posts. A platform big enough to
accommodate an adult he built under the mattress, placing a ten inch tricycle wheel at
the foot of the bed. The wheel was to be operated by a crew member who turned out to
be a freshman named Zachary Bartlett. Mr. Bartlett did an outstanding job and became
affectionately known as the “bed bug.” The “bed bug” would lie on his stomach and
operate the wheel by peddling with his hands. An infrared light was put on an opening
near the wheel and a strip of infrared paint gave a track for Mr. Bartlett to follow. There
was much practice with this guidance technique which resulted in a 99% success rate.
Despite a clearance of only an inch of on each side, only once during either run of the
show did the bed post bump the arches. Mr. Bartlett’s driving of the bed was quick and
seamless, permitting the performance to maintain tempo.

LIGHTING DESIGN

The lighting design of undergraduate Sarah Resch was a mix of mood and
atmospheric light that effectively served the production. We communicated well
throughout the process. I wanted lighting to help the storytelling without becoming
distracting and Ms. Resch accomplished that through her creation of unique looks for each of the twenty-eight scenes, despite having to work around the exigencies of a small circular stage, projection screens and high hanging set pieces.

Ms. Resch assisted the solution of the moving cart by using gobos with innocuous patterns in overhead instruments that ever so slightly crawled on the floor. She established the chapel inside Ethelred’s castle with dim bluish lights, supplemented with gobos, creating a stained glassed windows effect on the floor. This technique created the illusion that the windows were the only source of light. She and I devised a fireplace in the barn by configuring the rocks on stage in a square with an opening in the center where she focused a red light with a rotating gobo.

Much of the other lighting was used as an emulation of day or night, rainy, sunny or snowy, but Ms. Resch also did some effective thematic lighting. The script features a series of six Ethelred monologues as he tracks down Ymma and her crew. Each monologue is another step in Ethelred’s journey from a bed-ridden coward to a savage, aggressive tyrant. Ms. Resch followed Ethelred’s arc by including a little more red light during each of Ethelred’s monologues. By his final monologue, in which he describes torturing to death a Viking priestess, the audience was to feel saturated in the blood he has spilled.

Ms. Resch was also accommodating and generous when, late in the process, I wanted to make a significant change in the staging. Throughout rehearsals I had been having a difficult time in staging the scenes (scene 13 through scene 19) that occurred after the cart crash and took place in and around the ancient burial tomb the characters
discover, known as a barrow. My original staging was to put the rocks in a semicircle center stage to form the barrow. The subsequent scenes took place around the edges of the circle. There were several problems with this staging. First was that actors would be forced to move in a small area around the edges of the stage for a lengthy section of the play. The result of this confined space was blocking that was awkward, repetitive, and clunky. Secondly, was the difficulty establishing for the audience where the barrow entrance was and when the characters were in or out of the barrow. After struggling with several ideas (and working from a suggestion by Virginia Smith) I finally found an imperfect, but vastly improved set up. I moved the interior of the barrow to one of the vomitoriums. The rocks then lined both sides of the opening and formed the mouth of the barrow. When the characters slept inside the barrow they would be beyond the archways in the vomitorium. Though some audience members could not see them, this positioning opened up the rest of the stage to the actors when outside the barrow and clarified the scene’s geography. I didn’t visualize this solution until the middle of the week before technical rehearsals. I told Ms. Resch that I was making changes, but I didn’t give her the full details until we were in the middle of our paper tech rehearsal. She had already hung and focused the lights as we talked of the difficulty that my changes were presenting. Then, as if on cue, Ms. Resch received a text message telling her that a significant number of her lighting instruments were going to be moved out of place to facilitate fire treatment of the projection screens. It was a tense and emotional moment. I realized that asking for a change this late in the game was my own fault, but I didn’t want to back away from my new staging when it was clearly going to
make it a better production. I also understood that Ms. Resch probably felt
overwhelmed with so much work involved in both re-focusing and rewriting cues. We
cut off the paper tech before finishing so we could resolve what could and could not
happen.

I don’t know the full details, but through small bits of conversation I got the
impression that several graduate students in design pitched in to help her and their
efforts relaxed the situation. The change happened and all the adjustments took place
within the day and were ready for the technical rehearsals at the end of the week. I was
and am grateful both to Ms. Resch and the entire crew of graduate designers and
technical directors for making this accommodation, which resulted in a much improved
production.

COSTUME DESIGN

The costume design process was positive and uneventful. Katie Davis was the
costume designer and presented clear ideas throughout the process. Since Silence takes
place in 1000 A.D. there is only so much a designer can do with regard to fashion. Katie
presented vivid research images and strong choices for each character.

Agnes and Eadric were the easiest to costume. They each remained in the same
costume throughout the play and that costume accorded with their station in life. Agnes
remains in her simple servant costume until the very last moments of the play when she
narrates the epilogue in a simple peasant costume. In accordance with her station, the
goal of Agnes’ costume was to stay nondescript and never upstage Ymma. The only
exception to Eadric’s regular soldier costume is when he takes off his shirt in scene twenty-five while under the influence of hallucinogenic mushrooms. I asked Ms. Davis to make a costume allowing him to peel down his shirt and then hang from his waist, thereby simplifying his abrupt and chaotic exit from that scene.

Roger wears a simple priest’s robe for most of the play, but he adds ceremonial robes for the two weddings and for when Ethelred pronounces him a bishop. Ms. Davis’ research showed that there was a lot of variation in what priests wore at the time, but we eventually agreed on a simple black robe to keep things clear for our twenty-first century audience. This simplicity contrasted well with the elaborate ceremonial robes. Roger put on brown pants and shirt for the final narration with Agnes when he has left the priesthood.

Ymma needed to stand out as a Princess, yet even the most remarkable garments of this period pale in comparison to modern fashions. Ms. Davis and I decided on a light blue dress to be Ymma’s first travel dress. She wears that dress until she is fitted for her first wedding dress. This is the same dress which Eadric later violates and the distinct brighter color helped make it clear that it is her dress when he pulls it from the road bags. Ymma’s wedding dress was a pale peach in keeping with the muted tones, but it still expressed royalty and ceremony proper to the occasion. Her road clothes were less elegant since the group was disguising themselves as peasants and when she trades that dress for men’s clothes they, too, are bland and non-descript. The most unusual costume piece worn by Ymma, or worn by any character, was her wedding dress for her marriage to Ethelred. Ms. Davis created a dress from a very thick and
textured piece of brown fabric that looked like nothing else in the show. It worked well as a piece scrounged up by Ethelred in the evacuated Ragnarok. Very little would have been left in the empty city and the uniqueness of the fabric gave a sense of Silence’s hometown being somewhere quite different than the southern England of the other characters.

Ms. Davis’ most formidable tasks were in costuming Ethelred and Silence. I talked to Ms. Davis from the outset about how each of the characters in the play takes a journey with the most transformative one belonging to Ethelred. The king evolves from inept to inimitable and his clothing must document this evolution. Ethelred started in a filthy nightshirt. Although I appreciated his other costumes, his nightshirt disappointed me. I wanted the garment to be disgusting. The gown needed to be torn, dirty and hanging from his body. Ms. Davis first presented a neat, clean garment. I asked for more soiling and she accommodated me. I expressed how it should have a wide opening at the top so that it was hanging off his shoulders but the nightshirt remained cinched at his neck. Ms. Davis expressed understanding and offered no resistance, but still the changes were never incorporated. Ethelred’s other costumes were excellently designed and executed, and Ms. Davis did an excellent job of changing those costumes in conformity with Ethelred’s emotional journey. Each new scene in which Ethelred appeared in after his release from prison in scene twelve onward he added to his outfit. Capes, boots and robes kept contributing to the transformation, and by the time we see Ethelred in Ragnarok in scene twenty six, he is clad in a majestic suit, complete with fur lining and he has assumed the countenance of a new man.
The challenge in portraying the character of Silence is making a she (the actor) into a he that is a she (the character) and having the audience accept it. I knew that the key to the audience buying this convention was going to be Brenna Hill’s performance, but I wanted the costumes to help as much as possible. We talked about clothes that are baggy so that her gender would not be so readily apparent and the costumer bound Ms. Hill’s breasts to help this effect as well. Ms. Davis wanted fabric that set Silence apart from the others since she is a Viking. I agreed with this reasoning, but I rejected the first fabric she presented for Silence. This fabric was attractive in color and differentiated well from the others, but contained a decorative pattern than had a lot of curves and shapes resembling leaves. It was not overtly feminine and would have worked as men’s clothing on an actual man, but since we were battling to make Ms. Hill less feminine, I didn’t want any curvy lines or environmental decorations that would have made the suggestion of maleness any more difficult. Ms. Davis came up with an alternate light green fabric that made an excellent Viking inspired tunic without any of the more feminine patterns.

SOUND DESIGN

Since Silence has so much action and so many different and diverse locations, I knew from the outset that sound needed to play a prominent role in creating the world of the play. Sonia Sandoval did an excellent job designing those sounds, but the process was not as successful with regard to communication as it was the other departments.

Conversations with Ms. Sandoval always appeared to be productive, but often
the songs and sounds she played for me were unlike what I thought we talked about. She created many effective sounds that served the play such as the horse and wagon effects to underscore the cart travelling scenes. She also provided the sounds of birds and frogs when the characters found themselves on the moors and sounds of rain that provided a background effect for the audience without overwhelming the dialogue. The sounds of fire were effective during Ethelred’s dream in scene eight, when he talked of the apocalypse. The same effect reappeared for Roger’s dream of the apocalypse at the end of the play. Ocean sounds rumbled when Ethelred was on his ship and a pulsing heartbeat underscored Ethelred’s monologues when he talked of murder.

Two sound effects Ms. Sandoval created which I most appreciated were the echoes in the dungeon and cave and later the drum beat at the approach of Ethelred’s army in scene twenty-five. Ms. Sandoval placed microphones in the two voms used for the barrow and Ethelred’s dungeon. She programmed those microphones to have a reverberation effect, creating an echo that enhanced the impression that the characters were in a cave or dungeon.

Scene twenty-five presents a dramatic moment when Ymma is about to kill Eadric. He is seated and behind him Ymma is raising a sword, intending to decapitate him while she calms him with soothing words. Underneath her speech we begin to hear a drum beat that underscores the tension behind the potential violence we are about to see. Before Ymma can go through with it, Agnes and the priest interrupt her proclaiming, “There are drums!” Even though the moment is broken, the drums continue and we learn that these sounds weren’t atmospheric underscores, but actual
drums from an approaching English army. A new kind of tension now builds, but the drum sounds became the bridge between the two moments.

The biggest difficulties with the sound process were in the aforementioned use of music. I had talked to Ms. Sandoval about covering the transitions between the many scenes with both environmental sounds as well as music depending on the mood and length of each transition. Then during one production meeting, however, when Virginia Smith asked about our use of music, Ms. Sandoval said that we were not using any music during transitions. I talked to her later about this and said I did want music on the longer transitions. The sounds continued nevertheless to be mostly environmental.

I have a lot of strong opinions about music, but I held back from making specific choices with the intention of giving the sound designer room for creativity. I provided Ms. Sandoval the starting points of songs from the band Enigma such as “Sadeness” that have a medieval feel but are still modern. I also directed her to a band called Mediaeval Babes who perform ancient ballads in their original languages. Ms. Sandoval came up with several Mediaeval Babes songs that made up the preshow and intermission music. I talked with her about modern songs that would lead in and out of each half of the play. Ms. Sandoval never presented me with any potential songs, so the last night before tech found songs on my own. I chose U2’s “Until the End of the World” to start the show. This song is subdued, but remains upbeat with lyrics that express struggle and the tension of perceived imminent destruction. To end the first half I chose Johnny Cash’s “Cut You Down” to punctuate Ethelred’s monologue at the end of scene twelve. Ethelred talks about killing in the name of God and the drum beat that opens the song
sustains the intensity of the climax of his emotional speech. The lyrics then take on an
ominous implication as Johnny Cash even tones warn us “Sooner or later God will cut
you down.” I stuck with Mediaeval Babes music to slip us back into the world of the
early 11th century as we started the second half. The final moment of the show I played
“At the End of the World” by Ingrid Michaelson. It is a bittersweet love song that left an
emotional impression on the story, as we watch Agnes and Roger kiss on stage and
Silence and Ymma kiss on the screen. Agnes finishes the play by stating that they are still
“living on the edge of destruction.” The lyrics of the Michaelson song echoed Agnes
words that sum up the story when she sings pleadingly, “At the end of the world, will
you find me?”

PROJECTIONS

Since I had not worked extensively with projections in the past, they were for me
a new toy and I wanted to play with them a lot to see what they could accomplish. We
had these screens above the stage and I wanted them put to use, so my original list for
projections was extensive. They included background images for each location, video for
each of the dream descriptions and an “Indiana Jones” style map tracking the
characters’ travels. Assistant Professor Steve Kolbe, the faculty advisor to my
projections designers, undergraduate film students Drake Tucker and Ethan Seagren,
immediately indicated that my initial list seemed overwhelming. Mr. Kolbe was right and
the first thing I cut was the “Indiana Jones” map. The thought of the homage to the films
amused me, but did little to help tell the story. I tried to simplify my requests, but the
final list of projections was still extensive.

With a minimalist set up for the basic furniture, I definitely knew that I needed something to set the background and assist the indication of travel. The previous summer, during a trip to London, I was able to catch the West End production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*. This production included a section where the story of a character taking a trip was told through projections that moved across the back wall. They were not detailed images, but rather shadows of recognizable shapes. This use of shadows I envisioned for the travelling scenes, and in fact, for background for all the scenes. I spoke to Mr. Seagren and he quickly understood my vision. Once he produced these images there were very few revisions needed. Most of the requests had to do with the speed at which the scenery went by as the cart travelled. The final speed was significantly slower than the original design since I wanted to be sure the audience could get the feeling of movement while not becoming too distracted by what was on the screen. If the scenery went too fast, the audience might focus on the screens for fear of missing out on something.

The basic background images, all of which were in black and white, ended up as the following:

Scene 1: Trees and a field

Scenes 2, 4, 6: Walls of a chapel with stained glass windows

Scenes 3, 5, 7: Interior castle walls

Scene 8: Exterior courtyard walls, lighter

Scene 9, 11: Trees, fields, moving scenery
Scene 10: Close up of manacles of cellar wall, very dark

Scene 12: Blank until video image

Scene 13: Moving scenery with rain until crash. After crash, an open moor

Scene 14: Inside a barrow, Cave paintings

Scene 15: Ethelred’s ship: planks that slightly rocked

Scenes 16, 17, 18: an open moor with varied levels of brightness

Scene 19: Video of Ethelred

Scene 20: Moving scenery, trees, fields

Scene 21: No image

Scene 22: City of York, stands in a marketplace

Scene 23, 26, 28: Ragnarok, Interior castle walls

Scene 24: Interior of barn: wall planks. Also, shadows of hallucinated goats pass through.

Scene 25: Forest with snow falling

Scene 27: Snow falling against blackness

In order to enhance other moments I wanted to use live action video. In particular I wanted to make the dream descriptions in the text more vivid. The following were film clips that I directed and that were edited by Mr. Tucker.

All of the following images were live action and in full color:

Scene 6: As Silence describes his sexual dream to Roger we see film clips of Silence running through forest and encountering “the barbarian.”
Scene 7: As Silence describes her wedding night with Ymma to the audience, on the screens were close up images of Silence and Ymma laughing and talking and drinking.

Scene 8: Ethelred’s dream description is accompanied by sexually provocative images of Ymma as envisioned by Ethelred and digitally animated fire.

Scene 11: Close up of Eadric’s face as Silence realizes that Eadric is the barbarian form the dream.

Scene 12: A close up Ethelred’s hand slitting his jailer’s throat Ethelred punctuates the end of our Act One.

Scene 13: Silence has a fantasy about Eadric while in the cart.

Scene 15: Ethelred gives an inspirational speech to his troops and then talks about the past tense. I filmed this and then had Ethelred watch it on the screens with the audience.

Scene 26: A close up of Silences’ feet as she jumped from the tower and then her falling into darkness, which we filmed using a green screen.

Scene 28: As Roger and Agnes kissed center stage to end the play, I mirrored that with a picture of Ymma and Silence kissing.

Scenes 11, 18, 28: We used strings of purple, which looked like electrical brain currents, which wafted across the screens when Eadric practices his “mind speech.” He describes the words his mind receives from the king as “they come to me in purple.”

Scene 24: The group mushroom induced hallucination was indicated by various psychedelic colors floating across the screens.

One video image I conceived, but later cut was the idea of showing the Viking
Priestess who is tortured to death by Ethelred and his men. Although initially I wanted to spice up a speech that was long on description, I didn’t want to introduce too strongly a character who is not actually in the play. Instead, her two utterances, which Ethelred quotes were recorded by the sound designer. The voice was that of undergraduate actor Lauren Huston, who has a full voice that commands attention. This kept the focus on Ethelred as he was approaching the apex of his personal transformation.

Another of my initial ideas likewise eventually cut was the idea of starting some scenes on video that would then be “picked up” live on stage. I thought this technique might allow for quicker transitions, but it became unnecessary due to the simplicity of the set.

Overall, I was quite impressed by the efficacy and quality of Mr. Seagren and Mr. Tucker’s work. Graduate design student Joseph Burbach also impressed me with his ability to get the projectors working in the space. Professor Kolbe had expressed apprehension about getting the projections to work on a curved screen. Mr. Burbach used two projections for each screen, for a total of six, and made them work well. There was a technical glitch during at least one performance where test numbers kept appearing on the screens before showing the intended projection each time a new projection went up. Mr. Burbach fixed that glitch before the next show.
CHAPTER SEVEN: Casting

There was a lot of time for me to think about which actors could play these parts. I had over the previous two years, worked with nearly every sophomore, junior and senior in the department on a stage or film project. This work meant that over the summer I could not avoid formulations in my thoughts of who could play the roles. For several reasons, however, I wanted to keep an open mind. The other director for the semester may also want to work with the actors I was considering and student actors sometimes get better over the summer. Additionally, someone could surprise me or there could be some strong candidates in the incoming freshman class.

To my delight, the semester auditions were the strongest and deepest of the five sets that I had observed. I had begun with a list that included two actors who could play each role and left those auditions with a list of four to five who could play each role. This new list gave me a lot of confidence in finding the right combination.

The call backs went well and cemented several things in my mind. Maggie Austin was the best choice for Ymma. She had the combination of confidence, vulnerability and sexuality needed for Ymma. She would have no problem playing a character who is “in charge” and at the same time likable. Some of the other potential leading women who auditioned stretched believability as royalty or had a tendency to come off as mean spirited. Luckily for me, Ms. Austin was not available for the other show that semester since she was directing a play that conflicted with its rehearsals.

Brenna Hill and Kayla Klammer were my top choices for Silence. Both had faces
more feminine in shape then I would have liked, but there was no one who fit that
description and who had the acting ability to pull off such a complicated role. Ms. Hill
won out not only for her strong reading, but for the enjoyable experiences I’ve had
working with her in the past. She has outstanding natural instincts and listens to and
incorporates acting notes as well as, or better, than anyone else I have worked with at
UNL. Her physical stature was small enough to work as a young boy and she also had the
intensity to be believable as a warrior.

Someone I didn’t expect won the role of Agnes. She was Kirstie Smith, with
whom I had worked previously during the UNL New Artist Festival in 2012, and I found
her to be talented, but inexperienced. Her skills had improved significantly over the
previous year and a half and her reading for Agnes was outstanding.

The casting of Luke Glassman as Roger was an easy choice. I had Mr. Glassman
in mind as one of my top two choices, mostly due to his excellent comic timing. It was,
however, his sincerity in a dramatic reading that made Mr. Glassman stand out at call
backs. Ryan Rabstejnek as Ethelred also was an easy choice. His previous roles showed
him to be charismatic and able to go easily from sniveling to commanding.

The most challenging part to cast in this play, with this particular pool of actors,
was that of Eadric. This character is a warrior who must show off his muscles and appear
convincing as a one man army. The young men in this department are generally lacking
in that type of physical and emotional maturity. That paucity immediately limited my
selections to David Michael Fox and Spenser Stokes. To complicate my decision, Mr.
Stokes was not going to be in town for call backs, so I couldn’t read him with other
actors. I was a little reluctant at first to use Mr. Fox because when working with him in
the past he and I just didn’t always communicate as well as I would have liked. At times
it seemed as if he were reluctant to trust my direction. Further complicating my decision
was that I try to avoid casting couples, especially with college age actors, since some of
them bring unnecessary baggage to the task at hand and I knew Mr. Stokes was in a
relationship with one of the female actors who was a top choice of mine. I was wavering
when Joshua Waterstone, director of the other University Theatre show, *Middletown*,
expressed an interest in Mr. Stokes, so I went ahead with Mr. Fox as Eadric.

Overall there was very little overlap in casting desires between Mr. Waterstone
and me. Our meeting lasted only five minutes in negotiating for actors. It was a positive
way to start out the process. The casting of all six of the actors turned out to be the right
choices and it was a key part of the successful rehearsal process.
Chapter Eight: Rehearsals: Working with the Actors

WEEK ONE (September 3-7, 2013)

The first week was a short one since we had to wait until after the Labor Day holiday, but we made solid use of those four days. The first day started awkwardly when David Michael Fox was late to the read through. He claimed he had a conflict on the form, but I double checked and his conflict was vague. It deflated the energy a bit to start on such a down note, but I worked to keep the energy up.

I was starting with introducing the design team, which allowed time for Mr. Fox to arrive. I welcomed the actors to the process and reminded them that there were people who had already been working on the show for months. We looked at samples of that work that included drawings of costumes and the set model.

The first read through followed and it was fun and energetic. Hearing the words read aloud after only imagining them in my head for months was a relief. I noted at the read through how pleased I was with casting. After the reading, I shared some of the source material that inspired Buffini and offered to loan books relating to the characters. Ms. Hill borrowed my copy of Roman de Silence. I continued the rehearsal by presenting a newspaper article about a Chinese man who didn’t discover he was biologically a woman until he was 66 years old. I encouraged the cast to bring in other articles related to the themes of Silence, but that never developed.

The rest of the week was spent on blocking. I had never directed a play in the round before, but done some research to anticipate potential challenges of using that configuration. I began by emailing UNL faculty member Carrie Lee Patterson since she
had recently directed the play *Paragon Springs* at UNL in an arena configuration. Ms. Patterson recommended that I review the sections in the book *Play Directing: Style, Communication and Analysis* by Francis Hodge and *Theatre in the Round* by Margo Jones. I also reviewed Jon Jory’s advice in *Tips: ideas for Directors* and an online article by director Craig Mason from theatremania.com. The advice from those author/directors was very helpful and I found that staging a play in an arena configuration wasn’t much different from directing in a thrust configuration, with which I have a lot of experience.

The first step to staging in the round was an agreement on terminology since the standard upstage, downstage, stage left and stage right did not apply. A couple popular methods are labeling the stage as a clock or as a compass in which blocking is talked about in terms of numbers or directions, respectively. The compass made the most sense in my head and I established a very simple form of that with the actors. The directions were to have no bearing on the directions of the compass in real life. I picked the edge of the circle facing the wall closest to the door as south and then labeled the other four directions accordingly. Then I gave each entranceway a corresponding direction label. Those entrances were: west (where the bed entered); south (where the barrow eventually was) and northeast (where the stairs lived).

After establishing the directional coordinates, I talked with actors about what I determined were the three basic principles of in the round performance.

Number One: Walk in curves. Even if an actor is crossing to someone or something that is most directly reach by a straight line, the actor should still put a curve
into his/her path. Although this feels uncomfortable to the actor at first, the curve of the audience actually perceives these movements as more natural.

Number Two: OTS-The Over the Shoulder Shot. Whenever possible the actors should not talk to the audience member who is directly in front of them because that engages only those few people that are directly in front of them. Instead, when the actors are near the edge of the stage circle, they should address the audience on the opposite side of the circle. This technique opens up the actor’s face to the majority of the audience. People seeing the actor’s back are so close that they remain involved in the scene. For those audience members, the view becomes like an over the shoulder shot used pervasively in film. They don’t see the actor’s face, but they are still engaged.

Number Three: Subtle turns. Even when engaged in an OTS, actors don’t want to give any audience member back of the head for too long. Actors working in the round (or in thrust) must be aware of how long they have been closing off an audience member. Staying mobile and making small steps one direction or another can make a big difference. One sentence said over the shoulder in the middle of a speech will prevent the audience from feeling ignored.

I gave this speech and demo before we started blocking. It helped the actors understand what I was trying to achieve with the blocking, gave them principles to keep in mind, and, most importantly, put the principles fresh in my own mind.

My usual practice is to have a specific plan for blocking that I give to the actors and ask them initially to keep precisely to that blocking. I then tell the actors, “This blocking is the skeleton of the play. Start with this skeleton. Moving forward, if you have
an impulse to move somewhere else, go with it, because that is how the play gets fleshed out. Try new things. I will try new things, too. If they don’t work, we can always go back to our skeleton.” Such was the process we followed and by the end of the week we were nearly finished with staging.

WEEKS TWO & THREE (September 8-21, 2013)
The second week started out with finishing the blocking on Sunday and reviewing that work on Monday. The show had a decent shape after that first week “rough draft” of the blocking, but there were parts that felt clunky. I found that answers were a little slower in coming to me than when I was directing for thrust or proscenium and perhaps the actors weren’t so adept at adjusting to make the blocking work in the round. Virginia Smith attended the stumble through of the blocking and felt that things had a good start.

The first off-book day for the actors I set for that Tuesday, which was only one week after the first meeting. I knew that this day was sooner than usually expected for this group of actors, but I also broke it down in a way to make the process easy for them. I had received feedback after my direction of The Pillowman the previous year that I was working on sections that were too lengthy for the actors. After reflecting on that criticism, I thought about how, as an actor, I appreciated rehearsing small sections that were frequently repeated. With this concept in mind, I broke the play into six sections of just about twelve pages each. This plan extended the off book days to the length of an entire week. The process I used for each went as follows. We ran that day’s
sections all the way through without stopping and with the actors on book. A couple of the actors did the first run off book, but that was their choice. The second time through we stopped and started the action with the actors off book. I gave notes, adjusted blocking and talked about intentions and relationships. We then finished by running the entire twelve pages off book. This process allowed the actors to ease gradually into memorization. This way there was less tension than on a typical off book day, thereby allowing more to be accomplished in terms of character development and relationships.

Maggie Austin started off this process ahead of the others in character understanding and development. Her experience and training as a senior at JCSTF was evident as was her passion for her role and the play itself. She was clearly putting in a lot of work outside of rehearsal.

David Michael Fox and Kirstie Smith are both pre-med students and spent a lot of time during breaks talking about all they have to do in their science and biology classes. I also noticed that Ms. Smith in particular often did homework during times when she wasn’t on stage. Perhaps it was just these observations making me unnecessarily tense, but I also felt they weren’t as far along as the others in finding their characters. Realizing that unpaid undergraduate actors have other responsibilities beyond the play, I decided not to address it with them and focus my efforts on what was going on while they were on stage.

Ryan Rabstejnek, Brenna Hill and Luke Glassman all seemed focused and to be making excellent progress at this juncture. Mr. Glassman had really started to delve into his character. He revealed to me that he had come from a non-religious background and
wanted to understand better his character, the priest. He decided to attend church a
couple times with his roommates and then took up the habit of reading the Bible at
rehearsal. He often would be there early and would be lying on his back reading one
those tiny Bibles that religious groups hand out for free that contain Psalms, Proverbs
and the New Testament. It was heartening that he was so earnest about understanding
his character.

This week I brought in my fellow graduate directing student Joshua Waterstone
to choreograph the fights. I have a background in stage combat and have
choreographed a few fights, but with so much else on my mind I wanted to put the
initial stuff in someone else’s hands. I assigned Ryan Rabstejnek and Maggie Austin as
co-fight captains to work with him. On the day of the actual choreography I had to keep
leaving the room, because Mr. Waterstone works in a very different way than I do. It
often feels to me like things are out of control, whether they are or not. He allows a lot
of voices to get involved during choreography which I usually find counterproductive.
Leaving the room and getting involved only when absolutely necessary proved to be the
right move on my part. Mr. Waterstone came up with great moves and taught the
actors how to do those moves in a safe and effective manner. I learned the lesson that
when I cede control of some aspect of my production I have to live with the
consequences of that decision. I also I have to be willing to work with people who have
styles different from my own in order to get the best results. The next rehearsal I talked
to Ms. Austin and Mr. Rabstejnek about establishing themselves as the only voices when
critiquing and adjusting the fights during the daily fight call.
With the always rocky road to memorization behind us by the middle of the third week, I gave the cast a day off on a Wednesday to catch up on laundry and homework. I wanted to start fresh after the day off and begin to focus on finding the play’s rhythm while discovering more nuance in the characters.

WEEKS FOUR & FIVE (September 23 to October 4, 2013)

Early in week four I spent one rehearsal solely with Ryan Rabstejnek working on the arc of the character Ethelred. We worked on all his monologues in sequence without the intervening scenes. Mr. Rabstejnek has an innate charisma that makes him a dynamic performer, but it is sometimes so strong that the more subtle moments, of which he is capable, get drowned out by comparison. This particular rehearsal was significant in Mr. Rabstejnek’s development since we were able to explore not only the different things going on inside Ethelred during each monologue, but also where the character was psychologically in relation to each subsequent monologue. This departure was the beginning of breaking through with Ethelred’s development, but there was much left to do.

As Silence, Brenna Hill developed a lot during this time period. From the beginning Brenna had a deep understanding of her character’s wants, needs and overall emotional journey. She took a big step in the right direction after an excellent note was given to me by Professor Smith. She observed that what Ms. Hill was missing was the sense of the “cockiness and clumsiness of an overgrown puppy,” that can occur in young teenage boys. Boys in their early teens vacillate between arrogance and doubt and for
Silence, this confusion is exaggerated because he was raised to be a ruler. Now, however, he finds himself in a new world and is experiencing gender confusion. As usual, Ms. Hill incorporated the notes quickly and efficiently. She was able to add a bit of arrogance and defiance she integrated with her vulnerability for a well-rounded character.

Kirstie Smith continued to develop as Agnes. Her focus improved as we got closer and she began to find a good balance between Agnes’ levity and the heavy concerns that she suppresses. My paramount dilemma with Ms. Smith became her vocal production. She has a naturally very high pitched voice and sometimes when she is on stage her vocal energy sends her voice even higher. The result is a screechy sound that is hard to listen to and hard to understand. The good news was that Ms. Smith’s actor training at UNL had helped her learn to use her voice more effectively since the last time we had worked together. The strength of her voice nevertheless varied from day to day, so I made a point to talk to her about it at the end of one rehearsal. I reminded her that when she warmed up and focused on using her lower register that she had a strong voice that is pleasant to hear. After that Ms. Smith’s voice was consistently strong.

Vocal problems concerned me at times with the work of Luke Glassman. Mr. Glassman has a strained quality that appears at his upper register especially when his character becomes agitated or emotional. This sound of his is the sort that makes me want to clear my throat when I hear it. His problems were less pronounced than those of Ms. Smith, but I believed I could serve him and the play better by working on that specific weakness. Mr. Glassman had been aware of my observations about his voice
from a previous project on which we had worked, so it was easy to resume our dialogue and continue the improvement effort. He did a good job improving this aspect of his voice, but even during performances there were occasional moments when he would produce that strained, creaky, top-of-the-throat sound reappeared. Mr. Glassman will need to continue to improve his vocal quality as he continues to pursue his acting career.

David Michael Fox was having a hard time finding the character of Eadric. Next to flamboyant and aggressive characters such as Ethelred and Ymma, Mr. Fox felt like he was “doing nothing.” I tried to convince him that Eadric does in fact do nothing. He does not like to talk, though he is someone who has a lot going on underneath his stoic veneer. Mr. Fox still continued to struggle. I was pleased with the direction in which he was leading the character, but he was not confident about it. I feared his performance would fall apart if he was not secure. Wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt, I did not accuse him of wanting to put attention on himself ahead of the story of the play. This accusation might have had some truth in it, but, regardless of the cause, I knew the best solution was more and better communication. After a few unsuccessful conversations, we had a breakthrough when by happenstance the character of Maximus, played by Russell Crowe in the movie Gladiator came up in conversation. I had just shown a clip of the movie while teaching Roman theatre to my “Introduction to Theatre” class. Crowe’s Maximus is restrained. He does not speak without purpose and there is a permanently ominous quality to all that he says. He is deeply emotional, but expresses that emotion with the control of a warrior and I wanted to see those same
qualities in Eadric. Luckily, Mr. Fox was a big fan of *Gladiator* and something seemed to stick. The next day Mr. Fox came in with a deeper voice. He was more grounded and his emotions opened up without him becoming too vulnerable or sensitive. Whether or not Mr. Fox based anything he did on that film, I was pleased with his work after that conversation and he no longer brought up concerns that he was doing nothing.

During this time Maggie Austin continued to excel and she spent the last few weeks of rehearsal finding details. Occasionally, she would be a little mean to Silence leading up to the wedding night revelation that changes their relationship. That balance was a quandary we discussed early in the process when Ms. Austin had Ymma in full attack mode. We found the softer spots early on and had addressed the origins of Ymma’s rage. I believed that Ymma’s self-diagnosis of an angry nature was incorrect. She was angry because she had no control over her life, but she is not cruel. I told her that if she ever went too far with Silence, the audience could stop rooting for her. Ms. Austin had become aware when she slipped into old habits and fixed them right away.

Virginia Smith attended two full runs that week and kept pushing me on the details. Most significant were her observations on Mr. Rabstejnek’s performance and my blocking in scene twenty-six, when all six actors were on stage at once. As I mentioned earlier, Ethelred’s arc is a tricky one and Mr. Rabstejnek is a charismatic actor. From Professor Smith’s perspective his performance was “all voice” and there was little change from beginning to end. I disagreed with the acuteness of the problem, but I did see her point. I continued to encourage Mr. Rabstejnek to trust his ability and not push too much.
With regard Professor Smith’s observation about the blocking in scene twenty-six, I completely agreed and vowed to keep working to make it better. Professor Smith recommended, “Get the king out of the middle!” I did so and it worked. I had King Ethelred center stage for much of the scene and that placement, instead of giving him power, merely forced everyone else into weird spots on the sides of the stage that gave no one power and created clunky movement. I didn’t completely remove him from the center spot, but had him cross out of there very soon after the rest of the actors arrived on stage. After that juncture, I kept him mobile, allowing him to command the space. When he moved the others had to react. This positioning proved superior to his turning in circles while camped out center stage. Although this blocking was improved, I was frustrated that I didn’t see how rough that section was until I had seen how much better it could be.

The cast continued to improve as we got into week five. We received more and more props and they incorporated them into their performances with relative ease. When presented with my late adjustment of the barrow setup and the blocking changes that accompanied it, there was no resistance. In fact, it seemed to breathe new life into these scenes and to have something be different.

There were doubts, though. My late realization of the blocking problem in scene twenty six coupled with my changing the of barrow location during week five (thereby causing extra trouble for the lighting designer) had me wondering if there were other things that needed to be fixed in the staging, design, or characters that I just wasn’t seeing.
As the final run-throughs before tech rehearsals took place, I just decided to let those doubts go. I was confident in the cast and the script that I knew they would entertain even if nothing else worked. Besides that, there is only so much time and opening night was not going to change.
CHAPTER NINE: Tech, Dress and Preview

(October 4-9, 2013)

The last week before opening was productive and delightfully uneventful. My biggest concerns were things over which I had little or no control, specifically the bed, the projections, and stage manager’s ability to call the cues. As is usually the case when I direct, when the actors are out on stage I had no worries about anything going wrong. Not only had we rehearsed everything for weeks, but I had confidence in their ability to cover up mistakes as if they never even happened. Technical cues, however, either work or they don’t. The more prominent the technical effect, the more obvious is the error.

The design team and I created a lot of cues for Silence and now that their implementation had arrived, I just had to put faith on the production team.

A lot of work went into getting the projections correct and my limited technological ability left me to just watch it happen. When a problem was encountered I had no real understanding of how difficult it would be to correct it. I held my breath and watched through my fingers as they practiced getting the bed through its narrow passageway.

My notes were few during the tech rehearsals. Most had to do with confirming with the stage manager, Mr. Drenkow, as to whether the things going wrong were due to error or misunderstanding. I cut one sound cue (the sound of soldiers cheering during one of Ethelred’s speeches) and adjusted the timing of several others. I noticed a couple light gels reflecting their color onto the projection screens and ironed out the timing of
when moving projections started to move. There were no big changes, but there were a lot of do-overs to get the timing right.

There was one preview audience before our official opening night that consisted of students from the various "Introduction to Theatre" classes. These audiences are ninety percent 18 year-old freshmen and a large number have never before attended a live stage play. UNL acting students tend to regard these audiences with trepidation and dismay. The night before the preview I reminded the cast that the audience reaction would likely be difficult to handle. I reminded them of the audience’s lack of experience with live performance and encouraged them to think about the importance of training audiences to become theatre customers of the future. I encouraged them to focus and not be discouraged by a lack of response.

To my delight, the cautionary speech I had delivered was superfluous. The preview audience responded in an amazing way. Very few left at intermission, as they are wont to do. They laughed in all the right parts and murmured to each other at the character revelations and plot twists, seeming to enjoy the direct audience address without freaking out. They adored the sexual humor and the drug induced hallucinations. I relaxed. If we had captured the attention of this young audience, then the rest of the run would be a breeze. We had arrived. As Agnes tells us in the final scene of Silence, “The world did not end.”

Chapter Ten: Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival

On the morning of Sunday, December 8, 2013 I received a call from Brad Dell and Rick Anderson representing the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival, Region V. They informed me that Silence had been invited to the Festival 46 to be held at UNL in January. There were to be four performances and the production would remain in its original configuration and space in the Studio Theatre. That was good news.

Silence is a play not often produced and it features a female playwright and strong female acting roles. Our production made some bold staging choices and the KC ACTF respondents that visited us in October responded very positively. For these reasons, I believed we had a good chance to be picked up for the festival. I tried to keep my desire to do the remount at bay until I got official confirmation. I was both happy and relieved when I got the call.

We were ready to put it up again. In an early production meeting JCSTF stage manager and KC ACTF liaison Brad Buffum asked our TD Matt Rightmire to make a plan for storing the set and for loading it in quickly before he would enter the production for consideration. His position was, and I agreed, “If we can’t store it, then why bother entering?” So when the KC ACTF call came we were prepared. The four performances were more than usual for a KC ACTF production, which meant that two of the performances would be on the Monday of the Festival. For this reason they asked us to skip the usual timed and adjudicated, four-hour load in and instead have the set loaded
in completely before the start of the Festival. This was a generous offering on their part.

Although the set was relatively simple, the seating was quite complicated. The risers in
the Studio Theatre were not designed to be configured in a circle. Mr. Rightmire had to
create extra platforms to fill in the gaps left by the positioning of the risers. Putting that
together and then setting up the arches and screens and projectors in just four hours
would have been difficult. If needed, I am sure Mr. Rightmire would have found a way to
do it, but the entire production team was relieved to be able to take the whole week
before the festival to get it done.

I called one rehearsal for the actors before everyone left for the semester break.
We did a run-through on their feet, with no costumes or technical elements and Mr.
Drenkow on book. The memorization was at an okay level, and the mood was fun and a
little unfocused, and it wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. We accomplished the
goal of brushing away some of the cobwebs while also celebrating the knowledge that
some theatre-savvy folks decided our play should be shared with students and faculty
throughout the region. It was the end of a semester, ten days from Christmas and two
hours of happiness.

The rehearsals in January were more focused, but it was a challenge to schedule
them. The Festival was scheduled for the third week of January, but classes didn’t begin
until the second week. Since the first week of classes is when the actors audition for
that semester’s plays I knew it would be crowded. We did a regular 6:00PM run through
on Tuesday with just a few props and costumes. Our next run through was on the
Thursday, but we couldn’t start until nearly 11:00PM because Maggie Austin was
helping with the call back auditions as assistant director of the play *Really, Really*. The actors geared up, though, and they did a nice job even though we didn’t finish until well after 1:00AM. Our final rehearsal was to be a dress rehearsal on a Saturday where anyone who wanted to attend could be there. For some reason, not all the seats were in place and the projections had some problems. The light board operator was still stationed in the audience. With all the extra time I didn’t understand why everything wasn’t in place, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it at that point.

There was a little clunkiness in the calls of the cues, but none too big. I asked for two adjustments in projections. I eliminated the video of Silence falling into darkness. When I saw it in production, I hated it. It was an idea that never did work and I was pleased to cut it for the remount. The second change never happened. I was never happy with Drake Tucker had editing of the video showing Silence’s imaginary love scene with Eadric. The cut was sloppy and the vocals were off. I asked Drake Tucker to recut, but it didn’t look any better when I saw it during the Festival.

I didn’t give the actors many notes beyond getting things back to the way they were when we closed in October, but I did make one big one. Ryan Rabstejnek was giving a different performance by October 20th when we closed than he was on our opening on October 10th. This size of his performance was growing rapidly. He was pushing for laughs and becoming more extreme in his physical movement and emotional expression. I told Mr. Rabstejnek about my impressions and reminded him that he is at his best when he just lets things happen. He has so much natural expression that he has to do very little to get across what he wants to the audience. He made this
adjustment nicely and his performance was the best it ever was at the Festival. Mr. Rabstejnek became a minor celebrity among the KC ACTF participants and was greeted all week by strangers as, “Your Majesty.”

Also making great strides was Kirstie Smith, but I get no credit for this one. Something clicked inside Ms. Smith and she simply became a better actor between October and January. I have had similar experiences in my own career where at some point my understanding of the art and craft of acting has made a great leap forward and it was a pleasure to see it happen with Ms. Smith. She had an extra level of confidence and had greater nuance with Agnes’ lines.

Part of Ms. Smith’s improvement was the generous KC ACTF audience. In fact, each of the actors reveled in performing for such a responsive and supportive audience. The audience was so supportive that one of the respondents to the production commented on how nice it was to be able to have all your own students in the audience to support the production, when I was, in fact, the only UNL person in attendance for the Festival.

It was a great pleasure to put the play on one more time. So much work had gone into the production and I was a firm believer in its artistic and entertainment value. Keeping it alive a little longer made the entire experience much more satisfying.

To round out the experience, there were several glowing reviews from the KC ACTF National Critics Institute and the production was honored with four certificates of merit. These went to me for direction, Mr. Drenkow for stage management, Ms. Stein
for set design and Mr. Rightmire for technical direction.
Chapter Eleven: Critical Responses

UNL STUDENTS

The first critical responses I received were from my “Introduction to Theatre” students whom I required to attend and review a performance of *Silence*. Among the questions I required them to address were whether or not they knew *Silence’s* “secret.”

The question about *Silence* was an informative one. Their response was what I had expected and intended. Most of the responses indicated that they knew that Brenna Hill was a woman, but accepted the convention of a woman playing a man. One student wrote, “I thought you were just short on personnel.” A few students discovered that *Silence* was a female character when discussing her anatomical confusion with the priest in scene six, while others assumed that *Silence* was gay and that was why he was dreaming of the “Barbarian in the Forest.” Well over half of the students didn’t realize that the character was female until Ymma found out the truth by taking the matter into her own hands in the wedding night scene.

The reviews of the play were the most positive I have read from “Intro” students since coming here. I am sure part of this was a desire not to insult their instructor, but their comments matched the audience response I observed when attending the show. I believe there were multiple reasons for the positive response. One was the intimacy of the audience seating and the direct audience address that kept them from tuning out like they tend to do in the vast darkness of Howell Theatre. Additionally, the story is an
easy-to-understand adventure, with modern humor, sex, drugs and violence, yet only a little bit of ruminating about the meaning of life.

LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

The only media outlet to review the play is the Lincoln Journal Star, which wrote a short positive review. Kandra Hahn, the reviewer, praised both the acting and the set, including the “excellent mixed media projections that so often fail to deliver.” Hahn concludes the article hoping that Silence be chosen for KCACTF so that it could get “national recognition.”

KCACTF RESPONDENTS

October 12, 2013

Sharon Sobel, University of Nebraska, Omaha

Ms. Sobel has worked several times as a costume designer for Nebraska Repertory Theatre, which is the professional arm of the Johnny Carson School and uses the same performance spaces. Her first comment was that upon entering the space it was as if she had never been there before. Hers was quite a compliment for Michaela Lynne Steins set design. Ms. Sobel praised the floor that looked “dusty” to her and she felt the space was “feminine” just as Ms. Stein intended. Ms. Sobel praised the costumes as “real clothes for real people.” I was most pleased by her next comment, which was that “the actors seemed to be truly enjoying their performance.”

She had some constructive criticism, also. She liked the projections, but felt that
the live action sequences worked better than the animation. She believed there was a
lull in action in the middle of the second half, but that the play recovered nicely and
finished strong. She also disliked the choice of incorporating some modern music into
the preshow and intermission, because it drew her out of the world of the play.

Ms. Sobel applauded the acting and particularly was impressed with Brenna Hill.
She believed that Ms. Hill captured a difficult role and selected her for an Irene Ryan
nomination. Her response came on the second night of the performance run and the
positive feedback was encouraging.

October 20, 2014
Beate Pettigrew, Johnson County Community College

Ms. Pettigrew came for the closing performance on a Sunday afternoon. She
started out with praise, but also brought some tough criticisms to her response.
Although I agreed with some of her notes, others seemed to come out of nowhere. Ms.
Pettigrew had nothing but praise for the set that she described as “simple, but
complete.” She commented on how difficult it is to stage in the round and felt that we
had succeeded in using the space.

The lights she praised as “clustered,” but wanted to see more texture and fewer
monochromatic looks. The costumes she described as “sleek and serviceable” with good
“period touches.” She liked the sound except for the use of the heartbeat sound during
Ethelred’s monologues and the final song. She felt that “At the End of the World” by
Ingrid Michaelson was sentimental and cinematic. She did not specify why “cinematic”
was pejorative.

Her opinion on the projections effectiveness was the opposite of what Ms. Sobel had said. Ms. Pettigrew liked the animation, but found that the live action sequences did not work. In particular she disliked the throat cut ("too much") and the Ethelred battle speech ("just didn’t work").

The acting review was mixed. She was most impressed by Kirstie Smith and was negative about Maggie Austin. She praised Ms. Smith for honesty and described her performance as “clean.” She thought Ms. Austin’s performance was one note and suggested she find more places to play against the text. I couldn’t have disagreed more about Ms. Austin’s performance and I was thankful that this was closing night so that I didn’t have to worry that such comments might affect Ms. Austin causing her to change her performance.

RESPONSE BY UNL FACULTY

I asked UNL Emeritus Professor Tice Miller and Virginia Smith, my advisor and guide throughout the process, to give evaluations of the work. They had different perspectives on the work, but also shared several critiques.

Both Professor Miller and Professor Smith thought the play would have been served better by different casting in the role of Silence. They did not object to Brenna Hill’s understanding or portrayal of the role, but her stature. They wanted a Silence who was more convincing as a young warrior. Professor Smith said, “She seemed in size, more like a 10-year old Prince. A young woman who could challenge Ymma in size would
have been a believable partner in friendship and influence.” Professor Miller said, “I would have liked a stronger (maybe more macho) Silence.”

Professor Smith also did not feel the casting of Ryan Rabstejnek as Ethelred was an effective choice. She noted, “Mr. Rabstejnek played the role primarily for comedy.” Professor Miller, while not specifically mention Mr. Rabstejnek, commented that the play, “took a Monty Python approach to storytelling—which means the plot is absurd, the humor broad, and the characters comic types.” He also noted, much like I did above, that “little overt action occurs in the play” and there were “scenes that dragged on.”

The professors also made many positive observations about the production. Professor Miller, called it “a bold piece of theatre” and stated, “Dennis staged this with intelligence and imagination.” He particularly noted how the play was enjoyed by the university audience. Professor Smith believed my work showed growth by the actors both in their acting and vocal work. She believed that the use of technology was effective, particularly the video scenes. She also complimented the pace of the production, commenting how this was an achievement to overcome the technical difficulties presented by partially finished set pieces during run-throughs.

Professor Smith gave an excellent overview of my process when I asked her in writing, “Were the design departments focused on a common goal?” and “was the play unified in its style?” Below is her answer in its entirety:

“The design team worked very well together, and supported each other in elucidating your concept. Your concept was the common goal.

All of you worked hard at presenting a play with a unified style and you were
quite successful. The set design was lovely and the space satisfying and very useable. As we entered the space, using lights, set, and music, you set up the expectation of a mystical experience that would play with our imaginations. In my opinion, you were mostly successful in doing this. The circle of seating created a welcoming and useable space for the play. The problem of incorporating media was done more effectively than I have seen it done in the Studio Theatre. My problems with the set was that the beauty of the elegant angles of the arches, the center piece, and the cheese cloth screens wasn’t apparent in the other major set pieces, the bed, the stones benches, and the stairs. These were each very earth bound, and too realistic and unappealing for me. More sculptural pieces would extend the mystical journey that the circle of seating and the arches establish. The costumes were very well thought out and historically accurate, but they were also rather stiff and lacked a flow. I know your designer used heavy natural fabrics that looked authentic, but in some cases it was hard to find the grace of the character in the heaviness and bulk of the costume. The lighting was well done too, but I think you could have let some of it be darker and more mysterious. As I think now of the scenes, they are all well-lit, when many scenes would have been more effective in candle light, or moonlight. Do explore the edges of light more in your future work, especially in evoking environment effects. The difference for example, of inside the barrow and outside in the sunlight could have been so much more effectively done. I absolutely loved the snow effect that the projections gave you, but it wasn’t believably supported by the lighting. I also thought many of the projections were very effective, especially the use of film. I didn’t need the use of scenic elements in the projections. In fact, I often found myself
glancing at them and then ignoring them. My imagination was so much more effective at creating the spaces than the static images. Most of the sound and music choices were terrific, but the modern songs jarred some of your audience. “

The responses from professors Smith and Miller were both fair and insightful. I acknowledge that while many aspects of this production were successful, with experience, I will be able to create productions that are more cohesive and that show greater attention to detail and a more in-depth exploration of the themes.
Chapter Twelve: Self Evaluation

Among my goals in coming to graduate school for directing was to increase my experience in directing, to evaluate and improve my directing process, and to learn to work with designers. *Silence*, as a culmination of the studies, was not only a success on its own, but also a validation of choosing to spend three years in Lincoln, Nebraska.

I had a positive experience working with this set of designers and actors. I made mistakes, but they were different from the mistakes I made in directing previous plays. The mistakes during *Silence* included not pushing hard in finding solutions to staging problems and not ever solving some staging problems at all. In trying to solve the problem of the barrow staging, I should have gone to the set designer or brought in another director’s fresh set of eyes for ideas. Instead of seeking help, I kept trying to solve it on my own, which only hindered the progress of the production. I think I tried to do too much with the projections. Some of the projections were ill-conceived and some of them didn’t flow as well as I envisioned. During the second half of the play there is a drag in the action of the script that runs from the cart crash in scene thirteen until the drug taking, in scene twenty-five. There are many delightful moments in those sections, but there just isn’t as much action or story development. I recognized this shortcoming of the script early on, but I was unable to overcome it. This lull in action was observed by people who otherwise enjoyed the play.

The production’s positive aspects overshadowed the negative ones. First and foremost I was pleased with how the process worked. Early on I made a point to praise
the positive attitudes of the design team and regularly thanked them for their work, their flexibility and their willingness to make things work. I believe my approach made them more receptive to changes I wanted and to maintain a positive outlook. This process has put me in a position where I can go into a production meeting at any theatre in the country and feel comfortable making my desires known to designers and technicians.

Casting has always been a strong suit of mine and I thought the casting for Silence reflected some sound decisions. Having found the best actor for each part, I was then able to find an effective route of communication with each of them in order to maximize their talents.

Had I one more chance to put on this play I would make a thousand little changes, but not a single big change. They would include changes, which the respondents to the play recommended and many would derive from my own desire to tighten and clarify the storytelling. An interesting and telling aspect of the critiques I received was that very few of them were in agreement. Some liked the animated projections and not the live action projections, but with others it was vice versa. One respondent thought not enough was done to establish the relationship between Silence and Ymma to justify the on screen kiss in the final moment, while another thought that it was a great “happy ending” moment. Such disparate response says to me that many of the suggested things were personal artistic choices rather than flaws in the production. The contrasting in opinions, however, means I should have done more to justify and to integrate those choices, so that each audience member saw why
everything was happening as it did.

Ultimately, I wanted a production that had something to say, that could entertain new theatre audiences along with long time theatre practitioners. I also wanted to get people talking about what they saw. I am satisfied that this production accomplished all that and allowed me to put into practice everything I had been learning during the course of my graduate studies.
# APPENDIX A: Rehearsal Schedule

*Silence*: Overview Rehearsal Schedule

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEPTEMBER</th>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>DAY OFF</td>
<td>DAY OFF</td>
<td>1) Intros 2) Read Through 3) Cast discussion</td>
<td>Block Scenes 2,3,5,6,8</td>
<td>Block Scenes 1,4,7,9</td>
<td>Block Scenes 10-23</td>
<td>1) Stumble Thru/Blocking Review 2) Blocking</td>
<td>2) Clean up</td>
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<td>Block Scenes 24-28</td>
<td>Block Scenes 1-5 OFF BOOK</td>
<td>Work Scenes 6-7C OFF BOOK</td>
<td>Work Scenes 7D-12</td>
<td>Work Scenes 6-7C OFF BOOK</td>
<td>Work Scenes 7D-12</td>
<td>Work Scenes 13-20 OFF BOOK</td>
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<td>Work Scenes 13-20 OFF BOOK</td>
<td>Work Scenes 21-26A OFF BOOK</td>
<td>Work Scenes 26B-END OFF BOOK</td>
<td>Run Show 6:30PM Start</td>
<td>Work spots</td>
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<td>DAY OFF</td>
<td>Run 2nd Half</td>
<td>Run 1st Half</td>
<td>Work Spots</td>
<td>Run Show 6:30PM Start</td>
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<td>Work Spots</td>
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<tr>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Work Spots</td>
<td>Run Show</td>
<td>OCTOBER 1 Work Spots</td>
<td>Run Show 6:30PM Start</td>
<td>Run Show 6:30PM Start</td>
<td>Tech Day 1 6PM</td>
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<td>1st Dress</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tech Day</td>
<td>1st Dress</td>
<td>Final Dress</td>
<td>112 Preview</td>
<td>Opening Night 7:30PM</td>
<td>Performance #2 7:30PM</td>
<td>Performance #3 7:30PM</td>
<td>DAY OFF</td>
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Appendix B: Set Model

APPENDIX C: PRODUCTION PHOTOS

Actors, Ryan Rabstejnek, Kirstie Smith, David Michael Fox and Brenna Hill. Photo by Doug Smith
Actors Luke Glassman, Maggie Austin, Ryan Rabstejnek, Brenna Hill, Maggie Austin and David Michael Fox. Photo by Doug Smith
Set by Michaela Lynne Stein, Lights by Sarah Resch, Technical Direction by Matthew Rightmire. Photo by Doug Smith
Actors, Maggie Austin, Brenna Hill and Ryan Rabstejnek

Photos by Doug Smith.
APPENDIX D: PROJECTION SAMPLES

PROJECTIONS DESIGN by DRAKE TUCKER

CHAPEL WALLS

BARROW INTERIOR

A FOREST
## APPENDIX E: COSTUME PLOT

### SILENCE: Basic Costume Plot

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ymma</th>
<th>Angès</th>
<th>Eadric</th>
<th>Silence</th>
<th>Roger</th>
<th>Ethelred</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong> Field in Kent</td>
<td>Dress #1</td>
<td>Armor</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong> Chapel Young Silence</td>
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<td>Loose hose</td>
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<td><strong>3</strong> Kings Bedchamber- Ymma’s beauty</td>
<td>Basic clothing</td>
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<td><strong>4</strong> Chapel- first meeting</td>
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<td><strong>5</strong> Kings Bedchamber- wrong room</td>
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<td><strong>6</strong> Chapel- won’t grow</td>
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<td><strong>7</strong> Chamber- wedding night</td>
<td>#1 Wedding Dress</td>
<td>Long Tunic</td>
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<td><strong>8</strong> Courtyard- royal punch</td>
<td>Dress #2</td>
<td>Armor</td>
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<td>Night shirt</td>
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<td><strong>22</strong> York- Ymma’s new clothes</td>
<td>Men’s garb</td>
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<td><strong>23</strong> Ragnarok</td>
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<td><strong>24</strong> Barn- mystic shrooms</td>
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<td>Civilian clothing</td>
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<td><strong>25</strong> Snow- escape</td>
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<td><strong>26</strong> Ragnarok- reunion</td>
<td>Undress to shift</td>
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<td><strong>29</strong> Bedchamber- death and a wedding</td>
<td>#2 Wedding Dress</td>
<td>Agnés’ dress</td>
<td>Bisho ps Robes</td>
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