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Clowns, Fools, and Killers: An Exploration of Horror, Comedy, and Madness Through the Roles of Murderer 2 and Sir Richard Ratcliffe in William Shakespeare's Richard III

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CLOWNS, FOOLS, AND KILLERS:
AN EXPLORATION OF HORROR,
COMEDY, AND MADNESS THROUGH THE ROLES OF MURDERER 2 AND SIR
RICHARD RATCLIFFE IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S

RICHARD III

by

RJ MAGEE

A THESIS PAPER SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIRMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
IN
THEATRE ARTS

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO
MANKATO, MINNESOTA

APRIL 2023

DATE: APRIL 2023

The Thesis Paper has been examined and approved by the following
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ABSTRACT

Magee III, Richard Joseph, M.F.A. Clowns, Fools, and Killers: An Exploration of Horror and Comedy Through the Roles of Murderer 2 and Sir Richard Ratcliffe in William Shakespeare's Richard III. Mankato: Minnesota State University, Mankato, 2023.

This document is a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree in Theatre Arts with a Concentration in Musical Theatre. It is a detailed account of author RJ Magee's artistic and scholarly process in creating the roles of Murderer 2 and Sir Richard Ratcliffe in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The production was performed as part of Minnesota State University, Mankato's mainstage season in October of 2022. In five chapters, this thesis chronicles the actor's process: a preproduction analysis, a historical and critical perspective, a rehearsal and performance journal, a post-production analysis, and a process development analysis. Appendices and works cited are included.

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CHAPTER I

EARLY PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

For my final production as a Master of Fine Arts candidate at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I have been cast as Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe in Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The production will run in the Andreas Theater for the last two weekends of October of 2022 and closes on the afternoon before Halloween. The play's violent themes and unsettling atmosphere heavily correspond with the general ominousness that pervades the month of October. Thus, our production's slotting was not unintentional. Our director, Heather Hamilton, is, like myself, a fan of the horror genre. Thus, I can only imagine the macabre and ghoulish aesthetic that she has planned for this production. However, I also know that Hamilton will not let any 'spooky' visual accouterments get in the way of telling a clear, direct, and affective story.

My prior experience with this play is fairly limited. When I was a senior at Temple University, *Richard III* was presented as part of our mainstage season and the production was directed by a third year MFA candidate. This particular production of *Richard III* really leaned into the grotesque quality of Richard's movement, due to his infirmity. While on crutches, the actor playing Richard prowled around the stage employing a menacing, spider-like physicality. It was clear that the director and actor were aiming for a very animalistic quality from Richard in which his disability was extremely noticeable and he was constantly on the hunt. This interpretation of the character of Richard was very much part human, part monster. From an audience perspective, due to Richard's constant use of crutches, there was no question that Richard

was physically disabled in some form. However, I really do not remember how my characters, Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe, functioned or were portrayed in this production. Frankly, I do not remember them being in the show at all. That is not to say that these characters were cut from that production. My guess is that, in that director's respective cutting of the script, these two characters' text was significantly reduced or the actors portraying those characters embodied them in such a way that they did not stand out amongst the other (possibly more memorable?) characters in this play. I am only mentioning this because I want to give a sense of my prior relationship to these characters and to this text before beginning rehearsals. I think that it is safe to say that it is pretty limited which, in a way, is a good thing.

Last semester, I played Max Detweiler in *The Sound of Music* which is a role and a musical that I was quite familiar with before beginning that rehearsal process. Thus, it could be argued that my performance of that character could have been influenced in some way by other versions of Max Detweiler and *The Sound of Music* that I have seen onstage or on film. However, in the case of Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe, I will be approaching and interpreting these roles from a completely fresh perspective.

While at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I have been fortunate to work on other Shakespeare roles including Gonzalo in our mainstage production of *The Tempest* and Prince Escalus in a reading of *Romeo & Juliet*. Prior to coming to this graduate program, I only had the opportunity to work on classical text in the classroom and audition settings.

I know that Hamilton has been developing her visual and dramaturgical concepts

for several months. Thus, I am really excited to hear how my characters fit into the larger scope of her directorial vision as I know that she will want to incorporate every character, regardless of how many spoken lines that they have on the page, into the larger narrative and themes of the piece.

I can definitively state that, before starting rehearsals, one of my primary goals for this process is to find ways to differentiate my two characters from one another in ways that were extremely noticeable for our audiences. However, before determining what makes each of these characters unique, I need to find their similarities. Their primary similarities, just from behavior and action alone, is that they are both killers. Their vocation is literally to kill whoever they are instructed to kill. However, their respective mental and emotional relationships with murder are quite different. Murderer 2 has to kill others in order to make money and to survive. Ratcliffe has to kill others because there is no other act that gives him greater pleasure or joy.

When comparing Murderer 2 to Ratcliffe, my initial inclination, after reading the script, is that the former is the more clownish, bumbling, and quirky character. Although Murderer 2 mildly enjoys the act of killing, he is also clumsy and skittish. When encountering authority figures, such as when receiving orders from Brakenbury, he tries to convey a strong and confident demeanor. However, on the inside, he really has no idea what he is doing. Additionally, Murderer 2's enthusiasm for killing Clarence shifts several times in a matter of minutes. He demonstrates tremendous hesitancy at the beginning of the scene when he states, "The urging of that word 'judgment' hath bred a kind of remorse in me" and "Not to kill him, having a warrant for it; but to be damned for

killing him, from which no warrant can defend us” (Shakespeare 20). This is a telling moment for Murderer 2 as he is indicating that a judgement of eternal damnation could result from assassinating Clarence. This line reveals to me that Murderer 2 possesses some sort of spirituality and belief in the afterlife. However, he wastes no time discarding his conscious and reaffirming his intentions to kill Clarence when he remembers the financial compensation involved. He then proudly proclaims, “Zounds, he dies: I had forgot the reward” (Shakespeare 20).

I am also excited to explore my character’s relationship with Murderer 1, who is being played by an outstanding and accomplished actor named Ryan Sturgis. Sturgis is actually not a current Minnesota State Mankato student. He is a professional filmmaker with an extensive acting background. Thus, I will not be playing opposite an actor with limited experience. During the singular scene where our characters appear together, I know that Sturgis will be making exciting, specific, and creative acting choices from the very beginning of our process. Thus, I need to be prepared to match that level of quality.

Although Shakespeare literally assigns the title of “murderer” to these two characters, a label that immediately evokes fear, I am initially inferring from the text that the murderers could be portrayed as a clumsy, bumbling comedic duo in the same vein Abbott and Costello, Lucy and Ethel, Laurel and Hardy, and more. However, unlike these aforementioned pairings, our characters are literally assassins for hire. By the end of our scene, this pair of murderers will have willfully stabbed and drowned another human being. And, immediately before and after they end Clarence’s life, Murderer 1 and 2 seem to have little reservations or regrets regarding the act. Thus, Sturgis and I must

carefully balance a few different things: the comedic timing that our characters' text requires and the moments where the murderers come off as lovable, endearing, and somewhat buffoonish, with the undeniable truth that these two men will take another human life while only demonstrating brief hesitation.

The character of Ratcliffe is potentially a bit more complex, provocative, and evocative than Murderer 2. Unlike Murderer 2, over the course of the play, Ratcliffe shows no signs of any insecurities, fears, or doubts. As I described earlier, the murderers' intentions do seem to waver slightly at the beginning of their scene which is a stark contrast to Ratcliffe's behaviors. Ratcliffe takes immense pleasure from killing his victims and he is quite proud of the way that he exacts his executions. He delights and savors every moment of his kills. But to what end or purpose? What comment is Shakespeare trying to make via Ratcliffe's presence? Ratcliffe has few sizeable speeches throughout the play. While delectable and poetic, his lines are also fairly short. He is much more of a physical character and his body language is just as revealing as the words that come out of his mouth. But how do I physically embody Ratcliffe in a way that reveals his terrifying characteristics and instincts?

Since we have not yet begun rehearsals, I have had extremely limited discussions with Hamilton regarding her vision for this specific character. However, I do know that she has done extensive research and preproduction analysis. Thus, I am sure that she has ideas for how she wants each character to function within this production's overall aesthetic and storytelling. And, being that I am somewhat familiar with the theatrical themes that she often gravitates toward as an artist, I have a sneaking suspicion that she

will want Ratcliffe to reflect how violence and sadism permeates our society in all forms.

Ratcliffe also seems absolutely obsessed with the act of killing in a way that parallels many of history's most notorious serial killers including Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, and John Wayne Gacy. Like those aforementioned murderers, Ratcliffe feels an electric, almost orgasmic, charge of extreme pleasure before, during, and after his executions. He is addicted to killing and literally derives physical, mental, and emotional pleasure from it. In addition to these feelings of euphoria and ecstasy, he also seems to find quite a bit of humor and whimsy in these executions.

Ratcliffe is both a psychopath and sociopath. Violence pervades so much of his behavior and he has zero regard for human life. He does not know the difference between right and wrong, nor does he care to know. In fact, his loyalty to Richard is primarily rooted in the fact that Richard frequently provides Ratcliffe with fresh victims for mutilation. The extermination of human life is Ratcliffe's drug of choice and he keeps returning to Richard's entourage in order to maintain his addiction. Additionally, Ratcliffe approaches death with sarcasm. Following the decapitation of Lord Hastings, Ratcliffe exclaims "Here is the head of that ignoble traitor, The dangerous and unsuspected Hastings" (Shakespeare 47). Ratcliffe clearly mocks his victims. He plays with their severed limbs in the same that a cat plays with a dead mouse. With the potential exception of Richard, he fears no one.

In Shakespeare's writing, Ratcliffe's depiction pretty much correlates with how historians describe his real-life counterpart: He is a cold, ruthless, and frightening individual who carries out the executorial orders of Richard's political enemies without

question and with glee. Ratcliffe's constant, almost demonic, presence throughout the play demonstrates the extent of Richard's tyranny and the lengths that he will go to in order to maintain his grip on power.

In the play, Murderer 2, a fictional character created by Shakespeare, is responsible for carrying out several murders on Richard's behalf. Like Ratcliffe, Murderer 2 is a willing participant in Richard's plots. As I mentioned earlier, he does demonstrate some hesitation before committing to the slaying. However, he eventually carries out his orders successfully and willfully. The two murderers are based on the real-life assassins and henchmen who carried out political murders during the reign of Richard III. These individuals were often hired by powerful figures in the royal court to eliminate their rivals, and they operated with a great deal of impunity under Richard's rule ("Shakespeare's King Richard III vs Reality"). Shakespeare's inclusion of the two murderers further underscores the brutal and violent nature of Richard's reign and the extent of his manipulation through the utilization of fear and intimidation.

Symbolically, Sir Richard Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 also function as representatives of the corrupt and brutal political climate of Richard III's regime. Their presence and actions highlight the moral ambiguities and ethical dilemmas that arise in times of political upheaval, while also reiterating the power struggles that categorized this period of English history.

The roles of Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 are also very different from many characters that I have portrayed in the past. I am often cast as characters that are earnest, non-threatening, and without hostility. Thus, I can already tell that I will be exploring

quite a bit of new territory with these two roles. Although I do not share the inherent darkness and sadism that these two characters exhibit, I have personally experienced violent situations and encounters. Thus, Ratcliffe and Murderer 2's behaviors are not completely foreign to me. I recognize, but do not condone, how violent actions can be a cathartic release and coping mechanism for so many people. For example, it appears to me as though Ratcliffe longs for and cherishes the cleansing, exhilarating purity of bloodshed. I am also fully aware that, given the extreme proliferation of mass firearm shootings in the United States over the past decade, the unwavering desire to kill another living creature is an ambition and impulse that certainly exists within some subsets of humanity.

As I begin this journey, it is important that I do not judge (at least initially) these two characters for their horrible actions. I actually need to find ways to both motivate their actions and humanize them. During this story, why do Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe behave in the ways that they do? It would be almost boring to portray these two men as simply mentally unhinged and without reason. Even if Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe are mentally ill, and the latter character almost certainly is, how do I still sympathize with them? How do I present their ideologies in a way that makes them appear almost rational? The most effective and memorable villainous figures, from literature and popular culture, believe that their heinous actions are serving humanity in ways that are, ultimately, positive and for the betterment of society. I want Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 to always feel like real people, not caricatures.

I want to add that, since this production will serve as my master's thesis, I want to

really stretch myself as an actor during this process. As I often receive the feedback that my own personality and mannerisms heavily come through in my performances (sometimes more than they should), I want my portrayal of these characters to feel transformative. In terms of Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe, I want to create two specific and distinct characters that are vivid, intense, and unique.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The roles that I am portraying in Minnesota State University, Mankato's production of *Richard III*, Sir Richard Ratcliffe and Murderer 2, could be considered minor characters. However, they play important roles in both the historical and fictional contexts of the play. According to my own research, Ratcliffe is based on a historical figure who significantly contributed to King Richard III's reign of England. Historically, Sir Richard Ratcliffe was a member of the gentry and served as a loyal supporter, advisor, and confidant of King Richard III. Ratcliffe is also mentioned in several historical sources as being involved in Richard's military campaigns, and he is believed to have played a role in the suppression of the rebellion against Richard led by the Duke of Buckingham ("Shakespeare's Richard III: Portrait of a Villain"). Both of these aforementioned historical assertions are depicted and theatricalized on stage in Shakespeare's play.

In Shakespeare's time, the play was performed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who was a member of the Tudor dynasty that defeated Richard III and the House of York. It has been suggested that the play was intended to legitimize the Tudor dynasty by demonizing its predecessor and promoting the idea that monarchs were chosen by God and had a duty to rule justly ("Richard III: Fact and Fiction in Shakespeare's History Plays"). Overall, the historical context of *Richard III* is one of political instability, power struggles, and a shift towards centralized monarchical rule in England.

William Shakespeare's *Richard III* is a seminal piece of theatre, filled with depictions of characters and storylines that parallel many real-life events that have occurred in the 21st century. It is worth noting that this play is primarily a work of fiction, and while it is based on historical events, it should not be taken as a factual account. However, while Shakespeare's portrayal of these figures is often exaggerated or fictionalized for dramatic effect, he drew on a wide range of historical sources in order to create a complex and nuanced portrait of the people and events that he was depicting in his writing. However, regardless of specific accuracies (or inaccuracies), the play contains many relevant themes that our society is still dealing with today including the persistence of mass violence and the further conflux of truth and fiction in our news cycle.

Additionally, this play is often seen as a commentary on the nature of power and the dangers of unchecked ambition. Of course, it almost goes without saying that this sentiment alone is highly reflective of 21st century politics in the United States. The play depicts Richard as a ruthless, cunning, and scheming figure who will stop at nothing to gain power, including committing murder. Although the executions that Richard orders are government-sanctioned, I believe that one of the characters that I am playing, Ratcliffe, is utilizing this bureaucratic environment to enact his uncontrollable and homicidal urges. Ratcliffe is, essentially, using his government station to his personal and emotional advantage. Does this sound familiar? Regardless of his title, station, location, or vocation, Ratcliffe would always be brutally killing others. However, being Richard's protégé gives Ratcliffe unfettered access to fresh victims. This employment is incredibly

beneficial for both parties: Richard gets to easily take out his enemies via a surrogate and Ratcliffe gets to enact his violent fantasies.

These violent conceits are also akin to the mass killings that have recently occurred in our country including, in November of 2022 (only a few short weeks after our production closed), the violent murders of four students at the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. Since this play and our production provides a commentary on social violence, it is worth taking note of the pervasive violence taking place, nationally, around our performance dates.

On December 30, 2022, Bryan Christopher Kohberger, a graduate student at Washington State University, was arrested in Pennsylvania and charged with four counts of murder in connection to the slain Idaho students. As of the publishing of this thesis, Kohberger has not been formally convicted of a crime. However, according to The New York Times, “On December 28, 2022, the Idaho State Lab reported that a DNA profile obtained from the trash and the DNA profile obtained from the sheath, identified a male as not being excluded as the biological father of Suspect Profile. At least 99.9998% of the male population would be expected to be excluded from the possibility of being the suspect's biological father.” In the likely event that Kohberger is guilty of these crimes, it is important to note that The New York Times also described him as having “studied in Pennsylvania in part under Katherine Ramsland, a forensic psychologist whose books include ‘The Mind of a Murderer’ and ‘How to Catch a Killer.’ He researched the psychology of criminals when they committed crimes” (“10 Key Revelations in the Idaho Murder Case”). Since there seems to be no apparent motive that personally links

Kohberger to the victims, it could be inferred that Kohberger, like Ratcliffe, was obsessed with the act of killing and wanted to experience it for himself. Kohberger also formally studied the patterns, pathology, and psychology of serial killers. Perhaps he tried, unsuccessfully, to satiate or suppress his murderous inclinations by immersing himself in his academic study of the subject. However, at some point, the urge to kill fully took hold of Kohberger. He had no choice but to turn his fantasies into a reality. In ways that are not dissimilar to Ratcliffe, Kohberger might have committed these murders purely for pleasure, enjoyment, thrill, and personal edification.

Although Kohberger (allegedly), Ratcliffe, and Murderer 2 employed bladed weapons for their killings, most murders in the United States are committed using a firearm. According to John Gramlich, an associate director for the Pew Research Center, utilizing analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), and other sources, reported that “Nearly eight-in-ten (79%) U.S. murders in 2020 – 19,384 out of 24,576 – involved a firearm.” Gramlich focused on the year 2020 because, as of the publication of this thesis, it is the most recent year for which complete data regarding this subject is available. If Shakespeare’s *Richard III* was set in contemporary America, Murderer 1 and 2 would undoubtedly be carrying out their assassinations using a gun. However, Ratcliffe, not unlike the aforementioned Kohberger, seems inextricably linked to his bladed weapon due to the agony, torture, and gore that it supplies for the possessor.

In his article, Gramlich further added that, “More Americans died of gun-related injuries in 2020 than in any other year on record, representing a 14% increase from the

year before, a 25% increase from five years earlier, and a 43% increase from a decade prior.” When examining how many people are killed in mass shootings in the United States every year, Gramlich stated that this is a difficult question to answer because “there is no single, agreed-upon definition of the term ‘mass shooting’ because definitions can vary depending on factors including the number of victims and the circumstances of the shooting.” However, the “FBI found an increase in active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2020” (“What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S.”).

According to the data that Gramlich collected, in the year 2000, there were three mass shootings and, in 2020, there were forty mass shootings. Thus, there is no question that violent actions have steadily pervaded our country over the past two decades. But why?

Although it is important to note that these numbers are still below the peak of 16.3 firearm deaths per 100,000 people in 1974, a reporter for the BBC wrote that “Some experts...point to the rise in life stressors, both in general and as a result of the pandemic, especially hardships related to finances, employment, or family.” Nadine Yousef, the author of the BBC article, goes on to quote Jaclyn Schildkraut, the interim executive director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Rockefeller Institute of Government, as stating that these issues can lead some people "to act out or respond violently.” Yousef continues to quote Schildkraut as adding that "toxic masculinity could factor in as well: nearly all mass shooters (around 98%) are male” (“Why number of US mass shootings has risen sharply”). It almost goes without saying that, in terms of gender, both Sir Richard Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 identify as male. These correlations, while not

necessarily unique, are noticeable.

Additionally, when it comes to the correlation between the COVID-19 pandemic and the life stressors that Yousef mentioned, our production of *Richard III* has not been unaffected. We have had several members of our cast miss rehearsals due to exposure to COVID-19 and it was only a few months ago that our university dropped its masking requirement. During a recent rehearsal, we also administered COVID-19 tests to everyone in attendance before continuing on with our rehearsal agenda. Aside from the incredible financial and economic toll that COVID-19 took on all of us, we have had members of our cast lose loved ones due to the virus. The pandemic's significant influence on mental health is a topic that has been highly prevalent amongst everyone involved in our production.

Additionally, aside from the intimate indulgences that violence grants for Ratcliffe, violence is also a key theme in this play because it is used as a tool for both gaining and maintaining power. The physical, psychological, and emotional consequences of this violence are also explored. Throughout the play, violence is primarily depicted via the consolidation of power and the assassinations of Richard III's political enemies. The executions of Lord Hastings, the Duke of Buckingham, and the two young princes all reflect this. They are victims of Richard's violent ambition. Richard is shown to be a master of psychological manipulation, using his wit and charm to draw people into his orbit.

The play also explores the psychological toll of violence on both the perpetrators and the victims. Queen Margaret and the Duchess of York, the former having been a

queen who has now been stripped of her power and the latter being Richard's mother, are deeply traumatized by the violence and political turmoil that surrounds them. Meanwhile, Richard is also consumed by his own violence, with his guilt and fear eventually driving him to madness. Overall, thematically, violence is extremely prevalent, and the play provides a powerful exploration of the ways in which violence can be used as a tool for political gain, as well as the devastating consequences that can result from it.

In addition to my aforementioned analysis of how violence pervades both *Richard III* and our modern society, the play continues to remain relevant for several other reasons. In terms of the social and political upheaval that today's world constantly faces, *Richard III* depicts a political system in which power is consolidated by a single individual who is willing to employ any necessary means in order to maintain control. In this respect, *Richard III* can be seen as a cautionary tale about the dangers of authoritarianism and the risks associated with concentrating too much power in the hands of a single person. This message still rings true, as many countries around the world continue to struggle with issues of corruption, authoritarianism, and the abuse of power.

Additionally, the play raises important queries about the nature of facts, as well as the various ways in which those in power can manipulate and distort the truth in order to maintain their grip on power. Shakespeare depicts Richard as a master of propaganda, using lies and exaggerations to shape public opinion and further his own political goals. As we live in an age of "fake news" and disinformation, where the truth can be difficult to discern and where those in power often have a vested interest in obscuring it, the parallels are quite evident.

Finally, this play is a reminder of the human cost of political turmoil and instability. Throughout the play, we see characters who are willing to go to great lengths to protect their own interests, often at the expense of others. As our country continues to grapple with issues of inequality, injustice, and the exploitation of marginalized communities, this level of applicability is astounding. *Richard III* reminds us that the consequences of political upheaval can be devastating, and that it is up to us to work towards a more just and equitable society.

CHAPTER III

JOURNAL ENTRIES

August 22, 2022

This evening, we have auditions for the first three productions in Minnesota State University, Mankato's 2022/2023 season. This is my third and final year of graduate school and I am knee-deep in applying for jobs in higher education and artistic administration. Over the past several weeks, I have also been thoroughly prepping my audition pieces for this round of casting. Due to scheduling and logistical reasons, following tonight's auditions, whatever role that I am assigned will automatically become the project that my master's thesis will focus on and chronicle. Although the decision is not really up to me at all, I have been slightly torn as to what direction I would like my thesis to potentially take. I know that any role in a play or musical, ensemble or otherwise, is eligible for project documentation. However, for my master's thesis project, I really want a role that I can sink my teeth into and that will expose new layers of my acting abilities. I would love to secure a role that feels like a culmination of my graduate studies, while also being multilayered and nuanced.

Our department's fall musical, *High School Musical*, has a "plumb" role in it that has been on my radar for quite some time: Ryan Evans. However, due to the fact that the actor portraying this character is supposed to believably read as a high schooler, I am a little hesitant to admit that I might be slightly "long in the tooth" for this role. This reflection actually brings up an interesting point: where do I currently fit, type-wise, within the theatrical canon? As a professional casting director, audition coach, and talent

manager, I can easily identify the potential age ranges, skill sets, and artistic energies of other actors. However, this is not a superpower that I am able to use on myself. Regardless, Matthew Caron, the director of *High School Musical*, and Nicholas Wayne, the musical director of the production, both know my work very well and I trust them implicitly to ascertain my suitability for a given role. In fact, directorially, I tend to agree with many of Caron's casting decisions. Thus, I know that he will make a choice that most benefits the students and the production. Another reason that I would be hesitant to write my master's thesis on *High School Musical* is that, as an aspiring academic, I am looking to develop a writing portfolio that reflects a certain level of scholarship and range that correlates with the industry standards of higher education. This is not to say that a master's thesis written about *High School Musical* would not make for an interesting analysis. However, the other production being produced during this casting round, Shakespeare's *Richard III*, would probably fall more in line with what might be traditionally described, in academic circles, as "scholarly." I might be totally wrong about this and, regardless, the choice is not up to me. And, over the course of my professional acting career, I have found this aspect of our business to be extremely freeing. As actors, all we have to focus on is our own audition preparation, and the subsequent results, whether positive or negative, fall far out of our purview. Thus, as this evening's audition approaches, presenting the best versions of myself as an actor and singer is all that I can focus on successfully achieving.

As I mentioned previously, I am an actor who also often doubles as a casting director and talent manager. Thus, I am well aware of the many factors that go into

casting a show and this wherewithal also makes it much easier for me to digest the results of my audition.

August 23, 2022

I am excited to announce that I have been cast as Sir Richard Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 in William Shakespeare's *Richard III* which will perform October 20-23 and 26-30 in MSU's Andreas Theatre. The production is being directed by Heather Hamilton, a theatre professor on MSU's faculty. I will admit that I was somewhat hoping to be cast as the title role of King Richard III/Duke of Gloucester. However, given the fact that my various academic and professional commitments this semester are already starting to overwhelm me, I am secretly glad that my casting assignment is not quite as oppressive. However, that is not to say that these two roles offer little in the way of critical analysis and exploration. Without having spent very much quality time with Hamilton's cutting of the script, I can easily point out one of the primary challenges of this casting assignment is the simple fact that I will be portraying two separate and distinct characters in this production. This is not my first experience portraying multiple characters over the course of one play. In MSU's 2021 production of *Sense and Sensibility*, I played two different roles. And most of the characters in this production are being doubled by multiple actors. However, of the two roles that I doubled in *Sense and Sensibility*, one of them was a small cameo role that appeared briefly at the end of the play. The specific and unique analysis that Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 will individually require is much more significant. I really want these characters to feel vocally, physically, and energetically different.

Although they are both employed by Richard with the express duty of killing certain designated individuals, their motivations, affects, and world views are quite different. What makes these men tick? How does the act of killing live in their hearts, bodies, and minds? Do they feel regret after having taken another life? Are the murders of their respective victims strictly monetarily motivated? Do either Ratcliffe or Murderer 2 (or both) kill others for the sake of personal pleasure and enjoyment? As we begin rehearsals, these are all questions that I will looking to explore and, hopefully, answer in the coming weeks.

I am also excited to be directed by Hamilton. I have been in several of her performance, research, and theory classes. I really respect her directorial eye because I know that she brings zero ego to her process. And she tends to be “spot on” when it comes to finding the truth of a theatrical moment. She also has a knack for determining the most effective comedic precision and timing (a notoriously difficult skill to master) for a given scene, character, monologue, and/or song. Hamilton also has familiarity with me personally, as an actor, and as a student. Thus, I know that she will both challenge and hone my creative process and instincts.

August 29, 2022

Our first rehearsal for MSU’s production of *Richard III* took place this evening. Hamilton spent the majority of the rehearsal outlining some important dramaturgical information, as well as her visual and thematic concepts for the production. She actually teaches our department’s dramaturgy course. Thus, she is extremely knowledgeable

regarding the best practices for dramaturgical research and incorporating that research into a play's rehearsal process. Hamilton and I share the sentiment that dramaturgical research is an important element of any production process. This holds particularly true for a play, like *Richard III*, that heavily draws on historical figures and events.

Hamilton described the various familial lineages that are denoted throughout this play and lectured on the various figures and events that comprised the War of the Roses. From Hamilton's research, I ascertained that the War of the Roses was a series of English civil wars fought between the House of Lancaster and the House of York in the 19th century. The conflict was named the War of the Roses because the symbol of the House of Lancaster was a red rose and the symbol of the House of York was a white rose. The war was a power struggle between the two noble houses for control of the English throne. The most famous battle was the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, which ended with the death of Richard III and the ascension of Henry Tudor as King Henry VII, marking the end of the Plantagenet dynasty and the beginning of the Tudor dynasty. The Battle of Bosworth Field will also be theatrically depicted, onstage, as our production's finale.

Additionally, Hamilton helpfully clarified, using visual materials, "who is on who's team." There are many characters in this play. Thus, it can be hard to discern who are Richard's allies, who are his enemies, and where each character fits within the larger War of the Roses.

August 30, 2022

During tonight's rehearsal, via a crash course Hamilton, we heavily delved into the language of William Shakespeare. We also watched clips from several film and stage adaptations of *Richard III*.

Shakespeare's writing is characterized by poetic language, use of verse and meter, and the employment of iambic pentameter. Although most of this information was not necessarily new to me, it was all very important reminders of how complex, beautiful, and technical Shakespeare's writing can be. However, since lines of Shakespeare also coincide with the beat of a human heart, it also reiterated how emotional, poetic, and affecting his dialogue is.

Over the course of the evening, Hamilton defined terms that are important to an analysis of Shakespeare's writing: meter, verse, scansion, and iambic pentameter.

Meter is the rhythmic pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are often written in iambic pentameter, a metrical pattern that consists of ten syllables per line, with each pair of syllables containing one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable. Verse refers to lines of poetry that often have a regular rhythm and often rhyme. Shakespeare's plays and sonnets are written in verse, with each line of iambic pentameter forming a complete thought. Scansion is the process of analyzing a line of poetry in order to determine its metrical pattern. Scansion also helps readers and performers to understand the rhythm and flow of a line of poetry.

These elements combine to create the beautiful and unforgettable language that makes Shakespeare's plays and sonnets so enduring.

August 31, 2022

We are now ready to do our first read-through of the play after two days filled with dramaturgy, robust discussions regarding our production's characters and concept, and a review of the poetry behind Shakespeare's language. I am so glad that we had two nights of preparation before jumping into the text. I am a huge proponent of table work as I feel that it establishes a short hand for the cast and creative team. Table work gets everyone who is working on a production on the "same page" from day one.

While reading the murderer's scene for the first time, Ryan Sturgis, the actor playing Murderer 1, and I were already getting some positive reactions from our director and castmates via audible laughter. The scene between Murderer 1, Murderer 2, and Clarence requires a fair amount of listening and comedic precision. Sturgis and I need to really function as one unit. During our spring 2021 semester evaluations, one of my professors remarked that, in terms of my acting work, I am not always deeply and specifically listening to my scene partner. Thus, over the course of this process, I want to really focus on improving my onstage moment-to-moment connections and responses.

Although Murderer 1 and 2 share different viewpoints (Murderer 2 is much more sheepish and nervous at the beginning of the scene, for example), they are very much a team. They finish each other's sentences and move with a sense of synchronicity. They seem to share a long history. I think it would be fair to state that, aside from the time that they spend together as murderers for hire, Murderer 1 and 2 are friends. Our scene will be richer and deeper if the relationship between the two murderers has some gravitas to it. We want this scene to be more than slapstick. The stakes should feel incredibly high.

Luckily, Sturgis and I have a strong opponent to play off of: William Hoeltzle, who has been cast as Clarence, our victim. Hoeltzle is not a theatre major. However, he is a strong actor with an innocence, vulnerability, and earnestness that will make his onstage execution truly heartbreaking and scary. I am really excited for the three of us to start putting this scene “on its feet.”

September 6, 2022

Following last week’s table work sessions, as well as our three-day weekend, we are now beginning to block the play. In terms of setting the due dates for her casts’ to be off-book, Hamilton also has a very specific policy: She requests that all of her actors be completely off-book by the second week of rehearsals. Obviously, during staging rehearsals, we need to hold our scripts in order to write down our blocking. However, although the deadline for requesting that actors be off-book during a given rehearsal process varies vastly from director to director, I am very much in agreement with Hamilton’s policies. In previous productions, I have had directors who, when it comes to setting deadlines for being off-book, are quite casual. Frankly, I feel as though the work eventually suffers in these situations.

There is no question that memorizing lines is an unpleasant process. It requires a tremendous amount of focus and diligence. It is also time consuming and, in my opinion, boring. And, for some actors, it can be very difficult for them to learn their lines. However, as actors, we really cannot begin to fully create, explore, and play until our lines are completely memorized. It can also be a little bit harder to memorize lines

without having been given your character's blocking beforehand. This is because the synthesis of dialogue and movement often makes for easier memorization. Thus, setting a standard, early deadline, for the entire company, regardless of how large or small their respective roles are, rigorously mobilizes all of the actors to work their hardest from the minute that they are cast in the production.

Since the memorization deadline has passed, after writing down the blocking given to us by Hamilton, we are now running our scenes off-book. This also makes for a much more expedite rehearsal process because, in terms of establishing and pursuing our character's objectives and tactics, we can start making immediate headway.

After spending some time with Hamilton's unique requirements for line memorization, I am definitely now a "believer." As actors, we are truly treading water until we have learned our lines. And, in my opinion, there is no question that memorizing lines (particularly Shakespeare) is an arduous process. However, it is an essential part of any rehearsal and production process. In fact, it is the most unavoidable element of our art form. With some very rare exceptions, if you cannot completely and accurately memorize lines of dialogue, you cannot be an actor. And, until all of the actors' lines are 100% memorized, it is pretty much impossible for a production to achieve formidable growth in the rehearsal room (unless the play is being performed with the actors actually holding their scripts during the performance). Through every line of dialogue, we must be able to pursue a clear action, while coinciding our dialogue with whatever movement or blocking that we have been given by the director. Again, Hamilton and I are of the belief

that this level of detail cannot truly take place until a cast's lines have been fully memorized.

September 9, 2022

During this evening's rehearsal, we began to really bring the murderers' scene to life. This scene has moments of contemplation, freneticism, humor, banter, terror, freneticism, and jubilation. It is not a particularly long scene. However, we are already starting to realize that the many aforementioned qualities that this scene possesses are going to make it an exercise in focus and specificity. Thankfully and unsurprisingly, this scene is incredibly well-written. The essence and spirit of our characters are quite evident via Shakespeare's dialogue. I am also really enjoying my onstage interactions with Ryan Sturgis, my fellow murderer. I want to make it clear that I do not think that two actors need to be good friends, offstage, in order to convey a sense of onstage familiarity and amiability. However, in this case, the congeniality between Sturgis and myself that exists outside of the murderers' scene seems to only enhance our onstage comradery and chemistry. Compared to myself and my undergraduate colleagues, Sturgis and I are closer in age. We are both film aficionados, singers, and have spent time living in New York City for extended periods of time. Thus, we share a level of commonality that has not always been the case in other MSU productions that I have appeared in.

Sturgis is a wonderful actor who has more experience playing these types of roles than I do. I have never played a villain or murderer. Most of the roles that I have previously played are characters with pure intentions and open hearts. Sturgis is a

masterful character actor. He is able to manipulate his facial expressions and voice in order to embody a character's specific persona. Thus, pretty much through osmosis, Sturgis is helping me to access qualities and mannerisms that I have not previously employed in my acting work.

This section of the rehearsal period has been heavily focused on balancing Ratcliffe's threateningness, while also maintaining the comfort levels of my fellow actors. When it came to Ratcliffe, my initial instincts were to make him as uninhibited, imposing, reckless, nasty, sadistic, and visceral as possible. However, I neglected to consider that I am not the only actor in this company with thoughts, feelings, and boundaries. Prior to MSU, my previous training and experiences heavily stressed that the theatrical, emotional, and dramatical effectiveness of any given production element should be the primary consideration. The comfortability of the actor, particularly when it comes to physical contact, has not been the primary concern. This is not to say that my previous experiences in the theatre have completely negated an actor's willingness and comfortability with onstage physical contact. An actor's safety has (usually) been taken very seriously. However, storytelling, boldness, daringness, and bravery have always been the priority. And I have previously appeared in musicals that include an incredible amount of physical contact and sexual situations including *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Hair*, and *Cabaret*. In those instances, in terms of physical contact, the actors did what needed to be done in order for the story to be told in the clearest, most provocative, most alluring, and most effective way. We understood that, in order to depict a play's erotic or carnal moments, we had to be vulnerable and uninhibited. However, the casts of these

aforementioned shows were made up entirely of professional actors. Thus, over the past three years, my mindset and approach to onstage physical contact has had to significantly shift.

September 26, 2022

We are slowly approaching a new phase of the rehearsal process: moving from the rehearsal studio to the Andreas Theatre, our department's black box space, where we will ultimately be performing our play. In the meantime, as it relates to my work in the show, we have been focusing quite a bit of our time on perfecting the final battle (the aforementioned Battle of Bosworth Field) and finding our way through the complexity that is Sir Richard Ratcliffe. Both are significant undertakings. Every member of this play's company appears in the final battle and this is my first-time performing stage combat maneuvers in a production. Due to a previous injury, I did not take the required stage combat course at MSU. However, I am excited for this, albeit brief, introduction to the craft. In previous rehearsals, David McCarl, our department's stage combat instructor, has led the cast through some basic combat exercises. Hamilton has incorporated the motions that McCarl taught us into a larger battle scene (which will essentially serve as the conclusion of the play) that is quite intricate and elaborate. Since real swords are involved, Hamilton is, rightfully so, extremely concerned about safety. Thus, her approach to staging and rehearsing this sequence is quite methodical. Additionally, since the battle takes place all over the set (which is still currently being constructed), we are not sure if or how this rough sketch will successfully function once we have access to that

structure. There are a lot of unknowns. However, Hamilton is ensuring that, for everyone's safety, regardless of how the battle will need to shift or evolve in future rehearsals, we are still being meticulous every time that we run the sequence. I am actually learning quite a bit from Hamilton regarding the best practices for directing such a large battle sequence, with actors of various skill levels within stage combat.

October 10, 2022

We are now beginning a new phase of our production process for *Richard III*: tech week. Thankfully, Steven Smith, our incredible lighting designer, has a very non-invasive approach when it comes to “teching” a show. For the most part, he allows the cast and crew to continue working and running the show uninterrupted. Thus, tech weeks at MSU do not feel quite as restricted, methodical, and slow as I am used to them being. Typically, due to the limited nature of the technical process, we would need to have the show already perfected so that we are able to “hurry up and wait” while the designers set and run the lights and sound cues. However, because Smith is so flexible and experienced, he is able to pretty much work around us and our rehearsal needs at that moment.

I also want to mention our incredible set which has been designed by John Paul. Paul is a faculty member at MSU and his scenic design on this show has resulted in one of the best sets that I have ever seen or worked on. This looming structure is primarily made up of wooden scaffolding and features several ladders and staircases for the cast to utilize and explore. It also evokes a gothic sensibility which fits the tone of our

production extremely well. It is also multileveled, allowing for the cast to make our entrances and exits in unexpected places throughout the Andreas. Throughout Paul's set, our scenes can be played in a multitude of spaces that can serve as an endless amount of this play's locations. Additionally, this configuration of the space makes the Andreas Theatre, our department's black box space, appear to be much larger and expansive.

I do not always consider a production's set to be an element that influences the construction of my character and the extension of my moment-to-moment work. However, in this case, Paul has designed a structure that truly inhabits the unnerving, intimidating, and chilling spirit of our *Richard III*, while also giving us a literal playground to explore. There is something about this set, with its looming scaffolding, hard lines, and dark ambiance, that is really influencing my development of Ratcliffe. As Ratcliffe, much of the murders that I commit take place on the set's second level. At the end of the first act, in order to display the severed heads of Rivers and Grey on their masts, I also climb to the very top of the set. Ratcliffe, in a way that is dissimilar to Murderer 2, fully commands this space. He can easily finagle his way in and out of the set's nooks and crannies. Ratcliffe really is, as his name implies, like a "rat." In an earlier conversation between Hamilton and myself, she also emphasized the "rat" imagery: Ratcliffe collects and exhibits the heads of his victims in the same way that a rat might hoard food and garbage.

October 22, 2022

I am so excited to write that we have officially opened our production of *Richard III*, and we are performing the play for a live audience nightly. I am extremely curious to hear thoughts and feedback, regarding both my work and the production as a whole, from my colleagues. This is a unique production that really feels like a psychological thriller. There are directorial, design, casting, and acting choices (including my own) that really take some risks. However, not in a way that is dissimilar from the last Shakespeare play that I appeared in at MSU, *The Tempest*, we embrace all of our conceptual choices wholeheartedly. MSU's production of *The Tempest* made some equally big choices, particularly in terms of design and staging. I love that Shakespeare's writing allows for such creativity. His plays can successfully live in a multitude of visual and conceptual worlds. The actors and creatives can put their own artistic "stamp" on any of his plays and, because the original material is so strong, the language and themes are still apparent.

In the days leading up to opening, Hamilton and I were still refining my portrayal of Ratcliffe. As I have mentioned in other sections of this thesis, we did not want Ratcliffe's presence to distract from the leading characters and primary plot points. However, thematically and atmospherically, Ratcliffe is crucial in establishing the play's tone. Thus, we really have had to find the perfect balance. Once we were in the space, particularly in terms of volume, it took some us some time to really establish a "happy medium" between Ratcliffe pulling focus and keeping him scary. Although I do think that we did eventually find the right temperature for this, it was not easy. This whole process, for me, has been about making big choices and then adjusting them according to their

effectiveness and appropriateness. Some of these choices have worked, some of them have not. However, all of these choices gave Hamilton and I a lot of information regarding what will, storytelling-wise, be the most effective and compelling. We also had to make sure that Richard's prominence and the comfortability of my fellow actors were at the forefront of our minds. This really has been a meticulous operation, with quite a bit of finessing and tweaking. But I am so thrilled with how the final product turned out! I think that, in the end, we really found the "best of both worlds."

CHAPTER IV

POST-PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

My participation in Minnesota State University, Mankato's production of *Richard III* has resulted in significant discoveries and realizations regarding my abilities and processes as a theatrical storyteller. The past several months have been challenging, invigorating, and exhausting. Prior to starting rehearsals for this project, I was a little bit confused and skeptical as to how my characters functioned thematically and dramatically within both the larger story arc of *Richard III* and how these roles would influence my own growth and development as a theatre artist. I am well aware that, regardless of the size or stage time, all roles in a given play should be subject to the same exhaustive and thorough analysis that our graduate level projects at Minnesota State Mankato require. However, being that this play and role were my MFA thesis project, I was truly hoping to be cast in a part that stretched my acting and artistry in a multitude of ways. Frankly, in a moment of naivete, I was not sure, initially, that Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 were going to do that. However, as I look back on this production's journey, I can confidently state that these roles challenged me far beyond what I expected and were, thus far, some of the most demanding of my career. I can attribute part of that to Hamilton's extremely detailed, generous, and exacting direction. She was extremely trusting as a director, giving her actors the room to explore and play. But she also did not let us off the hook when it came to making detailed, specific, vibrant, and intelligent acting choices that were supported by the text and that served the production as a whole. Hamilton really pushed us to deepen and refine our performances right up until opening night.

Additionally, my two roles in *Richard III* significantly stretched my acting skills both physically and vocally. Hamilton, as a way to enhance our scene's physical comedy, wanted Murderer 2 to carry himself and move in a very different way than Murderer 1, my onstage counterpart. This would allow the two characters to feel like the opposite sides of the same coin. Although there is always room for further exploration and specificity, I do think we were fairly successful in achieving this comedic dichotomy.

Visually, physically, and vocally, Sir Richard Ratcliffe obviously needed to appear completely different from Murderer 2 so that the audience did not incorrectly assume that I was portraying the same character for the entirety of the play. However, I did receive the feedback from my Acting for Everyone (a nonmajor's theatre course that I teach as part of my graduate assistantship) students that, after viewing the production, they were under the impression that Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe were the same character. They did attribute some of this to the lack of variety when it came to my costuming. David McCarl, our costumer designer, had all of us wear black pants and button-down shirts as our base costume layer and, for the most part, some of us swapped out vests, capes, and caps in order to differentiate character. When it came to the costume design for this production, there was a minimalist aesthetic that combined modern and period apparel. The clothing was also primarily all black. I liked the designs a lot and I thought that it was an effective and unique design landscape. It also worked well with Hamilton's larger vision for the visual world of this production, along with the incredibly unnerving set that our resident scenic designer John Paul designed. However, again, I did receive feedback from my students that the lack of extreme variety between the costumes sort of

impeded their ability to distinguish characters that were played by the same actor (of which there were several in this production). Most of my students definitely did not pick up on the fact that I played two different characters throughout the play. Audience members who were more versed in Shakespeare and potentially more familiar with the play itself did not seem to have as much trouble with this.

Both Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 are very weapon-centric characters. Ratcliffe, in particular, is so reliant on and compounded with his sword that they are almost the same entity. Murderer 2, when it comes to the use of his weapon, is clumsier and more fearful than Ratcliffe. Ratcliffe relishes and delights in constant presence of his sword. His sword is, quite frankly, his best friend. Ratcliffe is also haughtier, more cavalier, more contemptuous, and more precise than Murderer 2. Thus, all of these elements had to be reflected in the ways that Ratcliffe moved about the stage. My early career and training in the theatre involved quite a bit of dancing. Thus, I do consider myself to be an actor that has an awareness and engagement with my body. Additionally, being that I am a singer, I am constantly surveying the connection between my voice and body. However, I do not consider the process of creating a character based around a specific physicality to be one of my strengths. Vladimir Rovinsky, a theatre faculty member in our department, is a proponent and pedagogue of physical acting and is often asking his students to begin their character-building process by examining the potential physicalities of a given character. For whatever reason, this has never been a method that ignites my imagination. I am much more interested in investigating the given circumstances of a character and what their goals, obstacles, tactics, and expectations are. Essentially, I am much more of a

textual and language-based actor. However, when it came to creating Murderer 2 and Ratcliffe, the physical life and movement of these two characters had to be paramount.

Verbally, Ratcliffe is actually a fairly quiet character. Thus, it was just as important (if not more so) that Ratcliffe's menacing presence needed to be primarily realized and reflected through the way that I physically embodied him. His use of language and vocal qualities were obviously important as well. But Hamilton and I wanted Ratcliffe to be scary. And it almost goes without saying that someone can be absolutely terrifying just by the way that they move their body, without uttering a single word. Some of cinema's greatest killers and monsters are perfect examples of this: Michael Meyers, Jason Voorhees, Frankenstein's monster, and more. They silently move in such a way (often with their weapon in hand) that evokes an extremely visceral and unnerving reaction from the viewer. We also wanted Ratcliffe's mannerisms to be demure and restrained. Hannibal Lecter was another literary and film character that myself and Hamilton often referenced during our character discussions. One of the reasons that Anthony Hopkins' iconic portrayal of Lecter was so successful and terrifying was the calm, confident, and sly demeanor that Hopkins employs throughout the film.

Another character from popular culture that I heavily drew upon for inspiration for the creation of Ratcliffe was the Joker, a villain often featured in DC's line of Batman comics who has also been portrayed in countless film and television adaptations. The Joker is known for the way that he delights in all that is chaotic and evil. I also heavily patterned Ratcliffe's laugh, physical demeanor, and voice off of Mark Hamill's various iterations of the Joker from *Batman: The Animated Series*.

Additionally, Ratcliffe's blocking, spacing, and physical proximity to other actors onstage was a huge navigation for me. My previous training as an actor had only minor regard for the comfort level of my fellow actors. Prior to MSU, whatever dramatic choice seemed to resonate more vibrantly, whether it be a staging element, a production's visual concept, or the portrayal of a character, was usually paramount. However, rightfully so, support, training, and awareness for theatrical intimacy training has become a critical component of a production's process (particularly in, but not limited to, higher education). I am a bit apologetic and regretful to admit that I never considered theatrical intimacy to be an important part of my work as actor. I held this notion because I am not typically cast in roles that require the actor to be involved in what we traditionally view as "intimacy," such as kissing, cuddling, embracing, and more. I did not realize how far and wide the scope of the protocols for theatrical intimacy extends, as well as how much it actually impacts me as a theatre artist. Thus, during the rehearsal process for *Richard III*, I encountered some hurdles regarding my physical proximity, spatial relationship, and physical contact with other actors onstage. Movement, gestures, and touch that seemed benign to me and that, in my opinion, only furthered the play's story and atmosphere, were not welcomed by some of my fellow actors due to their previous trauma. Hamilton and I had several meetings where we discussed best practices for Ratcliffe's physical life and blocking. I initially had trouble with how I could still effectively embody Ratcliffe's creepiness, sadism, and perverseness without being in extremely close proximity to and without touching his victims. I think part of this can be attributed to how I initially viewed Ratcliffe's interactions and executions through the lens of various horror films,

such as *Interview with a Vampire*. In the film adaptation of Anne Rice's novel, the vampires literally salivate over their victims' dead bodies. Rice's cohort of vampires explicitly lust for the sensualism and fetishization that physical contact with their victim can provide. And I still stand behind my initial inclination that Ratcliffe does fetishize violence. He receives physical and emotional pleasure from killing other people that is quite similar to a sexual experience. However, throughout this process, I learned that much of what is accomplished on-camera, via claustrophobic closeups and tight shots, can actually be done just as effectively onstage with quite a bit of distance, physically, between the performers. Honestly, I am not sure what I can really attribute this to. However, this entire situation was an extremely valuable lesson. I realized that I need to significantly educate myself more on the landscape that is theatrical intimacy training, as it is far more all-encompassing than I had previously assumed. Instead of prioritizing the intensity and tension of a theatrical moment, I need to prioritize the respect of personal boundaries.

Throughout the rehearsal process for this play, Hamilton and I also discovered that Ratcliffe finds the act of killing to be absolutely hysterically funny. We worked meticulously on crafting Ratcliffe's laugh so that it was atmospherically effective without stealing focus. At the end of the day, Ratcliffe is definitely a supporting character in *Richard III*. Thus, Hamilton and I worked very hard toward finding a balance between Ratcliffe's vibrancy and attention-grabbing moments, while making sure that I was not pulling focus from the play's primary storyline and leading characters. Ultimately, I really do think that we were successful in finding that balance. However, it definitely

took some navigating! I would actually describe this entire production process, particularly the character-building, as extremely focused, detailed, and meticulous. I can attribute this partially to the fact that we had a slightly longer rehearsal period than is often allowed for mainstage productions at Minnesota State Mankato. Thus, our overall moment-to-moment work, character-building, dramaturgical research, and textual analysis was able to be more rigorous and comprehensive than I have experienced in some other productions here. Hamilton and I really had to work as a team to hone and craft the two characters that I was portraying. In previous productions at MSU, the interpretation, vocal quality, and physical life of my character was obvious from the very beginning of rehearsals. However, this particular production required a tremendous amount of trial and error. Thankfully, I had Hamilton's keen eye on the other side of the table. She was able to astutely and honestly point out what acting choices were working versus which choices were not serving the piece's overall framework as effectively.

Ultimately, this process was just as much about supporting the character of Richard as it was about creating fully realized versions of Ratcliffe and Murderer 2. This show really did feel like an ensemble piece in many ways and every character, no matter how few speeches or stage time they had, felt specific, vital, and unique. This production's journey was a great example of how roles that might appear minor on the page still require an intense level of analysis, creativity, scholarship, and craftsmanship.

I do feel that I successfully balanced an integral element of the inner life of both Ratcliffe and Murderer 2: horror and comedy. Film scholars often state that the horror and comedy genres are closely related and share more commonalities than they do

contrarities. Ratcliffe and Murderer 2 are good examples of how these two elements, fear and humor, can be equally present in a single character.

Chapter V

Process Development

As I conclude my final year in the MFA Theatre Arts program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, I am taken aback by my growth as both an artist and scholar. My three years in this program have truly impacted my artistic and academic growth. However, it is the personal interactions and friendships from my time in Mankato that will ultimately remain in my mind and heart for years to come. And, in a way, this sentiment goes hand in hand with my future as a theatre artist and educator. Theatre is the ultimate collaborative art form as it draws upon every artistic discipline and, during my time in this program, I have fallen in love with interdisciplinary collaboration.

Camaraderie and team work are essential to the success of any theatrical project. During my time at MSU, I have learned to communicate more effectively and kindly. I have also learned how to lead and educate young artists in ways that support and validate them, while also holding them to a scholarly and professional standard that they can be proud of when the work is finished. At MSU, I really learned how to set achievable standards and goals for myself and others. I realized that going the extra mile or putting in the extra effort on a given project might seem overwhelming in the moment. However, the sense of satisfaction and validation for a job well done is much more rewarding in the end. I also came to the difficult conclusion that not every artist or student values or upholds the same standards and artistic aesthetic that I do. However, I did have two artistic, interdisciplinary collaborations that cemented my passion for cultivating new theatrical pieces.

This journey started with a project that was assigned during Julie Kerr-Berry's Dance Composition course where each member of our class was paired with an experimental filmmaker from MSU's art department. The goal being that each pair would work together to create a short film that highlighted original dance composition. I cast the dancers and choreographed the movement for the dancers to execute on-camera. I also scouted our shooting location. My partner from the art department acquired the camera equipment, shot the short film, and edited the footage. We were both really pleased with the final product and I found the experience to be very enriching. It also reminded me that sharing responsibilities during an artistic process can make for a more enjoyable endeavor because the work does not all fall on one person. I am so used to handling many of my project's logistical elements myself. During this assignment, I realized that having good, reliable collaborators can both even out the workload which makes for both a smoother process and a more compelling final product. I do not have to always feel like I need to do everything on my own.

This past semester, in addition to appearing in *Richard III*, I worked on a project that seemed to truly encompass and draw upon everything that I learned over the course of this program: I wrote and directed our department's annual children's musical. As an actor, I have appeared in many productions that were geared toward children and families. Thus, I am very familiar with the genre's unique requirements and style. However, this was my first time really writing a theatrical script that was more than a few pages. Thankfully, my composer for this project, Cadence Smith, is one of the finest new writers of musical theatre that I have heard in recent years and her contributions to the

project were immeasurable. She musically composed complete magic out of the vague outline and ideas that I presented her with.

In the same way that that it was very fortuitous that I started and ended my graduate career working on Shakespeare plays (more on that later), the process of creating this year's children's production (which we titled *Not All Heroes Wear Capes*) really connected so many of my educational experiences over the past three years. I began the graduate program at Minnesota State Mankato while our country was in the deep trenches of the COVID-19 pandemic. We wore masks for pretty much all of our classroom activities for the majority of my first two years of graduate school. During this time, our country was often celebrating the work of first responders and essential workers, such as nurses and doctors, who were forced to face the pandemic in order to treat those that had become critically ill from the virus. This recognition of our society's unsung heroes partially inspired my writing of *Not All Heroes Wear Capes*. Additionally, during my time working on children's theatre in the professional world, I have assumed the position that theatre for young audiences needs to be creatively approached from the same narrative and storytelling standards that are used to develop theatre for adults. Children know when they are being talked down to and when they are being presented with entertainment that wears a patina of youthfulness without actually exploring meaningful subjects. I wanted to construct a piece of children's theatre that had a level of maturity to it. Thus, the primary plot point of *Not All Heroes Wear Capes* is that the leading character, Rory, is dealing with the recent death of her father.

As I inferred earlier in this chapter, I also came to MSU wanting to collaborate

across disciplines more than I had previously in my undergraduate and professional career. The process of crafting and directing a new musical is maybe the ultimate interdisciplinary undertaking as all mediums are involved: movement/dance, visual art (sets and costumes), acting, and music. Again, I really came away from this experience realizing that the interdisciplinary, artistic process of conceiving theatre is my calling.

This program also really helped me form and shape both my academic and artistic voices. I solidified, in all areas, what my preferences are as an educator, director, writer, and actor. I now know what my preferred approach to the work is, as well as how that approach informs the way that I educate young artists, prepare for a role, or direct a play. Over the past three years, I learned that my voice matters and that my thoughts and opinions hold power. I have also learned to trust myself.

However, I also came to this program with a very specific career goals in mind: to eventually teach and direct theatre in higher education. I can confidently state that, over the past three years, I was exceptionally well-prepared for this vocational objective. I also tapped into some other artistic and personal achievements that I was not expecting. My confidence as a performer has grown exponentially, primarily due to having played four roles in our department's mainstage series that truly exercised my technical skills as an actor: Gonzalo in *The Tempest*, Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, Max Detweiler in *The Sound of Music*, and Ratcliffe/Murderer 2 in *Richard III*. These four roles each tapped into my unique and varied sensibilities as a performer, while also being vastly different creative processes. I feel much more confident as a teacher and director knowing that I can, personally, be vulnerable onstage and accomplish all of the same

performance qualities that I am asking my students or cast members to execute.

Fittingly, I also began and concluded my journey as an actor Minnesota State Mankato in two (extremely different) Shakespeare plays. This was not planned. However, this synchronicity of events has affirmed for me that classical text should always be a part of my artistic repertoire, portfolio, and life. Gonzalo and Ratcliffe are two Shakespearean roles that could not sit on further sides on the aisle from each other. My intended interpretation of Gonzalo was to characterize him as wise, venerable, honorable, hopeful, kind, and benevolent. From the very beginning of *Richard III*'s process, I really wanted my portrayal of Ratcliffe to be a vehicle for what an exploration of unabandoned evil and violence can look like in a person. The dichotomy between these two figures, Gonzalo and Ratcliffe, only reenforces how emotionally, thematically, and motivationally diverse Shakespeare's characters can be. This spectrum also illustrates how varied my stage work has been over the past three years.

I can also state, with some caveats, that my time as a performer is probably slowly coming to an end. As an actor, I appeared in a total of five productions at MSU and, in the summer of 2022, I performed at The Great American Melodrama, a professional theatre company on the central coast of California. However, my teaching and directorial work constantly seemed to feed my soul in more satisfying ways. But I am not officially retiring from acting just yet. In fact, I still have many dream roles that I would like to play and I do not foresee acting ever completely vacating my life. As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, I always want to be able to accomplish and execute the very same skills that I am training my students or directing my actors to perfect. However, for the time being,

my days of summer stock, road gigs, self-tapes, and pounding the pavement with my headshot, resume, and repertoire book in hand, are probably coming to an end. I am incredibly thankful for the decade that I spent doing those things as my primary way of making a living because that lived experience will only help me better prepare my students for the professional world. As I continue my professional development during my academic career, I will definitely be seeking out performance opportunities for the summer months and I hope to always continue my theatrical casting and talent management work on a freelance basis. However, I can confidently state that I am, at least for now, shifting my career persona from “professional actor” to “professional educator and director.”

Although my time onstage has been extremely valuable in honing my craft as an actor, I have found my time in the classroom, both as a student and educator, to be where I have grown the most as an artist at Minnesota State Mankato. Additionally, there have been several theatre-related classes, particularly the scholarly and academically oriented ones, that surprised me by how much they resonated and connected with me. Hamilton primarily teaches most of our department’s theory, criticism, and research courses. During my undergraduate education, I had little interest in courses that were not primarily focused on singing, dancing, or acting. And my undergraduate GPA reflected this level of disinterest! However, Hamilton introduced me to the power and beauty that can come from engaging in the historical and theoretical conversation with our artform over time and across cultures. She always challenged my graduate cohort to utilize empirical research techniques that allow for thoughtful, contemporary, and individualized analysis

that uniquely contributes to our field's larger research and scholarship on a given subject. Throughout her courses, my confidence as a theatre theorist, researcher, scholar, and writer grew tremendously. Of my entire graduate career, her Theatre Research class was definitely my favorite course. Through Hamilton, I fell in love with the larger exchange of ideas that exists beyond performing and directing. She also establishes a classroom atmosphere where students feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and viewpoints in respectful and intellectual ways. As both a director and acting teacher, Hamilton also has the uncanny and innate ability to determine the best methodology for executing a precise theatrical moment onstage. She inherently knows how to help actors navigate roadblocks and expose the humanity in theatrical texts of literally all genres. I implicitly trust any feedback that she gives me on my performance work. She is also one of my first mentors and colleagues that I call upon whenever I am struggling with how to effectively execute or further specify a storytelling moment, whether spoken or sung. However, I am most struck by her compassion and empathy for her students. She truly cares about the artistic, academic, and personal growth of her students. Hamilton is one of our fiercest advocates.

Matthew Caron was the very first professor that I met, in-person, upon arriving at this institution. Due to logistical and timing reasons, prior to enrollment, I was not able to visit Minnesota State Mankato. However, any concerns that I might have had about personal, professional, or artistic compatibility with the faculty were quickly assuaged after meeting Caron. We speak a similar artistic language and share a droll, sarcastic sense of humor. I was also fortunate to be directed by Caron in two productions that were seminal events in my artistic development, *The Tempest* and *The Sound of Music*.

Caron's production processes as a director are always so smooth, calm, creative, joyful, and collaborative. He knows how to perfectly balance the rigor and discipline that our field requires with comradery, humor, and kinship. The latter qualities are not always present in an artistic process. However, Caron's extremely successful body of work as both a director and educator are highly reflective of this. I will deeply cherish the two experiences that I had being directed by him as they were truly some of the fondest productions of my career.

One of my most memorable experiences as an actor was under the directorial hand of Vladimir Rovinsky. Rovinsky joined our department's faculty the same year that I began my MFA candidacy, which will always connect us. I also appeared as Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, the very first production that Rovinsky directed at Minnesota State Mankato. Due to the fact that I wanted to continue the development of my classical acting skills, I was particularly eager to work with Rovinsky on this particular production and the experience did not disappoint. Rovinsky and Hamilton have very similar directorial styles in that they both set high (and achievable) expectations for their actors from the very beginning of their production processes. Until the very end of the rehearsal period, Rovinsky mines and refines every last detail of his shows. As a director, his level of rigor and scrutiny will stay with me forever.

Additionally, as a student, I took several courses from Rovinsky. Most notably, Rovinsky offered a special topics course on Devised Theatre in the fall of 2021. Prior to enrolling in this course, I did have some experience with this theatrical genre and I have always loved the freedom, collaboration, and inventiveness that the Devised Theatre form

can provide. As I am extremely passionate about creating stage work that is ensemble-based, community-minded, and relevant to the turmoil our modern society is facing, Devised Theatre can be an incredibly useful theatrical tool, device, and form for both commenting on and drawing upon the political, social, economic, public health, and public safety issues that our country has encountered over the past several years. My directorial work reflects a constant and unwavering exploration of the human condition and my time spent in Rovinsky's Devised Theatre course only reenforced this sentiment for me.

I also want to mention the knowledge that I obtained from the courses that I took in the dance department under Daniel Stark and Julie Kerr-Berry. This program really allowed for me to delve into dance from the critical, theoretical, and compositional perspectives. I came to graduate school with several topics that I wanted to research over my three years. One of them resided specifically within the dance area: the juxtaposition of modern and contemporary dance with the musical theatre artform. It is my belief that musical theatre can find more artistic and commercial success when producers and members of the creative teams embrace and employ experimental, avant-garde choreographers from the concert dance world who possess minimal experience or knowledge regarding the musical theatre genre. Thus, the compositional, somatic, and history classes that I took within the dance department were extremely helpful in furthering this research.

Finally, I wanted to express some sincere gratitude for Professor Nicholas Wayne, my advisor for this degree program. Being that my concentration within this degree

program is musical theatre, I spent quite a bit of time in the rehearsal studio and classroom with Wayne. Wayne has overseen my journey and growth as both a performer and, more importantly (in some ways), as an educator. He has extended and availed himself on my behalf, both personally and professionally, on countless occasions. Wayne has shown me, by example, how to be a top tier musical theatre artist and educator. His breadth of practical and historical musical theatre knowledge is unparalleled, as is his passion for the synthesis of music and theatrical storytelling. As my academic advisor, Wayne guided me through all aspects of this program. Knowing that I ultimately dreamed of a career in higher education, he advocated for my involvement in specific, non-performance related opportunities that ranged from student recruitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion training. He even drove me three hours, in the middle of the winter, from Iowa to Minnesota, so that I could attend an emergency Orthopedist appointment. Wayne allowed me the freedom to unabashedly express my own thoughts, philosophies, and inclinations about the musical theatre artform (and other topics) so that I could hone my pedagogical, artistic, academic, and directorial voice. When it comes to expressing my viewpoints and formulating my pedagogical approaches, Wayne helped me to become immeasurably more confident. However, most importantly, Wayne taught me how to “not sweat the small stuff.” He also taught me kindness.

As I enter the next phase of my career as a theatre professor in the high education sector, I am incredibly grateful for my time in the graduate program at Minnesota State University Mankato. As an actor and director, I have been able to develop and hone my artistic process. My verbal and written communication skills have also grown

tremendously. I feel confident in my ability to teach and mentor the next generation of theatre artists, in the same way that I was in both my undergraduate students at Temple University and my graduate studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato. I attribute much of this to our wonderful faculty who, even after three years, I wish I could spend more time being taught by.

APPENDIX A

PRODUCTION PHOTOS



Ratcliffe proudly displays Lord Hastings' severed head.



Ratcliffe, along with two of Richard's guards, lusts for the physical, psychological, and emotional pleasure that he will receive from inflicting pain on Lord Hastings.



Ratcliffe brandishes his sword, ready for his next victim.



Murderer 1 and Murderer 2 drown Clarence in a barrel of wine.

APPENDIX B

PROGRAM BIOGRAPHY

RJ Magee (Murderer 2, Ratcliff) is a third year MFA Musical Theatre candidate whose previous Minnesota State Mankato credits include “Max Detweiler” in *The Sound of Music*, the “Boatswain” in *H.M.S. Pinafore*, “Mrs. Jennings” in *Sense and Sensibility*, and “Gonzolo” in *The Tempest*. He has appeared in professional productions across the country at regional theaters including Arizona Broadway Theatre, Roxy Regional Theatre, Top Hat Productions, Pines Dinner Theatre, Broadway Palm Theatre, Dollywood Entertainment, Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, and more. In addition to his career as a performer, he is both the owner/founder of RJ Magee Casting and a Theatre Associate for Baker Entertainment in New York City. He has served as an entertainment industry adviser to market research and management consulting firms EY-Parthenon and Third Bridge. Additionally, he has taught and/or directed at the Wyoming Seminary Performing Arts Institute, Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School and Camp, Actors Launchpad, Actors Connection, North Texas Performing Arts Academy, Weber State University, Texas State University, and more. He is a proud member of the Musical Theatre Educators’ Alliance. RJ is a graduate of Temple University and Interlochen Arts Academy.

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