AN ACTOR'S PROCESS:

An examination and description of the practical application of acting theory as experienced in three roles.

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by

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INTRODUCTION

In this Thesis I will explore the acting process in relationship to my work as an actor in three roles. As Belle Starr in JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN; The Ingenue in SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR; and Irina in THE THREE SISTERS. Discussing the acting process seems to me a personal and private contemplation with a great need to be communicated to students and laymen alike. It is my objective to explore the creative process and communicate my own personal approach to this sensitive craft.

Acting is an intensely spiritual exploration in which the artist is thrust into what at times seems to be a circus environment. Within this excitement the actor must pull forth personal and private moments from her own stock at will. She must be ready at all times to relive moments most of us struggle through. As writer Brian Bates states in his book THE WAY OF THE ACTOR (a path to knowledge and power) "To act is to risk, and takes courage" ¹. It is this risk or danger that attracts as many actors as it repels. Ultimately, it is this show of courage which fascinates us about the magic that surrounds the actor like a veil.

Every production calls upon a (sometimes entirely) different process. Directors, designers and especially other actors comprise major factors in this complex
equation. Every ingredient will effect the final, ever changing creation. The most detrimental choice an actor can make is to not allow herself to be affected. It is not unlike in nature where the tree that does not bend, breaks. By avoiding the negative energy of the equation the actor may also inadvertently be censoring out the positive, creative force which seeks freedom to express.

In *HEALING THE SHAME THAT BINDS YOU* John Bradshaw explores the nature of shame in all of us. He also discusses the importance of feeling freedom while we create; without it we are stifled. He states:

Richard Bander suggested that one of the major blocks to creativity was the feeling of knowing you are right. When we think we are absolutely right, we stop seeking new information. To be right is to be certain, and to be certain stops us from being curious. Curiosity and wonder are at the heart of all learning. Plato said that all philosophy begins in wonder. So the feeling of absolute certainty and righteousness causes us to stop seeking and to stop learning. 

The sense of curiosity is at the heart of creation and at the heart of the actor.
In a special issue of PARABOLA magazine: "The Creative Response", the nature of creativity is explored. In an interview in this issue Seyyed Hossein Nasr (author of ISLAMIC ART AND SPIRITUALITY, and Professor of Islamic Studies at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C.) says that "Everything we do is art," it is either "good art or bad art" 3. In Lorraine Kisly's editorial of "The Creative Response" issue she says that "Dr. Nasr's comment affirms further that living is an art, that all are called to respond creatively to their lives" 4. The actor takes this exploration further; it becomes public. Our task then is to delve deeply into the psyche of what Carl Jung calls the "collective unconscious" of society. By exploring both the darker side of society as well as the lighter, the theatre attempts to strike a balance within society. Although religions may be said to attend to the spiritual life of the community, the theatre strives to purge the hopes and fears that would normally not be attended to in every day life. The Greeks considered the theatre a holy art, and actors paralleled priests in terms of respect. Alas, it is not so anymore and we are forced into compromising ourselves and our art on an almost daily basis. However, for me the internal process has not changed. We ask the same questions, face the same obstacles, and our interpersonal relationships are as complicated (and as simple) as those first actors. For me the creative process
has always been an exceedingly intimate and personal journey. It is this journey that I will relate to the reader in this thesis.

Throughout the academic year I have performed in three productions in which I have played three distinctly different roles. Each role has required an entirely different response as an actor. The three productions and roles I performed are as follows: Belle Starr: JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN by David Freeman; The Igenue: SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR by Luigi Pirandello; Irina: THE THREE SISTERS by Anton Chekhov.

This process of "acting" is a fragile and nebulous entity. How do you describe the creative response? However, this is indeed my task. To describe and formulate a process that at its best and brightest moment is spontaneous. T.S. Eliot describes this spiritual state of creativity as:

music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. 5
A SCENE FROM: JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN
CHAPTER ONE - JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN

INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 1989 school year, Dr. Tom Lasswell and I began to talk about possible shows for the following season. He wanted to find a two person show that would be exciting for him to direct, showcase my talents and also be used as thesis material. Many plays were discussed, but finally, we both enthusiastically agreed on JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN by David Freeman. Dr. Lasswell had wanted to do this play for some time because of his interest in the old west, especially the outlaws. I had wanted to play Belle ever since I read and performed a scene from the play in 1982 at the University of Oregon. Ironically, this is also where I met Dr. Lasswell.

I have always been fascinated by strong, independent women and Belle certainly possessed those qualities; and not only did Belle possess these traits, she used them to command and seduce a band of dangerous outlaw men. In a frontier that was ruled by fear, she epitomized the bold and daring woman warrior, a contemporary Amazon. Our American history is only slightly dotted with women warriors and few had the audacity and courage of a Belle Starr. More often than not they were considered heroic only because they fit
the male perception of what was considered heroic. So we are cursed with the Betsy Ross' and Martha Washingtons; women whose sole act of heroism was her ability to stand behind her man while he fought romantic wars, freeing everyone but the partner who silently smiled in chains. For me the most fascinating women were the ones on the outside of society, women who constantly challenged the idea of what it was to be a woman. Belle Starr had the courage to be herself.

Finding Belle Starr's true story was a confusing task. I believe that Freeman began his search for truth in earnest, but finally surrendered it after discovering that the truth lies buried with Belle. This play is not an historical account of Jesse James and Belle Starr; in truth they may have only met in passing and had no intimate relationship. However, Freeman's play is not an attempt at what is factual as much as it is a study in the inner workings of two larger than life people and their "celebrity" status in our culture.

There are many films and books written about Belle Starr's life, some based loosely on fact, while others truly attempting to unearth the "real" Belle. It is on this thin line between myth and reality that Freeman based his play.
We will never really know just who these people were and how they perceived themselves and the violent lives they were destined to live, but this play helps us imagine it.

The American west was itself a place entangled in myth, full of tall tales of heroism and larger-than-life men and women. This presents quite a challenge to the actor to portray the mythic hero and heroine while revealing the human being at the same time. The same task lies in store for the actor who takes on any of the Western heroes -- Jesse James, Wyatt Earp, Calamity Jane, Judge Parker, The Younger's, The Dalton's, or Wild Bill Hickock. Unraveling a rumor filled life can be tedious and frustrating, and absolutely fascinating.

BACKGROUND

Belle Starr was an attractive, magnetic, bold, strong, independent woman who succeeded brilliantly in a male world according to her own rules. Belle was challenged from an early age to be better at the game than the men. And she invariably was. She was Born Myra Belle Shirley, February 5, 1848 (although this date has been challenged, February 5, 1848 seems to be the most widely accepted and is indeed engraved on her tombstone) in Jasper County Missouri. At the age of eight the Shirley's moved to Carthage. It was in
Carthage where Belle's father, John Shirley, became prominent in local politics, owned his own business, and the family enjoyed a respected and prosperous position in the community. Belle was educated at the Carthage Female Academy. She was schooled in the classics, philosophy and music among other subjects. But her true passion lay in horses, guns and men, in all of which she became expert.

Belle's brother Ed, to whom she was extremely close, was murdered in 1863 by Federal troops. Ed Shirley was a Confederate holdout and continued to fight for the South's cause long after it was defeated in the Civil war. He, along with William Quantrill, Cole Younger and the James brothers, fancied themselves as rebel guerrillas and fought (tyrannizing and robbing banks) until the group's nucleus was defeated in Northfield, Minnesota. When Belle was informed of her brothers death she flew into a rage and rode off to join the rebel Guerrillas. Belle Starr was just fifteen at the time. It was at this time that Belle fell in love with Cole Younger and bore his child; a girl whom she named Pearl. However, after Cole was captured at Northfield she settled for another, less notorious, outlaw by the name of John Reed. Belle had a second child by Reed and named him Ed (presumably after her much loved and missed brother). Reed and Belle were married and almost simultaneously the children were shipped off to live with Reed's family back
East. Their passion was not parenting. The two then returned to the Indian country and embarked on their most notorious outlawing years. She finally tired of Reed and married Sam Starr, the son of Tom Starr who was a notorious Cherokee Indian. Belle turned Sam Starr's ranch, in the bend of the Canadian River under Hi-early Mountains, into "Younger's Bend"--the famous outlaw hideout (the name perhaps in memory of her daughter's father and her first love, Cole Younger). In 1882 Belle and Sam stood trial in front of the infamous Judge Parker, both receiving prison sentences. Belle spent six months in the federal prison for horse stealing. This sentencing finally brought Belle into the national spotlight, and she became an overnight sensation as "the Bandit Queen".

Belle Starr took many lovers in her short life, among them: John Middleton, Blue Duck, Jack Spaniard, Jim French, Felix Griffin and a host of other outlaws. Belle loved and desperately sought male companionship; she was sexually liberated at a time when women were either considered to be saints or whores. Belle refused to be either.

In 1888 Belle had married again after Sam Starr's death. This time to a young Creek Indian named Jim July. It is believed, but not proven, that it was her young husband who had her murdered. On her grave Pearl Younger had
inscribed:

Shed not for her the bitter tear,
Nor give the heart to vain regrets
'tis but the casket that lies here,
The gem that filled it sparkles yet. 6

David Freeman seems to have used these facts as the foundation for his Belle Starr in JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN, but added to it freely, creating a mythic life and relationship with Jesse James. It is highly probable that Belle would have run into Jesse on several occasions, although none are documented. Jesse ran with Cole Younger and probably used Younger's Bend along with many outlaws of that time as a hideout. He and Belle most likely had some kind of relationship, whether it was romantic is pure speculation. Freeman, however, chose to use this mythical relationship as the basis for his play.

As an actor I am forced to abandon historical facts in favor of the world of the play. At times this is conflicting and can be confusing, but ultimately there is more freedom in fiction than in a standard historical drama. We as actors are not harnessed to absolutes in the re-creation of historic figures, but instead are allowed to create human beings based on certain unalterable facts.
For example in JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN, a certain amount of historical information is extremely helpful to the actor. For me all of Belle Starr's notorious behavior (the affairs, children, her education in the classics and illegal activities) stood as an absolutely necessary foundation on which to build the Belle Starr of David Freeman's play. However, since Belle and Jesse never had a romance that we know of, I was required to fill in real gaps in her life. Therefore, departure from historical fact is not only an actor's choice, but a necessity.

It is with this luxury of both historical information and theatrical freedom that I began my research into Belle Starr. However in this production, as in most, the character only truly comes to life when the actors meet, read the lines for the first time, walk on stage and inevitably breathe life into the character in a uniquely personal way.

DIRECTING CONCEPT

Dr. Lasswell's approach to this play was really very simple. He wanted to focus on the characters of the play and to only partially attempt to create the physical world. He achieved this by designing a set that used only three pieces of furniture and period properties. The most important environmental choices were centered around sound and music.
This helped create mood for both the audience and the actors.

When Dan McLaughlin, (who played Jesse) Dr. Lasswell and I began working on this play, we all decided that our job was to break down these larger than life characters and find the real human beings. Throughout the process we attempted to discover the real moments of frustration, love, desire, anger, humor and courage that existed not only between Belle and Jesse but the other characters that live in the play as well. David Freeman offers the actor a unique challenge in his play: the actors cast as Belle and Jesse must also bring to life the spouses, murderers, judges and children who populated their world. Thus we were given the opportunity to play an assortment of characters, including those of the opposite sex. The danger in a play like this is to let go of these seemingly inconsequential characters and focus on the more interesting and fully realized main characters of Belle Starr and Jesse James. With Dr. Lasswell's guidance, Dan and I concentrated very hard on the other characters' right to a full stage life.

Dr. Lasswell, (at who's insistence I shall refer to as Tom) Dan and I became very close during the rehearsals. As the rehearsal process first began we slowly worked ourselves into the script and each others lives. I felt Tom was
extremely sensitive to this part of the rehearsal process and allowed for this in our rehearsal schedule. He chose a fairly drawn out process. This fit both Dan and my desires as well, since we were just getting to know each other.

Dan and I met at the first read through of the script. This could have been a disaster considering the intimacy that the script requires, but unavoidable as Dan had just moved to Oregon from Texas. I was very pleased to be working with such a fine, experienced actor, and we fast became friends. This intimacy was not surprising given the challenge of Freeman's exciting script.

In our sparsely designed set, Tom made it clear that the emphasis of this production was to be on the actors. David Freeman has written a script that confronts the audience with the characters at their most vulnerable moments. Many times it is only the audience and the actor relating, this can be difficult to rehearse with an empty theatre. In most plays the audience is the third point of a triangle that also includes the actors on stage. This interaction is crucial to the success of any play, and especially one like _JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN_ where the audience is forced into participating, feeding the actor as she stands alone on stage begging for understanding. Our audience at the University was a little less used to this
convention than other more seasoned audiences perhaps; never-the-less, it took them little or no time to accept it.

I cannot imagine undertaking this kind of a production with any other director than Tom. This play requires an open rehearsal space that allows discussion, disagreement and experimentation. Tom allowed the channels of communication to be absolutely free to his actors. Without this freedom the play could not have been the collaboration that it was, but might instead of turned into a very frustrating experience. I am extremely fortunate to have had Tom as my director and friend on this show.

As we began our dissection of Freeman's script, Tom allowed Dan and I to "play" freely with the physical life of the characters. For example, Dan and I not only wanted to portray the playful nature of the characters, but also how quickly their games could turn to violence. In one scene in particular (the "razor" scene at the end of act 1) what at first appeared to be playful banter, results in a dangerous power struggle between Jesse and Belle. This was an especially difficult scene to stage, but with Tom's guidance, Dan and I began playing with the physicality until we arrived at what we believed was the essence of the scene, and ultimately their relationship. It was with this
patience that Tom guided us along. He allowed us the freedom and confidence to explore a confusing and dense script.

**VISUAL APPROACH**

As I stated before, the set that Tom (along with Jeff Seats) designed was sparse. It was designed with the actors in mind and was intended to be an acting space, "theatrical" -- with the properties and the costumes exposed to the audience. We never left the stage other than at the intermission; therefore, we needed everything immediately available to us.

I have always felt that the actor along with the director and costume designer should have a major say in the decision making process of the actor's costume. I have not always felt this way, and at times in fact have altered certain aspects of my characterization according to how I am costumed. However, at other times I have felt betrayed by the costume. This is not a reflection on only the costume designer, but a reflection on the entire communication triangle which includes the director and the actor as well. More times than not, no two people will have the same perception as to how a character will look. However, it is imperative that a constant flow of information amongst the
creative triangle be sought. When this fails to occur, what happens is anger and frustration. Unfortunately, some of this did occur in our production. My own inability to see in my own minds eye what Belle looked like, until we were almost into production, and a failure on my part to involve myself in the costuming discussions led to misunderstandings about how Belle should be costumed.

In retrospect, I sympathize with Jill Hoddick, our costume designer. I understand that we must have been a difficult group to communicate with, mostly because we were not prepared to talk about costumes from the very beginning, probably because we did not know what we wanted or needed. I did ask for a rehearsal skirt and boots to work with as soon as possible, and Jill supplied me with those items immediately. Working with the appropriate clothing from the period is essential in my process as an actor. Clothing will effect the way an actor\character moves in any production. That is why I always ask the designer if it is possible for them to furnish me with a suggestion of my costume. If this is not possible I will furnish something from my own wardrobe that may be appropriate.
REHEARSAL SCHEDULE AND JOURNAL

We began our rehearsal schedule in mid August for our September 22 opening. As we began we were both very familiar with our long speeches, but less so with the dialogue. Tom felt that it was crucial for both Dan and me to be off book as soon as possible, because he felt that as soon as we began working with the props and costumes, as our full concentration was essential. He was right. JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN is a very difficult play to stage because of the "business" involved. In fact, the director does not stage such a play as much as he choreographs it. This resulted in rehearsals devoted to getting chaps off in a minimal amount of time, and also making sure that boots end up in the appropriate position on stage. The actors bond increased as did the level of frustration.

We began very slowly just reading the play aloud. We did this twice before we attempted to put it on its feet. Because of the nature of the play, and how it is broken up into scenes, it is important to dissect every moment before the actors begins "acting". As it is written, there are a total of twenty-one scenes in the two act play, so we approached the play scene by scene. The play tends to jumps around in time but the thrust moves towards the final confrontation between Jesse and Belle, which ultimately
leads both to their destruction--Jesse's at the hands of Bobby Ford, and Belle's, symbolically, by her own son, Ed Reed. The actors must move quickly from scene to scene, with no let-down of tension in the transitions.

One of the most frustrating aspects of our rehearsal process was that just as we felt we had effectively staged one scene, our work became essentially obsolete as soon as we added the props and costumes. The re-staging of scenes happened more than once, which led to Dan and my insisting upon having as many props and costumes on hand two weeks before opening. Unfortunately this resulted in our acquiring unfair alias'. We were both labeled "difficult", which we embraced as long as we received our requested items. For the most part we were able to work with all our props and costumes with ample time to rehearse with them, and indeed, by the opening we felt reasonably comfortable. This is crucial to an actor's state of mind as he has more than enough to think about on opening night without being haunted by props.

For the most part, we worked daily either with our director or without. Dan and I never strayed very far from our scripts and the tedious task of running our lines. In a two-person play this is extremely convenient; it became our daily ritual. Dan and I spent almost all our time together,
which helped strengthen our on and off-stage relationship. In the process of rehearsing this play—or any play for that matter—it is imperative that each actor find something in the other to be attracted to; especially a love interest. With Dan this was, thank goodness, not difficult; on the contrary, it was a pleasure. I do not say that there were not times when we became testy and frustrated with each other. We did, but we chose to turn it into a playful game between us. We maintained our sense of humor, and with that intact you can get through anything.

ACTING STYLE AND APPROACH

This was a unique play to work on in many ways. The many scenes, the constant shifting of focus between Jesse, Belle and the audience, the age changes of the characters, the character transformations on stage, the mythical quality of the characters, and finally their place as real human beings in history. The approach to this kind of a play begins technically. First, I simply started breaking each scene down, beat by beat. I then looked for the conditioning forces of the scenes: What time of year is it? Where are we? What has just happened? How old are we? How long has it been since we have seen each other? If it is not a scene with Jesse, then what is my relationship with this person? These are just some of the important questions
that an actor must ask when just beginning. I then went through the entire play asking the same questions of every scene, and discovering the many things that were said about my characters. I would then file these little clues of character away, keeping them in mind as my character developed in the rehearsal process.

Even before this very analytical approach was begun, I began reading the play over and over all summer; not memorizing lines yet, but just to get impressions from the script. I simply thought about Belle Starr as a real human being, simply from what was said about her in Freeman's script. I then began imagining what kind of a woman Belle would have had to have been to become a legitimate force in a definite man's world. Thinking about what she would look like, how she would walk, how she would talk, what she thought about herself, her children, Jesse, everyone she came into actual contact with in the script, as well as the people and relationships that are only referred to in the script. For example, it seemed to me that Belle would walk bow-legged and as if she had been on a horse all of her life, which, indeed, she had. And she would talk with a deep, throaty voice that could command attention, and yet be sexy at the same time. To accomplish this I had to rehearse in my lowest vocal register from the beginning of rehearsals so that it appeared effortless by the time we opened. The
walking was not as difficult, as I am bow-legged myself, and as I rehearsed in boots from the very beginning, this immediately gave me an attitude I felt appropriate for Belle. At this point I still had not begun any real research yet. It was at this time that I began the actual technical breakdown of the script.

In Belle Starr's own words she sees herself as "a woman who has seen much of life" (page 6). while successfully maintaining a sense of humor about herself and life. I believe that Belle Starr began her life as a hopeful and vulnerable young woman who discovered disappointment early in life. In the first speech that Belle has in the play, she talks about losing her virginity, and innocence at the tender age of ten. By the time Belle meets Jesse in the play she has already become somewhat tarnished and embittered by the world, although she cannot help but show some hope that perhaps Jesse may offer her more than disappointment. I felt that it was important in the first scene between Belle and Jesse to explore her vigorous sexuality and innocence all at the same time. Belle never allows herself to openly appear hopeful to Jesse, or encourage his affection, but underneath her armor a young girl eagerly searches for the love she never received as a child. Tragically Belle's hope turns to envy and jealousy when she realizes she is a woman in a man's world; she wants
power. But more than anything, Belle Starr's most unrelenting search is for love.

I wanted to play the part realistically, recognizing, at the same time, the theatricality of it. However, as an actor I had to concentrate on the reality of the situation, even the transformations on stage. All the conventions of the play are apparent, but the actor must accept them as real. We are Jesse and Belle finally telling our stories to a captive audience. Not many figures have the opportunity to do this, and we take advantage of it.

If Belle's super-objective is to be loved, she must first be understood. Belle seeks understanding from the audience about her children. She feels a need to defend her motherhood, or lack of it. Her final judgement depends on it. Both Belle and Jesse must defend their honor, and explain their crimes to be acquitted. They must defend their lives. It is these very real needs that makes JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN such a challenging script for the actors to be involved with. And Freeman paints a very vivid picture of Jesse and Bell's needs. The actors' job then is to discover how to get those needs met.
Freeman takes us a level deeper than Jesse and Belle's moral defense; he explores their desire to become whole. They need each other to obtain this end. Freeman uses cross-dressing as a way of exploring their sexual confusion and inadequacies. As an actor I must also look at this aspect of Belle Starr and explore it along with the other characteristics that are more obvious. I believe the only man that is really a challenge to Belle is Jesse. This excites and frightens her at the same time. She again feels the need to defend herself from such a dangerous opponent. Jesse settles for a loveless marriage, while Belle continues to search for in other men what only Jesse can give her: Love and an equal sparring partner. Belle keeps searching but never finds her equal. In the end even Jesse falls short. No man equals her wit, charm, intelligence and guile. Not an easy task for an actor to pull off. My objective was to constantly outsmart and stay on top of Jesse Dan. By making this my goal, I could also play every moment for the realities of the moment-to-moment on-stage life which Dan and I created every night. This nightly exploration made the performance life of the play ever-changing. Alive.
PERFORMANCE LIFE

It is in performance where the work finally takes off. The actors and the director may work and re-work scenes and moments over and over, but sometimes it takes the world of the audience for things to finally come together. This was especially true of JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN. So much of the play relies on the life and energy of the audience since more than half of it depends on their response.

In a play like this one the audience response is as important as another actor. Therefore the response received or not received from the audience will have some kind of effect on the actor on stage. In our production the audience was always different. Sometimes sympathetic, other times judgmental, but never indifferent. It did not matter to me which they were, as long as there were some conclusions drawn. The most difficult performance we had of the show was a matinee when there were very few audience members present.

When I would look out into the audience and see and feel their response to Belle, it would affect my performance. The stage actor is not like a film actor. The stage actor belongs to a triangle of energy between herself, the audience, and the other actors on stage. This
performance triangle is much like the creative triangle between the director and both actors. Sometimes the audience sided with Belle and then my defense was less desperate; other times it took the entire evening to persuade them to finally listen to Belle's reasons. In response to that, the need became stronger, more desperate on my part. It is such a great opportunity to be able to interact with the audience because, more times than not, we must be aware of their existence without acknowledging it. Freeman uses the convention of the aside to allow Belle and Jesse an opportunity to defend themselves and ask for understanding. It is a play where, when it works, both the actors and the audience will feel purged.

AN INTERVIEW

The ability to look back over ones work and be able to arrive at personal conclusions which will lead to growth is one of the most important of all the actor's tools. This hindsight helps to give the actor an objectivity that is crucial in the theatre. It is with this in mind that I undertook my own post-production analysis of JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN and my personal work as Belle Starr.
Part of this process involved my discussion with Beth Harper, a local actor, about her own experience as Belle Starr. In my research into playing Belle Starr I felt that it was important to talk with another actor who had also gone through the same process, and find out where her obstacles appeared. Beth Harper was eager to exorcise her own demons about the play as we sat down to talk.

My interview with Beth brought up quite a few questions that I had about the script. Which as it turned out, we both had. We agreed that the questions of sexuality which the play explores were probably the most important aspect of the play for the characters. Both characters possess an obvious sexuality that is used by both to get what they want. If the actors playing the roles, then, do not possess the same androgenous sexual quality the play loses much of its danger. If this aspect of the play is missed then one of the most important themes of Freeman's play is missed. The play is not so much a love story as a story about uniting the male and female aspects of these two characters persona into one whole being. They cannot survive without the other, and indeed when one dies in the play the other too must die. One of the best ways that Freeman emphasizes this point is at the end of the play when Belle and Jesse exchange clothing; their union is finally complete, they become each other. One.
Almost as soon as we began discussing the play, similar production nightmares began to appear. The number one problem that we both felt unresolved about was the costuming of the play. There are a total of eleven character changes for both actors in the play, most require some costuming changes. This can be tedious for the actor as at times the play feels like it is simply about costume changes and props. Ironically, both Beth and I shared the same costumer, Jill Hoddick (which allowed Jill an opportunity to experience the costume nightmare, prior to our mounting it at the University). Beth and I agreed that the play is a difficult one to design partly because of the pace with which the changes must occur, and partly because of the combination of surrealism and reality that Freeman has woven into the play. The play is surreal in that it takes place in a timeless space where the characters float in and out of reality. However, the emotional world of the play is very real. Freeman paints a mythical background for historically accurate characters to live in. Beth felt that her director took too much of an historical approach to the play rather than concentrating on the themes and world of the fictional play. She felt that this preoccupation with fact was inappropriate since the relationship was fictional anyway.
While interviewing Beth, I wanted to talk not only about the shared experience of both playing the part of Belle, but also about the acting process in the creation of the role. Beth felt that her directors preoccupation with the historical aspects of the characters created many problems for the actors playing the roles. Beth and I agreed that even though the characters were real people, their relationship was created by the playwright. Therefore, as actors we are allowed to take liberties in the interpretation of Belle and Jesse's assumed love affair. This led us to the inevitable controversy of the cerebral director as opposed to the visceral. I was fortunate in being able to work with a director who also enjoyed working from instinctual and emotional reactions to the play based on fact, as opposed to responding to the play as a historical documentary. Beth felt that her director did not include her and the other actor in the creative process, but instead based his concepts on pre-conceived, and unbending ideas that he brought with him. She felt "fooled by the director" 7 into holding on tightly to the history, rather than "letting it go" 8 early on.

Beth and I both believed that Belle was written stronger than Jesse, and that as a character she grew more and had more levels to explore in the course of the play. We also agreed that this led to the audience's feeling an
imbalance in the play. Most audiences are not used to watching a strong, sexual woman roaming around the stage, and handily controlling such a mythical hero as Jesse James. Even today's audiences have a difficult time accepting this blatant sexual and violent relationship. It is this violent sexuality that ultimately drew Beth, and admittedly myself, to the role.

*Jesse and the Bandit Queen* offers the two actors who play the roles an unlimited range of emotional and physical levels to explore. This can repel an actor as easily as attracting him. It is this challenge that intrigued both Beth and myself.
A SCENE FROM: JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN
SUMMARY

The process of playing the role of Belle Starr, and working with a small but extremely tight-knit company, allowed me as an actor the opportunity to both explore and create in a safe and positive atmosphere. This kind of production is unique. Most productions involve numerous actors, more complicated design elements, and generally less intimacy. Although our costume requirements were complex, and working with the properties involved frustration at times, an overall simplicity of production was achieved.

Playwright David Freeman opens up a dangerous world where sexuality, heroism, violence, competition and "celebrity" are all questioned. The world of JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN fascinates me as an actor and more importantly as a human being. The questions that intrigue me are not solved, nor is it Freeman's intention to arrive at any conclusions. Instead he chooses an already mythical, larger-than-life world as the arena for his play. It is in this arena that Jesse and Belle wrestle each other into a oneness, uniting perfectly into--Jesse Starr!
A scene from: SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH

OF AN AUTHOR
CHAPTER TWO: SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

Originally this play was not to be included in my Thesis. In fact I had no idea I would be performing in the play until I received a phone call from Dennis Bigelow on January 18, 1990 to start rehearsals on January 19. Not much notice, but I was certainly in no position to turn down the opportunity to perform with one of the most respected regional companies in the country. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival has been a company I have watched and respected for many years. When they decided to open a company in Portland I was very excited by the possibility that it would bring national attention to Portland's blossoming theatrical community.

I had vaguely remembered reading SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR when I was an undergraduate, but had not really remembered the play at all. I have long thought of it as one of the plays in history we are supposed to know, yet no one looked forward to reading the stiff and intellectual English translations of the play. All of this was true until I read Robert Cornthwaite's recent translation which the festival had commissioned him to write. In his words, the play finally became active and
made wonderful sense. It was then that I decided I wanted it to be part of my Thesis.

When Dennis Bigelow first called me he told me I would be playing the role of the Ingenue, and also understudying the role of the Step-Daughter. Two weeks before we opened one of the little girls in the production came down with the measles and we had all been exposed! Fortunately almost all of the cast had had the measles, except of course for three of the main characters, one of whom was Sheryl. As it turned out we had an extremely successful and healthy run.

I was very nervous and yet very excited to embark on this project. It seems that when good things happen they happen all at one time. Which is quite acceptable but can be extremely hectic. This is how the rest of the school year went for me; from January 18th on it is all a blur. I am not quite sure how I got as much done as I did, but as Dr. Lasswell often said; "all graduate school was about, was learning to juggle". All of 1990 was a crash course in juggling.

REHEARSAL SCHEDULE AND TECHNIQUE

We began rehearsals Friday, January 19, 1990, and proceeded to rehearse almost everyday except Monday until
opening night. The "Company" would rehearse 12:00 - 5:00 pm and the "Characters" would return after a one hour dinner break and rehearse until 9:00 pm. This schedule was kept up for four weeks followed by three preview audiences. We opened February 21 and closed March 17.

This rehearsal schedule never varies for this company and every show has the same amount of time in which to rehearse. In some ways this makes an actor feel rather as if she were part of a factory, pumping out plays like shoes. The successful regional theater company is motivated by money and to be successful they must produce popular plays regularly. The reality is that much of the work is inspired, but some seems stiff and passionless. It would be unfair to say however that this is a bad thing. Ironically, it can be just the opposite. The end result of this "factory" play-making, is consistent, professional, balanced and heart-felt work. This approach is light years away from how Dan, Dr. Lasswell and myself worked to create JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN. The time we were able to spend just talking about JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN, and the creative scheduling we could do proved most beneficial in our small company. Although the concentration, focus and discipline that such a well oiled machine as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival can offer is indeed impressive. In the final analysis I feel I work better under their system because it
presents a reliable structure in which to work.

Mr. Bigelow was determined to have the entire play on its feet at the end of the first week of rehearsal, which he did. This helped a great deal since we were able to see the bare skeleton of what the play and our work revealed to us early on in the process. This was the first time I had seen a play come together so early on. With this basic structure we, the actors, were allowed an incredible amount of freedom within which to create.

Rehearsing this play was the first time I had ever worked under Equity rules, and it was a pleasure. I believe by treating an actor like you would any professional worker, more can be expected of him in return. If you treat him as an amateur, you will get the performance of an amateur. Sometimes the ten minute breaks, that are required every 90 minutes according to Equity rules, would break the momentum. However, the actors always returned fresh, and clear. The result in the end was consistent rehearsals which always seemed to build toward the performance.

**DIRECTING CONCEPT**

Our first rehearsal consisted of Mr. Bigelow talking first about the play, followed by a reading of the play.
The director's enthusiasm was evident, as was his terror in approaching such an awesome piece of theatre history.

Luigi Pirandello wrote *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* in 1921. Many productions of this play have set it in the present, using a modern day company as the troupe that is invaded by the "characters" from the past. Mr. Bigelow chose instead to set the play in the period which it was written, therefore the Characters also had to appear out of a very recent past. By placing the play within this world we see how the Characters would have been received at that time, raising questions about theatre and acting that we now take for granted. For example, the attention to detail and the insistence on maintaining "reality". The theme of "reality" is echoed again and again by both the Step-Father and Step-Daughter throughout the play. This "reality" is constantly challenged by the director (played by the translator Robert Cornthwaite) who demands to have the "drama" played out for him first by the acting company then by the Characters. As the story unfolds, the stage is slowly transformed by the Characters into their world, almost magically. Finally as the tragedy is unveiled, the Characters leave the theatre in search of another place and time to tell their story. The Acting Company cannot decide if the events that just took place were "real" or imaginary. The final image is of the "theatre within a theatre"
literally tearing open, as the Characters enter the world of today, (the "reality" of the Portland Center for the Performing Arts) still in search of an author to tell their story.

In our first meeting Mr. Bigelow said he felt that "the play is about everything". Pretty all-encompassing, but all too true. He also pointed to the "humanity of the play", and the "demolition of reality". He felt that the it was a "play of passions", both on the part of the Characters and in the hearts and minds of the Acting Company, which are not as easily exorcised. He made a very specific point about the fact that the play goes from the illusionary world of the theatre into reality and back again. It was important to take the audience on that same journey. He said the stage was a "metaphor" for a battleground and that the theatre was the equivalent to war. This is hardly surprising given the time frame in which the play was written -- Fascist Italy on the brink of World War II. The battle is between the Characters and the Company, between what is real and what is illusion.

The play is broken by Pirandello into three parts, what Bigelow called "the temptation", "the fall", and "eternal damnation". In the first part, the temptation, the Acting Company yields to the temptation of re-creating the play,
the passion. In the second part, the fall, the Characters suffer because of the temptation, and they are unsuccessful in their attempt to re-create the drama. Ultimately it is not real, it cannot be, it is only a re-creation. Finally, in the third part, the eternal damnation, the Characters are eternally damned to watch their drama be played out but not to participate. The Acting Company exists as a perfect mirror to the Characters, but they ultimately are less "real" than the ghosts that must wander throughout eternity searching for life. The Characters are the real human beings; the actors in the Company only shadows, puppets acting out a story, which is not their own.

Mr. Bigelow felt that the play symbolized "ultimate chaos and destruction", that the play was written at a time of chaos, the end of the first world war and in the midst of Italian Fascism. The play begins as it ends, in chaos. There is an ending beyond the ending written that he wanted our production to allude to. Finally the director wanted to express to the audience that the play is like "a hurricane", a force of nature. Thus he wanted the audience to be "blown away" at the end.
BACKGROUND

The role of the Ingenue in *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR* is definitely less significant than the role of the Step-Daughter; however, the research remains the same. In fact it is more work on a certain level because the work is not already done for you by the playwright. The actor must instead create the entire history of the character, from beginning to end. This can be very exciting because the actor may create any life he wishes. I began with Eleonora Duse.

At the time the play was written 1921, Eleonora Duse was at the forefront of the acting world. She was also Italian. I decided that she would then become my idol as an actor, and as a character for this play. Between the director and myself we decided that the Ingenue was not only the youngest but the newest member of the Acting Company. Her main objective is to please the director of the company and surely work her way to the top. She sees herself as a young Duse, with total knowledge of Duse's career, step-by-step. One of the books I referred to was *AGE CANNOT WITHER*, the story of Duse and D'annunzio by Bertita Harding.
Another idol of the period that I used in my character work was Isadora Duncan. I felt that Duncan, even more than Duse, was a rebel in her time, and that the world of expression that Isadora opened up must have been very exciting to a young girl just starting out in the Arts. The most fascinating book that I came across was that by Victor Seroff titled THE REAL ISADORA. Since Isadora she lived until 1927, she, along with Eleonora Duse, was one of two very strong, independent woman whom I chose to emulate as an actor for the character of the Ingenue.

**VISUAL APPROACH**

The set designer for SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR was Michael C. Smith. The set design for the play was modeled after a small eighteenth century Italian theater, one which in our time would be considered a regional theater. The theatre, within the theater, was sparse; there was an empty stage with some stock set pieces scattered strategically -- items such as old trunks, ladders, chairs from various periods and costume racks.

Throughout the course of the play, the Characters "set the stage" by having the stage hands reconstruct different locations to accurately relive their story for the Acting Company and the director. As the play progresses the stage
settings become more and more real as the theatre belongs to the Acting Company less and less. Slowly, nothing is left on stage by the end of the play other than the actors, as they stand wondering if any of it actually happened. As they, too, disappear the theatre is literally torn apart before our eyes. What is left is the current stage of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival with her entire guts showing; in this space the Characters enter once again asking the question which begin the play; "We are looking for an author" (page 6).

The costume designer was David Kay Mickelsen. As in the set design, the costumes for the Acting Company were Italian, 1921. Ranging from practical (as in the Character woman), to youthful (as in my character of the Ingenue), to extravagant (as in the Leading Lady and Leading Man). Our costumes attempted to bring insight into the Acting Company, but remain extremely realistic.

On the other hand, the Characters were extremely stylized, in both costume and makeup. They were all mostly in black with some darker shades of green and blue. The director wanted them to look like they had just stepped out of a 1920's silent movie, whereas the acting company was all in warm, muted colors: peaches, taupes, beiges, browns.
ACTING STYLE AND APPROACH

Basically my approach to this production was not unlike my approach to Belle Starr in JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN. Comparatively looking at the two shows one might ask, "what kind of preparation is there for so few lines?" It is the same. The on-stage life that is created is no less important. In fact, it can sometimes be more difficult because the actor is not given his/her life story, it has to be created. The acting style of the play was to be somewhat elevated. The acting company in effect to be less real than the characters. The director wanted to convey an almost two dimensional quality, as opposed to the extremely stylized reality conveyed by the Characters.

As the company we were to be immediately threatened by the very existence of the Characters. The stage was to be a battlefield where the Acting Company and the Characters fight for their existence, both cannot exist in harmony with the other as they are diametrically opposed. As the play begins we (the Acting Company) were to be in control of the stage, but as it progresses the Characters take over.

My job as an actor, then, was to be the same as that of the audience. The Ingenue spends a great amount of time simply watching the "acting out" by the Characters. She
regularly shifts back and forth between believing in the Characters, and being incredulous as many of the Acting Company is. The audience experiences much the same feelings, so in a very real way the Ingenue plays a very important role for the audience, as she becomes a mirror, or a touchstone. This was an incredible opportunity for me to explore my own levels of concentration which in any other type of production may be interrupted by "acting". Instead I was allowed to explore an inner monologue that was never ending, and never verbalized. The inner monologue which I had created was reinforced by a fellow actor, Dan McLaughlin, when he said after seeing a performance; "if you wanted to know at any time where the focus of the production was, or how to feel about any given moment, check in with the Ingenue". This was a great compliment to my character's life on stage.

PERFORMANCE LIFE

As the run of SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR was much more extensive than that of JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN I had an opportunity as a performer to experience a "professional" run. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival performs every day of the week, except Monday, with two performances on Sunday and sometimes a student matinee on Thursday, making up a total of up to eight performances a
week for four weeks. Including the three preview performances, that gave us a grand total of 28 performances.

In much the same way that *Jesse and the Bandit Queen* took off in performance, so, too, did *Six Characters*. Although I could safely say that very nearly every production becomes a "show" when the audience arrives, some transform more than others. This would apply to both of the above. There is something quite magical that will happen in a production that can make it extremely special and important both artistically and spiritually. But it has everything to do with the chemistry of the cast, and their commitment to the show and the audience's acceptance of the material and/or message. Unfortunately, this is not an exact science for a producer, it is fraught with outside elements that cannot be predicted. However, it is into this uncertainty that a show must travel. *Six Characters* travelled this road with great success.
A scene from: SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR
SUMMARY

I do not think there could have been two more different acting experiences than JESSE and SIX CHARACTERS. Being able to play such different characters back-to-back allowed me a rare opportunity. The physical, vocal, and emotional life of each being entirely different. However, the world of Luigi Pirandello and David Freeman are not unalike. Each playwright explores the themes of reality, violence, sexuality and incest in unique ways, but both ask the audience to challenge their current belief systems, and find compassion for basically amoral behavior. In both plays Belle and the Ingenue's perception of reality is challenged, both playwrights challenge the same of the audience.
CHAPTER THREE: THE THREE SISTERS

INTRODUCTION

Anton Chekhov's play THE THREE SISTERS has always inspired a bit of awe in me. I have always placed Chekhov in that untouchable category of "classic writers". Work to be aware of and studied and kept at arms length until years of acting training had been accomplished. Of course I felt this to be true of Shakespeare also, until I had the opportunity to work on OTHELLO. I think we tend to hold at arms length what most we feel a kinship with.

Approaching a classic is frustrating. The actor is certainly not at a loss to find ample information surrounding the play. In fact one can be at a loss as to where to begin. However, in our situation we had additional information to research. I was once again working with Dr. Lasswell on this production and to make life more interesting for us all he decided to change the location of the play from Russia to America. Instead of living in rural Russia and longing to return to Moscow, we were instead living on an army base, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, 1905, and longing to return to New Orleans.
We were all a bit skeptical at the change Dr. Lasswell was making, but after reading the play with the entire cast we threw away some of those doubts, and dived into the project. The dialect of the American West worked very well with the poetry of Chekhov's writing. The military aspect of the play was fulfilled also. However, the one essential element of the play that I felt was lost in the translation was the sense of hopelessness. In Chekhov's play the reality of a period disappearing was very real, but in the United States at that time there was an abundance of innocence and hope. The play ends tragically with Tusenbach's death, this symbolizing the end of the Russian Aristocracy. In our production Tusenbach's (Toussaint Le Bache) death ended the era of the Southern Aristocracy, and the South's hope for independence. I was not convinced that our ending held the same weight as Chekhov's, but I was excited to see.

In our production I was to play the part of Irina (Irene). The play begins on Irina's twentieth birthday. By the end of the play Irina is twenty-four. I wanted to play this part because I felt that I would have plenty of opportunities to play Masha and Olga still, but I was coming to the end of my Irina days. I also felt a kinship with Irina. Her restlessness, frustration, and gradually disappearing innocence were all something I felt close to.
I also felt that of all the sisters Irina translated more fluidly to the American West setting than any of the other sisters. Her sense of purpose and obsession with working and producing something to leave behind were all traits that many pioneer women had to acquire to survive in the rugged new country.

DIRECTING CONCEPT

Before we embarked on an intense rehearsal schedule Dr. Lasswell planned a weekend at the coast retreat on March 31st. The objectives of this weekend were to encourage a company feeling, read the script and talk about it in depth, and generally to get to know each other better. All of the objectives were met with much success. We indeed bonded, our understanding of Tom's concept increased, and we had a wonderful and relaxing time. This was a great way to begin such a grand project. However, after we returned the real work began.

Adjusting to the play's new home, America, was not difficult on a surface level. The lyrical quality of Chekhov's writing translated very well to the American southwest. However, the lack of courage of the characters to change their unhappy lives was the hardest obstacle to overcome.
As the play progressed Tom chose to have the audience experience the feeling of distance in much the same way that the sisters felt distanced from their home, and lives. He accomplished this by having the last act of the play played out on the upper proscenium stage, as opposed to the thrust stage area that the beginning acts had been played on. All of a sudden their world physically opened up for them, but the sisters are unable to recognize their freedom. As Masha states in act four; "The birds are flying south already...Swans or geese...My loves, my happy loves..."(Page 266). The sisters, too, want to fly away but feel paralyzed out of fear, and hope for rescue. I am not sure the stage convention translated for the audience, but the actors recognized the irony.

Often times when Chekhov is produced the productions end up somber and slow. Tom did not want this to happen in our production. We fought very hard to keep play light, especially the first two acts. The play turns very dark all on its own, we were not to help it along prematurely.

REHEARSAL SCHEDULE AND JOURNAL

THE THREE SISTERS became something of a scheduling nightmare for both the director and stage manager, Renee King. No one was more responsible for this confusion than
myself. As our rehearsals began at the beginning of February, I was still committed to **SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR**. Due to the size of my part this created a bit of uneasiness between myself and the rest of the cast. In fact I was not able to make a full unqualified commitment until the beach trip at the end of March. This rough beginning established a distance that was hard to ignore. By opening night on April 19th, I believe the earlier feelings that I felt of distance, had all but vanished. After all we had one of the most intense and exhausting performance schedules ahead of us.

We opened on Thursday night the 19th of April, then had shows on Friday night, a two - o'clock matinee on Saturday, an eight - o'clock that evening, a Sunday matinee, and finally we closed that evening the 22nd of April!

Most of the problems I experienced in this process were due to scheduling. I was in the midst of rehearsing two shows simultaneously, which lead to my feelings of distance ultimately in both shows. I continued to keep in mind the art of "juggling" that Dr. Lasswell reminded me of early on that year. This, after all, was the larger lesson to learn, and I had no choice but to learn it.
BACKGROUND

Anton Chekhov's plays were among the first to attempt an entirely new and unique approach to the art of acting. However, without the inspiration of Konstantin Stanislavsky they may have disappeared from the theatrical world unnoticed. Stanislavsky launched a new era in acting with the birth of the Moscow Art Theatre, but his dreams were unfulfilled until Chekhov's plays put his theories into practice. Each was responsible for the other's success and lasting importance. A perfect marriage was born between the two artists. Chekhov's plays placed the focus on character as opposed to plot, and Stanislavsky's theories required complicated characters and relationships. Stanislavsky wrote the first outline of his ideas in 1909, THE THREE SISTERS was written in 1901. The relationship of these two men catapulted the theatrical world into the twentieth century. Without their work the "method", the most fundamental of all modern approaches to acting, may have had an entirely different inception, or possibly never existed at all. The face of the American theatre would certainly be different.
VISUAL APPROACH

The set for THE THREE SISTERS was designed by Jeff Seats. The set was structurally sparse, with specific window seats, furniture (a dining room table and piano for the first act, beds and screens for the second and outdoor furniture for the last) and large columns. The columns were to change in the course of the play from southern Doric columns to trees in the final act. The set unfortunately was never really realized due to problems which the cast were not privy to. As I stated in the director's concept, the show moved from the thrust stage to the upper proscenium for the final act. While this may have made some sense intellectually, I believe the audience had a difficult time adjusting; thus the final act became confusing and distant.

Professor Jill Hoddick, (who also designed for JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN) designed the costumes for THE THREE SISTERS. They were absolutely appropriate and beautiful! My dresses for Irina could not have felt more right; they were the final piece to my process as an actor. Professor Hoddick utilized the American west theme while at the same time maintaining an elegance that would have been appropriate to both Russian and Louisiana aristocrats.
Professor Hodick portrayed the gradual erosion of hope in the color changes in Irina's dresses. As the play began we first see Irina in a very light champagne colored dress, all bright and full of hope on her twentieth birthday. But as she slowly realizes her dreams will not be fulfilled we see her choose the darker tones like her sisters. As the play ends, the sisters have accepted their unhappy existence, their defeat visually supported in their choice of garments. Wearing these costumes was a pleasure.

**ACTING STYLE AND APPROACH**

The challenge of playing Irina did not appear to be as profound initially as it later proved to be as the rehearsal process progressed. Through the course of the play it becomes apparent that she is a major dramatic figure, and that of all the characters in the play she changes the most. The only one that perhaps rivals her journey is Natalya and the changes that she experiences. In fact they literally exchange positions in the household. As Natalya marries Andrei, Irina, Masha and Olga's power is usurped. They have been replaced and Natalya becomes the power center of the family.
Irina's demise and the erosion of her dreams becomes the metaphor for the entire play. It is her realization of the drudgery of daily existence and the gradual awareness that her life's dream ("to go to Moscow") will not be fulfilled, that takes away her sense of purpose. Irina's tragedy, like her sisters, is the collapse of her dream.

As Tom and I began discussing Irina and the play, we both agreed on the importance of not playing the ending too soon. We decided the best way to approach the play was moment to moment, Act to Act. This allowed the audience to watch Irina change before their eyes, her life becomes tragic and hopeless. We wanted her to fight the defeat every step of the way, so that at the end of the play she does not know she is defeated.

From the very first words that Irina utters in the play: "why keep harking back?"(page 191). Irina lives in the moment, with a strong thrust towards the future. Unlike Masha and Olga, Irina remembers very little from her past, all she has ever really known is her life in the country. I believe that Irina could have been happy living a very simple country existence, however her sisters are continuously lamenting the beautiful and important lives that they once led, thus Irina believes she wants only the same. Irina's life may have been entirely different had she
had the courage to live it. In fact, the entire family remains paralyzed after their father's death, each still longing for his unobtainable approval. From the beginning Irina hangs on to her sisters' dream while discovering one of her own, the desire to work. It is this obsession with "working" that drives her forward.

The play begins on Irina's twentieth birthday. She is full of hope and innocence, and yet there is a bit of foreshadowing at the end of the Act where her inner sadness betrays her youthful exuberance. She says to Tusenbach; "You say that life is beautiful. But supposing it only seems to be? For the three of us, for me and my sisters, life hasn't been beautiful up to now -It's choked us like choking weeds... Now the tears have started" (page 211). We see here the first signs of seriousness and fear. As each following Act begins we see her slowly erode as her dreams die. As Act two begins Irina is now twenty-two. She has been working for the last two years in a telegraph office and the romance of work is already wearing thin. But rather than feeling sad, she feels only slightly confused and feels it is the job that she must change. Irina has become introverted and moody, longing for peace and more determined than ever to escape to Moscow. With Act three, two more years have gone by and Irina is now almost twenty-four; her quiet despair has now turned to rage. It is during the fire
when everyone's masks drop, if only for an evening. In this speech Irina purges all:

Where's it all gone? Where is it? Oh, heavens, heavens! I've forgotten it all, I've forgotten it ... It's all mixed up inside my head... I can't remember the Italian for window, or ceiling... I'm forgetting it all, day by day forgetting it, and life's going away, and it will never come back, never, and we shall never get to Moscow ... I see that now - we're not going...I'm in despair, and how I'm still alive, how I haven't killed myself before now, I really don't know... (page 251)

It is at this moment in the play when Irina changes. She realizes her dreams were just illusions and decides to settle, like Masha, for a man she does not love. It is only Tusenbach's death that saves Irina from becoming mean and bitter like Masha, but instead of Irina embracing her freedom and second chance at her life dream, she settles for the same unfulfilled and passionless life that Olga has.

In Tusenbach Irina has found a spiritual partner. Although their union, like that of Masha and Vershinin, will remain barren. However, unlike Masha and Vershinin, their affair is passionless, their relationship centers around
their mutual obsession for work -- or purpose in this life. While Irina settles for a partnership with Tusenbach, she still longs for a passionate love, whom she believes to be in Moscow: "I kept waiting for us to be in Moscow. That's where I was going to meet the real one. I dreamt about him, I was in love with him... But it's turned out to be nonsense, just so much nonsense" (page 252). Instead she chooses to work, hoping that in her work she will find solace.

I approached Irina first emotionally, concentrating on her emotional responses to those around her, and allowing her movement to result from those responses. For example, in Act one her happiness causes her to continually prance around the room, requiring total focus from those around her. But as the play progresses and Irina's feeling of defeat slowly engulf her, her shoulders lose their confidence and the aura of youthful confidence is reduced to visible sadness and defeat.

**PERFORMANCE LIFE**

The performance of THE THREE SISTERS was an exhausting and furious three days. By the final few performances we were all so exhausted that I do not remember much about our audiences, or our performances for that matter. In
retrospect I think that a two-week, gentle run may have helped the individual performances and the entire ensemble's work assume its true potential. As it was we had a very different kind of lesson to learn. The play had more of its rough edges showing, less sophistication and more pure heart. I believe this is both good and bad. The performances were more "real", less "studied", but the show may have lacked in smoothness and refinement.

SUMMARY

Approaching a "classic" play like THE THREE SISTERS may be somewhat intimidating at first. But the work and discovery along the way is reward enough. The reasons that these are considered "classics" becomes more and more apparent daily, and the more that is discovered along the way tends only to make the actor leery of what has not been unearthed. As I came to know Irina my respect for Chekhov and the life he had created grew immensely. In the world of Masha, Olga and Irina lives hope, fear, happiness, sadness and all that the human existence has to offer us. Although I believe their end to be a tragic one, it is "everyman's" ending. None of us are guaranteed happiness and all we can really hope for is to experience the life as it is given, without judgement as to its quality. The sisters fail to see that their lives are inherently full of purpose, that no
further work is required other than to live it passionately. But it is this passion that they fear, for to give-in to life is to admit that we are powerless to the life that we have been dealt. As in classic tragedy "fate" is unyielding. We cannot hide from our destiny.

CONCLUSION

In the words of the great Isadora Duncan "Art gives form and harmony to what in life is chaos and discord" 9. It seems to me that this is what the three plays that I have discussed. Each play challenges the audience's perception of reality and our concept of what is good, and seeks to make sense of it and strike a balance within our world. The theatre at its best does this. JESSE AND THE BANDIT QUEEN, by David Freeman; SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR, by Luigi Pirandello; THE THREE SISTERS, by Anton Chekhov, all continue the timeless search for a sense of unity and harmony in our discordant universe. It is this attempt that makes these plays great and the characters in them timeless.

Belle, The Ingenue and Irina all exhibit strength, courage, intelligence and individuality. All traits that attracted me to each of them. Although some aspect of their realities are all challenged, they do not bend or break -- but instead have the confidence to look at themselves and
persevere. It is this ability that makes them timeless and their stories universal.

I wanted to play all of these women because of their sense of adventure. Although, we cannot say that any of them wins friends and influences people with their choices. They all choose their own road and stick to it. Belle Starr chooses to live as an outlaw, renouncing the role that was set up for her as a woman in her society. The Ingenue chooses also to live on the outside of society by becoming an artist. And finally Irina tries to pursue what she believes to be her purpose, to work. All accept the alternative to the "normal" life that their contemporaries chose. They have no choice but to follow their hearts, and although this may lead them to loneliness, in this pursuit they find freedom. It is apparent to me now that I am like them, and that our relationship over the past year has not been accidental. The joy of being an actor is that when you meet and become your character a part of them never leaves you. It is like the Characters that haunt *SIX CHARACTERS IN SEARCH OF AN AUTHOR*, they exist whether it be solely in the mind of the creator or not, they live. So Belle, The Ingenue and Irina will live in me.
ENDNOTES


6 Glenn Shirley, Law West of Fort Smith (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press) 98.


8 Beth Harper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


