

The Grand Balcony; The reflection of a corrupt world.
Directing *The Balcony* by Jean Genet

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Abstract

In directing Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, I consider Genet's voice, especially how it manifests in his novels *The Thief's Journal* and *Our Lady of The Flowers*. I look at the ways his desire to connect to the audience by breaking traditional barriers between artist and patron manifests in *The Balcony*. In my consideration of directing the play, I examine the importance of good, thoughtful leadership, referring most significantly to Simon Sinek's *Leaders Eat Last*, and eventually to The Harvard Business Review's *Dealing with Difficult People*. I consider how the current President of the United States of America and his campaign manager share qualities with the characters in Genet's play; they care more about possessing a title than considering the actions and responsibilities that come along with that same power position. Most significantly, I examine my own process as a director and leader, and the important learning that comes with struggle.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction	1
The worship of institution and glorification of power.	
The importance of leadership.	
Directing <i>The Balcony</i> .	
Leadership	4
Creating a positive working culture.	
Brain chemistry and positive feelings.	
Companies that succeed and companies that fail.	
Directing <i>The Balcony</i>	10
Katie Mitchel and Stanislavsky.	
A personal challenge.	
Revolution!	14
The French Revolution	
The Yellow Vest Movement	
A Radical Shift	18
Casting The Brothel Girls as Revolutionaries	
#MeToo	
Genet, The Balcony, The Tyrant, and the Forth Wall	20
Jean Genet: <i>The Thief's Journal</i> , <i>Our Lady of The Flowers</i>	
Sartre's understanding of Genet.	
Donald Trump: A corrupt leader.	
Journal of Creative Process	27
Epilogue	39
Works Cited	47

The Grand Balcony; The reflection of a corrupt world

“My life has been lived so that a glorious page may be written, and then read. It’s the reading that counts.” (Genet, *The Balcony* 92) With these words spoken, Roger, a revolutionary leader, castrates himself while dressed as the Chief of Police, in one of The Grand Balcony’s newest scenarios, created for the clientele to act out power fantasies. After losing the revolution and the woman he loves, Roger has infiltrated the brothel and performs his own castration to tear down the image of the power mad Chief of Police.

The Balcony, written by Jean Genet and translated by Barbra Wright and Terry Hands, is a play about the worship of institution and the glorification of power. Set in a moment of social and political disruption, the majority of the action takes place within the walls of Madam Irma’s brothel, The Grand Balcony, which she calls her “House of Illusions”. (Genet 28) There, people come to act out their fantasies; donning the costumes and attitudes of the power positions they hold most dear. Outside the brothel a bloody revolution rages in the streets, orchestrated in part by the Chief of Police, who seeks to be glorified by the people by having his image represented in one of Madam Irma’s studios. As the revolution encroaches on The Grand Balcony, they are visited by the Queen’s Envoy, who seizes the moment when The Royal Palace is blown up, appointing Irma as the new Queen. In her first move as Sovereign, Queen Irma enshrines the clients who have come to the brothel to play the Judge, the General and the Bishop, in their roles, and in doing so makes a terrifying statement: that appearance is more important than function.

This drive for power and glory at any cost is antithetical to the purpose of leadership and institutions; which exist to serve people. And yet, this is a familiar story. The current ‘leader of

the free world', an ironic title for a tyrant, Donald Trump, personifies this idea in our time and place. In writing his name into this paper it is not lost on me that I give him what he seems to desire most: that is, his name reverberating throughout time; just like the Chief of Police in Genet's *The Balcony*.

Although Genet could not have known how perfectly his characters would be represented in our society, he did have a drive to speak to the masses; to communicate and to mirror the absurdity of the world he saw, or perhaps simply to present to the public the nature of corruption. In three of his works, *The Balcony*, *The Thief's Journal*, and *Our Lady of The Flowers*, Genet works to tear down the barrier between artist and patron, breaking storytelling conventions to insert his voice directly into the action, to speak one-on-one with the public about his own oppression in a world that worships a title above its function. In communicating in this way, in representing himself as truthfully as he can through his words, he holds up a mirror to society, and what we see in that mirror is not a pretty picture.

When leadership is corrupt, when leaders lose the understanding of the function of their roles, the people they are meant to serve revolt. The French Revolution is a remarkable example of this.

What started as a gathering to assist the King in dealing with financial matters exploded into a full-blown revolution, with people marching in the streets, demanding their voices be heard, storming institutions, and eventually beheading the very King who called the original meeting for assistance. They effectively tore down feudalism and the aristocracy and a new era was born in France. (Davidson 1-2)

Today the Yellow Vest Movement in France, inspired by "rising fuel prices, growing income inequities and much more" (Friedman), and the world-wide #MeToo

movement, through which survivors of harassment and abuse (especially women) have begun to speak up, shattering the silence they were confined to for so many years, both demonstrate the revolutionary tendencies of people. When leaders cease to serve the public, the public take to the streets to make their voices heard. In *The Balcony*, the Envoy warns the corrupt Chief of Police that the revolutionaries “have tremendous power over the people. (Because) They want to save them.” (Genet, *The Balcony* 61)

It would be hypocritical for me to write about leadership in this way without examining its nature, and without striving to be the kind of leader who does not ignore the needs of the people I am meant to lead. To be the director of a play, there are many things one needs to do in order to prepare. Katie Mitchel walks the aspiring director through several steps, from preparation to staging, in her book *The Directors Craft, A Handbook for the Theatre*. In this text she considers the entire process from reading the play one hopes to direct for the first time, to deciphering its message. She writes about how to begin the work of staging, how to conduct rehearsals, and how to give notes to actors before opening night. It is my intention to use her text as a guide in my preparation and the execution of my rehearsal plan. In her introduction, Mitchel says “Most of the tools described in this book come from Konstantin Stanislavsky’s teachings”. (Mitchel 2) I will also draw upon my experience using the teachings of Stanislavsky, for an understanding of Mitchel’s source material, and to pay homage to the reverence Mitchel gives to the man’s work. For this I will draw on my own notes and experience being led through Stanislavsky’s System during a production of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov.

It is not only the step-by-step actions of creating the world, the characters, and the message a play seeks to deliver, that a director need consider when moving into a rehearsal process. The behavior of a leader effectively (or ineffectively) sets up and maintains the culture

of a room. It is of the utmost importance in getting good work out of people, inspiring trust, and ultimately gathering everyone together to work toward the common goal. In this case, that goal is bringing Jean Genet's *The Balcony* from the page to the stage.

Leadership

“People will respond to the environment in which they operate. It is the leaders who decide what kind of environment they want to build.” (Sinek 132) Leaders set the tone for a working environment. They create and maintain the culture in which their team operates. Good leadership is a key component in creating positive, productive working cultures. Leaders have the power to make or break a team. Good leaders have vision, integrity, and the ability to inspire individual members of the team they lead to do their part in moving the whole toward the vision. When the leadership is weak, aggressive, or self-serving, it can foster a culture of competition, fear, and individualism. If a leader is doing their job, they create a culture of sharing and comradery which helps steer their team toward success. (Sinek, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32)

The Balcony has multiple scenes with sex-workers. The actors who play these parts will be costumed in lingerie and performing simulated foreplay and simulated sexual acts. This kind of performance can be stressful. People are prone to shut down emotionally, causing them to telegraph their discomfort to the audience. It is my desire to build a culture for *The Balcony* where people feel supported, autonomous, and safe; to inspire loyalty and drive in each member of the team and to eliminate unnecessary competition and stress, which does not serve the creativity of individuals or the group at large.

Positive cultures are ones where people feel as though they understand their roles clearly, where people are empowered to act in the best interests of the group and the task. They feel they

are able to admit to mistakes, or to be wrong, or to let go of ideas in service of ones that may move the group closer to the goal. Good leaders create atmospheres where people are not afraid that one misstep, or mistake will lead to being shamed, ridiculed, or cut from the team entirely. This is not simply the result of hiring or casting complimentary personalities, although that is not to be overlooked. It is a direct result of the culture in which the group operates. This culture is built and maintained by the leadership. (Sinek 57-65)

A person will behave in the best interests of the group if they believe they as an individual are being included and considered alongside the team. The chemicals produced by the brain can either alert a person to danger or support the idea that they are safe. Serotonin and Oxytocin play a key role in the health of a culture. (Sinek, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52)

Serotonin is the feeling of pride. It is the feeling we get when we perceive that others like or respect us. It makes us feel strong and confident... As social animals, we more than want the approval of those in our tribe, we need it... Whether we are a boss or a coach or a parent, serotonin is working to encourage us to serve those for whom we are directly responsible. (Sinek 47-48)

Oxytocin is...the feeling of friendship, love or deep trust. It is the feeling we get when we're in the company of our close friends or trusted colleagues... oxytocin is long lasting. The more time we spend with someone, the more we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable around them. (Sinek 49-50)

To create an atmosphere where Serotonin and Oxytocin are flowing is an important aspect of leadership, not only for the team they are leading but for the leaders themselves. When people feel strong and confident, liked and respected, they are less likely to participate in

behaviours that could harm the culture. They are more likely to be loyal to the group, because they feel respected and are getting what they need from the environment. They are in a cycle where positivity and reinforcement of neighbourly, collaborative behaviour satisfies the members of the team and the leader and creates in them a desire to help one-another. (Sinek, 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51, 52)

How does a leader create this kind of atmosphere? Sinek expresses a need for integrity, which encourages trust. When we trust that a leader has the best interests of the group at heart, we are more likely to follow them. It may be natural to want to hide mistakes or a lack of knowledge, in order to not appear wrong or be considered incapable of doing a job. Being a good leader requires us to let go of this ego-centric way of thinking: “Integrity is not about being honest when we agree with each other; it is also about being honest when we disagree or, even more important, when we make mistakes or missteps”. (Sinek 151) We are much more likely to follow someone who is willing to admit to mistakes because when we do so, we are able to problem solve in the moment, and the issues do not get out of hand. This also sets an example for how the team is supposed to behave. If a leader is willing to admit to a mistake, a culture of hiding, which can lead to trouble down the road, is replaced with one of sharing, where the best idea wins.

Creating a culture where people are each other’s allies rather than each other’s competition is also key in ensuring a healthy atmosphere. In a healthy, sharing atmosphere, the work produced is superior. 3M is the scientific company responsible for the creation of the Post-It-Note. Scientist Spencer Silver, in trying to develop a strong adhesive, accidentally made a very weak one. Because of the culture of sharing among employees, he sent out his accidental findings to the other members of his company. Another scientist at the company, Art Fry, then

made use of this weak adhesive by creating a bookmark that could stick to the pages of his sheet music without ripping it (Sinek 134) The conclusion I draw from this story is that these employees were not hiding mistakes out of fear of the repercussions for failure or holding onto their findings out of a fear that someone might take their idea or leave them behind. Society now enjoys the use of the Post-It-Note, which we may not have if Silver chose not to share his findings with his coworkers.

Alternatively, negative working environments create fear and encourage people to think only of themselves and their own survival. They are unable to help facilitate progress in the group long-term, because they feel they have to watch their own backs, fight to keep their positions, and compete with the other members of their team. They do not trust their leadership to hold space for the team or for them as individuals. “As social animals, we feel stress when we feel unsupported”. (Sinek 56) This feeling comes from a natural instinct to protect ourselves from danger. Cortisol is the chemical responsible for this feeling (Sinek, 54, 55, 56)

Cortisol is designed to alert us to possible danger and prepare us to take extra measures to protect ourselves... it is also behind the feelings of anxiety, discomfort or stress we have at work. Cortisol increases aggression, suppresses our sex drive and generally leaves us feeling stressed out. (Sinek 54-56)

In our contemporary society, we often find ourselves in highly competitive environments. It is not the norm to feel supported and therefore capable of our best work. Stanley O’Neal became the chairman and CEO of Merrill Lynch in 2002. The company, at the time, was known for being a positive working environment, whose leader periodically ate lunch with the employees. When O’Neal joined the team and rose to power, things changed (Sinek 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140.)

O'Neal wanted to do away with (the company's) employee-centric culture... viewing it as soft and unfocused... With no interest in fostering any particular healthy corporate culture, the business was all about competition... This was a culture in which people completed intensely against each other...(O'Neal) had no interest in fraternizing with his people...It wouldn't take long for O'Neal to completely isolate himself...allowing the culture of Merrill to be almost entirely driven by the...dread and paranoia of cortisol... In October 2007, the company announced it had lost 2.2 billion... O'Neal left Merrill Lynch in disgrace. (Sinek138-139)

The culture of fear and competition O'Neal created led to the loss of billions of dollars as well as his own demise. This kind of leadership, which supports abstraction and denies community, while attractive in our world of individualism, only leads to destruction, mistrust, and failure.

These three chemicals, naturally produced by the body as a response to positive and negative stimulus, are essential for our survival as individuals and as a species. (Sinek, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67.) Therefore, a leader needs to create an atmosphere where behavior encourages the release of Serotonin and Oxytocin and eliminates the unnecessary production of Cortisol. The stimuli for Cortisol come from being threatened or from a perception of being threatened. A good leader should create an environment where people do not feel threatened and competitive but feel the leader, the team, and themselves can work toward a common goal with support from one-another.

When people are forced into competition with one-another and when their livelihood depends upon winning that competition, they become separate from the people who could otherwise be considered to be their team-mates. Individual performance becomes more important

than collective performance. The distance between the leadership and the team, and each individual team members, grows. This distance creates a lack of comradery and encourages abstraction. In extreme cases, this distance can create a serious lack of empathy. “The more abstract people become, the more capable we are of doing them harm...Anything that separates us from the impact our words and actions have on other people has the potential to lead us down a dangerous path”. (Sinek 101-103) The less we know people personally, the more abstract they become to us. The more abstract they become to us, the less we care about them, and the more our self-interest becomes our main priority. This self-interest is counter intuitive and does not lead, as we have seen, to positive and thriving work environments but to negative and difficult ones, where Cortisol reigns.

It is my hope to create a positive working culture for *The Balcony*. From Sinek’s findings, I conclude the following: in order to create a positive working environment, I must first have a clear vision. This will come from being well-prepared, knowing the script thoroughly and having a clear idea of where I want it to go and what the ultimate outcome is. I will then be able to share this vision with the team I am working with. This vision must still leave room for others to contribute their ideas and strengths to the culture. I cannot be so attached to my own ideas that I do not hear the ideas of the others. I cannot be so separate from the team that they become abstract to me. There are many paths to take to get to the realization of a vision, and I must create an atmosphere of sharing, by rewarding the team and the individual members of it with encouragement and support. One way of doing this is to reinforce the notion that every idea, even if it is not used, helps to define and shape the world we are working to create. A “no” does not mean “bad”, it simply means, “this is not a part of the world we are creating”. When a team member contributes an idea to the building of the world, if the idea does not work, it simply

helps to clarify the world we are building. To know what a world is not is as important as to know what it is.

I must avoid creating an atmosphere of fear and competition and encourage people to share their ideas with each other, and to be supportive of one-another. I will achieve this atmosphere by playing games that will help the group become a team that knows and understands one another. I will encourage the vocalization of concerns, confusion, and the sharing of ideas. This invitation will allow us to both get to know one another and how we work, and also to bring up mistakes or concerns which, if unnoticed or unheard, may contribute to a culture of fear and misunderstanding, and ultimately may steer us away from the vision I have for the play. In the first days of rehearsal, I will make a list of what I think it is each individual member needs from me, the leader, in order to feel supported and included in the work, and I will endeavour to provide for these needs.

It is my belief that these steps will help to foster an environment where people feel good about the culture, the team, and their own work. I believe this will help create work which is ultimately more creative, dynamic, efficient and effective.

Directing *The Balcony*

Katie Mitchel's text, *The Directors Craft; A Handbook for the Theatre*, lays out the step-by-step process of directing a written play. On the very first page of her book, she writes about the two opposing opinions people have about directing methodology. "Some think that directing is an inherent talent that can only evolve on the rehearsal room floor during making shows." (Mitchell 1) This first quote resonates with me because it is what I have done for so many years: I have relied on vision and talent. The second methodology "...that the craft of directing, like

acting, can only benefit from a preliminary training period” (Mitchel 1), is what I have been working on for the past two years.

I trained as an actor and have mainly worked professionally as a performer, but I was always drawn to directing. Sporadically, I would direct an indie production. At first these plays were devised by the group I was working with. Later I moved on to directing with a playwright in the room, where the team could do anything to the script and ask for rewrites that would come in the next day. My method was focused and driven, but lofty; I strung together moments and images I was artistically excited about but was never one-hundred percent certain of the concrete reason for anything. I was always unprepared to answer any questions that might have to do with research or methodology. I would answer any questions asked by stating that I had a *vision*; I had a *sense* of how things should be said and how things should appear. I relied heavily on the trust of the actors I was working with and that trust was assumed. As I began to direct on a larger scale, communicating with designers and producers, and considering concrete ideas and finances, became a necessity. I began working with more professional actors who had their own training and ways of working, so having a method that could inspire trust and provoke interesting and productive dialogue was now paramount. This was especially apparent in working with male actors and producers. Being socialised as a woman has put me in the awkward position of being disliked if I know what I want and considered a fool if I do not. It became especially important for me to back up my work not only with vision, but with concrete concepts and justification for the things I ask for artistically. In spending two years at York University, during which I have been accountable to hundreds of students on stage and in the classroom, I have started to understand the meticulous planning that good directors do to prepare themselves and the room they are inviting other artists into, even from the first reading of the play.

When reading a text you want to direct, you will often find that your heartbeat increases and your body temperature rises. It is a feeling akin to falling in love. You may feel excited and, as a result, you will not always read the text very carefully or slowly.

Instead, your eye slides and skids over the words, every now and then concentrating on a section you particularly like. "I'll sort that out later" you say to yourself. If you were to direct the play on the basis of the early readings, the performance would reflect your unsteady excitement and be uneven (Mitchell 3)

When I first read *The Balcony*, I was astonished by how horrible and beautiful Genet's characters were; so close to their own shame and their own glory; naked in it, wrapped in it... subservient to it and catastrophically desperate for it. It reminded me of myself and of everyone I've ever met. I fell in love with it, much in the same way Katie Mitchel expresses above. I fell in love with my idea of it, with the things that were already apparent to me, with the things that already reinforced my understanding of the world. "It is important to read the text carefully and slowly in order to check that you are actually reading all its scenes and not just a few of them". (Mitchell 3). She also expresses the need to read several times, to look for specific things each time; making lists of facts about the play, things that the playwright has written in and are clues about the truth of the world, then researching the things on the list that need attention, including researching the playwright, and any clues that might be present to help unpack what they were trying to say, and why.

"For Stanislavski...the great Russian actor, director and reformer of the theatre... theatre was an institution of cultural and moral education". (Moore 2) It is with this sentiment that I bring the work of Stanislavski into play when directing Genet's work. It is clear that Genet had a

great deal of social and political thought to express through his work and although Stanislavski and Genet were very different men, they share this desire for cultural and moral examination.

“Create your own method” Stanislavski said, “Don’t depend slavishly on mine. Make something up that will work for you! But keep breaking traditions, I beg you.” ... Stanislavski did not want the method to be an end in itself, but simply a means to an end. It suggests a way, a path to follow in finding personal truth in the creation of a character. (Moore xvi)

It is in this spirit that I hope to use some of Stanislavski’s teachings to move the actors toward development of their characters. I do not intend to follow Stanislavski’s method to the letter. I intend to take some of the tools he worked with and to create a system of my own for this particular production, giving the actors a base to work from, which they are likely already familiar with from their own studies.

“An Action cannot be accidental or superfluous”. (Moore 56) The ultimate goal of a play is for it to be seen and digested. It lives when an audience comes to witness it. The audience has nothing to go on but what they see, what they hear and what they feel as a result. Therefore, an actor must be led to be precise in their performance and what they do onstage. The audience will read into everything they see, they will interpret what is being put in front of them. It is always the hope that what they take away is what was intended by the artists so that the meaning, the message can be digested. Specificity of intention is key. I will consistently question the actors about their actions, what they are doing and why they are doing it, and what they hope to get out of it. When an actor understands why their character behaves the way they do, they can begin representing the individual they are portraying. This representation, if done well, is like a puzzle-piece that fits perfectly with the others, to create an image. They create something extra that an

audience can detect in a performer, which makes them watchable, relatable and therefore, a transmitter of information.

Revolution!

In 1788, King Louis the 16th, who was to be the last King of France before the establishment of The First Republic, invited the political body, the *Estates General* to convene and help him sort out the financial crisis the Kingdom was facing and bring issues from individual towns and bodies to the attention of the leadership. This group represented “all the people of France”. (Davidson 9) Expressed at this meeting through representatives, was “shock at the financial deficit and showed general distrust of the King’s arbitrary authority in managing the public finances”. (Davidson 11) This meeting was to be the inadvertent beginning of The French Revolution. The *Estates General* vowed to look into helping solve the financial crisis only after a Constitution had been written and approved. This Constitution “would limit the powers of the King and create a system of national representation with the right to authorise taxation and make laws”. (Davidson 12) The population was feeling the effects of extraneous and unfair taxation as well as a lack of sustenance. The needs of the people were not being dealt with by the people in charge.

“On June 17...the Deputies of the *tiers etat* (third estate) ...declared that since they represented 98% of the nation, they now constituted an *Assemblée nationale*. Almost immediately this National Assembly claimed that it had the sovereign authority to take all decisions on taxation and declared that it placed ‘the creditors of the state under the protection of the honour and the loyalty of the French nation.’...They were taking the responsibility for the solvency of the state away from the King”. (Davidson 18)

With this move, the people of France took control of the fate of France and began to wander down the long and bloody road away from Feudalism and Aristocracy. This road was one of violence, and a shift in political ideology (Norwich, 2, 3, 4, 5.)

For a few years, the Revolutionary Bourgeoisie ran the revolution with a fair amount of order, but the majority of the French people were willing to support the revolution because of the dire circumstances in which they lived their lives (Davidson, 10, 11, 12.) Things did not remain orderly. The French people, the majority of whom lived in poverty, began to revolt.

The Bastille, a state prison “(loomed) darkly over the center of Paris ... a constant reminder of the power and majesty of the king”. (Norwich 195) It was invaded by and fell to an angry mob made up of French people, who decapitated the Governor Marquis de Launay and “paraded (his head) around Paris on a pike”. (Norwich 195) The Royal family, who lived in Versailles, were forced to come to Paris. After an attempt to escape this fate, they were imprisoned and eventually put to death. (Davidson, 95, 96, 97)

What followed these events were years of back and forth between different political bodies and the people of France, the establishment of The Declaration of the Rights of Man, and a sequence of Constitutions. (Davidson, 161, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166) Confusion and mystery still shroud the events of the Revolution. “The Revolutionaries succeeded in pushing over the ancient regime, but they did not succeed in setting up a durable alternative system of government, even in theory”. (Davidson 244) Feudalism and the Monarchy were over, but unemployment and a lack of food continued to plague the French people. Ultimately, Davidson expresses that the initial reason for the Revolution was the lack of understanding between the leadership of the country, and the people it was meant to govern.

...the most profound political reason for the Revolution was that the King and his predecessors had, over many decades, repeatedly adopted policies which alienated those who might have helped him solve his problems, including, crucially both the nobility and the bourgeoisie... (Davidson 2)

The French Revolution began and continued due to a continuous stream of leaders who did not fully understand the needs of the people, and who did not act in the best interests of the majority, despite whatever good intentions they may have had. In his Epilogue Davidson concludes that the Revolutionaries themselves “set off a tsunami of internecine political and social conflict which took at least a hundred years to calm down...” (Davidson 245)

The current Yellow Vest Movement in France begs the question, did things ever really calm down? The Yellow Vest Movement is so called because its supporters don a bright yellow vest associated with the working class. This highly visible garment has become a symbol of outrage for the thousands of protesters showing up to revolt against the politicians who do not seem to have their best interests at heart, especially the current President of France, Emmanuel Macron. (Friedman) “The majority of French people...say they support The Yellow Vest Movement” (Nossiter) which started in response to rising fuel prices but quickly moved to the larger issues of a public that does not feel they are being served by their politicians. “General assemblies organized on a weekly basis in every corner of France continued to attract people who for years had stood on the sidelines of political life.” (Stetler) It seems that even people who are not normally political are in support of this movement, which seeks to be governed by people who are willing to serve the function of their role.

One protester said, “We really want to assert our choices, and not the choices of the politicians who do not live up to them.” (Nossiter.)

The movement has attracted both peaceful and non-peaceful protesters. As the protests became aggressive, police have pushed back against the forceful Yellow Vest's. One protester expresses that "The police have become the symbol of the government's refusal to negotiate." (Peltier. *'Yellow Vest' Protest Fuels Anger.*) Grenades and rubber pellets have been used by the police as a deterrent for the more violent protests. Last year the movement saw over a quarter of a million people coming out to protest. Numbers are dwindling but a violent assembly took to the streets of Paris again on Saturday March 16th. The organizers expressed that "... (we) wanted the day to serve as an "ultimatum" to "the government and the powerful." (Peltier. *'Yellow Vest' Protest Dwindles in Week 18.*) The question remains: is it possible in the current climate of our world, given the nature of power, for us to have leaders who are seeking to serve the people, and not simply trying to keep their power?

When we first see the revolutionaries of Genet's fictional world, their leader Roger says "The people mustn't amuse themselves, and they mustn't play. From now on they've got to be in dead earnest". (Genet 53) He has a fervent belief in the cause of the Revolution, and a desire to remain stoic and serious about the events which are about to unfold; to remain focused on the cause. When the Royal Palace is blown up, the revolutionaries are elated. They speak of tearing down and undressing the old leaders, who they have been fighting against. In the next moment, they speak of replacing those figures with themselves and Chantal (the embodiment of the revolution and a former sex-worker in Madam Irma's brothel). It is here that Roger begins to lose his faith and to realize that his own love for Chantal blinds him to the needs of the revolution. That the rebuilding of society will mean the rebuilding of institutions and power positions. As Chantal leaves him to sing for the people and thus ascend into glory, a defeated Roger expresses this growing realization, "The fight has left reality...Nobody, neither side, we

none of us remember the reasons for our revolution any more”. (Genet, *The Balcony* 73) It is here that he makes a choice that will doom him to counter his own revolution. He goes to The Grand Balcony to play the part of The Chief of Police; The Hero. He goes with the intention of destroying the image the officer has built up for himself and concludes that “...everything has been destroyed. Truth wasn’t possible...” (Genet, *The Balcony* 92) By going to enact his revenge on the Chief of Police, he ends up giving the officer exactly what he wanted: to have his role become so important that a person will want to play his part in Madam Irma’s House of Illusions. And so, the same question I ask about France and the current Yellow Vest Movement can be asked of the world of *The Balcony*: is it possible in the current climate, given the nature of power, for there to be leaders who are seeking to serve the people, and not simply trying to keep their power, or oppose someone else’s?

A Radical Shift

In interpreting and casting *The Balcony*, I have made a choice to cast the same actors who play the sex workers in Madam Irma’s Grand Balcony as revolutionaries. It is my desire to demonstrate, through adding a silent show at the top of the production, that these people are one and the same. This is a dramatic shift for the play, giving identity, and therefore more power to these women, and bringing the revolution closer to Madam Irma’s House of Illusions. This choice comes out of a reaction to the current climate as I see it, especially the #MeToo movement. Women are demanding control of our lives and over our bodies, taking to the streets to march for our rights, demanding equal pay for equal work, and refusing the notion that we are second class citizens by birth.

“On Friday, October 11th, 1991, the meaning of being a woman was changed forever. Oklahoma law professor Anita Hill’s testimony about sexual harassment set in motion a train of events that (brought about) ...unprecedented female political activism.” (Woolf xiiv) In speaking up about sexual harassment in the workplace of American Politics, Hill highlighted the different ways men and women see the cultures of their workplaces and their own behavior, forever changing the landscape of politics. The social order was permanently disrupted. More than twenty years later, another damn broke in the fight for gender equality. “The #MeToo movement is accomplishing what sexual harassment law to date has not”, writes Catherine A. MacKinnon in an opinion piece published by The New York Times. (*#MeToo Has Done What The Law Could Not*) Coined in 2006 by Tarana Burke, “me too” has become a way for women worldwide to express that they too have been victims of sexual harassment and abuse (Johnson, Hawbaker)“Burke’s idea was simple: that if she herself shared her story, then others might follow, and ultimately, men might begin to understand how pervasive sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape are, and how shame has served as a silencer of women.” (Rhar) This is exactly what happened. Women took to social media platforms, wrote articles, made podcasts and filed lawsuits; we broke our silence and stopped protecting the people who had been hurting us. The flood of information was staggering (Hawbaker, Johnson)

It is not my desire to vilify sex workers, or to say that their work is not valid. I believe the way these particular women are used in *The Balcony*; to facilitate the counter-revolution, and maintain the status quo, denies them autonomy. They are a device Genet uses, a tool for the clients of Madam Irma’s brothel to use in their thirst to embody the world’s powerful elite. But women are not a tool. We are not a theatrical device. We are people. By casting the same

women in the roles of the brothel girls and the revolutionaries, I deny the use of these women as a means to an end.

Genet, *The Balcony*, *The Tyrant*, and the fourth wall.

“Genet holds the mirror up to us: we must look at it and see ourselves”. (Sartre 644)

Jean Genet was born in 1910 to Gabrielle Genet, who abandoned him (*Jean Genet: French Writer*.) He grew up in the French countryside, cared for by a family of peasants. After getting caught stealing, Genet spent his youth in a reform school. The psychology of his position as an orphan, and then a thief, which he later shared with Jean-Paul Sartre, brought him to the feeling of otherness at a young age, and the title ‘thief’ would follow him for the rest of his life (Sartre, 575.) Genet continued a life of crime, as a sex-worker and vagabond (*Jean Genet: French Writer*) After deserting the French Foreign Legion, Genet continued a life of crime until he was imprisoned. There, within the confines of a cell, he began to write poetry and eventually novels. (Gussow)

Genet would have faced life in prison if it were not for a group of artists who protested on his behalf. (*Jean Genet: French Writer*) After leaving prison, he continued to write novels, poetry and plays. Genet passed away in Paris in 1986. In his obituary, he was referred to as “an actor in the play of his life, putting on masks, rearranging facts to suit his purpose and clouding himself in mystique.” And “An outlaw in art and life.” (Gussow) It is clear from these descriptions that the man was an inspiring and fascinating stranger to this world.

Sartre wrote *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*: a six-hundred-forty-four-page volume which is at once a biography of Jean Genet and also a jumping off point for a philosophical discussion on otherness, as well as objective and subjective realities. In the novel/ biography, Sartre outlines

a portion of Genet's life and then goes on to explain, at length, how it relates to the psychology of the human condition. Almost incomprehensible in its density, the book paints a dramatic and mysterious picture of Genet.

“‘The idea of a literary career would make me shrug.’ When he (Genet) writes these words, he has already had two plays performed and has published a volume of poems and four of his great books; he is completing the fifth and is preparing a film scenario; in short, it is the moment when people are beginning to talk about his work”. (Sartre 520)

This lack of desire to be what the world wants him to be, to ‘shrug’ off popular opinion, is an example of Genet's otherness. He is so deeply rooted in counter-culture, feels so separate from the rest of humanity, that the notion that he should please his audience or do what is expected of him, is met with ridicule. Sartre goes on to explain how Genet often abandons his work when he becomes bored with it and seems more concerned with the fire of inspiration than living a life according to the rules of civilization. “He has no particular desire to produce a ‘well-made work’; he is unconcerned with *finish*... when the criminal impulse is satisfied, he lets go, finishes off as quickly as possible, shuts up shop and returns to everyday life”. (Sartre 521)

Genet was incredibly specific about the performing of his plays: on *The Balcony*, he wrote: “It is - and must therefore be performed as - the glorification of the Image and the Reflection. Only then will its meaning...become apparent”. (Genet xiii)

Sartre writes about Genet's play *The Maids*, as an expression of the playwright's otherness. “...the maids are relative to everything and everyone; their being is defined by its absolute relativity. They are *others*”. (Sartre 660) Here Sartre expresses his own passion for understanding the psychology of Genet and his otherness. He goes on to explain how Genet expresses his otherness by mocking the very patrons who would come to see his work: “Every

evening five hundred Madams can sing out, ‘Yes, that’s what maids are like.’, without realizing they have created them...” (Sartre 660) Here we get another glimpse of the glib Genet. Here is some of the attitude coming through which gives clues on how to direct this piece, with a smiling disregard for those who seek to oppress, even Genet himself.

In Genet’s novel, *Our Lady of The Flowers*, we begin to see a hint of the humanity which haunts the author. We see the loneliness which accompanies the *other*. Genet wrote the novel in prison. Genet himself is the narrator of the book, which takes the reader through a gruesome story filled with murderers and pimps and depicts the mind of the writer isolated in his cell. Of his own humanity he writes, “...though I have never known what friendship could actually be, what vibrations the friendship of two men sets up in their hearts and perhaps, on their skin, in prison I sometimes long for a brotherly friendship...” (*Our Lady of The Flowers* 103) This solemn longing expresses a loneliness and a desire for friendship and love that the man would never obtain.

It is Genet’s loneliness in particular that I am interested in, his otherness and his shame in who he is. It is his psychology that drives his works and allows him a fascinating perspective on the state of the world. He uses his own disenfranchisement, and the otherness he feels because of it, as a device; to hold a mirror up to society, and to enact change.

As we quicken toward the end of *The Balcony*, the universe begins to crack. Questions begin to arise: Does Arthur, Irma’s right-hand, die? Does Chantal? Does Roger castrate himself? Or is it all a part of ‘the act’ for the Chief of Police’s power fantasy? Is the revolution itself a part of this fantasy, and if so, is it manifesting in reality, or is it an elaborate set up? In the final moments, Irma speaks directly to the audience, breaking the fourth wall entirely, telling the audience to go home, that “nothing there will be any more real than it is here” in the theatre.

(Genet, *The Balcony* 92) What is real and what is for show when, in the reality of the event (putting on *The Balcony* at York University), *everything* is for show?

This relationship between reality and illusion is of great importance to Genet, whose other works also demonstrate a desire to break out of the medium in which he is working and speak directly to his audience, in the same way Irma does in the final moments of *The Balcony*.

In *The Thief's Journal*, he interrupts his autobiographic story about his own wandering and thieving through Europe, to explain to his readership the difference between writing about his past sentiments and present ones:

If I attempt to recompose with words what my attitude was at the time, the reader will be no more taken than I. We know that our language is incapable of relaying even the pale reflection of those bygone foreign states. The same would be true of this entire Journal if it were to be the notation of what I was. I shall therefore make clear that it is meant to indicate what I am today, as I write it. It isn't a quest of time gone by, ...but a work of art whose pretext-subject is my former life. It will be a present fixed with the help of the past, and not vice -versa. Let the reader therefore understand that the facts were what I say they were, but the interpretation that I give them is what I am now. (*The Thief's Journal*, 63-64)

Genet has a need to be truthful and clear with those consuming his work; to break out of the story he is telling, about his crimes and the criminals he loves, in order to assure the reader that he knows his audience exists. He has a message and uses both storytelling and his own first-person experience to bring it home. This experience, like silenced women, like the public who does not feel represented by their leaders, is one of displacement and disassociation from society. Genet, who never felt welcome in this world, writes:

“My being a foundling entailed a lonely youth and childhood. Being a thief led me to believe in the singularity of thievery. I told myself that I was a monstrous exception. In fact, my taste and my activity as a thief were related to my homosexuality, emerged from what had already set me apart in an exceptional solitude...I wanted to oppose society, but it had already condemned me, punishing not so much the actual thief as the indomitable enemy whose lonely spirit it feared...If I cannot have the most brilliant destiny, I want the most wretched, not for the purpose of a sterile solitude, but in order to achieve something new...” (Genet 235-236)

Genet gives himself away entirely in this one passage; he speaks to the truth of his own life, to the deep shame imposed upon him by society, and through this he speaks to our time as well. Although there are many social revolutions going on in our world (#MeToo, The Yellow Vest movement), we still shame people for being who they are.

All tied up in this shaming and dismissal of human life and experience is the institutional worship in which we participate. In our society, it seems that we set up institutions: organizations, companies, universities, and individual power roles; and we see them as above us. We allow them to dictate our opinions and social orders instead of requiring them to serve us as we are. Nowhere is this clearer than in our political systems which are full of egomaniacs. People are put into power to serve their egos regardless of their abilities as leaders. Politician has become a dirty word. It has created for itself a dual meaning. ‘Politician’ means both a person who works in politics, and a person who speaks in double talk; confusing the constituents or telling them what they want to hear. Politicians terrorize society into complacency and into supporting the status quo. This results in mainstream society while leaving those who will not or cannot fit into a very narrow image of a model citizen, out in the cold. Nowhere is this clearer

than in the Trump Administration. When Donald Trump decided he would run for president, Steve Bannon, who would become his campaign manager, came to meet him. He and David Bossie, a republican investigator, raised the issue of Trump's stance on abortion. Bossie told Trump his political leanings and his support of people who were pro-choice would be an issue running for the Republican Party. Trump immediately switched his position (Woodward. 3.)

“You’ve got some problems on issues,” Bossie said. “I don’t have any problems on any issues,” Trump said, “What are you talking about?” ... “There’s never been a guy win a Republican primary that’s not pro-life,” Bossie said. “And unfortunately, you’re very pro-choice.” “What does that mean?” “You have a record of giving to the abortion guys, the pro-choice candidates. You’ve made statements. You’ve got to be pro-life, against abortion.” “I’m against abortion.” Trump said (in spite of his record of supporting pro-choice candidates and organizations) ... “Well, you’ve got a track record.” (Bossie said) “That can be fixed,” Trump said. “You just tell me how to fix that. I’m- what do you call it? Pro-life. I’m pro-life” (Woodward 3)

It was that easy. Trump wanted to win, and he was willing to do and say whatever it took to get there. He was willing to claim anything about his beliefs if it meant he was going to achieve the highest office in the United States of America. Once he got there, it became apparent that he didn't know what he was doing. He didn't know what his own job description was, let alone know who he had to hire to do what job in the Oval Office. His staff, recognizing that he had no understanding of the delicate nature of Foreign Affairs, immediately mistrusted him, taking official papers off his desk so that he could not sign them, in order to ensure the country did not end up in a war they were not intending to be in (Woodward xix.) In Trump I see *The Balcony's* Chief of Police, who seeks to have his position become one that people come to the

brothel to perform, just like the Bishop, the Judge and the General. The Chief of Police cries out “I shall force my image to penetrate your studios...to increase, to multiply!” (Genet, *The Balcony* 42) He is attempting to move toward immortality. He is killing revolutionaries and taking power to ensure his immortality, not to protect and serve the people. When the Envoy comes to the brothel the Chief of Police shows concern for the Queen, but not because he is sworn to protect her and the position she carries, rather because “it is in her image I am moving toward my own.” (Genet, *The Balcony* 60) The politics of the Trump campaign are also reflected in the Envoy. She comes to deliver a message, that the Royal Palace is dead, and the Queen is dead, and the Great Figures are dead, and Irma and The Chief of Police are going to take their place. I see Bannon, the campaign manager for Trump, in The Envoy. Here is a person who will recognize that someone is unstable, uninformed, and wrong for a job, and still whip them up into a frenzy and work toward putting them in power.

The world is a mess. Politicians are not leaders, they are power hungry tyrants bent on gaining and keeping power. *The Balcony* reflects the world I see but presenting this piece to the public is a hopeful act. The people of France took to the streets during the French Revolution, and they are doing it today through the Yellow Vest Movement. Survivors of assault are speaking up, using the hashtag #MeToo to draw attention to the crimes that have been going on in silence for too long. I hope to do my part by continuing to examine the nature of our society through art, by listening to the world around me and representing it on the stage, and by ensuring that I consider the importance of my position as a leader. It is through our understanding and acceptance of the faults of our world, that we will be able to move toward overcoming them. I see *The Balcony* as a powerful message to anyone who seeks to have their image reverberate throughout time without the burden of serving the function of their position.

Rehearsal Journals

Jan 29th, 2019 Rehearsal 1

Our first rehearsal went exactly according to plan. I decided to take a page out of Katie Mitchel's book and not begin with a table read/table work. Instead we got on our feet doing a significant physical warm up that included dancing, some basic strength training and stretching. Then we explored the fabric panels. We were not able to get six pieces of fabric hung from the ceiling today, we had two instead. We were still able to do the exploration of it that I had planned, which included some free time for each actor to play with it solo and in pairs, to develop a language and a facility with it, and to learn what it can do and how we can use it for story-telling. The lack of more panels didn't affect the exploration too much as it is preliminary days, but it does teach me that I will have to be clearer with Stage Management and the production team about the needs of the room as I did plan to do some blocking of the silent show off the top that was not possible with only two panels.

The undergraduate actors are very game to play, excited to explore the dynamic world we are creating. A couple of the more senior actors do not seem willing to explore in the same way and were not making offers or engaging much in the activity. I find myself in a strange position of wanting to be more demanding of them and recognizing that there is a dynamic that has something to do with age (they are older than me) and I can see this being something we bump up against. I am not sure how to navigate that yet.

We found some beautiful images and some ways to move the fabric to change the space. We played with flashlights and created silhouettes. From the very beginning when talking with Eleanor (the lighting designer) and Maddy (the set designer) about our finalized set, I have imagined a silent show at the top of the piece, with the brothel girls helping Chantal escape. We

set some pretty cool images for the top, where the women start as large shadows and become smaller, then peak out from behind the panels. It sent chills and was a true realization of an imagined image.

We did a first reading of the play after our play-time with the fabric. It is very different to be alone reading and unpacking the play and hearing it read out loud, especially with people like Corey, who is playing Irma, and doing her thesis on this show. The understanding of the play and the words in the room is already living in an advanced place but there is much to unpack and learn.

February 2nd, 2019

Today we staged the entrances and exits of the play, an exercise learned from Peter Hinton. It is an interesting way in. I learned a lot about the play and also about the actors. In terms of the play, this exercise has already helped to create clarity about the story, and about the state of being different people create in others simply by entering the playing space. By having the actors considering where they are coming from, and what energy they are entering with, I hope to bring them in these early days to an understanding of the violence of the world outside the brothel. I am still struggling to discover what all of the actors need. There seems to be an intimidation factor with the material due to its existential and absurd nature. While some people are fully on board and ready to be led and also to discover things together, others are presenting more of a challenge. It is surprising to be met with such considerable resistance from the senior actors in the room. There are a few who so far have not been on board with exercises we are doing, which in a 14-person cast makes it quite difficult when they are influencing the room. I feel I have provided a positive culture so far and have conveyed my intentions about how we are going to work and what we are moving toward, so I'm not currently certain about how to

proceed. I have just obtained a book called *Dealing with Difficult People* from the Harvard Business Review Press and plan to read it for some clues on how to deal with this kind of a situation.

February 8th

Today I had a chat with Gwentyth and Lindsay, my supervisor and the director of the other Rep show, Orlando. As an artist I often keep things to myself, I think that in large part this comes from a fear of being challenged, as being socialized as a woman has taught me that I am wrong more often than not (even or maybe especially when I am right.) Learning to let that go and trust myself and my instincts is a huge part of my growth as an artist. Speaking with Gwentyth and Lindsay about taking control of the room and about the power imbalance and lack of trust I am experiencing from some of the actors and discussing the legitimacy of the loneliness one feels as a director was very helpful. I do not think we came to any conclusions about what to actually DO, but the discussion helped to confirm that I am not just imagining things to be the way they are. In our meeting we also discussed the difficulties I am having with stage management and how much more work is on my shoulders because I am teaching him how to hold space. Because a significant portion of my focus has been on leadership, I am deeply focused on this, and am learning that I need to be able to communicate my thoughts and feelings without attaching to them or needing them to be permanent states of being- I need to give a lesson, and then give it time to sink in, and allow the person who is learning another chance to get it right, and in fact assume that they will get it right. That is difficult right now because the stakes are incredibly high for me in this process as are tensions. Having these conversations is never going to be easy; conflict resolution is never going to be easy, but if I am going to be a leader, than I need to become an expert at flagging potential issues, specifying what the behavior

is that needs changing, and having frank conversations with people, inviting them to change, and allowing them the space, and providing them with the encouragement to do so.

We blocked scenes one and two today. These scenes are very intimate and require a lot from the actors, both vulnerability-wise and in terms of those actors who are playing a part within a part.

We began by doing some simple mirroring exercises and by creating a check in/ check out between intimacy partners. They created a hug or a handshake and a way of speaking to each other before and after to ensure if anything is getting out of hand, they can have a chat and make sure to bring it back to what we set. We had a conversation about where and how each of the actors are comfortable being touched, and where they were not comfortable being touched, or how. I brought with me all of my ideas for how I wanted the scenes to be staged- I had very specific images I wanted to see and directions I wanted to go in with each scene. We went over the images without the text, blocking them much like one would do with choreography. We did this for both scenes, and I believe it was a no-stress way to become more comfortable with the material and each other while not moving into the deep end this early in the process. It is my hope that this way of working: sketching a general idea out, then filling it in with color, and then detailing that color, will help us move comfortably and consensually toward the more dangerous aspects of putting on a play this risky.

February 15th, 2019

This past week we have made great progress in the artistry and the movement in the play. We have now gotten to the point where we have blocked the entire play. Leaving table work behind has instilled a new confidence in me, as I am remembering that I have done a lot of work preparing for this, and that while I may not work the way people want me to work, or expect me

to work, my work is legitimate and the results of my work satisfying. I think in the future I should look at other ways people do table work. I have enjoyed Katie Mitchel's book and advice, especially considering not doing table work right away but getting people on their feet and moving- I found this very valuable, but I have not found my own method of research and table work that I can be as engaged in as I am in the physical work and the dynamic work of dealing with human relationships in a moment. The characters and their needs and wants are becoming more clear to me through the physical exploration.

One aspect of the play I have been considering deeply is the ending, where Irma comes out and speaks directly to the audience. I am starting to lean in a direction that breaks down the fourth wall. I believe that when Irma has her nightmare in Scene 4, the 4th wall should break- perhaps by having the material actually fly into the audience to break the wall.

In regard to leadership, the process continues to be difficult, although I am trying to take the advice of the people who wrote essays in *Dealing with Difficult People*, I am finding that there is only so much I can do. I am allowing myself to be brought down by the aggression of others and I must find a way to rise above this and continue on in the direction I have planned, despite the fact that I do not have all of the actors fully on board. I have been trying to find patience and understanding for our assistant director, who has been disrupting the process considerably by being late, having done no homework, insisting on extra support from me which I do not have to give, and laying on the floor during rehearsal looking at the ceiling or falling asleep. I am beginning to feel that I will have to ask her to leave this process if she does not choose to engage in the work. I have been thinking of this as a failure, but I think I need to change my thinking on that, and instead look at it as a necessity for the team, in order to grow

and be better. I have to learn that protecting the team is important. And that perhaps also that protecting myself is protecting the team.

We have now blocked the entire play now, with the exception of Scene 10, which is a very exciting place to be right now. It is a huge play- it is more than I have ever been responsible for and I am finding it to be a true challenge. I am having to remind myself consistently that this is SUPPOSED to be a challenge- that it is supposed to be difficult- did I want my thesis project to be easy? No.

February 23rd 2019

Today was our first day back after reading week. We have settled into the rhythm and many people have come prepared and off book. We got a lot accomplished today and began to shade in the broader strokes we have created for each scene. We began to develop an understanding for Irma's relationship with the Chief of Police. The actors who are playing these parts have worked together before, both have fight certification and were companions for their fight exams, so this is excellent considering the kind of intimacy and violence I hope to create in their scenes. I want to help Nelvin build a Chief of Police who both strong, threatening and unpredictable, and whiney, needy and melts like a puddle when no one else is around to see it. We also explored in depth the relationship between the Chief of Police, Irma and Arthur, the push and pull of hating people one loves. The many layers of these people, their relationships, what they want and what they do not want and what they can have and what they can't have and why is fascinating. We talked about their history, building a solid back-story for these characters and helping to answer some questions we all had about the nature of their relationship now. I think one could direct this play for months and still not unpack all of the layers of human relationships and the insecurities that come from them.

March 2nd, 2019

We completed our first run of the play today. Many of the elements worked very well. Clarity is key when it comes to a Genet play. The otherness that Genet feels and expresses through his writing can at times be alienating. I feel included, but I am also other and so there is an element to what this play is that I understand inherently. It is important for an audience to understand too. Why else would we make theatre, if not to connect with an audience, and bring them closer to understanding the dynamics of truth?

One thing that came out of today was that we need to be much clearer about when we are ‘in the game’ – in the roll playing, and when we are dropping out of it and back into character. We must heighten the roll playing aspect, bringing it out of realism and into a more melodramatic place.

The other thing that remains to be seen is the deaths in the end- as we explore the breaking down of the fourth wall, what does it mean for the deaths? If we are indeed breaking down the fourth wall to the extent I am currently imagining, we may need to see the actors who are ‘dying’ in the end, alive and well.

Now is also a time to go deeper into character work. Most people in the cast are familiar with Stanislavsky and his method, and they have all already been doing this back-story work that is so essential to creating relatable characters.

The Envoy’s character remains a bit of a mystery to me, but I have become more inspired by the breaking down of the fourth wall and I think there is something in her power in and out of the world of the play that will lend itself to a fuller understanding of this character for Rae (the actor playing The Envoy) and for myself.

I am currently lost in all of this right now. The reading of Genet's works puts one in a dark, existential mode of thinking. The resistance from some of the actors coupled with my inability to figure out what some of them want is creating a kind of tension in the room that is difficult to work around. I am trying to trust my own vision. To breathe and recognize that even people who are resisting need strong leadership, perhaps they need it more than anyone.

March 6th, 2019

Today we examined the intentions of the characters in depth which brought us closer to the truth of the piece. We talked about how the customers who patronize the brothel have a need to express themselves as they see themselves, in a way that they cannot achieve in their respective lives. We talked about how in the midst of a revolution, surrounded by chaos, people cling to what they know, to what they believe is their deepest truth.

Our fight/intimacy coach also came in today. Because it is so late in the process, we have already done the intimacy work of building trust, talking about what the actors are comfortable with and what they are not comfortable with. We have staged all the major fight and intimacy moments. It was great to have someone around to give the actors more permission to be intimate with each other, because I have been wanting to take the work into a riskier place, but it is hard to do when you are also the person constantly reminding them to respect each other. There is a power dynamic there too that is really helped by having someone who specializes in the work there to suggest turning up the volume.

As I work through this process, I am feeling that so much of a director's job is to manage people's fears and anxieties. This is an aspect of the work that I can pay more attention to- managing my own are one thing but I must manage others as well. I think having a game plan of

self-care in the future is going to be as important as having a clearly mapped out schedule of work.

May 8th, 2019

Today we did a paper tech. We talked through the show with the lighting designer and sound designer. This was a breath of fresh air. As we have been working together since August, we have a repour, and we are all on the same page about what the goal for this production is and where we are trying to lead it. They are very supportive of and excited about the ideas surrounding this play, and frankly, they are supportive of my ideas which is uplifting.

This paper-tech also brought me closer to my own understanding of the play and of the break-down of the world. Having Eleanor (the lighting designer) so on board with the break-down of the world and the forth wall is very exciting. Her ideas for light when the world is becoming less and less real and more and more theatrical, are rejuvenating and will support the work we have been doing well.

Next week we are on deck which will be a game changer. We are not working again until then, which means three days to think and ruminate on this play and how to bring people closer to the vision.

March 12th 2019 :First Day on Deck

The first day on deck was exciting and revealing. It was fun, as the actors really enjoy being in this space and playing to (an imaginary) house. It was an inspiring day. We worked with the fabric, which is significantly different after being fire-proofed and given how long it is (it is almost three times the length in some cases.) We worked the major movement sequences like the Nightmare and the Envoy's main scene. These are the places where the world breaks down most significantly, where 'magic' happens. Rae, who is playing The Envoy, brought in a magic trick,

which is something I had mentioned to her a while ago but had not had time to follow up on. It was really cool and exciting, and I am beginning to see *The Envoy* more plainly. We worked scenes 1 and 2 and they were challenging because it was not possible to do things in the way we hoped because the physical set is a tad different than imagined.

Tomorrow we will be working scenes 3, 4, 5 and 6- which is a lot to do. Scene 4 is essentially 1/3rd of the play, and scene 6 is such a major shift for everything. I recognize now that some clarity is needed in terms of when things break down, especially the forth wall, and why. I also hope to challenge the actors who are playing blood, sweat (sperm in the original) and tears to understand what they are saying a bit more, and to hit consonants with more clarity to help tell the story as it is happening. I am recognizing in myself that I have a significant and advanced understanding of imagery and that I can use more work when it comes to breaking down language and being sure that everyone understands what they are saying.

March 14th 2019

I had a hard day with Rae (the Envoy) today. She is confused about her roll and I have also been confused about how to take this character a step further- we are both trying to find a way closer to this person. I have been revisiting the book *Fear* by Bob Woodward about the trump administration which is an annoying and terrifying read. I have offered to Rae that she considers what it is like to be a political game-player. I have been thinking a lot of Trump's campaign manager, and how this person knowingly went in to this situation and helped Trump get elected despite the mounting evidence that Trump is a power-hungry misogynist.

This conflict with Rae- which was not really a conflict but was more us not seeing eye to eye or being able to meet each other half way because we are both involved in solving the same problem... it has brought me closer to the truth, which is that I believe the Envoy should cue the

major deaths, and perhaps even start in the lobby with the audience, and also that she should have a mirror as well as the brothel girls, so that she can reflect light out into the audience, continuing the breakdown of the fourth wall. She needs to have more power than anyone else, recognize everything that is happening, and perhaps even sit in the audience throughout the entire show.

These realizations have come out of conflict. This leads me to a new understanding of leadership and has taught me many things and one important thing about this show- that bumping up against people in an artistic process is part of the process... that resolution comes from conflict. That conflict in fact exists for a reason... which is to find a resolution. This is an exciting development.

March 20th, 2019

One of the greatest realizations I've had, that I have written down in my journal and taken a whole page to do so, has to do with the fact that I have stopped believing in my own direction because of the negativity I have been met with. But one thing came to me last night about my work, which is that it is risky- it is on the verge of possible. I have taken on a significant challenge in directing *The Balcony* and I have made it a greater challenge by not being satisfied with my preliminary understanding, and with the physical world I have decided to create. This challenge is bold and it is a scary place to exist in but good art should be challenging. I am asking the actors to trust I know what I am doing, but no matter how prepared I am, I am always doing something new and always challenging what I know and what the group knows going into a process... so there is always an element of unknown, and therefore, there is no way to be fully prepared to deal with everything. What a relief, and what a torment.

March 22rd, 2019

I am learning so much about directing a play of this magnitude and about the careful planning that must go along with it. We have a good structure for the revolutionaries but their scenes are lacking heart. Gwyneth has suggested that we do more physical work around it; have them do jumping jacks or run or something to get them into it. Today I plan to talk to the actors playing revolutionaries about the Yellow Vest Movement in France and lead them in a couple of exercises that will hopefully bring the battle into the rehearsal room.

I plan to go over their relationships as individuals and make sure that they are connecting the dots in terms of standing for something and also being real true humans. Intellectual thoughts are not enough.

I will play music to hype them up, and do an exercise with them where they move around the space at different speeds, imagining they are about to enter a battle, and have the actors playing Roger and Luke shout out “1,2,3” which they do for the top of their scenes, and have the rest of the actors get into a fight-mode pose after the 3. I hope this will help bring some urgency and danger to their scenes.

March 23rd, 2019

Final dress was very solid. Or, rather, it improved significantly from the other day. The beats and shifts in intention were much clearer. There were times when I forgot I was the director and became excited.

I look at this show and recognize the ambition of my ideas and concepts. I hope we live in a universe where it all comes together. Giving my final notes was difficult. From the very first day there were actors who were not on board and they are still not on board. I have a lot to learn about leadership and some of that is acceptance of what I cannot change.

I have learned a lot about my own expectations, about when they are valid and when they are asking too much.

I have learned a lot about knowing the team you are going to work with and consider now that a brief interview is as important as an actual seeing of the abilities of actors when auditioning... that being on the same page might actually be more important than the skill of the actor. The skill is important yes, but that the skill is usable is also key.

As I reflect on the process, and on how challenging it has been, I am grateful for it all. I have learned a lot about balancing the creation of a positive working culture, and the work itself. It has not been an easy kind of learning, but it has been fruitful and inspiring time and I am certain that I will take the lessons with me into my work in the field.

Epilogue

Leadership

Understanding how to build a culture was instrumental to the process of directing *The Balcony* by Jean Genet. I have come to believe that deep research in the field of leadership is the key to longevity as a director. From the very first conversation with designers, I aimed to express to the team that their opinion was as important as mine, and that while I would make choices about the direction and steering of the ship, their input was valued and encouraged.

The set designer Madeline Harkens and I were immediately on the same page when we had our first meeting in late August 2018. We made eye contact with ease, we understood each other, and we shared some fundamental beliefs about femininity and the importance of having women in positions of power. We both saw fabric draping over the set in a luxurious way. This immediate connection allowed us to dream of other possibilities, which I encouraged, believing

that our connection and the timeline allowed for some dreaming. Maddy came to me in mid-October 2018 with an entirely new idea: Escher-style staircases leading to nowhere all over the stage which could come together to create one platform that would be The Grand Balcony. It was here that we began to get stuck. I sat with my script for hours attempting to imagine what the action would be on these staircases. Nothing came. Although we had a true and deep connection right away, it didn't seem like that was serving us here. We leapt into unknown waters and it seemed we couldn't swim. We both felt like abandoning this new idea and moving back into something safer. We were in an uncomfortable place and abandoning it for familiar waters was very attractive. However, as I have been focusing so significantly on leadership and how to treat people, make them feel heard, and lead them toward a goal, I realized that this uncomfortable, frightening place we were in was the darkness before the dawn. I did not withhold this revelation, I shared it with Maddy. Even though we were not able to see ahead of us, I knew that if we stayed in this darkness a little longer, instead of retreating back to our old idea, a lightbulb would go on above one of our heads, and we would find ourselves in a new, more exciting place. And that is exactly what happened. A few days later Maddy sent me a text message indicating that she had it, she had the idea and it was good, she knew it. The next day she revealed her plan to me, with a beautiful staircase that looked like a grand piano, and panels of fabric draping from the ceiling. Immediately I saw the Chief of Police from Jean Genet's *The Balcony* descending the stairs in his long, flowing coat. I saw Roger and Chantal's shadows appearing from behind the panels and I saw the fabric flying through the air as machine gun fire rang in the distance. The realization of this design is in my opinion one of the most successful elements of this production.

In the early days of rehearsal, as a team we did an exercise where we went through the script identifying interesting words and talked about our understanding of them and then looking

them up. The word 'blood' was an interesting one to unpack. Queer people talked about the blood ban. Cis women talked about menstruation. We talked about blood boiling, about life blood, and about blood lines. As an exercise it showed us that there are definitions for words, and there are understandings of words; that ultimately an audience member will hear words in the context in which they understand them. This idea stems to our understanding of the larger concepts of the play and of making theatre in general; everyone's gut reaction must be valid, as an audience is not discerning in their reaction. If someone's understanding of a word does not fit with a definition of the word, which is more valid? When considering an audience, I believe both must be considered.

Creating an atmosphere where all people feel empowered was, ultimately, a huge part of the learning process for me. I have never learned more in a single-project situation than I did during the direction of this show. This was an incredibly ambitious undertaking. I took on two actors I have never worked with before, fourteen actors overall. Even with all my consideration on how to be a good leader, I found myself lacking sometimes. Knowing how to interact with people, although excellent subject for study, is not only science, but also an art. Not allowing one's own ego to get in the way is a feat that I am not sure I have mastered yet. Fourteen people, fourteen personalities, plus my own. It was a new kind of challenge and in the future I will trust my own instincts more, while also being prepared to deal with people who may not believe in my vision as much as I do.

One of the greatest leadership challenges came from navigating, teaching and working with the Stage Manager. The person who stage-managed is a kind, organized human with a significant knowledge about York and the navigation of the system. Having him around for this reason was very valuable, as he knows York and the way the production department works much

better than I do. However, there was a lot of information lacking there in terms of interpersonal relationships, the sensitivity of the room, and the non-organizational aspects of stage management, which are in my opinion, equally important. Every day was a lesson in patience and resilience. A lot of the tasks of a stage-manager; creating safe space and holding space for people who need it, navigating personal schedules, and providing the actors with things they needed (rehearsal costumes and shoes) became my responsibility due to the fact that he did not understand how to do these things or when they were needed. He interrupted rehearsals for inappropriate safety announcements, which meant I was having to teach him moment to moment what was necessary for safety and what was simply making the actors paranoid. Information did not get passed along to the production team in an appropriate or timely manner, and he often used his Assistant Stage Managers without including in his requests, positivity or gratitude. I had multiple conversations and email exchanges with Luc and in that examination of leadership, when things were not working, I learned about the practical application of allowing people to be wrong, pointing out the behavior and explaining clearly why there was something about it that was problematic, and then forgiving and allowing the work to continue. For me, as a perfectionist, this was a difficult task to take on. I was also in a position where there was almost nothing else I could do about it but accept it, and so the acceptance and forgiveness became a necessity. About half way through the rehearsal period, things started to work between Stage Management and me, and although he never fully got there in terms of being able to hold space for people, eventually we got to a place where I did not need to focus all of my attention on that aspect of the job, and was able to then focus more of my attention on the actual direction of the play.

What I did not anticipate is that no matter how well you think you are setting up a room and a culture, there are still going to be people who do not feel heard all the time, or held all the time. About a week into the process I began recognizing that there were a couple of actors who were not on board with the process, who were struggling to take direction and even resistant to it, who were arguing with every request and who were not grasping the world or the direction. These actors all had different ways of expressing this but ultimately it changed the temperature of the room, creating a hostile environment and stopping the work, sometimes literally, to express discontent. It is here I began to draw on the language of wants and needs - what does your character want, what do they need. It was difficult for people to grasp that they had to maintain their wants and needs even as the world around them was literally crumbling and giving way to absurdism. I went to the bookstore and perused the shelves. I found *Dealing with Difficult People*, a series of essays on emotional intelligence published by the Harvard Business Review. As I read this book, which contained practical solutions to real issues, I realized that dealing with difficult people is also an art. As a leader, I cannot hope that creating an atmosphere will be enough. Especially since my leadership comes in three to six-week bursts, and I am often walking into a culture that already exists. Changing the temperature of the room comes with its own set of challenges. The book spoke of cooling down people who are hot and heating up situations that are cool. This focus helped me bring people on board, although the entire process was still quite challenging. Overall, though I have learned much about leadership, I still have a lot of work to do here to help bring this work about.

My challenge/ Directing with a clear method.

My aim was to do some learning on how to use a method for an entire process. As stated in the body of my thesis, I often rely on my natural skill and intuition, and allowing inspiration to

come into play. Doing research, and especially reading other works of Genet's helped me immeasurably in both understanding *The Balcony* and leading others toward an understanding of it. I read *Our Lady of The Flowers*, *The Thief's Journal* in full. I re-read *The Maids*, which I acted in in 2010. Although I have always been a natural leader, reading about Leadership helped me to look at it in an entirely different way, giving me tactics to deal with people and situations rather than just relying on what I have always done, and on my own good sense. I took Katie Mitchel's advice and went through the play, making lists of questions and lists of facts. Then I went out and researched the list of questions. I made sure to have a clear plan for how we would go through the entire play. I decided that the method we would use would be going over each scene as a rough sketch, then go back in and color in major points, and then go back and do fine-detail work. This allowed each scene to get as much attention as the last, although some scenes, like four and six, required more fine detail work in the end.

However, my preparation for this was not enough, or perhaps was enough for me to learn that I can go further in depth with my understanding of leadership and cultures and how to deal with the task of being a leader. In my initial research I focused on how to create a culture where people feel good and empowered and like they are a part of a whole, and safe to express themselves. In keeping with this, I played a game with everyone in the room (myself and stage management included) where we stood in a circle and crossed to ask a question of someone, such as "what is your reoccurring nightmare". That person then crosses and asks another question of another person, "How do you hide?", without answering the initial question. Eventually when someone comes back to ask another question of a person, they are allowed to go and as a question of someone else or answer the original question they have been asked. No one ever has to answer a question asked of them if they don't want to, and along the way we learn a lot about

people, and about what they are really made of. This game helped to create a sense of intimacy in the room and reminded us that we are all human, and that we all have hang-ups, and also helped back up the idea that we were all holding space for each other. I brought tea to all of our initial rehearsals, and snacks like cookies and oranges. This helped to create space where people felt cared for and at home. We did a word game together where we went through the script and went over words, attempting to understand both what the words meant, and how they land on people's ears. This discussion led to a broader discussion of what happens in the play, and the world of the play, and what things meant. We did intimacy work with the entire group, doing mirroring exercises, and letting each other know where we are comfortable being touched, and where we are not comfortable being touched, and we created check-in 'handshakes' with our intimacy partners so that we could check in and out of the work and create some boundaries between when we are working, and when we are colleagues. All of this set up a very comfortable and intimate room, which was no easy task with almost 20 people in the room at any given time.

I believe that the work I did was exciting and nuanced. With life to live over again, I would give more attention to the second half of the play. Although each scene got three rehearsals in total, plus runs of the show and dress/ tech rehearsal, the second half of the play was a lot harder for people to grasp intellectually. I would spend more time focused on this, do more research into absurdism and existentialism, and do more exercises with the actors to explore the depth of the characters amidst a crumbling world.

Challenge

Directing this play was the most challenging project I have ever taken on. The multilayered concepts, the size of the team, and the scope of the project were all new to me. I have never been in charge of so many people or worked with so many challenging personalities

before. About half way through the experience, I realized that I had the expectation of myself that I would be as good at leading this group toward the realization of this mammoth of a show as I have been at leading a smaller group toward a smaller show. When I realized the pressure, I was putting on myself because of this, I realized that one of the most important areas I can focus on improving is in giving myself permission to learn and grow, permission to not be perfect and amazing at everything I do the first time I do it. There is something very poignant about ego inside this realization, which makes it a poetic discovery when one considers the nature of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*, and how it relentlessly calls out ego and narcissism.

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