THE MYSTICAL AND METAPHYSICAL IN THE MUNDANE: DIRECTING MIDDLETOWN

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THE MYSTICAL AND METAPHYSICAL IN THE MUNDANE:
DIRECTING MIDDLETOWN

By

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A THESIS

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THE MYSTICAL AND METAPHYSICAL IN THE MUNDANE: DIRECTING MIDDLETOWN

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Advisor: Virginia Smith

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

Topics addressed include play selection, script analysis, director/designer collaboration, coaching of actors and evaluation of final product.
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“someone is born, someone will die, both are you, unwind, unknow.” (Eno 29)

1. Play Selection Process

In the fall of 2012 all MFA Candidates in Directing for Stage and Screen received instructions to propose three plays for a thesis production in the 2013-2014 Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film Main Stage Season. I had searched all summer for adequate proposals, reading and rereading scripts, looking at the list I maintain of plays I wanted to direct, and comparing scripts I knew with current theatre seasons across the country.

A requirement of the thesis production was that it must include the integration of digital media, so I was set on finding plays in which the project would fully integrate digital media into the design and concept of the play. In this search I was wary of plays in which media would either seem tacked on or overtake a production. My goal was for media integration to support the script.

As our advisor Virginia Smith had stated, we should look at various styles of plays in our submissions to provide better choices to the season selection committee. The committee works within a rubric of types of plays produced, using a formula which the school hopes will bring diversity to its Main Stage Season. This rubric is ultimately intended to expose undergraduate actors to a variety of theatre styles. I diversified my search to include historical, period, and classical plays as well as contemporary and experimental ones.

On my list of plays was the historical and stylistic play *Mother Courage* by Bertolt Brecht. I had directed a scene from *Mother Courage* in our Advanced
Directing II Class the previous spring. I was drawn to the topical nature of the material, the songs in the script, and the possibility of incorporating live music as well as exposing undergraduate students to “Epic Theatre.” I was also excited by the idea of exploring and teaching them about Brecht’s principle of *Verfremdungseffekt* or “distancing effect.” I felt that Brecht’s plays have room to incorporate digital media, especially in titles and character names projected onto the set. Brecht also writes in actual signs to identify a scene or a character, both of which could be projected. The names of characters could likewise be projected to further enhance the distancing of the audience from becoming emotionally caught up in the characters. Brecht’s use of media was to help distance the audience, enabling them to judge the actions of the characters and the play objectively.

Another selection I proposed was a piece by the collage-inspired playwright Charles Mee, titled *Under Construction*. This experimental play fascinated me as Charles Mee not only creates his “collage” plays with found-text, YouTube videos, mixed media, and anything that inspires him. He also had media and projections already written into the text. I was also fascinated by his website, “the (re)making project.” On the website, Mee states,

> Please feel free to take the plays from this website and use them freely as a resource for your own work: that is to say, don’t just make some cuts or rewrite a few passages or re-arrange them or put in a few texts that you like better, but pillage the plays as I have pillaged the structures and contents of the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of Soap Opera.
Digest and the evening news and the internet, and build your own, entirely new, piece and then, please, put your own name to the work that results.\textsuperscript{1}

Charles Mee essentially “open sources” his plays, and \textit{Under Construction} is a play about America. It seemed very fitting that this play about the American “Salad Bowl” utilized a collage writing technique by pulling from different sources and stitching them together. It also fit the American mindset with his offer that any theatre company deciding to work on the production has permission to create and add its own scenes, or cut scenes entirely to reformat the play for the space, time, and company in which the performance is taking place. My advisor Virginia Smith struck that play from the season selection choices, because, as she said, a previous M.F.A. graduate Shannon Cameron had recently directed Mee’s work.

My third proposal, the one the committee selected, was \textit{Middletown} by Will Eno. I heard about Eno when a friend of mine visiting during the holidays recommended the playwright. Upon reading Eno’s work I found a voice that was poetic and provocative, funny and poignant. What attracted me most was the metaphysics and philosophy in the play. In my first read of \textit{Middletown} the tone and the candidness of the characters intrigued me, as did the convention of direct address, which felt confessional.

While intrigued at first read, subsequent reads allowed me to find depth and beauty in the piece and I began to envision not only how digital media could

form an integral “poetic character” as Virginia Smith coined it, but how having the
real-time sky sequences and a couple of spectacular projections could bring us
back to the wonder and awe within the play.

*Middletown* is a poetic, touching and humorous play, exploring the
compact universe of a small American town. Many of the audience members at
the University of Nebraska-Lincoln hail from small towns where everyone knows
each other. I also felt the small town aspect would resonate with audience
members in Lincoln NE, because I originally found Middletown reminiscent of
Lincoln. I therefore wanted to project a feel of the big sky-scenes of Nebraska.
The people of *Middletown* were likewise so similar to our student population.
They have dreams and aspirations, worries and questions, and have to deal with
finding out how to live life in between the miracle and mystery of birth and death.

My play proposal for *Middletown* to the Season Selection Committee
highlighted the associational relatability of the play to our audience. I wrote in the
proposal that *Middletown* deals with a subject deeply personal, universally
relatable, and it is within the experience realm of our undergraduate actors. This
is a play into which undergraduates can sink their teeth, minds, and hearts and
bring their unique experience of life to playing the parts. The roles and theme
would be a challenge, but the questions asked within this play make the
challenge worthwhile for the actors, for myself as director and for our audience
as part of the University Theatre Season.
2. Background of the Play and its Author, Will Eno

Charles Isherwood of the New York Times described Will Eno (1965-) as a “Samuel Beckett for the John Stewart Generation.” Eno is a Brooklyn-based playwright with a unique voice. His one-man play *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* garnered him a Pulitzer Prize finalist for Drama in 2005. Eno incorporates metaphysics, poetic metaphor, and non-linear storytelling into his plays. When John Bailey of *A Capital Idea* asked Eno in 2010 about the structure of his plays, Eno replied,

…”no, I’ve probably never written a straight nuts-and-bolts story. Not for lack of trying and not because I don’t think it’d be a good thing to do. I just kind of can’t. But that’s all right. And it doesn’t mean I’ve never written a story that follows a follow-able emotional and semantic arc. But I have trouble doing it in a really linear way, and that trouble becomes an interesting part of the story to me. I think our weaknesses and blind spots are probably, in an art-making context, as well as in life, the more interesting part of us.”

Will Eno is noted for his free associations and his defense of his poetry to his editors. His characters seem to talk, sometimes without knowing where the sentence is going to end or what they might say. *Middletown* has a lot of stream

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of consciousness talking within the dialogue, which is essentially a stylistic choice throughout Eno’s work. The characters in Eno’s plays are in the midst of figuring out their lives. There are very few characters who have all the answers and this active discovery of probing a question within the scene lends the dialogue a stream of consciousness feel.

Critics have compared *Middletown* to Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. This comparison is a result of both plays’ setting in a small town and presenting everyday life. Stylistically Eno’s play distinguishes itself, yet thematically there are noted similarities. Theatre critic Chris Jones observed such thematic similarities in the Les Waters-directed Steppenwolf production of *Middletown* in 2011.

Where most contemporary playwrights would just write “hello,” Eno will typically write “hello, hi, how are you?” and protect that trifecta from an editor. Not only is his dialogue uncommonly rich and poetic, it free-associates with the rarest and most delicious kind of abandonment… But that's not to say that the resultant play is pretentious or formless or academic or esoteric or even just plain weird. Actually, "Middletown" (like the Wilder model) is tightly focused on what matters in small-town life: finding ourselves born, dying, relating to others, finding our place, searching for personal meaning, fighting off loneliness, passing the time. ³

Eno’s plays emphasize loneliness. In *Middletown* Mrs. Swanson talks about how lonely she feels getting a house ready for a family which has not yet arrived. Mary Swanson never sees her traveling husband and her unborn child is the only one to keep her company besides Middletown resident John Dodge.

John Dodge seems only to have the new arrival, Mary Swanson, as a friend. When Greg the Astronaut looks back at Earth from space he says “It doesn’t look lonely from up here. Everything looks right-next-door. It’s where you’re sitting, right now.”

In Eno’s famous work *Thom Pain: Based on Nothing* the unpredictable protagonist delivers a rambling monologue about the suffering he has endured in his life and the audience listens as he speaks of failed relationships, his unrequited love life, his experience of a dog that died, and the pain of a bee sting. Throughout, *Thom Pain* has an inherent loneliness. Yet what seemed to make *Thom Pain* a critical success was Eno’s ability to keep the audience in suspense. The main character is at times volatile and other times friendly. He hits on a member of the audience, breaks down in self-doubt and pity, and flares up in rage. Critics said,

> At its conclusion, audience members may not know exactly what they just saw or what it was supposed to mean. Is *Thom Pain* a meditation on disappointment? An exercise in futility? Perhaps both. One thing is certain, however. Even if the piece is based on nothing, as its subtitle proclaims, its unconventional style makes it far more interesting than many other plays that are currently on the boards.4

*Middletown* also employs an unconventional style, featuring an unconventional topic called “the ineffable”, sacred and unable to be spoken. As a

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Increasingly we get the sense that Middletown's inhabitants are stuck in what they imagine to be the middle of their lives. Some are at peace with that. Others distract themselves with various pursuits while time passes. Eno's characters repeatedly pursue, and fumble with, the ineffable in their lives. They try to construct meaning and only sometimes succeed. They make big mistakes and pay full price for them, in their comings and goings.

*Middletown* had its first production at the Off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre in November 2010. It won the Horton Foote Prize for Promising New American Play for Eno in 2010. Since then the play has been produced in 2011 by Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Dobama Theatre of Cleveland Heights, Ohio and Actors’ Shakespeare Project of Boston Massachusetts in 2013.

His (Eno’s) plays have been produced in New York City, Off-Broadway and by regional and European theatres: the Gate Theatre, the SOHO Theatre, and BBC Radio (London); the Rude Mechanicals Theater Company, The Satori Group, (Seattle); the Flea Theatre, NY Power Company and Naked Angels (NYC); Quebracho Théâtre (Paris); Circle-X (Los Angeles); The Cutting Ball Theater (San Francisco). *Thom Pain* has been produced in Brazil, Italy, Germany, France, Norway, Denmark, Israel, Mexico and other countries.

His plays are published by Oberon Books, TCG, Playscripts, and have appeared in *Harper’s*, Antioch Review, *The Quarterly*, and *Best Ten-Minute Plays for Two Actors*.  

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“I just want to be a regular living person” says John Dodge in Middletown and throughout the production, other than “Birth and Death” nothing spectacular happens”
–Boston Globe

3. Script and Character Analysis

“The play is full of regular-seeming people, like a Cop, a Librarian, a Mechanic, a Landscaper, and a Tour Guide. And apart from a birth and a death, nothing very spectacular happens. But over the course of 2½ hours, Middletonians speculate as to what ought to happen between birth and death, as well as what might come before and after.”

The above quote is from a review that the Boston Globe did of the Actors’ Shakespeare Project production. It succinctly sums up my production in terms of what the play portrays. It is about the mundane and how we view the mundane.

“What do you want out of life” asks the female doctor to the Mechanic as he digs through the trash looking for pills. “To feel beautiful” the Mechanic replies. The play as a whole asks the question “What do you want out of life?” and then explores different world views. It does not give answers or prescribe a best life practice. It seems rather to define the givens, such as “There is birth and death, those are just two events, there is a lot in between” says the Cop in Middletown. I found a connection with each of the different world views presented in the play.

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Hodge Analysis

Environmental facts

**Geographic Location**: The action of the play is set in “Middletown.” Middletown is a fictional small American town. There are actual Middletown’s in Ohio, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. The town in Eno’s play, however, does not share a history specifically with any of these towns. In the second scene of the play the librarian introduces us to the town by reading a description from her computer by the Chamber of Commerce. “Middletown was built on the ruins of other older Middletowns, and, before them, a town called Middenton, which was named for being between two other places, both unknown and now incidentally gone.”

This description helps to shine light on the title of the play as it talks about the Middle, being between two physical places: that’s one interpretation. Another interpretation is the act of being in the middle of your life, in between the somewhat metaphysical and inexplicable concepts of birth and death. The characters in *Middletown* have age ranges in the middle of their lives, with the thirties, forties, fifties, and sixties as the ages of primary characters. It explores a question of purpose “what you want out of life” at this crucial point in the middle of it.

**Date**: The text provides no exact date of the play but Eno’s interviews suggest setting it in a present-day small town which could have throwbacks to an earlier era. The questions the characters ask are timeless and work for any era.
Eno said on writing *Middletown*: “I wanted to write something that was a statement about what life feels like, to me, on earth.” This statement gives a present date and time.

**Season:** The designers and I decided to set Act 1 in the summer and Act 2 in the fall. This season was something we wanted to portray in the costuming, and the lighting/projection of the leaves on the trees.

Fall is a harvest season, so it fit with the very ripe and pregnant Mrs. Swanson and the dying (waiting for the reaper) John Dodge. Fall is a time of change and there is a big change in the second act with Mrs. Swanson giving birth and John Dodge confronting his unhappiness, which had led to his attempted suicide and an ensuing fatal infection.

**Time of Day:** Eno writes the time of day into each scene description and it is important to the scenes. How characters act and the things they say depending on evening, midday, or morning can change philosophically. That change connects mood with the natural world. The Cop mentions time of day and his mood while on his beat “I do like this time of day: night. All the people. All their bones and arteries and personal problems. Beautiful animal: the Person. Dark.” (Eno 17). When Swanson mentions “Night is hard you know? It gets so quiet” has a similar philosophical ring, “I never know what I’m supposed to be listening to. But it does give me time to catch up on my needless worry.” (Eno 26) The tour guide scene however has the stage directions of “Bright Daylight” and
this direction is important to the optimistic crescendo of the scene. In Act 2, I pictured the swelling of the clouds in the sky to mirror the swelling of the pregnancy to the point in which the rain dance releases not only the rain, but the soul of John Dodge and christens Mrs. Swanson’s newborn baby of the same name.

I laid out in my initial director’s ideas the following times of day and sky-scapes/climate in each scene.

**Act One**

*Scn. 1:*

_Time of Day: Dusk/Evening_

*Scn 2:*

_Time of Day: Morning Sky_

*(Library set, desk, information sign)* Lights/projections: Morning Sky, and interior library.

*Scn 3:*

_Time of Day: Night_

Town/House set.

*Scn 4:*

_Time of Day: Midday._

Town Square

_Scenes 5:

Same time as 4 could the sky change the lighting a little? As in a real time change in the sky video mirrored and accented with light._

Town Square

_Sc- Owens Square_

_Sc 7:*

_Star Scape/Night Sky/Space_

_Sc 8:*

_Time of Day: Day_
Swanson Kitchen. Kitchen sink, drain and cabinet. kitchen table. (how to do this? Minimally? Or revealingly? Open her house and bring it forward?)

Scn 9
Time of Day: middle of Night
Flash light and sky/moon only light, low light

Scn 10 ---Intermission---- evening

Act 2
Scn 1
Time of Day: Night

Scn 2
Time of Day: Bright Day
Middletown Hospital Outside of: Emergency Sign
Area to plant/ grass/landscaping/ rocks to dig up.

Scn 3
Time of Day: maybe same day as Scn 2. Or cloudy with sun
Inside Doctors office.

Scn 4
Time of Day: Storm clouds, Day
Hospital Room John Dodge

Scn 5
Time of Day: Storm Clouds continue or clear up?
Hospital Loading Dock

Scn 7
Time of Day: before a rain sky. Swollen clouds
Entrance and lawn of Middletown Hospital, Tree is planted, Emergency sign.

Scn 8
Time of Day: Raining
Mrs. Swanson’s Hospital room

Scn 9
Time of Day: Raining
John Dodge’s hospital Room
Scn 10
Time of Day: lightly Raining
Swanson’s Hospital Room

Scn 11: heavy Raining
John Dodge hospital room/ death

Scn 12
Unspecific space, Mrs. Swanson and the body of John Dodge visible through the darkness on stage.

Chakmawg Indian ceremony. Rain dance

Scn 13
Time of Day: After the Rain Sky/ Magic Hour Sky.
John Dodge Hospital Room

Scn 14
Time of Day: Evening, Magic Hour Sky, sunset color into night?
Mrs. Swanson’s Hospital Room

**Economic Environment**: Middletown is a small, primarily middle-class town. The characters’ occupations are Cop, Mechanic, Librarian, Landscaper, Tour Guide, Tourist, Public Speaker, Audience Member, Attendant, and Freelancer. Such jobs belong to a middle class to lower middle socio-economic class. The mechanic with his drug and alcohol problems puts him in a borderline homeless economic situation. The Doctor and Astronaut are more specialized and represent the wealthiest of the citizens seen in *Middletown*.

**Religious Environment**: While all of the characters go deep into big questions of their existence, they do not explore the subject of organized religion within the play. The closest we get to Judeo-Christian religion is a few comments
from the librarian. At the end of scene 2 the Librarian is on the phone with a little girl who is doing a book report on the Bible, but the conversation is mainly about how the library will not provide macaroni or spray paint while she is working there. Another reference to God is after the Librarian reads a story about a medicine man. The librarian says “I read once the question mark comes from a musical notation used in Gregorian chants, to signal that the phrase should have an upward intonation that it should rise upward, to Heaven. Imagine this little red one here…rising up to Heaven, to God. Imagine the look on His face” (Eno 29). She then goes on to end the scene saying that it is a beautiful night, “Whether or not there’s anything up there” (Eno 29).

Many of the characters are spiritual and find moments of connection with each other and with a power greater than themselves. Greg the Astronaut has a spiritual speech to Ground Control while looking down at the earth. Greg speaks of a scientific view of space being “cold, it’s almost just raw data, raw mathematics.” Later in the same scene Greg says how Earth looks “so welcoming and good” and also that it is “sacred, profound and mysterious” but he makes no direct mention of a particular religion, even though he states his embarrassment at “waxing all fragile and religious.”

The spirituality of the play tends to return to an inexpressible mystery which has more roots in tribal and pantheistic religions than in monotheistic ones. The librarian speaks of the Chawkmawg Indians who called the area “Inpetway”, before it became the town of Middletown. Later in the play the Tour Guide, fervently attempting to show the Tourists parts of the town “not yet
monumentalized,” returns to a spirituality of the Chakmawg Indians. The Tour
Guide says, “There’s a meadow we could walk to. Just nice grass and trees. It’s
quiet, nothing noticeably historical going on. The Chakmawg Indians believed
trees were gods. They thought everything was. So that whatever you were doing,
no matter what you were doing, you were praying. They had certain words you
could only use when it was raining. They had a chant to heal people’s hearts,
another chant to keep the sky blue. Let’s go to that meadow. We’ll sit for a while”
(Middletown, 22). The act of sitting for a while together and noticing the holy is
the spiritual environment of *Middletown*.

Another spiritual aspect in *Middletown* is a mystical interweaving of
caracters foretelling future events. In Act 1 the Librarian enters with a book in
hand and reads to the audience: “The medicine man spoke in difficult ways of
difficult things, in the worried vocabulary of medicine and night…The sick man
listened, and quietly got worse…He asked the sun to come to warm the unborn
child and the born mother” (Middletown, 29). The sick man refers to John Dodge
who in Act 2 tries to commit suicide, and the unborn child and mother refers to
Mrs. Swanson who gives birth in Act 2. A spiritual Native American rain dance
follows these two events of birth and death. It is as though the earth and sky
weep in releasing the rain, responding to a mysterious ritual connecting the
beginning of a life and ending of one.

*Previous Action:* There are some immediate previous actions that help the
actors with the “moment before” they bring to each scene. In the play we find out
that Mrs. Swanson recently moved to Middletown to start a family with her
husband and that she is expecting a child. We know that John Dodge does odd jobs and checks out self-improvement books from the library, but he is between jobs. The Cop is currently dealing with the sickness of his mother and is on patrol in a suburban neighborhood. The Mechanic has recently purchased a bottle of liquor and something to eat at a convenience store and plans to sit outside drinking, enjoying the night. He has a past rivalry with the Astronaut, who dashed his dreams of appearing on television by telling him that the rock he found was not a meteorite. Almost all the characters were born and reared in Middletown, except for the new arrival Mary Swanson and John Dodge (a long-time resident but born elsewhere). The two visiting tourists are likewise non-residents.

Dialogue: Along with Eno’s stream of consciousness style of writing there is a lot of direct address in the play. The characters find it easier to speak to the audience than to each other. The Mechanic even says to the audience, “I was nervous earlier.” He then proceeds to tell us his life story. He is “nothing special” but did have a big event whereby he almost gained notoriety, and he wants us to know about it. The characters treat the audience like old friends, to whom all the characters want to justify themselves and whose favor they wish to gain. The audience serves as a passive confessor for the characters. At the end of Act 1 there is the free-speaking “intermission audience” who discuss the play and add insight to the first Act. In Act 2 more barriers break down with dialogue and characters address each other on a first-name basis.
Character: Each character represents a world view, which are distinct from each other and present the audience with a certain perspective on life. In an interview with the Boston Globe, Eno said, “It’s hard to be a human being. It’s complicated and complicated in ways we’ll probably never fully be able to see. I wrote this play and mean it to be a kind of testament to the difficulty of consciousness, or a picture of the complications of the simplest life.” (“Metaphysics of Middletown”). The difficulty of consciousness is that we all have similar questions but we answer them in different ways. Here are the world views I identified in each character.

Characters and their World Views:

Public Speaker:

“All we people slowly graying, slowly leaving, who make all this all possible, this activity, this festivity, this hope, this dream dreamt with open eyes.” (Eno 6) This sentence has a double meaning as it welcomes all “breathers” as he finally decides upon a label which unites all human beings. Along with welcoming all of those who communally allow life to be possible, the public speaker also proclaims what we are about to witness. The audience will witness a play and they are integral to it. It is this community of everyone in the theatre that makes this festivity possible, this imaginary world.
Cop:
The Cop starts the play in an irritable mood and expects to be labeled for what he wears. He expects those who see him to reach for the archetype which the outfit denotes. “You think I’m a cop. I look like a cop, I walk like a cop, so, you figure, case closed: I’m a cop” (Eno 7), yet even the Cop is encouraging us to look beyond the cover. “Everything is as everything seems, I guess. Good for everything.” (8) The cop in a fit of rage tries to choke humility, wonder, and awe out of the Mechanic. The Cop views the world with authority and the world has a right way and a wrong way to act around other people. “I try to uphold the law, keep some order around here, but, I have my moods.” (17) About the future, the Cop says, “there are some guidelines, some givens” (46). By the end of the play the Cop changes his attitude towards humanity and embraces forgiveness. He has a meaningful chat with the librarian about his mother’s funeral and becomes a bit softer and more humane in his interactions.

Mechanic:
Craig the Mechanic is loitering at the beginning of the play and through much of the rest he is just wandering around drinking, eavesdropping, or looking for drugs. He battles with alcoholism and speaks of a sober period offstage but onstage he is seldom sober. The Mechanic had dreams of grandeur and feels like he has let everyone down. He feels he was a perfect baby and it all went downhill from there. The Mechanic always felt different and wanted to distinguish himself, but he cannot come to terms with just being a local resident. He also has
hints of mental illness or hallucinations as he hears things during his monologue to the audience. However he undergoes one of the biggest changes in the play as he lives up to one of his life’s goals with the drug induced rain dance. He “feels beautiful.”

Librarian:
The Librarian cares about and is genuinely interested in other individuals throughout the play. She has deep insights, is a good listener, and remains remarkably easy going. She also has her own brand of humor. When asked for a library card she says “Good for you, dear. I think a lot of people figure, ‘Why bother? I’m just going to die, anyway.’” Her world view consists of curiosity about everything and she finds many answers in literature. “I think we’re born with questions and the world is our answer” (65). She reads the audience a book on the Chakmawg Indians in Middletown, whose prophecy comes to fruition in the second act when Mary Swanson is pregnant and John Dodge is sick. She also expresses the personal viewpoint about “some people [who] say the secret to life is being able to live in the middle of all our different ideas about life.” (63).

John Dodge:
John Dodge moved to Middletown 15-20 years ago. At the beginning of the play he is between jobs and reading to pass the time. His loneliness is palpable, a divorced homebody who gets occasional panic attacks. He laments his failed marriage, “We had some pretty good times. Probably my best.” (24) And perhaps
sees in Mary Swanson a home life he longs for. He sums up his emptiness when he tells Mary “You sit around reading the side of a cereal box. Half the dishes are gone, half the cups, no more pretty shoes by the door, and, that’s your little half-life.” (24). John’s theory of life is about the transient nature of it and how it passes by so quickly. “Time, you know. ‘Buzzz’ ‘Plink.’” John is drawn to Mary and even says he finds her “intoxicating.” He recognizes the emptiness in his life is and acts on his suicidal thoughts sometime between Act 2, scene 1 and scene 2. John mentions from his hospital bed that he always thought that Mary and he would have had more of a relationship. His biggest fear is to die scared and alone, writhing like an animal. Despite his fear, “like an animal” is exactly how he dies in the play.

Mrs. Swanson:
Mrs. Swanson is a new resident, looking on the bright side on her recent relocation to Middletown. We know that she has moved to Middletown, but her husband “Bob” works out of town a lot. He never makes an appearance in the play. Mary is interested in children and she and her husband are starting a family. Her loneliness at being in a new place, setting up her house alone, and her doubts on her own ability to be a good mother are her primary internal conflicts in the play. She also finds herself drawn to John Dodge and must wrestle with fidelity to her absent husband. She tries to perk up John Dodge by bringing an optimism to his viewpoint as she says “That’s kind of gloomy…. Things aren’t so bad” (25).
Tour Guide:

“I thought this was the world,” says the Tour Guide. Tourists she meets on her job—though why Middletown attracts tourists is never logically clear—serve to open up her world view. She grew up in Middletown and has never traveled outside the town. She believes the monuments in the town are important, though without questioning why and who assigns importance. Once the tourists awaken her, however, she becomes impassioned with noticing the “not yet monumentalized” parts of Middletown. She finds there is power in the connection with the air molecules we share with historic figures half way around the world. She also finds a connection with nature and the earth, which stirs something deep inside her.

Male Tourist and Female Tourist:

Both are world travelers and have seen so many monuments that they now look for the ordinary. They travel in search of truth as they say to the tour guide “We went to Rome last summer. In Search of eternal truth, and, to be totally honest, for the food” (18). Their view is that life is about new experiences and travel. They travel to find out history and truth. “We’re kind of on a quest. Just because we don’t look like pilgrims doesn’t mean we’re not pilgrims.”
Greg the Astronaut:

Greg experiences a phenomenon known to astronauts as the “Overview Effect.” While looking back at the earth from the perspective of being in space he sees human fragility, unity, and interconnectivity. Greg represents the world view that we are always looking for what is extraordinary but the ordinary should give us greater awe. Greg expresses this axiom when he says we should not be sad finding the ordinary. “All these things are miraculous because all these things are earthly… sacredly and profoundly and mysteriously—well yeah—earthly” (30).

The Intermission Audience:

They represent a world view of life through art. They are talking about ideas in the first half of the play and find meaning in their lives and a philosophy from responding to the play. I attempted to express this world view by having the audience who watched this portion of the play in the lobby during intermission live-videoed and broadcast on two televisions framing the scene.

Landscaper:

He has a connection with nature swaying like a tree to find out where to plant it. The landscaper fits in with a quote by Gustav Eckstein which Eno uses as the preface to the play. “We are born what we are, and if that is not lucky, we can make it worse with our thoughts. What the giant or dwarf thinks of, when he sees his reflection in the shop windows while pretending to study the new spring styles
is a force in his life. A human being is not simply cells. There is a mind attached. This may often wish it had been born a tree” (Eno 3). The Landscaper also experiences the world through sound and etymology. He feels that the words “rock” and “tree” seem like honest words versus the word “person.”

**Male Doctor:**

The Doctor possesses a scientific world view but remains in awe of science and the unexplained miracles of life. He is compassionate but also very busy. The Doctor answers Mrs. Swanson’s questions on “what to do” and “how to be” with her baby by saying “Love is all, It sounds so simple, I know, but, give him love. Without it, he’ll just go around the world saying different things and seeing this and that and none of it’ll make any difference. You’ve seen the type. Out in the rain, just kind of rattling around in their bodies.” (Eno 49). The Doctor stresses forgiveness, but speaks so fast in his instructions, overwhelmed by all he has to do in the day.

**Female Doctor:**

With a strictly scientific world view, she attempts to explain to John Dodge what happens when you die. “Dying, from the outside, from the bodily perspective, it’s not very pretty. Nobody looks very peaceful, as far as I’ve seen. We have stories of people seeing white light and feeling an angelic serenity. But these are stories from the people who lived, so they might be just describing what it’s like to almost die and then live. So we don’t know.” (55). She believes in nature. “Irony is a
people thing. Nature is very frank. You’re here, and we’re taking care of you, is the point” (55).

Philosophical Statements (Quotes from *Middletown* by character)

Cop:

“Welcome to the little town of Middletown. Ordinary place, ordinary time. But aren’t they all? No. They are not, all.” (Eno 8)

“No News is Good News, But there’s no such thing as No News.” (16)

“See the Universe. See a tiny person in the middle of it all, thrashing. See the bright side. Try to look at the bright side.” (16)

“I guess we all have a story. Once upon a time, Once upon a time, and so on, The End.” (17)

“I just remember screaming “Awe” at the poor guy. Hard word to scream. It just sounds like a sound. And you can’t bully people into feeling something, anyway. Oh, well.” (17)

“Life can get tough. It’s tough for everyone. You know that, right?” (70)

John Dodge:

“Time, you know? ‘Whoosh.’ ‘Clank.”’ (13)
“I had the worst night. Almost nonstop meaningful silence. Worst morning too.” (23)

“Oh God—nighttime. Daytime, too. I’m like, ‘Enough—I get it.’” (26)

“I’ve been thinking about that philosophy thing about how you can’t step in the same river twice. It turns out you can.” (32)

“You get used to them, though. That’s the sad thing. You look around: miracle, miracle, miracle. It’s tiring. It’s sad. Or scary.” (34)

“I just want to be a regular living person.” (70)

**Mary Swanson:**

“We all have our dark nights. We’re probably never as alone as we think.” (26)

“I wish I had more gratitude. When you think of all the miracles it takes just to sit in a chair. A billion things going right, just to sit here.” (34)

**Mechanic:**

“I’m nothing special, postnatally speaking.” (15)

“Com’on family, start you bastard”

“People don’t stop to think of how lucky they are. I do. And, I’ve realized, I’m not that lucky. But I get by.” (15)

“I was somebody’s golden child, somebody’s little hope. Now, I’m more just, you know, a local resident. Another earthling.” (16)

“That’s my impression of a cell dividing—or, I don’t know, metastasizing. Same thing, probably for a while—until it isn’t.” (44)
“At the risk of sounding like some fuck-up pawing through the garbage for drugs: I want to know Love. I want to calmly know love on Earth. And to feel beautiful.” (58)

“Here’s my philosophy. I’m sitting on a bench. I’m wearing this shirt and these shoes. It’s this certain weather. This is my body, end of story.” (64)

“There’re people like me in the world, I think. You don’t hear much from us because we usually don’t say anything. But we’re out here, trying to get a hold on the whole thing. It’s like, I don’t know, it’s like trying to fix a moving car.” (65)

Freelancer:

“Since you don’t know the end, you’re not sure what your’ in the middle of.” (38)

“Where did nothing come from? King Lear has an answer, King James has another.” (39)

“This one culture whose name I forget thought the soul was in the feet. Other peoples have located it in the hands, or the eyes, the heart, all over the whole body.” (39)

“A serious mystery, then the middle part, then another mystery.” (40).

Woman:

“You know what’s funny? So, everything, in a way, is still going on. Time’s going by, in the town, at the library, in outer space, here-all over. In a fictional way, of course but, at the same time, like nonfictionally, too.” (38)

“There right in the middle of some life in some town-you know, in a way.” (39)
Landscaper:

“I think it’ll be soothing, you know, this tree, just nice for people. Bald kids going in on sunny school days. Shattered families leaving in the rain. Just a good old sturdy old tree. Year in, year out—a good tree.” (46)

“It’s got a real honest ring to it: ‘rock.’ ‘Person,’ on the other hand, I’m not so sure. It feels sort of last-minute, doesn’t it? Sort of fleeting? ‘Person’” (47)

Male Doctor:

“One other thing is: you never know. So be forgiving, of yourself, of him, of nature, everything. Nature is so insane, it’s so rough, and we’re just humans, just these chatty mammals with different names and colorful clothing. So forgiveness and love and you’re all set.” (49)

“Neither science nor religion has yet undone the wonder of the crying baby in air and light, grasping onto a finger.” (50)

Female Doctor:

“It’s not rare, but, it’s very lucky—to be a person, just a regular person. Did you know when you combine an egg cell and a sperm cell, there’s more ways they can combine, more particular kinds of people that can result, than there are atoms in the Universe?” (58)
Librarian:

“Some people say the secret to life is being able to live in the middle of all our different ideas about life.” (63)

“If it’s raining, it’s not snowing. If it’s snowing, the deer are thin. If the thin deer are sleeping, it is sunny. Hold the hand of your love and wait for the moon. Some things we are never to know. Listen to the brook.” (65)

“I think we’re born with questions and the world is the answer.” (65)
“See the Universe. See a tiny person in the middle of it all, thrashing. See the bright side. Try to look at the bright side.” (Eno 16)

4. Concept

*Midletown* as a play is a character study of mundane life. It repeatedly comes back to the characters looking at what is every day and commonplace and discovering something deeper, something we normally overlook. As the Cop contemplates while shining a flashlight at the two houses of John Dodge and Mary Swanson, whom we can see tossing a ball and reading through their respective windows “This is what life is like, here, right now” (Eno 17). With a bit of Samuel Beckett and Thorton Wilder, but with a signature stream of consciousness technique, Will Eno’s use of language in the play is poetic and important.

The characters rarely filter what they say and what they seem to think. If anything is hidden, Eno reveals it in direct address to the audience in the next scene. The play deals with characters in the middle of their lives, presenting, questioning, and searching for their own world view. “What do you want out of life?” the characters ask each other and in turn pose the question to the audience. The audience is treated as confidant and confessor. All of the characters want to speak to and justify themselves to the audience and at the beginning of the play the audience is invited into the town. The audience is welcomed as earthlings, breathers, humans into a play about the mundane act of living a simple life. Charles Isherwood says in the New York Times that
*Middletown* is about “life’s absurd beauty and it’s no less absurd horrors…the need for love and forgiveness, the search for meaning in life, the long, lonely ache of disappointment.”

Eno takes a small town and chooses characters with disparate world views within the town. The bulk of the characters start out as archetypes, as they are introduced nameless and only by occupations in Act 1 and by Act 2 the audience has heard enough of their story and internal life for Eno to name them. The archetypes become human. “I guess we all have a story. Once upon a time, Once upon a time, and so on, The End” (Eno 17) the Cop says while justifying himself in his direct address to the audience in scene 3 after the audience has witnessed him choking the Mechanic in Scene 1.

As the audience gets to know each character in the play, Eno also introduces an experience of their views of the world. We have the optimistic and pregnant Mrs. Swanson and the pessimistic John Dodge who begin a relationship based on mutual loneliness. The other characters do not have names until Act 2. We are introduced to each character as a separate person in the town and in the end we realize that there is connection and community, that each interaction and world view affects the other people in the town. Not only do the characters affect each other profoundly, but the earth and sky have a symbiotic relationship with them all. There is something mystical, shamanistic, and unexplained in the play about the sacred rituals of birth and death, and Eno connects all the characters with those events. The Librarian says that “some people say the secret to life is being able to live in the middle of all our different
ideas about life.” (Eno 63). This statement presents as a kind of credo in the play.
The play presents no greater conflicts other than each character’s internal
conflict about how best to live, what is important, and a mystical and mysterious
connection between all living things. To best portray this credo I want to highlight
in the set the things that connect everyone. Incorporating the earth below and the
sky above, the houses in which the characters separate themselves and the
spaces in which they gather together and exchange ideas.

Weather and sky appear in multiple parts of the script. This appearance
was to echo in the costuming of our main characters. John Dodge has a
pessimistic view of life and his costume matched the colors of sky and rain
clouds. Mrs. Swanson’s vibrancy and optimism inspired the colors of the sun.
Dodge refers to this palette when he says “I get nervous in certain weather,
sunlight reminds me of this great woman I knew.” Dodge also refers to suicidal
thoughts in nature imagery. “It was like this cloud came over me, this big dark
idea” (Eno 53).

Eno writes time of day into each scene description and time is important to
the scenes. How we act and the things said depend on evening, midday or
morning. Weather can change philosophy and connects mood with the natural
world. The Cop mentions time while on his beat “I do like this time of day: night.
All the people. All their bones and arteries and personal problems. Beautiful
animal: the Person. Dark.” (Eno 17), or when Swanson mentions, “Night is hard
you know? It gets so quiet. I never know what I’m supposed to be listening to.
But it does give me time to catch up on my needless worry” (Eno 26). The Tour
Guide’s scene, however, has the stage directions of “Bright Daylight” and this is important to the optimistic crescendo of the scene. In Act 2, I pictured the swelling of the clouds in the sky to mirror the swelling of the pregnancy to the point in which the rain dance releases not only the rain, but the soul of John Dodge and christens Mrs. Swanson’s new born baby of the same name.

The scenic elements of Earth and Sky draws our attention back to the basics of our nature, what unifies us. The Librarian reads an Indian prayer that addresses this connection to nature “If it’s raining, it’s not snowing. If it’s snowing, the deer are thin. If the thin deer are sleeping, it is sunny. Hold the hand of your love and wait for the moon. Some things we are never to know. Listen to the brook” (Eno 65). The Male and Female Tourists are invigorated by “the things that are potentially monumental, but that aren’t monumentalized, yet.” (21) The Tour Guide goes off on a tangent about the miraculous nature of the air, an unseen sunset, and the dirt. What is above and what is below and here we are in the Middle. Interwoven into that image is the knowledge that beyond what is under our shoes, is what is on top, and that some of that dust came from outer space. The ordinary becomes extraordinary in this play and to visually represent that I wanted two awe inspiring moments to occur, The Astronaut floating in Space and the incorporation of an unspecified magical space in the ritual that connects birth and death. This ritual was written by Eno as a Rain Dance and ultimately actualized by a projection of the Aurora Borealis incorporated into our version of the Rain Dance.
Also very important to my concept was that scene changes are seamless and had an easy symmetry to them. This is to create a feeling of scenes happening almost simultaneously in different locations. I used the convention of keeping characters onstage, albeit unlit, during certain scenes to give the impression that their life was still happening even if our attention was elsewhere. The interweaving of the simultaneous narratives and world views that all effect each other, even when characters are not in the same room, is hinted at in Eno’s stage directions. A line from the play that really inspired this is from the character Woman during the intermission audience scene in scene 10, she says “You know what’s funny? So, everything, in a way, is still going on. Time’s going by, in the town, at the library, in outer space, here-all over. In a fictional way, of course but, at the same time, like non-fictionally, too” (Eno 38), representing this became a goal in my staging.

I also felt this play is very much for the audience. Not only is an entire scene devoted to welcoming them at the beginning of the play, they are also portrayed in the intermission with a whole scene involving an intermission audience at the play Middletown. With all of the direct address and attempts by the playwright to speak to the audience their engagement with the play is of high importance. Greg the Astronaut even mouths to the audience in Eno’s stage directions “Maybe everybody knows exactly what this is like” (Eno 31). One of my goals was to directly connect the audience with the townsfolk of Middletown by having a direct video feed of the seating in Howell Theatre’s House projected on the scrim during the Intermission Audience scene. Another way I wanted to
engage the audience was in keeping the scenic elements recognizable enough that they could find parallels in Middletown to Lincoln, NE, or nearby small towns where they grew up. The description of the town and sky of Middletown reminded me of Lincoln, the Librarian says in Act 1 scene 2 “Middletown is a beehive, a human beehive, of activity and business. Many come to raise families and watch, swollen with civic pride, as their baby draws its first breath of local air. Also, drawn by the excellent clouds and the mostly silent nights, many come here to quietly retire” (Eno 11), the librarian goes on to speak about the great bike paths that the town has. There is another sky reference when the Mechanic shares his wish for himself “I’d like for people to look at me and say, ‘Wow. Look at that guy.’ I’d like to look at the sky and just think, “Hey, look at the sky” (Eno 65). Audience recognition was also why I wanted to film Nebraska skies as I felt that the skies here are distinct and would be recognizable to this audience.

Breath is another unifier within the play. At the beginning of the play the Public Speaker ends his introduction by finding the one thing that connects us all “Breathers” he calls us. Breath is also repeated throughout the production, John Dodge of his marriage only remembers “lying in bed, listening to the breathing” (24 Eno). During the Astronaut scene we had the audible breathing through the astronauts’ intercom and Greg mentions how “the breath it took to make the words…” (Eno 30) is sacred and profound and mysterious. Breath also is in the stage directions when John Dodge dies, “Occasional sounds of labored breathing” It was also added into the staging on a suggestion from Virginia Smith
when Mrs. Swanson is left alone on the bench during which we added in a
“Breathers Breath” as she sighed out her loneliness.

Below are my initial concept ideas I handed out at our first production
meeting. It outlines central ideas, inspirational quotes, wish lists, a break down
scene by scene and my main questions for each design department. Also
presented were the inspirational pictures in section six. I also played an
inspirational song “Carry On” by the band Fun. My central metaphor for the play
is a tree. Along with numerous references in the script to trees and the actual
planting of a tree onstage in Act Two, the tree is a visual metaphor of where the
characters are psychologically in *Middletown*. The roots of the tree represent
where we come from, our roots of our childhood, our history and past. Yet the top
of a tree is ever maneuvering to best absorb the sun to position itself to grow
higher towards the light, towards whatever we strive for, towards what feeds us.
The trunk of a tree is solidly in the middle, like the characters that are here
dealing with the act of living.

*Presented to Designers First Production Meeting:*
*(A lot of this section is summarized above, yet included as documentation of
ideas I first gave to designers to stimulate their process.)*

**Inspirational Quotes and Ideas**

“There’s a meadow we could walk to. Just nice grass and trees. It’s quiet, nothing
noticeably historical going on. The Chakmawg Indians believed trees were gods.
They thought everything was. So that whatever you were doing, no matter what you
were doing, you were praying. They had certain words you could only use when it
was raining. They had a chant to heal people’s hearts, another chant to keep the sky
blue. Let’s go to that meadow. We’ll sit for a while.”

-Will Eno, *Middletown*
“The awesome mystery of existence, the void whence everything came and into which it all may one day go.” –Charles Isherwood

“life’s absurd beauty and its no less absurd horrors”
“the need for love and forgiveness, the search for meaning in life, the long, lonely ache of disappointment.” –Charles Isherwood

: Directors Approach:

The Language of the play relishes in word choice and sometimes free association. Feel free to explore that in your design, yet keeping things focused enough to let the language shine through. There is a simple complexity in the play and there could be a simple complexity in the design. Take us to recognizable locations with depth, find something deeper in the mundane. There is much in this play that is about language, but language is more than words, it can be felt through other media the music we play, the images we show the shadows and lights all say something and we must be on a unified page. Middletown contains the poetic, absurdity and sadness in everyday life. The beautiful, the hysterical (in both definitions of the word, the funny and the uncontrollably emotional) and the devastating but pervading the play is A sense of “Awe” at it all.

On the language: “Characters say a lot of different things on different levels, but you have to tease out the stuff that really matters and treat it honestly. It’s no different from real conversation. Our few wise thoughts are surrounded by oceans of clutter.”
–Steppenwolf theatre company reviewer

Of Middletown, playwright Will Eno has said, "I wanted to write something that was a statement about what life feels, to me, on earth."

How I view coming to a play.
“we’re in need, you know? Just, in a kind of quiet kind of normal need. I can see why you’d think we’re just yahoos on vacation. But, we’re serious people.” –Eno, Middletown

“Time: Whooosh, Plunk” –Eno (life is fleeting and here we are) Laughing at our mortality, thinking of our mortality, having a sense of “Awe” at our mortality.

On Birth and Death “Those are just two events. There’s a lot in between” –Eno, Middletown

Projection ideas and Questions.

Sky above the town. Project Sky video footage across a permanent part of the set and use the different looks of the cloud/ time of day and sky-scape to inspire lights for the outdoor scenes.
Question: can we light something for indoors and still have a sky-scape projected? Rear projection for the sky?

*Scrim/ Cyc that we can project onto and then make disappear (could be used for beginning of show and for intermission and possibly at end of show.

**Projection Images (are mostly in scene notes.)**
Earth and other pictures of fragility, awe, the miracle of life. Foal being born, animals living and dying, stages of man/aging.

*Lobby Display:* A montage of young and old. From homeless to well dressed, from newborns to the dying, and every occupation in between. (on t.v's in the lobby?)

Can we project onto an actor from above? Time imagery, a clock to project on?

--

?Do we project sky when characters are indoors?

?Can we mic the stage?

?Do we have an official intermission after the stage intermission or is the stage intermission it

*Middletown Scenes: Specific Notes Scene by Scene.*

**Prologue p. 5**

**Actor delivers speech in time to montage of people projected**

Lines with corresponding Projections:
"Stock brokers, dock workers, Celebrities, nobodies."

“People who are still teething, who are looking for a helping verb.”

“the drunk, the high, the blue, the down, los pueblos (many peoples picture of all different ethnicities), los animals (many gorillas picture).

*After “Book worms whose eyes are tired from trying to read something into everything.” (motion animation words with pictures here)* "cross roads, in a crisis, a quandary, a velvety chair, the dirty, the hungry, yes, we the cranky the thirsty the furious, the happy, who are filled with life, bloated with it. Gorged on words” (motion animation words with pictures here stop)

(back to images) (sponsorship style)
“and of course the bereaved, the bereft, and let’s not forget the local merchants, the smiling faces, the placeholders, us, all we people slowly graying (time lapse aging video? Maybe?) who make all this possible.”

“sports fans” (Picture of guy with Husker T. Shirt)

(Collect all these images into a scrap book looking montage of all the images on the screen as the new ones below are added, they add to the projected image scrap book)

“time, hope, air, heart, nerves, chances, money, blood, friends, courage, faith, hair, time, teeth, time, time, health, hope”

“ghouls, ghosts, ... shades, shadows”

(On “I’m forgetting somebody” all projections disappear).

(We see the town through the scrim as cop enters, projection scrim goes up)

**Act One**

**Scn. 1:**

*Time of Day: Dusk/Evening*

(Town set windows and houses, bench, star scape with a projected sky at dusk/evening)

Possibly a Middle Town sign that can be incorporated into set and projected on a projection which says “Middletown. Population: stable (and has a graffiti horse in a stable drawn on it) elevation: same (= flat, graffiti-d on it).

**Scn 2:**

*Time of Day: Morning Sky*

(Library set, desk, information sign) Lights/projections: Morning Sky, and interior library.

**Scn 3:**

*Time of Day: Night*

Town/ House set.

**Scn 4:**

*Time of Day: Midday.*

Town Square, block of granite/plaque.

**Scn 5:**
Same time as 4 could the sky change the lighting a little? As in a real time change in the sky video mirrored and accented with light.
Town Square
Sandwiches

Scn 6:
*Time of Day: Evening
Town Square
Projections: CU of a medicine man (p.28) appearing and disappearing in the night sky?

Scn 7:
*Star Scape / Night Sky / Space
Projections: Space/Earth from afar, Thruster streaks?, end of scene Greg projected in sky mouthing words “maybe everyone knows exactly what this is like” without making any sound at all.

Sound: Radio Speech from Capsule to ground control. Amplified and some static and delay on speech as though through a radio transmission on a space flight, thruster sound of space capsule. Can we mic the stage?

*Space Capsule (Can we make him float in from a wing, on a dressed genie maybe?, so he is in front of the sky/Space projection? As he flies over the houses) (other option would be to use scrim to create the space scape.

Scn 8
*Time of Day: Day
Swanson Kitchen. Kitchen sink, drain and cabinet. Kitchen table. (How to do this? Minimally? Or revealingly? Open her house and bring it forward?)

Scn 9
*Time of Day: middle of Night
Flash light and sky/moon only light, low light

Cop enters through audience, back of house probably.

Scn 10 --- Intermission ----
Scrim covers front of stage
Actor Audience seats come onstage, one seat has a faulty armrest.
Projections: we live feed video and project our actual house audience throughout intermission.

*Sound: Recorded Applause? (maybe)*

**Act 2**

*Scn 1*
*Time of Day: Night*

*Scn 2*
*Time of Day: Bright Day*
Middletown Hospital
Outside of: Emergency Sign
Area to plant / grass / landscaping / rocks to dig up.

*Scn 3*
*Time of Day: maybe same day as Scn 2. Or cloudy with sun*
Inside Doctors office.

*Scn 4*
*Time of Day: Storm clouds*
*Hospital Room John Dodge*

*Scn 5*
*Time of Day: Storm Clouds continue or clear up?*
Hospital Loading Dock

*Scn 6*
*Hospital Room John Dodge*

*Scn 7*
*Time of Day: before a rain sky. Swollen clouds*
Enterance and lawn of Middletown Hospital, Tree is planted, Emergency sign.

*Scn 8*
*Time of Day: Raining*
Mrs. Swansons Hospital room

*Scn 9*
*Time of Day: Raining*
John Dodges hospital Room

*Scn 10*
*Time of Day: lightly Raining*
Swansons Hospital Room
Scn 11: heavy Raining
John Dodge hospital room/ death

Scn 12
Unspecific space, Mrs. Swanson and the body of John Dodge visible through the Darkness on stage.

Chakmawg Indian ceremony. Rain dance

Scn 13
Time of Day: After the Rain Sky/ Magic Hour Sky.
John Dodge Hospital Room

Scn 14
Time of Day: Evening, Magic Hour Sky, sunset color into night?
Mary Swanson’s Hospital Room

-End of Play-

Directors Impressions/Notes for Designers: Middletown

**Sound:** Transition music chosen to really add to mood. Inspiration: “Carry On” by Fun on album *Some Nights.* “Be Calm” by Fun. Scn 7: Amplified and some static or delay on speech as though through a radio transmission on a space flight. Thruster sound of space capsule. Recorded Applause. Hospital sounds, the sound of rain on a hospital roof, some light rain some heavy. Radio Voice, The last minute or so of the choral part of Beethoven’s 9th symphony.

**Light Needs:** spot light, star drop? Dusk/ evening, morning Using the sky as an inspiration for light, A differentiation between chars being in the scene and direct address to audience. Practicals in houses.

**Scenic Needs:** Scrim, Town set with windows we can see into the houses, at least two houses which we can see inside via window. (I.i) , bench in neighborhood playground/park. A place for the projected sky, Library Set. (perhaps sky windows in certain set pieces that we can see sky through? Town Square, Space Capsul?, Middletown hospital. Have to be able to go back and forth between hospital rooms seamlessly.

**Projection needs:** (need access to camera this summer) Sky at many different times of day/ looks, unbroken video of sky which can play through a scene, 10 mins of
each look to be safe?, Sky needs: Evening, Morning, dawn, rain, night (multiple),
magic hour, sunset, Space/Earth from afar, see projection/ image notes on scenes.

**Costumes:** Cop, Mechanic, Librarian, Miss Swanson (and pregnancy stages), John
Dodge, Tourists, Tour Guide, Astronaut, Mission Control, Male Doctor, Female
Doctor, Attendant, Chakmawg Indian, Public Speaker, Aunt, Sweetheart, Freelancer,
Man, Woman, Landscaper, Janitor

**Props:** Baton, brown paper bag bottle of liquor, computer at library, Information
sign, Librarian desk, Park Bench, library card, library cart/library books. Book
stamp, A business card “Lucy Graves Assoc.”, radio/walkie talkie, clipboard, maps,
camera to hang around a neck. Plastic shopping bag, sandwiches. Sludge in drain,
newspaper, Flash Light. Theatre Seats in a row. Sapling White Ash, shovel, pills,
pitcher of water. Baby,

Later over the summer I gave Janice Stauffer, the Costume Designer for
Middletown, the below character breakdown, quotes, research and thoughts on
costuming. Also included below is Janice’s email exchange with me regarding
costume ideas.

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**On Costumes**  
Will Eno’s, *Middletown*

6m 6f

**Male Actors**

Actor 1: **Public Speaker, Greg, Male Doctor**

Actor 2: **Cop**

Actor 3: **John Dodge**

Actor 4: **Mechanic**

Actor 5: **Man, Landscaper, Janitor**

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Direction
Joshua Waterstone
Actor 6: Male Tourist, Freelancer, possibly various extras (Ground Control) /offstage voices

Female Actors

Actor 1: Mrs. Swanson

Actor 2: Librarian

Actor 3: Tour Guide, Attendant

Actor 4: Female Tourist, Attendant 2, Woman

Actor 5: Aunt, Female Doctor

Actor 6: Sweetheart /offstage voices

From Boston Globe Article on Theatre and Art Metaphysics of Middletown

Costume Ideas Inspirational quotes:

Eno’s hamlet is populated with archetypal figures. But each one is a little skewed — a stolid, prickly Cop; a brooding, troubled Mechanic; a cheerful, dry-witted Librarian; and a compassionate yet candid Female Doctor. Like the Stage Manager in “Our Town,” Eno’s characters often speak directly to the audience. But the people in “Middletown” have a strange knack for articulating the secret fears and niggling anxieties, the hidden hopes and dashed dreams beneath the genial pleasantries of small-town life.

There is no lying in this play. It’s a grave honesty that society doesn’t usually welcome.

Arch of the Play Inspiration

Still, his fascination with life and death and the nature of existence remains unabated. But that doesn’t mean he’s a depressed or dour soul. In fact, thinking about death, he suggests, helps us all to better understand and affirm life.

“It’s hard to be a human being. It’s complicated — and complicated in ways we’ll probably never fully be able to see,” Eno says. “I wrote this play and mean it to be a kind of testament to the difficulty of consciousness, or a picture of the complications of the simplest life.”
Janices Thoughts: 8/19/13

Dear Joshua,

I do have some questions and proposals regarding the main characters who are not double cast – how best to emphasize the trajectory of each and to connect the dots between the scenes. It seems to me that the librarian is the character with the most solid core- the most intellectually curious and most able to connect between the characters. Mrs. Swanson begins rather bleakly but does achieve her goal, is encouraged by the doctor's words and fulfilled in the end, despite a real disappointing husband who is barely involved in the marriage, much less showing parenting potential (this also supports that 50's-60's vintage feeling-the belief that children and their raising is solely the woman's duty. John Dodge is clueless and ineffectual (except for fixing the sink) from the start of the play to the end – he and the mechanic exemplify what the male doctor describes as not knowing one's place in the world-the result of not being loved enough (but is it really by parents who were wise as to what molds character, confidence, discipline and the ability to cope- versus just keeping him fed and clothed).

I think there is quite a bit, actually, we could talk about which might affect only costumes or also perhaps the degree of vagueness or specificity in the time frame of both costume and props.

Themes: Loneliness, family, love, mortality, time, Birth, Death, Attraction, repulsion,

Characters in Middletown:

Middletown itself:

"Today, Middletown is a behive, a human behive, of activity and business. Many come to raise families and watch, swollen with civic pride, as their baby draws its first breath of local air. Also, drawn by the excellent clouds and the mostly silent nights, many come here to quietly retire. Middletown. We've got you coming and going." –pg. 11, Chamber of Commerce description.

“All the struggle and science and stale candy in every little speck. You look at it and you think, “Dirt” That's not even half the story.” (P. 22)

**Public Speaker (could be m or f):** (a presence of making a curtain speech, yet also able to get deep) able to handle language, Spanish, good timing for images.

**Cop:** a rule abider, but unpredictable, life is not neat and it has thrown him off and made him volatile

**Mechanic:** A drifter, troubled, a dreamer, thrown away life or feels life is thrown away, misunderstood, lost. An eavesdropper, listening to other lives as he’s dissatisfied with his own. Found a rock, thought it was a meteorite and he was going to make the papers. Disappointed it was just a regular rock. Has a violent side.

**Mrs. Swanson:** new to Middletown, curious and starting a new family, husband is absent away at work continually, she is lonely, pregnant, impressionable. Trying to
keep a sunny disposition. Trying to start a family. Does not have a passion for a job. Passion for husband?

**Librarian:** rational and curious, helpful, tolerant,

**John Dodge:** Handyman works for money, just goes from crappy job to crappy job, secretly depressed and searching for meaning, tries to find meaning in hobbies or books on gravity etc...a bit flying by the seat of his pants through life.

**Tour Guide:** Lived in Middletown entire life, tries to keep interest

**Male Tourist:** Former Gambler, thrifty, world traveler, just got back from Rome, camera around neck

**Female Tourist:** second wife to male tourist, likes to travel the world, and considers self as a pilgrim
5. Anticipated Challenges of the Play

As *Middletown* is an ontological play I anticipated keeping the philosophical and poetic musings inherent in the text active. That goal would be a challenge. I would need to find an urgency and presence to the play as the second act is largely characters sitting on benches or in hospital beds contemplating life. I coached the actors from the start to find immediacy in the language, that a downfall of this play will be ponderousness. Their discoveries have to be active and remain in the present.

I also felt that, due to the stage space of the Howell Theatre, a challenge would be maintaining the script’s intimacy while also sharing voices and body language with the back of the house and the seats in the balcony. I chose the Howell theatre, as opposed to a more intimate space, because I believed it would be best suited for the spectacle of the play, which I wanted to enliven the imagery in the text. I also wanted to incorporate projections and media technologies into the design. I knew I had at my disposal image, body, space, light, technology, language and sound and I wanted to utilize them all to the best of my and my production team’s ability.

Other challenges included

- Working with a cast of 12 actors playing 22 parts
- Staging and designing a scene in Space
- Choreographing a dance that is a ritual connecting life and death
- Connecting and engaging the audience in such a play.
6. Inspirational Images

Here are the images that were presented at the first production meeting:

The feeling of peering into a window at someone’s life. A voyeur perspective.
Town square

Astronaut and Space Capsule
Freedom to invent and reinvent with a simple complexity, or a complex simplicity in design. I used this picture to encourage creative thinking in design and freedom to think outside of the box. When asked if I was leaning towards realism or the abstract I answered realism as I believe that it is the mystical found in the mundane that is at the core of the play.
7. Rehearsal Schedule

Here is the original schedule I sent to my stage manager Savannah Kurtz for rehearsals. We continued to add to the latter half of the schedule through actor calls decided at the end of the week, planning rehearsal for the entire next week. It is preceded with notes I had for the actors before first rehearsal.

For memorization: I expect you to be very familiar with the script, but not yet off book for first rehearsal. After we block a scene, the next time that scene is called you should be close to off book. You will notice after fall break is full show off-book deadline.

The release times are approximations, when you are called for rehearsal plan to be here till we release you. If when you are called we are still working I expect you to meet with your fellow scene partners and begin rehearsing in the lobby together. *Rehearsal Schedule Subject to Change.*

**Mon Oct 7th**
All Called 6:30-10:30pm
Read Thru
Designer Share

**Tue Oct 8th**
All Called 6:30pm-10:30pm
Table Work
Movement
Exercises

**Wed Oct 9th**
Blocking Act 1
6:30pm scn 3,9 only Spencer
7:00pm add only Will Scn 1
7:30pm Scn 2 (Just Will called Spencer released)
8pm: Scn 2(All Actors in scene called)
9pm: Scn 5, 8 (Emma and Will released)
**Thursday Oct 10th**
Block Act 1
6:30pm Scn 6 (emma)
7pm: Scn 4 (no lauren involved in scn 4)
7:45pm: Scn 10
8:30pm: Scn 7
9pm: Prologue

**Friday Oct 11th**
Work thru Act 1 Scenes (no Lupe, no Meghan)

**Sun Oct 13th**
4-6pm Work thru Act 1 Scenes (no Emma, no Meghan)
6-8pm Block Act 2
6pm: Scn 4
7pm: Scn 5

**Mon Oct 14th**
Block Act 2
6:30pm Scn 1, scn 12 (just Will)
7:15pm Scn 7
8pm Scn 2
9pm: Scn 12 (with attendant)
9:30pm: scn 13

**Tue Oct 15th**
Block Act 2
6:30pm Scn 3
7:30pm Scn 8
8pm: Scn 6
8:45: Scn 13
9:15: Scn 4, 11

**Wed Oct 16th**
Block Act 2
6:30pm Scn 9
7:00pm Scn 10
7:30pm Scn 14

**Thur Oct 17th**
Work Thru Spots Act 2
Friday Oct 18th
Run/ Work Act 2

Saturday Oct 19th
2-6pm
Run Act 1 and 2

Wed Oct 23rd
Off Book Deadline (no scripts in hand)
Work Thru Act 1

Thurs Oct 24th
Work Thru Act 2

Friday Oct 25th
Scene Work Act 1 and 2

Sun Oct 27, 6:30-10:30pm
Scene Work Act 1 and 2 (No Jeff)

Oct 28th-Nov 1st Run/Work as needed T.B.A.

Sunday Nov 3rd 6:30-10:30pm T.B.A.

Nov 4th-7th Run Thrus and Works.

Nov 8th: First Tech

Nov 10th: Second Tech

Nov 11th: First Dress

Nov 12th: Final Dress
8. Rehearsal Journal

Below is my journaling of rehearsal and production meetings largely unedited from what was recorded on specific days.

4/15/2013

First Production meeting for Middletown. I began the presentation playing the song “Carry On” by Fun as I felt that the song encompassed the feeling and meaning of the play. The song speaks of mortality. It has some of the poetic philosophy and feel of the play and I love the structure of the song as it musically adds more and more elements becoming wonderfully overwhelming in its crescendo. Within one verse of the song is how we do not believe that we are shining stars and instead feel our own loneliness. The song also mentions “how our parents will die and all our neighbors and wives” and how we like to think that we can “cheat it all.” The chorus is “If your lost or alone, or your sinking like a stone, Carry on, may your path be the sound of your feet upon the ground carry on.” This is what I would like the audience to leave with, not one answer to life but having been presented with multiple world views. To feel some amazement and awe at life and with the feeling of carrying on through this amazing chance that we have to live. I presented my directors concept to the production team and faculty passing out a packet which included inspirational quotes, directorial approach, design wish list and jumping off points for each design area as well as a scene by scene breakdown to outline my projected sky-scape idea and specific needs I foresee within scenes.
After my first production meeting my advisor Virginia Smith said that she knows that I am a collaborative director but that she did not get that from my initial production meeting. Perhaps I threw too many ideas at the group. I was careful to state that I am only throwing out suggestions and that I want to hear any ideas that they have whether similar or different to the ones I laid out. I want these ideas not taken as gospel but as inspirational jumping off points for designers.

May 2013

In May we had our last production meeting before the summer.

Joey spoke of the cosmos and galaxy as color choices

Vicki brought in images of houses with roots growing out of them. I liked the idea of the town growing out of the stage, Native American inspired ideas and vines and trees growing up around the houses but could not get her to explain why she chose the pictures of houses with roots growing out of them and what that symbolized.

Joe is thinking of using the band “Fun” as song inspirations. I encouraged Joe to feel free to explore other ideas as well as his design matures. He also spoke of composing songs for transitions, sound effects, and sounds coming from the house (or directionally specific sounds)

Drake/Ethan: We composed a list of equipment they would need to capture sky footage over the summer. I wrote to Sharon, Rick, Virginia and Laurell for permission to film.
Equipment: Need video to fill the entire width, more than one camera and will need multiple projectors.

This list is what we asked for:

- Storage media, CF cards, 2 cameras that have same camera and lens configuration.
- DSLR still photo setup and possible intervalometer (for timelapses/sunrise, sunset)
- Batteries, watertight housing for cameras (for rain shots)
- Stock footage options
- Getty Images
- When will we know budget for projections?

I also setup email threads, A Facebook and Dropbox group to stay in touch on progress over the summer.

Late May 2013
I was able to get permission from Rick and Sharon to check out two matching cameras for the sky video. I kept in contact with Ethan and Drake until we were able to find a day to go out and test some sky footage with the setup we had. Drake, Ethan and I setup the dual cameras and tried multiple angles to find a way that will allow us to stitch the sky together into one projectable image. They said they will see if the footage works. Days later we met and they said that it seemed to work.
Early June 2013

Upon my contact continuing with Drake and Ethan I continued to try to find days which we could go out and shoot the sky footage. We were not able to coordinate another day to go out and look at footage due to their availability. I was eventually notified that the two camera setup did not work. They then decided that using a GoPro camera would be the best way to proceed as it has a very wide lens. Ethan already owned a GoPro camera but Drake did not. Drake was however working the film camp with Sharon and said he would ask her to check out the camera that the school had. I am now not a direct part of the process of collecting footage as they said they did not need the equipment I checked out and could gather just with the GoPros.

Also been trying to contact Vicki with little result. Both Joey and Greg have posted images and architectural references in the Facebook and Dropbox groups but have not had response or images from Vicki.

July 2013

Had some brief Facebook messages back from Vicki with her talking about working on some idea sketches to show me after she gets less busy with working the Nebraska Repertory.

No footage able to be seen from Drake or Ethan as now Drake has started an internship at LiCor and Ethan is working on the film project “Laurence” in NY. Joey has posted a slew of great inspirational images in our Dropbox.
I have posted articles on *Middletown* in our online groups and idea prompts to try to keep inspiring design discussions and posts.

Aug 2013

Set a date with Vicki after Nebraska Repertory Finishes to see some ideas and sketches.

We had been asking for a while about how projections would be handled with the Set, a few ideas were thrown out such as windows or a ripped piece of the sky, no response from Vicki yet, I will find out at the meeting.

8/19

Had a meeting with Vicki regarding the design for Middletown and to see sketches and hear about her ideas.

The parts I asked for, a place to project sky and the roots below were incorporated as were the two main houses. Only had a sketch for the main scene, no sketches for any of the scene changes.

I thought the overall feel could work, Vicki had the background dominated by buildings with the Lincoln Capitol building in the middle. She explained that she was thinking of projecting sky in the windows of the building so we see a reflection of the sky. This idea interested me as theatre is a reflection of life. This play particularly being an exploration and reflection on our lives and the idea of actual sky-scapes being reflected in windows sounded interesting to me.

I wanted more spots for the sky to be projected but integrated into the scenery. The initial sketch just had big square projection screens sketched in the
middle of the two large trees on stage. I suggested what if the projection area was integrated between the branches of the trees. Not just square but broken up by the tree leaves and branches as though the audience were looking at the sky through the tree. Vicki incorporated that into the sketch.

I wanted one side to have a large projection area. I was imagining the S.L. tree to split in two main branches and have a large sky projection area in between them that we could use for the stars when the astronaut was suspended in the air. Vicki didn’t like the idea of the tree having two wide branches as she said she hasn’t seen many trees around Lincoln that do that. I assured her that there were and also that trees in Middletown did not have to match anything we see in Lincoln, especially with the capitol incorporated the set already had a strong image that attached us with Lincoln and to copy local trees would not matter.

I also asked for the bench to be moved to S.L. rather than S.R. where she had sketched it as I felt it was a stronger position. Vicki had also put the planted tree off to the far D.S.L side and I suggested that we plan to plant it in the middle of the stage, perhaps even using the trap so that we could plant the tree with real dirt. This was an image I wanted of the new life in the center of the stage as I thought it would be a strong image later when John Dodge and Swanson are both in the hospital and the new tree was between them.

Also mentioned at this meeting was that I liked how Vicki planned to incorporate splays of tree branches peeking out from behind each curtain and proscenium
archway. It gave a vanishing point type of perspective which drew the eye onto the stage.

8/20

Meeting with Janice to chat Middletown costume ideas.

I brought my research and a costume breakdown character list for Janice and we chatted at “The Mill” coffee shop. Janice and I spoke about the idea of archetype and what is untrue about the archetypes in the script.

The handy man who makes problems for himself to fix
The happy housewife who is starting a family but is actually lonely and unfulfilled.
The Mechanic who’s life is broken
The policemen who seems more dangerous than the criminals
Maybe we have the Mechanic dressed in the natural skins and feathers of a ritual tribe but have a medical attendant hand him an archetypal headdress to entertain the kids. Maybe the Mechanic rejects this stereotypical version of an Indian.
(All the characters seem to reject there archetype, Janice sees a holdover from the 20’s or 50’s in the characters and how they act. Particularly the name of Mrs. Swanson being a very 50’s title.)

8/25

I was having lots of ideas about Middletown while listening to music and running, they are below.
• A ripped out piece of paper as the projection screen/swatch that is behind the trees and across the cyc.

• What would we do with the cyc to tie it in to the design?

• Would anything be able to be seen in the windows of the capitol as they would have to be really small to look to scale with the proscenium? Perhaps only the capital, no other buildings or not capitol?

• Could we reflect the stars and clouds in the two windows of Mrs. Swanson and John Dodges houses?

• “We are all made of Stars” by Moby. I was attracted to this song and wanted to share it at the next production meeting as it speaks of themes in Middletown. A lyric that hit me “People they come together, people they fall apart, no one can stop us now, cause we are all made of stars.”

• The reflection of the cosmos in the windows, the reflection of the world in the windows, all of the world is reflected in us.

• Joey talked of a window type projection area, and its interesting when Vicki brought up reflection of the sky that you see in windows, as that is what theatre is, a window a world, or world view. How do we unify the lens of the window? Could we add a glare on the windows in Adobe After Effects?

• If it is the capitol in the background Janice talked about how the top of the capitol looks like a spaceship, what if it took off with the astronaut in it? We could have the stars projected behind it and on the windows and fog
coming from the bottom of the capitol as though its taking off into space from the dome top. (This would certainly be a transformation of space)

8/26 (notes production meeting)

At the production meeting I looked forward to hearing about everyone’s ideas post summer break. I brought “We are all Stars” by Moby and played it so that the group could hear the song.

Props: Morgan had a list for me to peruse

Joe: spoke of making ambient music, sound effects and environmental sounds.

Vicki: Tree branches and parts of the trees, tree roots to bring the people onto the stage is something we talked about.

Colors: Going more naturalistic, brick and wood flat siding for the two houses. Trees coming on top of others, coming out of splays.

Joey: spoke of Atmospheric lighting with the projected skylines. Using the Star Drop is something interesting to explore. Spoke of isolated lighting and a smaller more intimate feel in the scenes.

Greg: was seeing what he could do about the top of the capitol popping off as the space ship capsule

Janice: Classic clothing pieces, from the 50’s, 60’s, bland clothes with an iconic feel.

Virginia and Laurel advised to use projections as atmosphere rather than trying to get them to do everything.
**Projections**: Drake and Ethan, Ethan has gathered some sky and will prepare it so I can see it sometime. Drake said he never collected any.

**Projections resources**: we are told that we have mad mapper, Q-lab 3 and Ghost Elementors (sic) to make it happen.

**Costumes**: With the Mechanic have him look magical and then when lights come up to look cheesy

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8/27 Response to Production Meeting

After this production meeting Virginia wrote me an email with some questions from the production meeting. It appears verbatim below.

“I said I’d have questions, but maybe it’s more musings. Even though I am deeply attached to the important things I say in your meetings, you don’t need to do them. My comments and mentor’s comments are there for you to reflect on and use or adapt or ignore. Unless, of course, they say you can’t do something. It might be politic to say, if you reject the sky being the poetic character idea, that you heard the idea and have decided to, blah blah blah, because of blah blah blah. Am I making any sense?

Did you hear Janice say she wanted the headdress to look cheesy in real light, magical in another light and return to cheesy? That’s right in there with your ideas about us being earth bound but made of star dust. Do you think you should question her further about her idea? Might be very productive.

You might want to look for the star dust in the doctor and the tourists. Can the
stardust be a special lighting thing? Or a heartbeat sound effect. Are all characters made of star dust or just the main characters? These are ideas that were exploding in me during the conversations.

Ignore Ed’s comment about not exploring ideas in the production meetings. He just wants the meetings short. Sometimes it’s your only venue for getting ideas from everyone. It should be reporting, yes, but not only. Do you have a choreographer? I think this is a touchy place in the script. Is he an astronaut of the spirit? Is that the climax of the play? Why does Mrs. Swanson reject it? Have you done a formal script analysis? Did you do a formal director’s concept?

We will talk tomorrow “

8/28 Thesis meeting

At our Thesis class meeting I had some questions about the role of the mentors at the meetings.

- I noticed that Steve wasn’t able to attend our meetings and wondered how that would affect projections.
- I also spoke of the need to test images on the scrim and Virginia asked if there were other ways to cover up the set other than the scrim.
- We spoke of the Native American Dance, would using a black light be prudent and plans for choreography.
- We also spoke about auditions and planning our upcoming callbacks.
Callbacks are difficult, a mix of excitement and fear, not only on the actors part but on my part as well.

Time is a problem! I got out close to 10:30pm but could have staggered more people for callbacks. It is difficult for this play since I am casting a 12 person show with lots of doubling and I wanted to see the versatility and different sides of the actors on certain tracks. I chose to hold the callbacks in the studio, so it was a bit more intimate than the Howell. I could see the actors well in the studio and felt like I could coach them better.

I think that the studio was the right choice to hold the callbacks. I felt good that even in a scene of 5 actors I felt I had direction to give to each actor in the scene to see how they take direction and to figure out if they would play the part well.

I saw a lot in these callbacks from the actors and received a good sense to make my decisions for casting. So much of casting in auditions is intuition, I get a sense from the actors of their intuition and feel what part they fit into and which parts they can grow into. Hoping for good decisions and for a cohesive and collaborative ensemble.

8/30

Contemplating casting a freshman as the male lead John Dodge.
It would be risky, I asked Harris his insight as he works with the freshman and he said “If anyone can do it Jeff can” and Carrie Lee cautioned that the upper level actors are taking many more performance classes than freshman are and should be improving much quicker in the course of the semester.

I’m rereading the play with casting in mind to get a sense.

8/30

After rereading the play post callbacks my mind exploded with possibilities and insights into the play. Having now the picture of the human side of the play, I realize that actors are a large part of the medium. They are the color of the art that is to be splashed and applied on the canvas. Made a lot of connections and I buzz with possibilities.

Some of the characters are cast “Just Right” based on our acting pool and others will take more coaching. The negotiating table for casting between Dennis and I was amicable and it only took a short time to cast. We are cast and on to rehearsals for Dennis and rehearsal planning for me as mine will not start till Oct. I’d like to setup individual character meetings with each main actor track to discuss ideas before the rehearsals officially begin.

Ideas from self-brainstorming session after reread of play.

**Props**: IV bag for John, Heart Monitor, Have to have the Emergency Sign. Middletown sign pops up on a spring loaded sign post and can go back down on command. Graffiti idea with projected sign refers to p. 63 on the
Mechanics poem of Middletown being like a horse. I wanted him to draw the stable around population: Stable.

Dig-able part of set for the rock and tree section

p.29: “Someone is born, someone will die, both are you, unwind, unknow.”

Dissecting life and the angles of why we are here.

- What purpose is the Astronaut? Seeing from afar the fragility of the planet.
- We have the mystic and his opposite in the Mechanic.
- We have the rule maker and the force in the cop
- We have the feeler, the over thinker and the dying and Dark in John Dodge
- The literature lover, learner, fortune teller in the Librarian
- The mother, sunshine, life giver, new family, new beginnings in Mrs. Swanson
- History and Awe at the past in the Tour Guide
- The advisor who knows how to bring life into this world in the doctor
- The landscaper finding truth in Nature
- Us, the audience in the intermission Audience, truth through viewing art.
- The scientific view of life, nature, “nature is very frank” (55) in Female Doctor
- Sweet heart channels the play, the rocking of autism is a shamanic move, its like a ritual.

We also have a repetition of the shamanistic

-the rain dance
-the literature that the librarian reads involves a shaman

-the Indian Prayer in act two (Eno, 65) The earth is Life idea.

Fragility: “one vowel away” Swensen, Swanson (52)

Dark and Light: Both lonely, both need each other, She names the baby John, the light honors the dark.

Moving towards winter seasonally, summer in first act, fall in second act.

Quotes:

- John Dodge: “I get nervous in certain weather, sunlight reminds me of this great woman I knew” My heart races, I get these twitches in my elbow, my mind races.” (Eno,53)

“It was like this cloud came over me, this big dark idea”

- “Stories of people seeing a white light” (Eno, 55)

“Those are just two events, there's a lot in between”

Kindness of the illegal kind: “she spills some pills on the concrete” (Eno, 59)

- Librarian: what people say “some people say the secret to life is being able to live in the middle of all our different ideas about life.” (Eno, 63)

Light and Dark: “My mother used to sing you are my sunshine to me at night, and then she’s sing Kentucky moon in the morning” (Eno, 64)

September (beginning of)

- Had lots of meetings with individual designers.

Here is a summary of production meeting ideas:
Scenic: Vicki has been measuring Howell. She came back with how many feet each configuration would give. Fourteen feet of space, or twelve feet of space, with the Star Drop it would be thirteen feet of space and we would lose one line set, another configuration is ten feet of space. This was all difficult for me to visualize.

Props: I have a list on Drop box and images

Lights: I had a separate meeting and spoke about ideas also looked at projections with Ethan.

Costumes: Janice directed me to a rain dance video on you tube to look at.

T.D.: Greg said that we can fly, that we have a harness and could move vertically as well as left and right.

Cody has been added as Projection tech.

9/4

Thesis Class Notes:

Tone: finding it and cohesion of tone for this play

The layers in the play that help with the complexity. Character development.

- Schedule callbacks better in the future to better use the actors time.
- Suggestions to make them move in the first rehearsal, perhaps be an animal or bring in a plant or psychological gesture.

9/10:
Tech: Can test Black projections Thursday on scrim (this had to be rescheduled thought due to setup problems)

**Set:** scene changes meeting with Vicki, Laurel has told Vicki to make a white model so we can visualize the set better. We struck the star scape as we don’t have the room onstage for it and the benefit is small to use the star scape. Need to figure out transitions, Make the transitions magical.

Morgan: has a new list for props

**Projections:** Drake: working on Kinetic text

Ethan: Digital Starscape he will work on. Need night and morning time of day, need something for the projecting test.

Lights: nothing today

Janice: showed patterns for scrubs. We made some decisions on material

Cody: need to do a webcam test to see if the live feed could work

Virginia: advised me to stick to my guns if I want less patterns on the scrubs in the hospital. She also said just tell them what you want and don’t worry about the line set discussion they are bringing me into. They will figure it out.

9/11

Try to communicate directly and specifically.

9/12

Ideas for Props
- Ground control is facing away from audience with LED glowing controls in the dark.
- Rocket thrusters on Jet pack or after burners in the sky?
- Using light as a spectacle in the transition

9/17

Cody and Greg: Projection Test still needed and Cody needs to get me info on live feed. We scheduled the test for this Thursday

T.D: How does the Astronaut hook and unhook? Is it quick? There was discussion of how jerky or smooth will the Astronaut move?

Projection Content: Drake and I will meet to go through the story boards he has for kinetic text and animations for prologue.

Ethan: I will meet with to see sky scapes

Lights: Lighting the face inside the Astronaut helmet, also working with Morgan to light the ground control board.

Costume: Astronaut: props will build the oxygen tank, can hide the attachment inside the clothes, will not be able to have a space capsule, Astronaut will have to fly just as a body in space.

Run Crew idea as Towns people.

Props: Got furniture props for rehearsal.

Sound: Greg will get a wireless mic, Ground control will have a working stationary mic. 2 radios for walkie talkie, telecue for the library scene.

Setup radio recording time.
Gorrillaz sound samples Joe will show me.

9/19:

**Projection Test**

I was informed that we are testing farther back than the actual line test, tested on the black scrim. All designers agreed that it will work.

The test looked funny but half of the screen looked great and bright and I was assured that the clear part is how it will finally look.

On the Live feed Cody said that Q-lab has the technology to do it.

Note: I also wrote after the test to Greg and Joey re-asking my questions about the clarity of the projection test and they both assured me that they are not worried about projecting on the black scrim.

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**One-on-One Meetings with Actors** (before rehearsals)

9/20/13

Talked to Bryan Howard about his insights into the characters he will play (Astronaut, Doctor, Public Speaker). He has a good grasp on the basics needed in the characters and I am excited at how excited he is about the play. The talk helped to give him more to think about in preparation for rehearsals. It also helped to clear up my thought in articulating them to him.
Bryan is looking at the world view for each of this characters and we had an interesting discussion about how the Doctor speaks rehearsed inspirational words to Mrs. Swanson about how to act as a mother.

The chat left with Brian on fire about the play and he gave me permission to push him in the rehearsal hall to get the most out of the play. This was a worthwhile one-on-one and gives me the trust and permission I need to really get the most out of Bryan. This one-on one excited me about directing.

9/25 One-on-One with Jeffrey Pascach

Jeff and I spoke about John Dodge and he said that he felt that John had a lot of his natural tendencies such as “Yeah, no” speech patterns. We also spoke of how John has a blatant honesty in communication. John’s different jobs, wandering and concessions he has made in his life as well as character history with divorce was discussed. I also spoke to Jeff of how I saw John as storm cloud and how the text alludes to a darkness and gloomy feel to John, but also a dark humor and the ability to laugh at himself.

Jeff was a bit quiet in the talk back but very open to ideas.

Meghan Modrovsky 9/25

Tour Guide: “I thought this was the world.” We spoke about growing up in Middletown and not knowing anywhere else. Also Meghan made the decision that the female tourist is doing her job full time. We also spoke about the Attendant and her naivety.

Meghan had nice ideas about her character.

Spenser Stokes 9/25
In speaking about the Cop Spenser confided to me that he felt that he understood the character on a personal level. The Cop’s mother died of cancer and Spenser’s dad died of melanoma cancer. He had seen some of the symptoms that the Cop describes when he talks about his mother in the play. I think that Spenser can use his experiences to inform the Cop.

Grant Alsup 9/26

Grant and I spoke about how to distinguish the characters in the play with voice and body positions. Grant had some good ideas for Landscaper and wanting a hippie feel for him but he did not have as many ideas about his other characters of Man and Janitor. We also spoke about recording the radio voice and how he will make his voice different for that recording so that when he comes back in as the Janitor it isn’t immediately recognizable that he is also the radio voice. I wanted to do this connection as a subtle metaphor of how we are all connected. The fact that the same voice coming through the radio is connected to the voice of the Janitor at the hospital. I don’t think anyone will pick up that idea but me, but I wanted to include it.

Will Voelker 9/26

Will and I spoke about the Mechanic. Will described him as a drunk, smartass, pushing back at the Cop. The Mechanic is also innocent and wide eyed and Will said he views him as “The child of the town”. He said he thinks the Mechanic never grew up, but always wanted to be something. We also spoke of his jealousy of Greg the Astronaut. Why does he drink? To nullify the pain of never becoming anything important.
Will had some good notions and I felt that he would need direction to embody this character but we are both very willing to work on it.

**Emma Gruhl 9/26**

The librarian loves reading and learning, she is wise and experienced in life, intelligent and well read. She is very giving and thinks more of others in the play than she talks about herself.

We discussed Destiny and Fate, and how the Librarian is optimistic about life and tender, loving and motherly. She takes her time. We also spoke of playing 50’s-60’s and how we might even play older with costumes and makeup to distinguish her. She has known many of the townspeople since they were young. Emma was insightful in her analysis and thoughtful in discussion.

**Lauren Huston 9/27**

Finding the sense of the script, there were some moments of which Lauren was unsure. We spoke how Mrs. Swanson is new to the town and is out of her element and trying to belong. We also spoke of her dissatisfaction in trying to be the good housewife yet not feeling quite right.

Is she falling for John? We spoke about love in the script and Lauren felt that she did fall for John Dodge. Sunshine was important conceptually for Mrs. Swanson and finding the positive, trying to “chin up” despite the odds. In the script Mrs. Swanson sometimes reiterates a line to convince herself that this is a good idea.

9/24
Production Meeting Notes:

Lights: Meet with Drake and Ethan on Projection test for Joey’s colors

Vicki: Working on planning masking on set, will email to Cody so he can plan projections.

Morgan: Rehearsal props are pulled

Set: Fly test pending, standard rigging, setup test with Bryan

Projections: Showed Story Boards for prologue, working on a CG nightscape,

Costumes: Ground Control sketches, Hats on tourists and glasses on Trey,

Tourists have backpacks and cameras.

Sound: Music as car pulling up. Car pulls into the scene. Space sounds. In the Hospital we will have the heartbeat. “Melancholy Hill” as a song that works for curtain call.

Projection Tech: Cody is looking into renting a lens for the projector.

10/2 Production Meeting

Set: promised a color model for rehearsal on Monday (only had white model on that day)

Props: have rehearsal props and wheelchair for Intermission scene, we decided to use a wheelchair as we only have 4 chairs that match the Howell audience chairs for the scene.

Costumes: looking at sweetheart options, Native feel.

Joe: Working on Native American tribute song.

Projections: I will work with Cody to figure out feed
**Lights**: thinking about practicals

**Publicity** due by 18th.

T.D.: We need to test the Astronaut flight but haven’t been able to get Bryan Ruhs to be around to help test it yet.

10/7/13 **First Readthru**

- Savannah explained about Equity rules. We are running rehearsals as if all of the actors are Equity and will elect a deputy at this first meeting as a learning experience for the actors.
- I spoke to the actors about how I encourage bold choices and for the ensemble to bring their ideas. I expect you to be a creative force each day in the rehearsal hall and I promise to give you the space to explore your choices. I want the actors to bring themselves and their ideas and have creative ownership in the play.
- Today we explore the script and it’s ideas and table work, tomorrow we explore the space, vocabulary, as well as acting as an ensemble.
- Asked for them all to start a notebook to collect images for characters, music that inspires the character and journaling.
- Had the Designers share concepts.
- We read through the play “for sense.”
I led exercises to give us similar vocabulary and build ensemble this rehearsal with the entire cast.

- Yoga warm up, Yoga = Union, Rolling down body head, shoulders, chest, pelvis.
- Voice warm up, introduced vocabulary of “Share your Voice” and also worked with the space and its poor acoustics.
- Note to: Relax focus, concentrate and let happen “into the space and out of your head.” Agree with each other, no choice is wrong in exercises.

Exercises:
- Pass Clap, Pass Bear Exercise
- Kitty wants a corner
- Go (and silent Go) for ensemble and concentration building

* Explored Tempo, Duration, and Kinesthetic response.
* Observation of senses: your touch, smell, sight, hearing.
  “Look at things and take them in, hold onto them, then move on when interest shifts.”
* Notice your breath, how does your character breathe?
* Walk around the stage at a medium tempo (pace) Follow, copy a walk.
* Explore different tempos and eye contact, greeting each other.
* Explore different tempos, and then tempos in between the ones already discovered. “There’s always another choice to be made.”
* Which tempos feel most like you?
*which tempo feels most like your character?

Duration:

“How long will you stay in a particular tempo? Push yourself to stay longer than comfortable.

Kinesthetic response:

- Make eye contact when you pass someone, acknowledge them. Say hello.
- Don’t acknowledge anyone who looks at you.
- Get the attention of those who aren’t looking at you.

Confession:

- Spread out across the stage, chose to look at each other or not look at each other, think of something that makes your character happy. –when ready to confess step to the confession spot and speak it out.
- What makes your character look away from another?
- Think of a secret your character has, confess when you’re ready.
- A song lyric which goes with your character.
- A dream of your character.

Played Collective Breathe and Count together game.

“Really talk, Really Listen”

? How do we create the first time every time we perform?

Acting is doing: “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances”

- 1-word story, and then without pauses (this emphasized listening)
Repetition exercises. Took the Ensemble through The first five lessons of Meisner’s technique to emphasize the need to really react and find the thoughts in the moment in this play. I also wanted them to have the same vocabulary so I could do some “working off” exercises later in scene rehearsals.

- Taking the 1st thing
- Repeat what you hear
- Putting into language: “point of view”
- 3- moment game (provoking and response)
- 3 moment with repetition and observation “working off”
- Pinch and ouch

We also played a great game I adapted from an exercise book called “moving day”. The actors paired up in threes and two would make a house around one actor who would then act out something they did in alone in their house. We altered this by having characters meet, having one have a secret and then switching who is the house and who is the character on “moving day”. I felt that the actors found an exploration of character and the small town of Middletown through this exercise.

Oct 9th-13th Rehearsals Act 1

I had a plan to go thru and block Act 1 followed by a work thru on Friday and Sat of Act 1. I was happy that my schedule deemed effective, I was very specific about who was called when to best utilize the actors and my time.
In blocking rehearsals I would typically give the actors a starting and endpoint and go thru the scene according to instinct. I encouraged them to make bold choices and follow impulses. I then would run the scene again in a very start- and- stop rehearsal in which I gave more detailed blocking and/or flushed out the actor’s impulses. I would typically run the scene a third time to solidify the blocking and get them to justify the blocking.

This way of rehearsing worked well and included impulse and collaboration from the actors. I stressed that in rehearsals I want them to try new ideas and bring bold choices to the table. During the blocking rehearsals I tried to hold back character notes to give them time to find the subtext in the scene. We would culminate these rehearsals at the end of the week with a run-through of Act 1 after which I gave notes and identified which scenes to work-thru. I wanted to work to help further flush out blocking and develop character, language, and motivation.

A few guidelines I gave in terms of the rehearsal process. Once a scene was blocked when we revisited the scene I wanted them off-book for the scene. This worked well for Act 1, most of the actors were off book by the time of the work thru, albeit calling lines. I worked this same way with Act 2.

Oct 13th-19th **Rehearsals**

The weekend of oct 12th and 13th We worked scenes in Act 1 to deepen understanding, justification, character, connection, sense and exploration.

I encouraged a confession tone to the direct address monologues with the audience and would use some of the verbage that Will Eno wrote in a preface to
Thom Pain: Based on Nothing as inspiration. Encouraging the actors that “We should see and feel the characters. Feelings much more in their suppression than in their expression. The pressure… like a soda can has been shaken violently. Will it explode? It’s trembling.” To encourage this I worked on justifications and endowments with the actors, finding what they want and returning to identifying their view of the world and what they wanted out of life. As we went further in the process I had most of the scenes do a “working off” Meisner exercise in which they identified and repeated trigger words that their scene partners spoke. This exercise seemed to work very well in enlivening, getting truthful reactions and encouraging listening and response and give and take between the characters.

Another character approach I brought to the rehearsal hall was inspired by a yoga philosopher. The yogi wrote about “flesh, mind and breath”. I encouraged the actors to look for union in these three aspects to find character. Let’s see you breathe onstage, the character is in the breath. I encouraged them to use the flesh, the genetic characteristics and history that must be honored. Also that their mind has characteristics different than other minds. The voice in your head is heard by no one else.

Oct 17th-27th Rehearsals

We focused much more on work shopping the scenes off book. The deadline was Oct 23rd for no-scripts in hand. These work-thrus were strong. I found lots to explore and give notes on as we explored the play, plot, language,
character and tone. Detail was paid to vocal projection in the space and yet still maintaining the intimacy we found in rehearsals. I had a couple of rehearsals in which Lauren responded to her notes in rehearsal with frustration and shutting down. I had a one-on-one with her to find out why this was happening. After the talk I felt that things were better, but I was more tentative in giving her direct notes as she seemed to get overwhelmed and shut down.

10/30 Run of Show

At this run Virginia Smith and Carrie Lee Patterson were in attendance.

The notes I received from both of them are copied below.

**Virginia’s Notes:**

Prologue:

- It isn’t just a list, Bryan has to greet each person.
- “Breathers Breathe” working well.
- Maybe he points to all the House exits for exit line.

Scene 1:

- Hard to understand Spenser.

Scene 2:

- Computer placement is blocking sightlines.

Scene 3:

- Transition from Library to cop overlapped.
- Spenser’s monologues are not cohesive, everything has same weight.
Scene 4:

- Town square: Meghan becomes poetic in this scene.
- The tourists goofiness is not working, Desiree’s voice is hard to listen to.
- Love Meghan in this scene!
- After John leaves a deep breathe from Lauren on the bench. Mary is blank in her introspection.

Scene 5 Librarian to audience

- Really talk to us Emma,
- Blushing woman is not working at this point.
- Exit on “it’s a beautiful night,” then turn around for “whether or not anything up there.”

Scene 7 Space Astronaut

- Trey is hard to understand.
- Perhaps a symphony should be playing.

Scene 8 Dodge works on sink

- All the same pace, add pacing variety.

Scene 9: policeman point of view

- What is he doing here? Meaning?

Scene 10: Intermission

- Not yet buying Lupe as special needs.
- Decide the pace of the scene, coach them to go thru it faster.

Act 2:

Scene 1:
- Fine tune the “ca-caas” of the mechanic.
- “Away” is working well

Scene 2
- Give weight to the plastic rocks.
- Spenser make a more masculine bump up against.

Scene 4
- Tatiana is indicating strongly D.S.

Scene 5
* Go faster, more laughter in it.

Scene 6
- John offer for Mary to sit.
- John hold her, (hold her like never going to let go.)

Scene 7
- Emma good “look at this pretty tree.”

Scene 11
- Can singing to the baby happen? “Rock a bye baby”, “Now I lay me down to sleep.”
- Can Swanson sing to baby at end of Scn 10 into this scene.
- Breathing come into Swanson scene and continue into the Rain Dance

After Virginia came to a run of Middletown she told me the next day that she spent a little more time in bed, that next morning, by her husband Doug. That the preceding nights run drew attention to an appreciation of life and an appreciation of her loved ones.
Carrie Lee’s notes on run of Middletown

- Staging and physicality really nice.
- Pacing and thinking could be picked up. Use the words to react to each other. Characters can think faster!
- Don’t have to look at whose talking, use more of body.
- John: when not talking must see the reactions in body. Reactions even when stuck in a hospital bed.
- Lauren: single outburst laughs are becoming a habitual reaction to every line. Trust the language, it’s in there. Want to meet people, wants to get involved wants to welcome everyone, the language can let you “take on the town.” Plant yourself and bloom. Don’t have to laugh to show us that you’re happy. Use the words.
- Bryan: Beware of vocal-fry with the doctor. Doing well with the Astronaut.
- Emma, Meghan and Will are doing a nice job.
- Look at Centers of Energy: the Aesthetic from the heart, let the energy travel through your legs and arms through the energy of the character. Radiate through your gesture. When touch someone else your energy goes into them. Don’t hesitate at touching Lauren.
10/31/13 **Production Meeting** (notes)

**Props:** beeper? Librarian desk fix for sightlines.

Set: 2nd panel for tree made, Middletown Sign.

**Sound:** By Monday will have radio commercial, recording actors. Tele-cue, walkie talkies work great.

**T.D.:** Trees up tomorrow. Bryan flying test (next week).

**Projectors:** Overlap the mapping of house projectors. Investigate Internet 2 for live feed and cameras.

**Costumes:** Need people on Monday. Swatches to talk about: maternity dress and Kitchen.

**Publicity:** Will get pictures and ideas to Julie for Lobby Display. Drake has made a slideshow of occupations and life events in the town and will use pictures of life events as stimulating images in lobby. Birth, death, weddings, occupations, graduation etc. as picture ideas.

**Lights:** Act 1 sc 8, will have a flashlight for under the sink illumination. I will block Spenser for front of stage during direct address of Cop to audience.

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11/6/13 **Flying Test**

We met with Costumes, T.D. Scenic and Bryan Ruhs to test the harness and the flying of the Astronaut. Upon testing we quickly found that the harness was a danger to Bryan Howard, we could not lift him off the ground without cutting off circulation in his legs. I found out that we had not ordered a proper harness with
a plan to use a harness that was only meant to catch someone on a fall, not sustained flying.

A new harness was ordered immediately as tech is in two days.

11/7/13 Production Meeting (notes)

Projections: Cody is still finding a time to meet with Ben. He says that he is in progress with focusing projectors.

Props: Arm rest, shovel for Grant, Bandages, shelf’s for heart monitor and card house coming.

T.D.: Harness, should be in by tomorrow night, it is being overnighted, Tech is tomorrow. We will test Bryan in it at the beginning of Tech. There will also be dirt onstage tomorrow.

Sound: All set and ready for Tech, Speaker directional sounds will be able to be tested tomorrow.

Costumes: Will be ready for Dress

Lights: Setting up practical’s and have gobos for trees as a backup for projector problems.

Projection Content: I will see the tree mask over the sky-scapes tomorrow when projectors are focused and hung.

1st Tech:

It was a difficult first tech as so much was not prepared in time for this Tech. We had a projections expert fly in to help Cody with setting up and focusing and
mapping the projectors but it was not finished for tech so I stopped taking projection notes as the projections were so unfocused I could not tell what was happening in that arena. Lights were strong and I enjoyed Joey’s work and gave notes. Sound was also strong and the directionality of the speakers and environmental sound were working well. We made some changes to Scenic as certain windows did not make sense when looked at in the scheme of the design. The leaf mask that projection content was trying to make on the trees also was not working, it looked too cartoony and did not fit with the style of the piece. There were scenic elements not yet completed, such as the splays hung and roots painted when I asked I was told these would be completed.

**2nd tech:**

Saw the projections focused and projected for the first time this tech and content had to be cut. The prologue projections as well as the leaf projections, they were not working and at this point we did not have enough time to re-vamp them properly. They needed to be cut as they detracted from the play. The prologue projections were too faint to see and I was told that they did not have another lens to make them brighter. The leaf projections just looked too cartoony and distracted the eye. Joey thankfully had some nice leaf gobos that could be used as texture on the trees instead. So we saved our full tree projections for the spectacular reveals of space and the aurora borealis rain dance. I think this will work better as it punches those moments by projecting over a larger area. Still working on making the center window with the sky projections read as weather and time of day. Made some hard decisions but they are necessary to better
unify the design and find clarity in the story supported by the design elements and not detracted by them.

Notes from First Dress to Actors:

Middletown Run 11/11/13

Hi Cast: Lots is going well.

Note for Everyone:

- Let’s find the excitement; the characters should be full of excitement and anticipation. Remember this is the first time. I’d love to do some warm-up games tomorrow and have a ritual to warm-up as a cast before the shows.
- We need overall to project!!!!!! As well as pick up the pace, the pace would get better with more energy.
- We don’t have an audience yet, and the designers are not a good reaction audience as they are focused on other things than your acting. Imagine an audience and really try to connect with them.
- We will Block Curtain Call before 2nd dress.
- Run Crew: could see some of you before scene changes in the wings.

Notes for individual actors:

Bryan: On some of the speedy parts you can get less intelligible in the language, you don’t have to slow down, but boost your clarity.

Desiree and Trey: As the tourists with talking about the ruthless empire and food stuff you also can get inarticulate. Push for clarity of speech here and be careful Desiree you are getting back into the character voice that makes a lot of your dialogue in this scene hard to hear.

Emma: your librarian Monologue is all the same weight and pace currently. Find the variety.

Spencer and Grant: We need to up the rock feel of those rocks, give them weight, they are currently seeming very plastic.
Lauren: We have some big pauses in between lines. Such as “we were thinking” pause “possibly” pause “John.” This is picky, but it will help when these lines flow more. You did much better with talking to the baby though for the flow.

No Jewelry in the hospital scenes for Mrs. Swanson.

**Prologue:**

Good Bryan, we have cut the projections behind you as they didn’t work enough. So it’s all on your language. Push for clarity even in the fast parts.

**Scn 1**

Lauren: Nice decorating in the window. Keep having fun with it, it’s a new place.

Jeff: Couldn’t see your card castle. Let’s have it face the other way, with the card faces towards the window.

Spenser: Wait for the ‘Middletown Sign” to come in and show up after you say “Middletown” before “ordinary place, ordinary time.”

Fight with Will and Spencer: didn’t work this time. Will your legs were sloppy from the start instead of finding some traction first and struggling and then becoming more limp. It seemed like the new grip threw you off, let’s look at it at fight call.

**Scn 2**

Lauren: You entered the scene with your body closed off from the start. Open your arms, no holding your hands together in this scene. You are welcoming everyone and radiating love in this scene. Aesthetic through the limbs.

Emma: You can be more animated with your arms behind the desk so we can notice you more.

Will: Stay occupied till monologue. You sat waiting for your monologue for a while, read a magazine on the edge of the bench till your left alone.

**Scn 3**

Spenser: Come on sooner, get to center stage and let the scene be set around you. Start fiddling with your radio when it sounds like there is radio frequency in the sound cue.
Nice on this scene Spenser

Scn 4:

Trey: Project!!! Lost “what time is it?”

Good T and D on ruthless empire, but must articulate and be clear with the language.

Desiree: Good “you know.”

Desiree: “monumentalized” section. More urgent here, it is what you are on a quest for. It’s a deep need of the female tourist.

Lauren: Stay engaged with the Tour guide scene you walk into. You’re interested.

Jeff: Enter this scene sooner.

Desiree: Project!!!!

Scn 5:

Lauren: your main objective here is to get him to be less gloomy, do everything you can to help John be happier. Don’t worry about Swanson’s loneliness until he is gone, or maybe a tad when you confess to having trouble sleeping. This is all about your relationship with John, how many ways can you help him get out of a funk.

Jeff: Find where you get excited to be talking with Mrs. Swanson, do people usually listen to your story? It feels good to be able to talk and have someone actually listen to you.

Had a couple line problems it seemed in this scene.

Jeff: Even further on “you have a really nice voice.”

Nice Jeff and Lauren on the ending on the “definitely, I’ll talk to you later” good!
Scn 6:

Lauren: Can you have your journal for the doctor’s office in your bag and use that to make a list or journal feelings the whole time on the bench. I don’t think you should acknowledge when Emma talks about you.

Emma: This scene needs more variety in your monologue. It’s coming off the same weight. Really try to connect with the audience. Use varying tactics to do that.

Emma: You could use your body more as well. Does the need to connect accentuate your limbs some? Put the urgency to connect with the audience in your body.

Scn 7:

Bryan: Try using your body constantly, slow accentuating movements. You were rocking a lot, was it from the flying in?

Scn 8:

Lauren: Have fun with the “where’s John” if you throw it away we get the scene off to a weak start. Can your objective be to make him laugh?

Lauren: Wringing hands a lot in this scene, open up and be more free with limbs.

John: Try using your arms some to muffle some of the lines. I think the arms work as well under the sink and sound better.

Project and articulate!!! Both

Lauren and John: Both really react to the gunk in the pipe. Lauren even more than John.

John/Jeff: on “seriously” keep looking at Lauren till lights go down.

Jeff: CAREFUL. Almost got clocked by the house flying in during the transition.

Scn 9:

Spenser: “Just Be All Right” give that directly to the audience than leave cleanly. Tell us what we should all do.
Scn 10:

Keep energy all in this scene!

Lupe: Articulate “life.”

**Act 2**

Scn 1:

Will try entering in front of the scrim this time. Then noticing the lights come up behind the scrim and plan your game with the audience.

Scn 2:

Grant: on “monument of its own creation” enjoy making this art piece and use your body to express your enjoyment.

Grant: Put dirt on both sides of the tree.

Spenser and Grant: Make sure to project in this scene.

Scn 3:

Bryan: Play with the words “Hi,” “Juice,” “Bye” we lost the playfulness.

Bryan: Keep the urgency here.

Bryan: when you put the little hat on your head wear it and be funny, but don’t laugh as you come out. It steals our laugh.

Lauren: A lot of your reactions work here! But keep your urgency of needing to know the answers to be a mother.

Bryan: “Owe”: Really think of it, the pain that one vowel can cause. Let’s see you feel that at the end of the scene. Don’t have to put pen in mouth at end if it doesn’t happen this time.

Scn 4
Good Tatiana and Jeff.

NEED TO PROJECT!!

Scn 5:
Tatiana: Can you take out "I used to smoke, some of these lines can be said looking out at the parking lot but to him. The parking lot is over the audience heads.

Tatiana: Project!

Will: Could go farther on the cover ups. Listen and react to each other.

Scn 6:
Lauren and Jeff: good connection between you two.

Project and think on line.

Good Lauren on contractions and good timing Meghan on getting her.

Jeff: After “I'm standing” stare out with bewilderment at audience until lights go out on you.

Scn 7:

Will: Can you swallow the pill rather than chew it? (you can also fake it)

Nice Emma and Will

Will: Later in the scene you became really down and affected by the pills. Less down and more thoughtful. Its active, alive and questioning, don’t worry about playing the intoxicated part as much.

Nice Emma

Will: “ton of pills” said this one too many times, playing it too much.

Spenser: Come in with more fire when you see Will, he represents disorder in the world.
Nice connection Spenser and Emma on the bench.

Scn 8:

Good Lauren and Meghan!

Lauren: Can you find Swanson still trying to keep her chin up here, it will give you an obstacle to play against rather than just making this whole scene about defeat. She is trying to put on a happy face around people until the confession and she can't anymore.

Scn 9:

Nice Spenser and Jeff in this scene.

Scn 10:

Tatiana: step back and see the painting, maybe frame it with your hands for a moment and notice the painting.

Lauren: Good with the baby, its connecting much more. Nice into the singing.

Scn 11:

Let the intensity build Jeff with the death, it’s getting to its most intense too fast.

Scn 12:

Will: Can you come out before Jeff is dead and slowly walk in behind him so you’re ready.

Scn 13:

Good Desiree and Meghan in scene.

- Use the SHEET to cover him, not the blanket.

Scn 14:
Sweetheart: Try a big toothy smile at the audience, not seeing you connect with members of the audience.

Emma: Good with baby “see you tommorow.”

Lauren: Good with baby.

Lauren: Nice wave to baby on bye” in the black hole, find the moments when you actively raise your head to listen to the radio earlier and alternate them with connecting with the baby.

Can you bounce the baby a bit energetically in time to the Beethoven’s 5th music. Have fun with your son.

Grant: Janitor is coming along, keep seeing if you can ground him so he is more and more delightful in being a character but also being very real.

Lauren: Get the baby to wave “bye bye” with you. See if you can teach him “bye bye” as you say it to the audience.

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2nd Dress Notes for Actors

Middletown Run 11/12/13

Hi Cast: Great implementing notes and staying alive on this run actors. Act 1 was energetic and alive, Act 2 still could have more urgency, raised stakes and pace.

Note for Everyone:

- Keep the excitement; the characters should be full of excitement and anticipation Remember this is the first time. Can you, as a cast, play 3-4 rounds of zip, zap, zop, (really giving and really taking/listening and responding) maybe “the rhythm in my feet” game (Will can lead that one) and “pass the pulse” before the show?
- Keep projecting!!!!!! As well as the urgency and pace.
- You get to connect with the audience tonight!
- Curtain call light dip will be darker, but the lights will not go fully black.
- **Run Crew:** A lot of nice transitions, now add with the efficiency that you are a member of the town, you can wave hi to an actor as you leave in the library scene, or play off a transition as though you’re grabbing a book and
going to read it. Keep it swift, pleasant and urgent, you have somewhere to be, the life of a town.

**General Notes:**

Jeff: need to be under the sheets when you roll onstage in hospital scene.

Lauren: No jewelry in hospital scenes, your fingers swell, they take your jewelry from you.

**Scene Notes:**

**Prologue:**

Nice energy and clarity in this run Bryan, connected with the audience today.

Bryan: Good velvety chair
Good transitions
Nice specificity with the audience members.

**Scn 1**

Looking good Lauren and Jeff.

Good Spenser and Will.

Spenser and Will: Stay thinking **on the lines**. Not too many pauses here, use lines to transition... Keep up the good listening and reacting.

Spenser: “Right” a little more active. What will he say and then jump on the line after “say something nice” he’s just floundering.

Fight: Spenser, I need more struggle from you with strangling him, at what point is it hard to hold on? Better with feet Will. Raise the stakes on the struggle

Spencer: Quicker on end pickup Spenser. Use the “Welcome Honestly Middletown”. What if you see the sign and then see the spray-paint? Spray paint moment is less clear.

**Scn 2**

Lauren: Good energy at beginning, but why holding your hands? Save the nervousness for just when you’re startled by Will, I think you can come in more confidently. You had much better energy throughout this scene Lauren.
Emma: Better on animation with body. Keep going.

Emma: In glasses when looking at the computer

Lauren: No pause before “that’s from the chamber of commerce”, have the puzzled thought on the line.

Will: Good “family start”

E & L: Good stare at Will after “only child” part.

L: Let the excitement of the child birth and children go into your limbs, it fills your whole body.

L & Jeff: Let the good scare from the pregnancy.

Will: When you go into the labor sounds, stare at Lauren. You are trying to get her to get the joke, but you scare her off.

Emma: Good “Huston”

Jeff: Much better on the card moment but use “there we go” to write the name, write the name on the line.

Will: Share with balcony when on knees with rock, look up there too.

Better with Hit. Let’ try you hit on “His name was Greg” Hit, “something”

Will: Distinguish “golden child” from “local resident” and “earthling” what’s you’re feeling about being all of those things?

Emma: Good phone call.

Scn 3

Spenser: Come on even sooner, get to center stage and let the scene be set around you. Fiddle with your radio the whole time you tune it to the station you think is clear.

Spenser: Nice “sees” you’re really getting this, keep it up!

Spenser: Make “thrashing” bigger with your body.
Spenser: “we almost had a glass museum here” keep the audience engaged with you.

Nice “fact” at end.

Nice on this scene Spencer.

Scn 4:

Much better Trey and Desiree. I could understand you much clearer!! Keep projecting and articulating!

Desiree: Nice “pilgrims”

Meghan: Face out on “what can I say, it’s pretty normal around here” then turn to them when it works for you.

Some fun stuff D & T & M, keep projecting and keep energy.

Desiree: Much better with voice.

Desiree: Emphasize “obstructed view seats” (not everyone knows about them)

Desiree: Better monumentalized moment, keep playing the urgency there.

Meghan: Yes, nice build up to “eating ice cream.

Meghan: Good “almost invented here”

Lauren: Good listening in the tour guide scene, nice keeping it alive and active.

Jeff: Good Entrance.

Meghan: take “Chakmawg Indians” out. See the trees in the audience.

Scn 5:

Lauren: Good “I’m already married” and conversation.

Jeff: Nice “buzz plink” reaction.

L & J: nice “sounds with your mouth” and “true”
Good Lauren, much more natural and you are varying the lines and just having a conversation… great!

Good Touch moment L &J

Jeff: Nice “just take it” with identity.

Good scene L & J keep listening and reacting to each other, 1st time excitement.

Very nice moments in this scene.

Lauren: I like the playful “are you asking now” Good.

Jeff: good “painting or sunset or something”

L&J: good “yes definitely” moment, that's working.

Lauren: Nice realization at end and sitting, that all worked well, see if you can be a little more quiet when getting the pen and paper out of the purse.

Scn 6:

Emma: YES, much more variety in your monologue. This time!

Emma: The body was also much more engaged and looks great. Keep going.

Emma: Notice star on “a star shone over inpetway”

Emma: Good distinction on “anxiety, death, spiritual”

Emma: Great “People, animal,” “Univers to expand” born and die section, yes, really communicate it to us.

Very nice moments Emma with medicine man, keep up the discoveries and variety.

Scn 7:

Bryan: Good movements! Yes
Trey: Good timing on “cormorant 9”

Bryan: Good, keep the need to put this “Awe” into words.

Scn 8:

Lauren: Good “where’s John.”

Jeff: Can you turn off the radio when you come out after “where’s john.”

Jeff: Project more so it is a distinct difference from when you’re under the sink

Lauren: Much better with body connection here, Nice “even your name is a typo”

Lauren: Good projection.

Lauren: When he says “I had shingles once” really let that statement puzzle you.

John: Arm muffles good.

John: Work the shingles joke, your trying to get her to get it.

John: A little more grunts and noise getting the gunk out of the pipe.

Lauren: Good “John” and transition into “do I seem different”, I saw the need for him to answer.

Lauren and John: Good moments in scene keep going! Get what you want from each other.

John/Jeff: Good last moment with “seriously.” Yes.

Scn 9:

Spenser: Good “Just Be All Right” It gave more of a button to the scene and gave us what you are trying to communicate.

Scn 10:

Good: D, T, L, T and G Good reactions.
Trey: Bigger “hey” with epiphany on writing, bigger writing epiphanies.

Grant: Nice “talk about play”

Nice D & T

Tatiana: Good “think she’s pregnant”

Grant: Good frustration with hitting on her and being rejected.

Good listening!

Trey more excited with “language” section.

Can we have less, everyone leave at once, at the end? Stagger it a bit more.

Lupe: The moments are getting much clearer, now add a little bit of not having full control of your body. You just aren’t as put together physically and everything doesn’t move as easily, maybe some rocking, but with a happy innocence.

Act 2

Scn 1:

Will: Notice the houses through the scrim, then wait for the scrim to go out before you Batman your way over.

Good playing here Will and connecting with the audience

Jeff: Nice on the staring out into the night.

Lauren: Good business inside and calling out.

Scn 2:

Good “Bang” Spenser. Good reaction Grant.

Keep on the pace in this scene guys! Urgency and need to communicate.

Grant: Good transition on “where do you think this should go?”

Spenser: Nice “people”

Grant: Nice Tai Chi.
Spenser: Don’t sit, get caught ½ way to sitting while watching Grants Tai Chi, you are in shock, what the hell is he doing?

Grant: Really project upstage. More vocal grunts when shoveling,

Any way we can cover the top of the burlap with dirt?

Better on Rock S & G. Keep giving it weight and maybe brush off hands after you touch it.

Good “Rock” “Person” delivery. I could you hear you.

Grant: Better on Rock, Tree Worm. Maybe a “wee” as though you’re giving the worm a ride into the audience when you throw it? End with a giggle?

Scn 3:

Bryan: much better with “Hi,” “Juice,” “Bye” we lost the playfulness.

Bryan: Keep the projection!!

L & B Good conversation together, really keep the pace in this scene you two.

Bryan: Hit “love is all”

Lauren: You need to get answers, hang on his every word, this is advice for you and you have no idea how to be a mother.

Lauren: Stand on “is that a problem” after eye itch so Bryan can calm you down after joke again.

Bryan: Lost your voice on “trust life”

Lauren: Nice making it hard to stand with belly.

B & L: Nice! Love the “you can’t” after Bryans name someone who wasn’t born part.

Bryan: Good clarity, needs projection in this scene though.

Lauren: Better with Q’s, on “what happens when your born?”

Bryan: Nice on taking lines out.
Bryan: Yes, That’s the “Ah E, Ow” moment. Good. Stay on the desk thinking about it for a beat longer to help cover the transition.

Scn 4

Tatiana: put the gloves on right before you check his wound. Don’t wear the gloves into the scene.

Jeff: Further on the need to explain yourself. This is the first person who is listening to you since you tried to kill yourself. You need her to understand, use everything in your power to explain to her, to think this action through with her.

T and J: Pick up the pauses in this scene. Quicker, needs to think on line and pace.

Project and Keep it active!

Tatiana: “my son” is a new tactic to get through to him, a cheer up moment.

Scn 5:

Tatiana: Project!

Will: Good “you look important”

Keep the Pace here T and W!!

Will: Less trash noise during Tatiana's lines.

Tatiana: really ask the question “what do you want out of life” really want to know. Do you know the answer and are you looking for an answer for you?

Tatiana: Good reaction to “they don’t know”

Keep Listening and reacting to each other.

Scn 6:

Nice L & J

Nice Hug! Keep that need and heighten it!
Lauren: Good need to know on “did you do that” Yes, on realization.

Nice, good work you guys, keep the urgency, the want to connect with each other and the excitement.

Lauren: Much better on “name him john”

Jeff: Better on the “standing”

Scn 7:

Good Will and Emma.

Keep this active and expressive with your bodies.

Emma: Keep, wipe of your hands, after touching the rock.

Will: Good “don’t say anything” harshness.

Emma: Nice prayer.

Will: This is getting more active, keep pushing it.

Will: “People like me in the world” can be active.

Will: Nice “look at that guy”

Spenser: Good stop.

Spenser: Good blow up. Keep making that everything that has built up inside of you coming out.

Good finger S & E

Very nice scene Spenser & Emma keep thinking on the lines together.

Scn 8:

Very nice Lauren and Meghan

Lauren: I saw you trying to chin up, good.

Meghan: Very nice listening.
Lauren: Nice “not alone”

Scn 9:

Nice Spenser and Jeff in this scene.

Spenser: you will need to come more USL of the bed for your “look at all this stuff” and “cops are grumpy too” section for lighting purposes.

Scn 10:

Tatiana: Much better on “Renaissance painting”

Lauren: Good with the baby, keep projection though.

Scn 11:

Good Jeff on death. Nice build

Scn 12:

Meghan, wait on your entrance until thunder dies down. Project over the rumble.

Nice intensity Will!

Scn 13:

Good Desiree and Meghan in scene.

- Use the SHEET, make sure to take the IV pole, Keep this scene active between you two, remember there is a body between you too. What does that do to you? How do you interact with each other with death in the middle.

Scn 14:

Sweetheart: Better on smile.
Spenser: Project! Grab Lupe sooner. As soon as she goes towards the audience go and get her.

Meghan: Does the water not work? Is the clipboard better? I think the water would give Lauren more to do.

Grant: let the dead body stop you more. Stone cold stop, no head nod, just faced with death for a second and taking out the trash left behind by the living.

Lauren: Nice with the baby, like the bouncing!

Grant: You should have a baby noise tonight for “he's trying to talk"

Lauren: Good recognizing the audience at the end Lauren. Nice!

**Opening Night:**

Feeling very good at opening night and received an insightful and heartfelt review from the Lincoln Journal Star. I felt that the actors were strong and that the play rang true. The acting wasn't sustained consistently past opening night though. It was hit or miss depending on the nights for half the actors, but consistent for the other half.
9. Working with Designers

Sound Design:

Working with Joe Shae as sound designer on *Middletown* was a wonderfully collaborative process. Joe came to production meetings with an open mind and began by simply absorbing my vision and the information that the other designers brought in and keeping us updated on where he was at. Because I had brought in music samples and played them at the first production meeting Joe initially gravitated towards the band “Fun” and the ambiance and tone of those songs. I mentioned that I was interested in environmental sounds to bring the audience into each scene and Joe began collecting outdoors sounds at different times of the day, Space and effect sounds and the sounds of a neighborhood at night. Joe also mentioned that he would compose music for the transitions which excited me.

I was inspired by another song which I brought into production meetings “We are all made of Stars” by Moby. I found this song intriguing as it spoke to the concept of people being made of star dust, which is another idea in the play. Joe latched onto the ambient music feel of Moby and was one of the first designers to bring in samples of what he was working on. In a one-on-one meeting Joe let me listen to many samples from the band Gorrilaz that he felt had a good feel for the play. At first I was not sure if the feel of the music exactly fit the feel of the play, however, I did not want to have just a knee-jerk reaction so I took more time with the songs and was won over by them. At our meeting Joe and I brainstormed
ways in which the audience could be brought into the play and he had the idea to use the sound of the police car to bring them into the space by panning it from inside the audience to onstage in the first scene. Joe also incorporated our musical theme of the band Gorillaz by making it sound like the Cop was listening to a Gorillaz song on the radio right before he turned off his car. In the next production meeting Joe brought in environmental sounds and some transitions which he had created. I loved the combination of the space shuttle blasting off with the “All Alone” song by the Gorillaz and found that it really helped to transport the audience into Space and gave a great feel for that scene. Joe continued to be extremely adaptable and good at creative problem solving as he worked with the Mechanic’s rain dance. Lupe, Will and I had already created a dance and feel that we wanted by the time that Joe was composing that section. He initially brought in one soundtrack and it worked against the energy we had created so he attended multiple rehearsals and was able to do multiple revisions over a week of rehearsal till we found a beat and tempo that complimented the scene.

Joe always brought a feeling of being a fellow collaborator and continually brought creative ideas into the process. He added wonderful moments to the production by playing with ways to bring the audience into the production. Some of my favorite moments were the rumble of the Space Shuttle taking off and the transition into Space. Also the transition out of Space which ended with the song that we used panning from across the entire house and then coming from just a radio sitting by John Dodge as he works on Mrs. Swanson’s sink. Taking a
transition song that was associated with the expanse of Space and then panning it to come from a small radio on the floor aurally summed up the idea of we are all stardust and that the universe is within us. Joe also used this powerful panning technique at the end of the play when the last song on the radio that Mrs. Swanson listens to on a hospital radio pans out into the audience for curtain call. Overall Joe Shae was a delight, easy to work with, forthcoming with ideas, easily adaptable, smart and passionate. Joe felt like a fellow artist on my team throughout the process adding his unique skills to best serve the story.

Scenic Design:

This was the second time I worked with Vicki Halverson as a scenic designer. Upon being assigned Vicki by the faculty as scenic designer for *Middletown* I was apprehensive as my previous experience with her was that she was a designer who needed a lot of mentorship and wasn’t very forthcoming on bringing her own ideas to the table. On *Melancholy Play* she had shown up to numerous meetings without specific ideas other than the ones I had initially laid out in my director’s concept and it was not until I had drawn out a ground plan for her and had gone through and given her layouts for every scene that she had started to add her own ideas. She did have some nice additions such as shape of the windows, floor painting texture and colors and how to incorporate the projection screen.

In *Middletown* I found that we started out similarly. I gave a lot of ideas at the first production meeting offering the suggestions of using scrim at the
beginning of the show and at intermission as well as potentially in the windows of the houses. I went through the wish list of what I dreamt for in scenic design i.e. being able to have the astronaut fly, being able to dig up actual dirt and rocks on the stage, having at least two houses which we can see inside via window. I also asked her to find a way to incorporate a projected sky and to incorporate trees, both which were big parts of my concept. The trees being holy and worshipped as gods by the Chakmawg Indians in *Middletown*, and the sky reminding me of Lincoln, NE.: I had never seen such big skies until I came here. Also spoken of was the idea of symmetry which Eno lays out in his notes. “A natural and unforced symmetry might exist between aspects of the sets in the first act and second act. Specifically, between the Swanson and Dodge houses, in the first, and the Swanson and Dodge hospital rooms, in the second; and between the town square and the hospital lawn and entrance.” *(Eno, 81)*

Vicki seemed onboard in talks with the ideas that I proposed but did not have any additions to make yet. Sandy Veneziano, who was Vicki’s scenic mentor at the time looked at me wide eyed after the meeting and said that she didn’t realize that this was a bigger set than *Silence*. I later spoke to Vicki one-on-one about how I really wanted the roots below, to symbolize the past Middletown’s. This image would also represent the dirt below and death, that which makes the ground fertile, spilling into the audience. I also pictured some way of creating big Nebraska sky-scapes above the town and that the people of the town are in the middle between the earth and the sky: two mysteries that in many cultures are synonymous with birth and death.
At our third production meeting Vicki brought in multiple images of houses which had roots growing out the bottom of them. I found these images intriguing but wanted to find out what in the script inspired her to root the houses which to me said that the two houses of John Dodge and Mary Swanson were old and important. Vicki did not have an answer for me other than I had spoken of roots. I told her that I was intrigued by the idea of the town growing out of the stage and I'm willing to explore the idea more if she would talk to me some about how it's inspired from the script. I never received any more communication from her on those images.

We left the last production meeting before the summer with promises of sharing research ideas, sketches, and thoughts over the Facebook and Dropbox shared accounts that I created for the group. I posted all of my inspirational pictures and initial director ideas. While over the two and a half months of the summer I continued to post research and articles to help inspire the designers and Joey Burbach, our lighting designer, began to post images and Greg our T.D. posted some architectural references to help inspire scenic there was no interaction or opinions on any of the posts from Vicki. I knew she was working the Nebraska Repertory Season during the summer so was in town and I tried to set up meetings multiple times but was told that she was too busy. I saw a half-finished sketch a week before classes started.

At this time Sandy Veneziano, who was the scenic mentor, was changing jobs in the school and would not be mentoring Vicki. We did not have a mentor for scenic when we started the new school year until after a couple production
meetings I found out that Laurel Shoemaker would be serving as scenic and lighting mentor. While I had some reservations with the initial sketch Vicki made and talked through a few notes with her, I was interested to see what notes we received from design mentors. I was initially not crazy about incorporating the Lincoln Capital Building into the design as I thought it may be too literal, but since it seemed to be something that Vicki identified with I wanted to let the idea evolve more through production meetings.

When sharing the sketches in production meetings I felt like I had to speak for Vicki as she would not explain very thoroughly when she shared an idea. In trying to explain for her I felt attacked by mentors Laurel and Brad on where things would be placed on the ground plan. They vehemently shot down ideas but did not offer many solutions and my designer was fairly quiet. I found production meetings a very different atmosphere than the creative problem solving implied in the Theatrix meetings that I ran for *Melancholy Play*. Fairly early on Vicki would not explain her ideas much at all in production meetings. I assumed that Laurel and Brad both would work with Vicki on finding clarity in her sketches as they were the mentors she and my Stage Manager had to lean on respectively. We did not receive many updates from scenic in production meetings following until a week or two before rehearsals when Laurel insisted that Vicki build a white model over the weekend. This model was very much needed to work through spacing and for my visualization for blocking. The inspiration for insisting on the model was spurred by a particularly long production meeting in which a goal I had wanted to shoot for from the very first
production meeting was attacked. At the first production meeting I had said that
on my wish list was a dream goal of “instantaneous” scene changes. I prefaced
this as a goal, and that we would be happy with whatever became the reality, but
the phrasing struck a chord in a later production meeting and the entire
production meeting became about the phrasing of that sentence.

The white model was very helpful, although made out of paper and I was
told later not made to scale. There were eventually Vector Work ground plans
given. My main worries with scenic came later in the process when there became
discrepancies between the white model, the sketches and the final model. When
the final model was completed it was right before building was going to occur.
None of the scene change props for the model were ever completed as far as my
knowledge as I never was able to go through scene by scene on the final model,
only on the white model. When I first saw the final model I gave some
adjustments to where the houses and trees were glued down as they had been
positioned half offstage. I was told at that time that while Vicki would take note of
the changes, she could not change them on the model as the trees were fragile
and she had worked hard to glue them down. I later found that all the final ground
plans she dispersed to my stage manager were made off of the new model and
were never changed to the new positions I had spoken with her about. My stage
manager taped down the houses and trees half off stage for rehearsals and it did
not make sense with the blocking and spacing.

This began a period of little to no compromising when I asked questions of
the final model versus what the sketches show and what was being built onstage.
I was informed on a few occasions that changes were made after meetings with her mentor Laurel but she never explained why or consulted with me on the changes until after they had taken effect. One change was a major concept change where the trees on which the sky was to be projected was changed from the original idea that realistic trees would be made with space for projection content to project sky. Our idea and what was represented on the final model was the tree foliage was going to be constructed with gaps amongst 3-D foliage between which the projected sky would show up. This was drastically changed to a new concept in which projection content creators now needed to handle not only the sky, but also make digital leaves on the new abstract one dimensional trees, which proved to be too big of a change with two weeks before Tech.

Many of these changes I could justify, such as the Lincoln Capitol being changed to the Sewanee Capital building. But I started to feel trapped by scenic when things would be built that I hadn’t approved and when I questioned Vicki I was told that nothing could be changed or altered after something was built because they had no time in the shop nor money. These new changes were the painting of the street altering blocking in the second half of the play as Vicki said that she forgot to include the bench on her painting elevations. I was told that there would not be time to alter the paint on the floor. When I approached Laurel about having a hard time communicating with Vicki earlier on in production meetings I was advised that this was a learning environment and that Vicki was learning from this experience. That Laurel understood this was my thesis, but that I needed to let Vicki find ownership in this design. When I approached Laurel
about the altered blocking changes a week prior to tech I was told to wait till tech on the issue and see if it resolves itself.

After our first tech multiple alterations were made as certain elements of the buildings in the background were distracting and clearly did not make sense when seeing them for the first time. The extra window that Vicki had wanted for projections on the building was cut as it seemed to distract and was out of place with the architecture and the backdrop. After second tech the tree splays were only half up, but were in a position in which it looked like the final model. After having communication issues I now was looking exclusively at the final model as an example of what would be the final product. Despite being told the final model was where I should look there continued to be discrepancies in the model to stage transfer. It was the morning before our preview audience that I saw that the splays had moved to new positions on the set. I also noticed that the unfinished front of the stage looked abstract and did not have any painted dirt texture amongst the roots like it did on the model. I wrote an email to Vicki, Greg and Joey that morning asking some questions on the changes and explaining why I felt like the changes did not work as well.

I was never contacted back on that email so I went to shop hours to ask why the change to the splays and if the roots at the front of the stage were done. I was told that it looked better with the splays the new way, it worked better for lights and that she was happy with the roots at the front of the stage and was not going to change them.
I was overall unhappy with the poor communication, abruptness and lack of explanation for many changes that happened throughout the process. I felt ultimately that Vicki’s mentor Laurel did not fully understand the play and so did not want to help me change things when I came to her. I overheard that Laurel had said “many things in the play don’t make sense, so what does it matter if some of the styles of design don’t match.” Overall I felt that we were able to find in the scenic design some wonderful pictures, but that those were hard won. With the design changing so much and being rushed in construction up till the end I feel like it was very difficult to work out some cohesion kinks that would have made it a stronger and more cohesive design.

Ultimately I received many of the elements I wanted: astronaut flying, houses you could see into, quick scenic transitions, a dig able portion of the stage, and a transformation of space. I was very pleased with those elements, but felt that production meetings became more and more rushed and became places to shoot down ideas rather than creatively problem solve. I found myself constantly bringing solutions to production meetings in order to fight for an idea rather than feeling that my scenic designer was looking for the best solution to the problems. This contrasted with the attitude of another key player in the scenery, the technical director.

Technical Direction:

Greg Rishoi as T.D. was known from the start as an inexperienced technical director. It was his first year in the program and he came from an Art
background not a theatrical background. Despite a lack of training in the field Greg came to production meetings with a collaborative and creative energy. I heard that builds were unorganized and that he was learning a lot as a technical director, however I felt that whenever I approached Greg he collaborated on how to solve a problem rather than give up or nay say against it.

It was Greg’s ingenuity along with help from Bryan Ruhs who made it possible to fly the astronaut. This almost was a dangerous decision as the team was not ready to test the harness until a couple days before tech and it was at that point I found out that to save money they had decided not to buy a specialized harness for the job but were planning on repurposing a harness that was not made or rated to fly a person. Thankfully upon testing the harness and seeing that Bryan Howard, who was playing the Astronaut, legs were losing circulation they immediately spoke to our executive producer of the school and gained permission and support to order a proper harness to be delivered overnight.

I know that putting on a play is not a smooth road. What I appreciated in Greg was that although where he lacked in experience, his enthusiasm and willingness to regroup and figure out new things along the way made me feel like he was still working with me to tell the best story we could along the way.

**Projection Tech:**

Cody Juttleson was our projection tech for *Middletown*. Cody joined the team later in production meetings as the faculty found that a projection tech was
needed. He was a welcome addition as he brought skills that the others did not have and brought solutions to how we could project amongst the scenery. Early on I felt that Cody was very helpful with bringing an expertise and a prior knowledge of the technology that was not held by anyone on the current production team.

A prior test that did not ultimately help us in our final product during tech week was the projection test. When we looked at the projections on a black scrim a portion of the projection was very clear, while the other portion was going through the scrim and looked unclear. I was assured that this was because either the distance or hanging of the scrim was off and that the final scrim projection would look like the clear half. Based off of this test the designers and I decided to stick with a black scrim. It was not until tech that we saw what was the actual projection saturation and found it very hard to see and so therefore resulting in cutting all of the projections during the prologue section of the play.

Cody’s drawbacks were not getting enough planning, hanging and focusing done before tech leaving us at first tech without being able to see and look at properly focused projections. Thankfully, Laurel had brought in help and a projection expert helped troubleshoot the setup with Cody so that we could see projections at second tech. Unfortunately, only having one day to really comment on focused projection content seen across the set made it necessary for me to cut a lot of projection content. I found the digital leaves cartoony and to further make the scenic elements seem as disparate styles. I made the decision to cut all of the sky-scapes on the trees and have our lighting designer give the tree
texture, saving the tree projection space for the big spectacle moments of Space and the Rain Dance.

This cut meant I lost my original concept of seeing the big skies of Nebraska looming over the set in real time as now we only saw the skies in the window reflections on the Capital Building, but I felt that it was the right decision to better unify the design aspects of the play. Virginia Smith advised me to cut the kinetic text and picture projections on the scrim during the prologue as it was so difficult to see the projections and that it just distracted from the acting. I agreed and was told that the clarity of the image on the black scrim could not be fixed due to our projection technology and so these too were cut after being seen in practice for the first time at second tech.

Cody’s biggest drawback was getting overwhelmed and not being able to ultimately work effectively on his own within the timeline. I tried to help him when at tech he mentioned that he didn’t have time to setup the lobby live video feed test. I took the initiative to set it up myself so that I could see it and make comments but this action seemed to offend him. I was surprised that he was offended at my help when I had been checking out and tracking down most of the equipment for the lobby display the past two weeks prior to tech as he had told me that he didn’t have time to find it or know how to get permission to check it out.

Cody and I went through three iterations of the intermission audience before landing on the lobby live feed and simultaneous recorded projection of the intermission audience scene within Howell. I initially wanted the intermission
audience scene to be live in front of the scrim with a live feed of the actual audience in the Howell Theatre projected behind them. I thought this would encapsulate what Will Eno was saying in the scene that participating in Art is one way to view the world. I felt passionately that the act of seeing yourself on camera and seeing the intermission audience in front of that projection would directly relate the scene to what the audience was experiencing. The original idea was struck down as undoable due to a speculation that the projector throws would interfere with the live feed camera. We did not test this theory as it was stated that the idea had to be struck. I then reimagined the concept as the scene being in the lobby with a live feed to the scrim. The live feed idea was again struck after some exploration of internet connections and transmitting a camera feed. The final idea was to video the intermission scene for the Howell projection and simultaneously have it going on live in the lobby. I immediately made filming happen so we could implement this idea. This idea did not ultimately work for the majority of the audience and I think it would have been better to just have staged the intermission audience scene on Howell and let go of the video portion of that scene.

Projection Content:

Ethan Seagren and Drake Tucker were assigned as the projection content designers for *Middletown* and for the preceding play *Silence*. As soon as I found out that we were sharing content creators I started to plan how I could get videos of the sky over Lincoln done over the summer. I knew that as soon as school
started that they would both get very busy with creating content for *Silence* and I did not want to lose the ability to gather sky, as at the time it was a large part of my concept on how I was going to integrate projections into *Middletown*. Also it was the summer sky-scapes and rain clouds that I really wanted to fill the space as I saw the character of John Dodge associated with the clouds and the rain and Mary Swanson associated with the sun. To get these videos I brainstormed with Ethan and Drake on how to capture sky and what format and cameras we would need. We initially made a list approved by their mentor and I petitioned the Film and New Media faculty to allow me to check out two cameras for the summer so that we could capture the different skies. After I had the equipment it took a few weeks into the summer until I could get both of them available to go out and do a test with the cameras. I wanted to get this done early as they both said they would become busy later in the summer. After the test it turned out that we needed to try a different method, that the best way to capture the skies was to use a Go Pro camera as it had a wide perspective. Ethan gathered all of the footage as Drake became too busy during the summer to help and we were able to use some of the footage that Ethan gathered in the final product.

When the semester started Drake took on the job of creating the content for the prologue but wasn’t able to focus on it until after *Silence* opened as they both became very busy creating content for that show. A few weeks from tech Drake showed me story boards and we edited them together. He then created some content that I thought would work with the prologue as well as making a digital *Middletown* sign with a video spray paint which worked well and an
intermission scene ticker for the intermission video. The prologue pieces had the potential to work, but all but the intermission scene and Middletown sign Drake created had to be cut due to it being very dim with the projector on the black scrim when we saw it projected during second tech.

Ethan took on the task of creating leaves for the trees which was a change in the scenic design proposed by Vicki and Laurel a few weeks before tech, along with creating the Space projections and the rain dance projections. He did a great job with Space and the Aurora Borealis of the rain dance but did not have enough time to realistically create leaves or render out that type of animation in a way that would complement the scenic elements. The leaves had to be cut, but the Space and rain dance became some of the most visually spectacular and visual awe-inspiring parts of the play.

Working with Drake and Ethan was a good experience. We were experimenting together to see what we can do with the medium of projections and they were willing to take notes and try new things, albeit with limited time to experiment due to their work load on the other projects. Steve was not able to be present through many of my production meetings and I think would have been a good resource to be more involved. Because of the split time the team was focused on solving the issues of _Silence_ projections and they thought that work on _Middletown_ would be easier and so gave less time to it.
Lighting Design:

Joey Burbach was our Lighting Designer for Middletown. Joey was quiet sometimes in production meetings but was a great contributor to the production. During the process I found him to offer creative ideas. He attended multiple rehearsals early on and was an active collaborator on the production. Joey was the first designer to contribute to the Facebook group and Dropbox over the summer with research images and was constantly responding to image and research prompts posted in the group. He tried early on to get Vicki to respond to more prompts by asking what she was thinking over the summer via our groups. I appreciated Joey’s “go getter” attitude, his willingness to take time with the production and his adaption of lighting all of the scenes with his gobos that he had planned for transition emergencies. I found his lighting to be very effective for the production and to work strongly with the show. I liked Joey’s lighting on the trees so much that I found them to be an effective substitution for the projections I cut. I also really enjoyed his practical lighting of the Emergency sign, Ground Control console and his work on lighting the Rain Dance.

Costume Design:

Janice Stauffer served as our costume designer. Janice brought expertise and professionalism to production meetings. She was the first to bring in research images and always had some progress to report at production meetings. I appreciated Janice’s wrestling with the ideas in the play and with her ability to collaborate. Janice interpreted the time period as the fifties which did
become a bit confusing for the audience. I wanted an Everyman or timeless feel that could be present day. I could have been clearer with Janice as I said I wanted the present but did not mind a throwback for some of the costumes to the fifties. I think particularly with Mrs. Swanson that the throwback became confusing as all of her costumes were set in a specific time period and did not quite work or flatter the actress.

I loved Janice’s work on the Astronaut and the Rain Dance costumes. These were well done and she brought lots of research and always was up to discuss ideas and come to a joint conclusion. Collaborating with Janice was a great experience and I learned that I should draw more lines in the sand even when a designer is passionate about an idea. I think that if I would have found a middle ground in which each of the costumes were from a different era giving Middletown an Everyman feel it would have ultimately served the play better than to lean towards a specific time period.

Properties:

Morgan Robertson was Props Master for Middletown. Morgan was easy to work with, brought in research and props lists early on, creatively adapted when the styles of props did not work and was a very hard worker to gather so much for the show. I was very pleased with Morgan’s work on the production, she was a strong collaborative member of the team. A challenge we had was making the hospital beds work for the production. Morgan and Vicki originally wanted to use rolling hospital beds that were too high for sightlines and looked like operating
tables. Morgan adapted their concept and created two beds that worked well for the hospital scenes and the blocking of the play and refaced the front of the beds to look much more like the kind of bed you would see in a hospital.

**Stage Management:**

Savannah Kurtz served as Stage Manager for *Middletown* and was highly organized and prepared throughout the rehearsal process. The production had a cast of twelve actors playing twenty-two parts, a design team, and a large crew. It was also a tech-heavy production involving projections and scenery fly cues, as well as aerial work on a Vortex fly system involving a performer.

Savannah Kurtz’s demeanor, dedication, and work ethic throughout production meetings, rehearsals, tech, and performances can only be described as professional. I was excited to hear that I would be working with Savannah because of her reputation at the school. Savannah is known for being a highly organized and diligent manager and student, which has landed her numerous leadership positions.

At our initial *Middletown* meetings Savannah approached me about her interest in running our rehearsals according to Actors Equity standards. This choice proved an excellent educational experience for the students, designers, assistant stage manager and myself. Not only did Savannah run rehearsals by the Actors Equity guidelines, but also she embodied the professional rules herself. She always prepared the space on time for rehearsals; she used her excellent communication skills and well executed rehearsal/production reports to
anticipate potential problems and worked as part of the team to creatively problem solve.
10. Self Analysis

I felt a bit beaten after *Middletown*. There was a lot of fighting for ideas in the making of the play and running around checking on and trying to motivate certain areas of the production. The product did not resonate with the majority of the audience as I had thought it would. I felt that most, but not my entire ensemble got onboard with the feel and the core ideas of the play. Certain nights everyone was onboard, but ultimately after opening night they were hit and miss on the unity of listening and responding, acting on the pauses for pace and active exploration and discovering the ideas in the production. I felt that the leads in the production had the hardest time sustaining the activeness we found in rehearsal and would revert to old habits. I also received many comments on Lauren Houston’s laugh, it became a habit that was not justified. I should have been clearer with her about letting go of the laugh and just reacting honestly in each scene.

The naysayer attitude modeled by some of the mentors seemed to infect production meetings and held us back from things we were actually capable of. If we look at the difference between the Magic Show that Matt Rightmire and David Michael Fox currently put up where they used the Vortex to fly out people and successfully incorporated projections with a live feed camera. These were both aspects I wanted in my production that took a lot of bureaucracy and fighting for in production meetings. The live feed camera was first deemed impossible, later thought possible and then again deemed unable to be done. I believe the Magic
Show did all these things with less deliberation due to being entirely student run group who had no one to tell them something was not feasible and could not be done.

I fought hard for a lot of my ideas throughout the process. As I reflect I am finding that I should have fought even harder and been unwavering on my side of the process. I believe that many ideas were shot down in production meetings and time was wasted making excuses or quibbling. We could have used that energy to solve the question of how could we do things as well as brainstorming creative ways to do it. Hopefully Middletown and the recent Magic Show have proved that we have the technology and capability to make these requests happen.

I also felt, being a director on a large design show that the design took a lot of energy which I would have liked to have just spent on the story and the actors. Because a lot of design elements, primarily scenic and projectors were constantly in a state of flux and needed attention I spent creative energy adapting to the waffling design rather than just focusing on how best to tell the story. It became a distraction during the latter part of rehearsals.

I learned a lot from directing Middletown. It was the biggest show that I have done and the most difficult. I am proud of the process and product of the play yet realize that I did not solve all of the problems that the play presents. I was glad that I could trust my gut on the big decision to cut a large portion of my concept because the sky-scapes and projections were not working and we would not have the time to fix them. I felt good about the look of the finished design and
the Scenic Designer won a Certificate of Merit for it at KCACTF. I was very pleased with Joe’s sound work in design and that he also received a KCACTF Merit Certificate. I am also pleased with how far I felt I was able to bring some of the less experienced actors in the ensemble. Will Voelker and Emma Gruhl did exemplary work and had rounded and beautiful characters that I fell in love with. Spenser Stokes, Bryan Howard, Meghan Modrovski, Desiree Bartels, Grant Alsup, Tatiana Gantt and Trey Martinez did some fine work and their energy and enthusiasm made me proud. My leads Jeffrey Paskach and Lauren Houston were hit and miss, with Lauren missing more than Jeff. It was difficult to have them be less stable in performance and in their chemistry with each other as they had to carry the show in multiple scenes.

I could be more decisive and definitive in talking with certain designers, as not all designers liked the open collaboration that I used in design meetings. I also have learned that it is up to me to really check up on the progress of designers and fight hard for the best ideas in the room to win out. I do not care if the best idea in the room is not mine, but I do feel it is my job to inspire and create an environment in which the best idea can rise to the surface and have a chance to be realized. I did not connect to as many of the student population as I had hoped with the play, but those who I did connect with I felt really connected and understood the production. I feel that I am in good company though in not fully solving this play. When Les Waters directed *Middletown* at Steppenwolf his reviewer Chris Jones wrote

> I would say that my enthusiasm was not universally shared at the Wolf on Saturday night. One woman just in front of me spent the entire
second act reading her luminescent smartphone, the crutch of the dumb, and the amount of rustling and snoozing and not-coming-back-after-intermission in my environs was, based on my very regular observations of these things, notably above average. That led me to wonder why.

Here's what I think. Too often, Les Waters' uneven production gets trapped in whimsy and, at crucial moments, steps away from the brink of truth, letting the characters, and the audience, off the hook. At those moments, when honesty retreats and deep truths are glossed over in some kind of glib, all-on-one-level word game, the stakes in the show sag. This is the grave danger of Eno's kind of writing. Characters say a lot of different things on different levels, but you have to tease out the stuff that really matters and treat it honestly. It's no different from real conversation. Our few wise thoughts are surrounded by oceans of clutter. (You might well be thinking that describes this review, which would further prove the point.)

Ian Borden once told me that it is the problem plays we learn the most from and I whole-heartedly agree. I plan to take the lessons learned from this production forth into my next venture battle savvy, smarter, with a renewed sense of purpose and with an open heart.

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11. Response

Responses to the production were mixed. Many of the audience either loved the play or abhorred it, not a lot of in between. I was extremely pleased with how the performance came together on opening night and here is the Lincoln Journal Star Review from that night.

Middletown,” by contemporary American playwright Will Eno, opened Thursday night in a well-done and thought-provoking production at the Howell Theatre of the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The dark and quirky comic drama draws its name from its exploration of the time spent between what student director Joshua Waterstone describes as the “journey in the middle of the miracles and mysteries of birth and death, the middle we call life.” In the two and a half hour run of the play the citizens of Middletown are presented, in all their joys, fears and dreaded ordinariness.

The ensemble cast is well-balanced and fine-tuned in its comic timing. Outstanding among them on opening night were Emma Gruhl as the Librarian, Jeffrey Paskach as John Dodge, Spenser Stokes as the Cop and Will J. Voelker IV as the Mechanic.

Eno’s works are known for the grandiloquence of their ordinary language. The UNL cast is to be praised for making such plain-spoken lines ring out to the audience. Examples are legion but here are a couple:

* Middletown boasts an astronaut. In a scene which adds little to the play but gives the director and crew a chance for spectacular special effects, the astronaut appears in space in communication with Houston Ground Control. Summarizing his awe at the view of earth and his origins, the astronaut asks simply and effectively, “How’d we get so lucky?”

* The mechanic, his life bounded and broken by substance abuse and aimlessness, finds himself on a park bench pouring out his problems to the town librarian, a woman who has known him since he was a child. He
speaks of his past, what has gone wrong, focusing on the ways he sees himself as different and thwarted. She asks him simply and profoundly, “Did you ever think you might be a normal person?”

Piercing the seeming complexity of contemporary life with simple truths is part of what makes Will Eno a playwright of prominence and promise. His work is now admirably presented on stage in Lincoln.  

Kandra Hahn’s review for the Lincoln Journal Star spoke to what I saw that opening night, strong ensemble acting, well timed comedy some spectacular pictures and technical moments and the words and style of the playwright ringing true. Other students and peers who I spoke to who were present opening night also had a similar experience of the play working together.

Another review I received was from the Daily Nebraskan. As I had mentioned that the play resonated differently amongst the student population and based on energy differences in performances. I felt that I was lucky to have Jack Forey write such an insightful review.

“Someone is born; someone will die. Both of them are you.”

If that statement resonates with you, then you should see “Middletown.” If that statement means nothing to you, you should definitely see “Middletown.”

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln production is about an eponymous town and its people. It could be any place, any town. There are successful people, abject failures and the mundane examples in between. It may as

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well be Lincoln; the backdrop depicts a monument that looks very much like our capitol building.

“Middletown” is essentially a series of absurd conversations between the various townspeople. Some of them know each other; others meet by chance. All of their interactions begin with mundane settings and topics, then progress into unreal territory as the characters openly pontificate on their lives and everything around them. Playwright Will Eno wants us to think about why the monument is there or why we speak English instead of Latin. In the midst of this postmodern styling, “Middletown” is often funny and sympathetic. Material that has potential to be pretentious avoids that fate, mainly because it is funny and doesn’t pretend to have answers for the questions it poses. The energy of the actors and poetry of the writing lend the conversations a humorous tone. Not only are we laughing, we’re thinking about what we’re laughing at.

The focus of the play is the relationship between the characters Mary Swanson and John Dodge, who are also the central dialectic of the play. The relationship between Swanson and Dodge, played by Lauren Huston and Jeffrey Paskach respectively, works as a metaphor for the duality of consciousness. Swanson is an optimist, Dodge is a pessimist. While Swanson jokes to be funny, Dodge uses humor to distance himself from inner pain. Swanson is pregnant with her first child, while Dodge openly contemplates suicide. This dynamic between them leads to a stirring climax.

The sets these characters inhabit are impressionistic representations of mundane places like a library, a park and the outside of an emergency room. During a few scenes, the main action is accompanied by secondary action on the side. The opening scene between a cop and mechanic happens as we see people through their windows in the background. Characters converse on a bench as a man lies in a hospital bed on the other side of the stage. The positioning of the set pieces is in one way just practical staging, but on another level, it seems as though the director is
trying to show us how close we all really are— that we are all in the same world together, part of the same story.

The music of “Middletown” consists mainly of tracks by Gorillaz, which is the only issue I had with the production. Gorillaz are a fantastic group, but its sound did not feel appropriate for Middletown’s style, which resembles something like a sitcom directed by Norman Rockwell. The songs didn’t matter much in the overall scope of the play; they were mainly played as stage hands came out to change scenery. Fortunately, the music was not distracting and didn’t take away from the impact of the story.

It’s possible that the ideas of “Middletown” may go over the heads of some audience members. It may seem confusing or superfluous. Maybe that’s how it should be. The play is all about how we feel living, whether we love it, wish it would end or we just don’t think about it much. “Middletown” may confuse, but isn’t life confusing sometimes? Even if one doesn’t care to contemplate the “Important Themes” of life, death and the passage of time, there are still the lively performances of the actors that keep us invested in its story. The performances of Emma Gruhl (as the elderly librarian), Will J. Voelker (the mechanic) and Bryan Howard (various characters) are particularly noteworthy for their inspiration and timing.

If you go see “Middletown” with an open mind, you will enjoy yourself. It may not be a play for everybody, but it is a play about everybody.⁹

Jack Forey summed it up with his conclusion of the play “not being for everybody, but about everybody.” The fact that he got that much out of the production and also noticed what I was attempting with the staging was a

success for me with the play being relatable to a portion of the student population.

I met one-on-one with Tice Miller and Ian Borden to get feedback on the production. Both had seen the performance the second night, which I remember had disappointed me. I also watched the second night because Sarah Ice the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival respondent came to that production and I remember feeling as though the ensemble’s energy was off that night, especially after the high that I had felt on what I considered a great opening the night before.

Tice Miller wrote up his response to seeing the production and it appears below.

*Middletown* by Will Eno
Director: Joshua Waterstone
November 15, 2013

*Middletown* is a challenging play for a young cast—especially if performed in Howell Theatre with its acoustical issues. It is about the everyday things we do that make life worth living. Immediately, it conjures up an earlier play that puzzled its audience some 70 years ago for many of the same reasons. Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* also dealt with normal events in the life of a town—our town—to help us see the beauty underlying our most banal actions. Every high school, community theatre, college theatre and some professional theatres have produced this play not fully understanding what Wilder was attempting to say. Every now and then, however, someone finds the key to making *Our Town* an insightful and poignant evening of theatre. The challenge of Eno’s *Middletown* is to take what might seem mundane to the casual observer and turn it into theatrical poetry.

How well did Joshua’s production do this? Much like the Stage Manager in *Our Town*, a speaker at the beginning of the UNL production of *Middletown* sets the scene for us. The town has a hospital, a library, houses, a town square with a monument, and more. We are introduced to the two main characters, Mary, a newcomer with absent husband; and John, a handy-man. We meet the janitor,
mechanic, doctor, tour guide and librarian. Eno doesn’t rush the opening scenes: he takes his time in introducing this “Middletown” to us. We see and hear the casual conversation of a day in the life of these residents. And in all of this, Eno, it appears, wants us to grasp the importance of these moments. While this is a play of nuances, there are some big moments—huge moments—such as the astronaut and the dancing bear that move us because they are so beautiful.

In many ways this is a post-modern play. The challenge is to make the audience understand what the mundane conversations, meetings, attempts at friendships add up to in the arc of our lives. Maybe a more intimate space—the Studio Theatre or the Johnny Carson (Lied)—would have involved the audience more—put them in the midst of the action—and allowed them to become more emotionally involved. Of course, this would mean that the director would have had to rethink the production—no more flying astronauts. But if given a choice I might have chosen intimacy and sacrificed the stunning visual moments.

Joshua and I had a good discussion about all of this after the production closed. I appreciate why he was attracted to this quiet play and how he attempted to meet all the challenges. On the night I attended (the second night), the first act seemed slow and I had to work to stay involved. Things picked up after intermission and I was fully engaged for the rest of the evening. Still, without a sharp dramatic conflict, the play requires a level of commitment that is hard for an audience—especially a young audience—to sustain for almost 180 minutes. And for the play to work we need to care about these characters, their reaching out for friendship, community and a reason to be alive. They reminded me not only of Wilder’s characters but also of Beckett’s tramps in Waiting for Godot—the classic of post-modern plays.

I found this production a worthy effort, one that pushed Joshua to grow as a director. I was impressed with his understanding of the text, the demands of the staging, and the visual images he created for Middletown. He should be proud of this production.

Will Eno has two productions opening in New York during the spring, and I’m pleased that Joshua gave us an example of this exciting young playwright’s work.

Tice L. Miller
Professor Emeritus
Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film

Fellow, College of Fellows of the American Theatre

When Tice and I met he asked me many questions about the production.

His biggest question was why I chose the Howell Theatre and not the Studio or a
smaller space. Perhaps a smaller space would have lent the intimacy needed for such a production and I know that the division from the audience that the Howell created was something that my cast had to work against with a play that really wants the characters interacting heavily with the audience. If I was to do the production again I would use a different space and go for less spectacle. The choice to work on the Howell was partly for what I had planned for the production but also because I hadn’t worked in that space and I wanted the opportunity to work with a big design. Tice also mentioned that the style of Bryan Howard as the public speaker worked against the piece. This was tricky as some nights I felt Bryan nailed it and others it seemed pushed. The night he saw it the urgency was not there, especially in the first half and I completely agree. The moments took longer and it brought the audience down. “Less is more” and “playing with the nuances” was also something that he said that I would use in another production of the play.

I met with Ian Borden after he had seen the production. He prefaced his remarks with how much he hated the script found it “immature and ponderous,” and that some of his comments may come from a distaste for this type of writing.

Notes I received from Ian are as follows:

- Didn’t bring together the elements of Design in this production. I had succeeded in my prior production of *Melancholy Play*, but in *Middletown* they seemed disparate styles.

Examples of these styles
• The tree in the middle of the stage did not work properly with the other trees.
• The stage rocks always looked like stage rocks and I should have just had them get real rocks so the actors didn’t have to try to give weight to Styrofoam.
• The I.V. was on the wrong hand and there were discrepancies in the doctor’s office that were not realistic. Should have done better research on the medical waste props.

Acting Notes
• Didn’t pull together the ponderousness, it was the most ponderous show he has ever seen.
• Tatiana as the Female Doctor was doing three jobs which she would not do in an actual hospital.
• John Dodge’s death was too long (there were too many false endings also in the script and the production).
• The Rain Dance choreography was not clearly articulated.
• The actors did not build a connection in the scenes.
• John Dodge and Mary Swanson had a lot of superficial acting.
• The Best scene was between Spenser Stokes and Emma Gruhl as the Cop and Librarian respectively as there was listening and responding.
• The Astronaut Image was great, but the microphone he wore was working terribly the night Ian saw it.
• He felt the actors were in isolated worlds and not connecting as a whole.
• The young actors did not mount consistency throughout.

• There was little conflict and purpose on stage.

• Take this as a failure in unity to learn from, lots of things changed and I had a hard time keeping track of and holding onto the different changing elements.

Theme

• The play is about the most ordinary things in our lives are spectacular, but it didn't need a whole play to say that one line.

• Ian felt that the sound design with Joe Shae was strong and that it helped to communicate the theme better than the other design elements did.

I found many of Ian’s comments to be an accurate assessment of the production, especially in terms of design. I do feel that the script has inherent problems but I am at the same time intrigued and impassioned by the writing and the questions of how to better solve a script such as *Middletown*.

My directing mentor Virginia Smith also gave a written response to the play and it is copied below.

**Professor Virginia Smith’s Response to Joshua Waterstone’s Thesis Production: *Middletown***

These comments are based on areas of focus throughout the preproduction, rehearsal and performance process.

I thought this was an excellent play for you to do. It was stronger than your other proposals, though I would have like to have seen your take on *Mother Courage* as well. It's very different from anything you've done, but still has a flavor of what you love. It is also a very odd play, an *Our Town* for the postmodern era. I'm really glad you brought it to our audience. We need to tackle the new and thoughtful work that is being seen across the country. That being said, it's a big play, with lots of demands without easy or built in appeal. It was an excellent choice, but arguably a challenging choice to present to an unsophisticated 112
audience. However, in my opinion, appealing to 112 students is only one of the 
prerequisites for choosing a University Theatre selection. This play offered you 
the opportunity to wrestle with so many problems, and gave you the opportunity to be successful in so many ways.

Your analysis of the script was effective and your concept very workable. The tree as a symbol of the connection between the earth and the stars worked well. Your idea of working out each character's "world view" was interesting, though, not particularly actable. I'm not sure I would have gotten it from the production, but knowing about it, I could see how it provided structure for the actors.

The auditions gave you a wide choice of actors and you prepared a good callback list. Your callbacks could have been more effective if you had been more cognizant of using the actor's time efficiently. Many actors sat for a long time waiting to read. I think callbacks are often tricky. You need to spend enough time with each actor to see what he or she can do, but also be respectful of their time. Calling people back in groups would have been more effective.

You chose to cast a number of freshmen and sophomores with only a few students with more training. This worked out for the most part. It certainly gave you the most diverse cast we've seen onstage for a while. It's been fun to watch the freshmen you cast blossom as the year has proceeded. Your work with them was definitely a positive experience for them. You seemed to work well with your cast, but they seemed to engage at different levels. Again, try to figure out how to get them all on the same page, into the same ensemble, and with the same full spirit to pour into the collective work.

The staging was effective, though the set design wasn't conducive to using the whole stage and forced most of the scene work into one plane across the front of the stage. It limited the possibility of much movement. The movement was effective, but some of the scenes were necessarily static because of the set. At one point in the process I mentioned that catching a glimpse of the whole stage during a scene change made me want you to somehow use that space as a release from the restrictions. You had earned it, by keeping us stuck on earth in our little homes, and narrow ideas. The release of space would have been perfect for the rainbow dance. However, my suggestion came too late in the process and would have upset other aspects of the production.

The pacing of the play was a huge problem during rehearsals. The scene changes were so lengthy, it was impossible to predict the flow of the production. I think the pacing worked when I saw it, but I bet it was a continuing battle during the run. When the pace was slow, the play stopped working. Try to figure out how to help the actors find the pace when the techs are slowing everything down. I probably would have imagined the houses until techs, or insisted that the actors bring on furniture and props. Even though they weren't going to be moving them
during the production. It might have even helped to build ensemble to give them more responsibility for the flow of events.

A use of the ensemble to push collectively forward, as just mentioned in set changes, might have added the needed passion, energy and vigor into the acting. Some of the actors had these qualities, as I've mentioned, but it was not ensemble driven and it might have been improved if it had been. The vocal work was fine. I know you worked on making the actors heard, both coaching them to project and asking for sound amplification early on in the process.

One problem with the play is that there isn't a clear central conflict that leads us inevitably to a climax. As a presentation of “world views,” some of the characters receive insight. The play operates more as a pictures of a community as individuals grapple with their individual conflicts and crises. I think that the death of John Dodge and the birth of John Swanson and the dance of life and death performed by the Shaman, Craig, could have been clearer. The dance was moving and magical, but though the rainbow was there, it did not become the rainbow bridge of our understanding.

I think this production had problems with making and meeting deadlines. I'm not at all sure that you are responsible for that. As the leader of the process you succeed in many areas. The failures came in not getting the support or essential technology you needed for effective projections, not having a set designer who was flexible and responsive to the needs of the production, and an inexperienced technical director who didn't anticipate the issues, such as flying an actor. But since the director is in charge of everything, my question is how can you be the kind of leader that can get everyone to believe in your vision, and how can you anticipate and resolve problems earlier in the process? I'm not sure you could have, but I would like this reflection to be a continuing part of your process. You worked well with the rules, budgets and policies of the JCSTF. I thought the marketing images were very effective and the use of all of the department’s resources were in line with other productions. Your rehearsal schedule seemed to work effectively and you successfully negotiated technical rehearsals in which you were forced to cut effects you had envisioned. You did this with confidence and grace, and your audiences saw a very credible, sometimes moving, and lovely production of *Middletown*.

The following is my response to questions Joshua posed about his production.

1. Was there unity of production?
   You worked hard to find the unity in this production and I think much of it was successful. You came prepared to your production meetings, full of inspirational quotes from the play and presented open-ended ideas that seemed to me to be an amazing invitation to collaborate. The problem was that some of your designers jumped at the chance and some did not. In the same sense some of your actors got on board and some just didn't buy in. It is also true that some of
the mentoring team became less helpful to you than they often are. All of this is laid at your feet. How to get the belief and buy in from the entire team? One of the design mentors said that you were unclear and wishy-washy about making decisions. Look at that. I also witnessed designers resisting the collaboration process, never speaking in production meetings, missing deadlines, and mentors taking you to task when it was inappropriate, i.e. asking for instantaneous scene changes when you meant cinematic transitions between scenes. How could you have improved the process or made appropriate changes in your approach to assure whole team buy in? Do reflect on how this process could have been improved. That being said, the scene changes worked well by opening night, the sound and music choices were delightful, the lights worked very effectively, you found some wonderful pictures, some of the acting work was lovely, and I found much of the production to be effective and moving.

The design areas that worked most effectively were sound and lights. The sound used was especially excellent and served as a unifying factor for me. The lighting design worked well too. Some of the scenic elements were lovely. The houses were terrific, both inside and outside. The trees almost worked for me. I loved the shapes on stage and they established the earth very effectively. I thought the branches and leaves lacked the elegance of the rest of the design. They just weren’t very attractive. Filling the cloth with projected leaves, if it had worked, still might not have made the shapes elegant. A simpler abstraction might have been more effective, but in elements that you can’t see until tech, you did what you needed to do, trusted your collaborators and made the best choices you could make until you were out of time. The costumes were effective, but it was unclear to me why the costume designer didn’t embrace your concept. Even though you said repeatedly that you wanted it to be presented in 2013, she gave you 1960s. Her research all supported her costumes as she found 1960s versions in today’s clothing, but I know you would have preferred to see your vision on the stage. The props and furniture pieces all worked effectively and the cohesion of design was very clear.

2. Was the audience effectively invited into the production? *Middletown* is play that would work best by having the audience only a few feet away in a more intimate space, and yet it would have been impossible in our Studio Theater. You worked very hard at making this very different play as accessible as you could. The long “welcome” in the beginning would perhaps have been aided by all the media that you’d planned and your ideas for the played intermission, were certainly never what you’d hoped for. But Eno uses the “welcome” to tell the audience members that this play is going to be something they have to work at, rather than lie back and enjoy. How could you have invited them in more?

3. Was the use of stage picture strong and/or effective? Your stage pictures were very effective. I loved all the scenes from outside the house looking in. I loved the astronaut scene. Though I never liked the technique
used on the tree branches, the overall effect was pleasing. My only criticism of
your stage pictures is that they were often static and what was a lovely picture
didn't change and refresh in the telling of the story.

4. Did the element of media help or hinder the production?
Such a huge amount of the media you'd planned actually didn't make it to the
stage. The whole prologue, the intermission scene, and the several things you'd
planned for the surface of the trees, including all the sky shots, central to your
ideas, were either changed or cut. I was pleased with your decisions to cut and
modify, but at least in the intermission scene, you never found a satisfactory
solution. Your ideas about the sky were very compelling, but again, the ultimate
use of them on the stage had a minimal effect. I'm not sure why these effects
were so elusive. The projection on the trees especially during the astronaut
scene worked very well and the light show during the native dance were very
effective. Ultimately most of the media used in the show enhanced your other
efforts. The intermission scene was hurt by the use of media. Audience members
just got too confused, I watched the video several times in tech and the actual
scene the second week of the run, and it never added to the production. Simply
playing it before the intermission with no media would have at least made the
playwright's intentions clear and the audience would have known the little girl,
who appears at the very end. The idea of the ability of an audience member to
enter the narrative would have been a wonderful burst of insight, if you could
have made it work.

5. Did you achieve layered, complex performances from your actors?
There were many effective moments in Middletown and many of them depended
on good performances. I'm not sure that they were layered and complex. The
Librarian and the Mechanic jump to mind. Each of these actors gave everything
they had in every moment they had onstage, but in some cases the actors were
playing archetypes instead of rich and layered characters. For some reason I
was not moved by the policeman. Maybe it was his violence in the very beginning
of the play. Perhaps if I could have felt that he struggled with the darkness in
himself, I would have been less wary of him. I didn’t really care about Mrs.
Swanson and John Dodge. When John was dying and when she was going
through the uncertainty of delivering her baby alone, I remained dispassionate. At
the same time, I was very moved by Craig searching for drugs at the loading
dock of the hospital. "I just want to be beautiful and loved." His native dance also
moved me. Judith's reading from the history book, and the tour guide's revelation
about our interconnectedness were great acting moments for me. Most of the
acting was handled well, but only some of it was as effective as it might have
been.

6. Did Middletown affect the audience? In what way?
Your production affected me and a percentage of the people who attended. The
ideas in the play are accessible in a new form than what we are used to. People
who are attracted to complexity and challenged by unusual beauty would be attracted to it, and would enter it, as I did. People who are either unused to, or unwilling to try something new and odd might not.
12. Conclusion

This was a challenging play and I consider it a problem play that I did not fully solve. I am still working on how to incorporate media into a production without it creating a large hassle and still fit seamlessly with the design. I am working on direct and consistent director-designer communication, and how to unify competing design ideas and stick to my vision. I was not successful in unifying design and finding holistic cohesion overall with this particular group of designers. I also wanted more consistent connection on a night to night basis between my two lead actors. The death scene was too drawn out in my production and the 1950s costume idea did not match the contemporary feel I wanted in the production. Scenic elements turned out half abstract looking and half realistic and I had a lot of snags with working with my scenic designer. I will work on clarity of concepts across all design areas when directing another complex play. I also have learned to speak early and often to promote clarity and to check daily for any inconsistencies with the production team.

Despite hardships I found a lot that I enjoyed in the production and I loved having the opportunity to work with Will Eno’s writing which I find thought provoking, rich and deep. I am proud of the production photos and images I was able to create with my cast and design team, of the reviews I received from local newspapers, and I see a beauty in the different aspects of design despite their somewhat disparate and collage feel. I learned a lot from working with each designer and used the whole gamut of my skills that I have honed while at the
Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film in conceptualizing, communicating
with and creating the town of *Middletown* as well as in rehearsing this production
with the actors.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to work on such a production as the
culmination of my studies here at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and am
grateful for the feedback and support of Paul Steger and the school, of my peers,
my Thesis Committee members Ian Borden and Tice Miller, Graduate Advisor
Bill Grange and Directing Advisor and Mentor Virginia Smith all who provided
support and insight as I went through the journey and adventure of directing this
play.
13. Appendix

*Middletown* Production Photos.

Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 13

Figure 14
Figure 21

Figure 22