

There is something magnetic about *Arcadia*. For every time I thought about it, saw it on my bookshelf, or read it, I kept heading toward it and thinking I have to direct this play. Each reading of *Arcadia* drew me deeper into the lives of the characters, deeper into the various themes, and deeper into the ideas and images that this particular play creates. Every reading was a new reading, which allowed me to see the play in a different light and stay intrigued. No matter how many times I read it, in the end it was always a puzzle, a mystery, and a love story. It was through those particular elements that I then became captivated with all the various themes, ideas, thoughts, and views found in this play. I wondered how it could contain so much, hold such a power over me, and excite me as much as it did.

I knew this play presented an opportunity that would allow the actors to be physically, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically devoted to their characters and their story. I wanted to implement what we do in the classroom into the rehearsal space, and to produce a play that required the actors to really focus in and work on their craft.

As I began working on *Arcadia*, I remembered a conversation that I had with a good friend of my mine. He saw the Broadway production of *Arcadia* a few years ago and said to me, "I hear that you are directing Arc-crap-ia?" I asked him why he had that response to the show. His answer and his feeling towards the production became my guide. With each of his criticisms I found a challenge and with each challenge, a goal.

His first statement was that he "was confused. What was going on with the two periods? I didn't know what was happening." Both of these worlds, the Regency and contemporary, can stand on their own. It's finding the connection between the two and presenting that story which is a concern. I need to distinguish the two time periods on stage, so I'll need to focus on manners and movements of the Regency period. For if the costumes are not enough, the movement and speech of the characters would be.

"I could not understand what they were saying because of the dialect." The play takes place in England, which for me is part of its appeal, and I wanted the dialect appropriate for both periods. The actors need to be fully equipped to handle the dialect, while still maintaining proper diction and vocal work. The audience needs to understand what the actors are saying, so the actors need to have the chops, vocal energy, and ability to tell the story effectively and with clarity.

"There was too much stuff - I didn't get what they were talking about." It is a play built around science, math, Romanticism, Classicism, emotion, and what it means to be human. The characters in this play are three-dimensional, full of principles, and each are on their own quest for truth, knowledge, love, or all of the above. The science, the reason, and the theories are meant to glorify and challenge the characters, while at the same time entertaining and educating the audience. I need to understand the show. I need to be able

to investigate and decipher not only the references in the play but also the subtext. I need to know this play in such a way that I can guide the actors as they develop characters. I need to be able to provide answers, thoughts, or suggestions so the audience can grasp some of the ideas, if not a majority of them.

“It was a long play and not much happened.” This I could not argue with. In fact people who were familiar with the show continually reminded me of this, for I heard “it’s a talky play” or “its three hours of people talking” quite a bit. I was fully aware of this but it did not defuse my excitement. It was simply a challenge to find ways to keep the audience actively engaged with the use of Stoppard’s language. I want the audience to appreciate *Arcadia* in whatever way they could.

I realized that all I had was five and half weeks to get a language driven show on its feet in such a way that the audience could stay intrigued, invested, and involved. One of my goals is to create a show where the characters are free to live and inhabit their world. I want to create a show that captures the beauty of the play, what I see every time I read or think about *Arcadia*. More importantly I have a desire to tell a story, a mysterious, romantic, and thought- provoking story, one that someone can easily follow. Those are my challenges when working on *Arcadia*.

These challenges guided me in planning my rehearsals, my personal approach to the show, and my communication with others. Every decision that was made, every note I gave, all of the work in the rehearsal space, all came from these challenges floating in my head. These challenges were the reason I had dramaturgical assignments for the cast and table work, why I divided the cast into their periods, why I encouraged the cast to continually converse with me outside of rehearsal, and why I recorded certain rehearsals. These challenges were the reason why I continually asked the cast to tell me a story, why I asked them how their characters fit into the story, and why that particular scene was important. These challenges became the best thing for me. By establishing how I wanted to accomplish each of the challenges, I created an educational environment and approached this production as both an educator and director. So it seems that these challenges not only set up the way I thought about the production, they became the foundation. What follows next is the background information of the process itself; my work with the production team and actors, decisions that were made and the execution of those decisions.

From the beginning I saw this play as two worlds and this is what I shared with the production team. Regarding lighting, I wanted the Regency to have a candlelit glow and natural lighting and the contemporary world to appear flat and artificial. For the costumes worn, I saw the Regency characters in textures and patterns, with warm, earth tones and the contemporary world full of vibrancy and cool colors. I thought that this would highlight and support the notion that we started off in two different worlds but by the time the play reached its end we realize that time is flexible. Another element that I wanted to discuss was the space itself. I felt that the room was a character, appearing both insignificant and expansive, and

adapting to each period. My impression of the room was that it contained the knowledge, secrets, stories, the romance, and the mystery of everyone that came into contact with Sidley Park. I also wanted a huge table.

When I first meet with the cast I made sure that they all knew that they were cast for a specific reason, which they were. As a whole I knew that the roles that they had before them would challenge them, allow them to develop as actors, and embrace a character that may be new to them, something they have not had the opportunity to play prior. I also gave them dramaturgical assignments because I knew that as much work as I would be doing, I would not be able to take on everything found in this play. They completed this homework over the summer and when we returned to school they presented their research during the first week of rehearsal. By establishing this, the actors already had a certain level of investment and connection with their characters, which I think carried through over the course of the production.

After the dramaturgical presentations, a read thru, and discussion of the play, I divided them into their respective time periods. The actor who played Augustus/Gus, was the only actor with me the entire time, since his characters existed in both periods. I set up rehearsals this way because I felt it was important for the actors to stay focused on their story and the work that I would need to do with each period would be different, in particular their movement and manners. I also wanted to stress the importance of not knowing. I told them from this point on, the other world did not exist. The only time the full cast would be present would be when working on scene seven, a scene that we rehearsed the most due to the complex nature of it, the integration of the two periods, and the notion of “the almosts”. This was something that I told the cast as we were working scene seven, that it is filled with “almosts.” The characters from the different periods almost run into each other and their dialogue almost overlaps each other, a scene of almost.

Before we got on our feet and did any blocking, we spent four days on table work. My fear was getting the actors on their feet before they understood what they were saying. I felt that if we did this it would slow down the process and would create a barrier between the actor and their character’s development. I settled on two days for each period believing that this would be enough for us to feel comfortable on our feet, while still being able to continually challenge and explore the language and themes. During this time I wanted to make sure that everyone felt relaxed and it seemed fruitful because we were collaborating and thoughts were being expressed.

Because the cast was divided into their respective periods, it was interesting to take note of the two different vibes that the groups exhibited in rehearsals. They both had the same strong work ethic, but their personalities changed the way in which I worked and communicated with the cast. When we were all together, it was a unique and memorable experience. We always had a lot of fun but still accomplished what we needed too. The time we spent on table work was beneficial but it also caused some actors to stay

in their heads. It wasn't until after the designer run, our first run through, that the actors finally broke free from living in their head. They realized they knew what they were talking about, what the subtext was, so they began to make choices and embody the text.

The realization came during a Saturday rehearsal. I had it scheduled that we would be doing Veiwpointing, style work, movement work, and then language work in the afternoon. However, the cast and I agreed when we broke for lunch that we should keep doing movement. I should point out that most of the work that we did that day always started with a goal and they had to discover what they could do, maintaining their period movements if needed, without the voice. There was no language used, no speaking period unless I felt that language was needed. I would give them permission from the sidelines if this were the case.

This was a day of ensemble building, trust, and laughter. We also established character relationships, strengthen character development and recognized the fact that we knew what we were talking about. This was also the day when the actors discovered what I value, want to see, and that I would never ignore their choices. Nathaniel who played Jellaba found his posture, his attitude, and his relationship to the characters that interacted within the Regency period. He realized the amount of energy and focus needed to maintain his status and job, the amount of information or gossip he actually knows, and, above all, how to show his agitation or annoyance without letting it be seen by the person he was addressing.

Casey who played Ezra Chater discovered the fool inside. He always knew that Chater was not the smartest of characters, but as we continued to dig deeper, Casey realized that Chater was the butt of all the jokes. It was hard for him to come to terms with that, to know that everyone is always laughing at Chater. He also began to explore his relationship with Septimus, Capt. Brice and the Coverly family.

Andy who played Bernard Nightingale truly realized what a conceited, selfish, and loathsome man he can be, especially if wants something from someone. Jamie (Hannah) came to the realization that she spends too much time in her head and what she thinks she is conveying with her body is actually not being seen. She also discovered the strength behind Hannah and how to play Bernard's game when needed. The Coverly siblings, Tim (Valentine Coverly), Brianna (Chloë Coverly), and Nick (Gus Coverly) became just that, siblings. They played games with each other, realized what they would be willing to do for each other, and from that moment on the three of them became stronger by creating small details that only the three of them would know.

Emily (Lady Croom) discovered two important things that continued to fuel her. The first was the notion of power, she found it, realized what it could do and never let it go. This power came into play when she was working with Brian (Septimus) on scene six. The things that they were doing were unbelievable, there was a moment when Lady Croom had all the power and within a second Septimus took it from her, and she

succumbed to him. I do not know if we would have been able to find scene six without this exercise. The second thing that Emily discovered came during a moment of exploration between Thomasina and Septimus. At one point I went over to Emily, who was watching the exercise, and I told her that she should enter the space whenever she felt inclined. It turned out that Lady Croom entered right when we all wanted Septimus to go over and kiss Thomasina. It was at that moment when the cast saw the destructive nature of Lady Croom and in turn, Lady Croom realized her protective nature over Thomasina and that her passion was mixed with distrust in regards to Septimus.

When working with Brian and Ceci (Thomasina) I had the two actors sit in their normal positions, at the end of the table. The rules that I set forth were these: language could not be used, explore your relationship to each other, notice what the space does to your relationship, and respond accordingly. That was it. What the cast and myself witnessed was their entire relationship unfold before us. The actors found the humor and teasing nature of their characters, the missed glances at each other along with shared glances. When Septimus could no longer stay at his side of the table, he moved to sit next to Thomasina. It was here, in their closeness that their relationship, their true relationship, was found. Brian, as Septimus, must have realized that he was too close to her, the fact that anyone could come in and see this, so he moved. He went back to his chair and then the two of them shared a look, a look of regret from Septimus and of sorrow from Thomasina. Just as Septimus was about to go back to Thomasina, Lady Croom entered. The above exercise between Brian and Ceci was exciting, heartbreaking, and rewarding. The actors realized that these two characters are intelligent and logical, but emotion is powerful and there is an enormous amount of it in their relationship. The actors also realized the relationship between Septimus and Thomasina is extremely important to the characters.

The relationship between the actors strengthened which allowed the relationship between the characters to grow. This particular exercise evoked various emotions from the actors, ones they could not fully articulate to me afterwards. After giving Ceci and Brian a quick water break, I continued working with the Regency characters. I started with Ceci and Brian and then kept adding the other Regency actors into the scene. Each time I asked an actor to enter I gave them a clear character goal to pursue. When all of the characters were in the space actively pursuing their goal, I said freeze and the rest of the cast and I saw a dynamic stage picture, one that I would never have been able to create. The relationships were clear, their goals evident, emotion was high and there was a clear sense of a story being told.

I performed the same sort of exercise with the contemporary actors with the same result. I started with the Coverly siblings, added in Hannah and then Bernard. However, with this particular exercise I would start and stop and continually change their character's goals. I would add or take away objects that would affect the character's interpersonal relationships and their relationship to space. Some of the discoveries that I mentioned earlier were a result from this exercise. This day was not only beneficial for the actors, but for

me as well as I moved forward in the rehearsal process. Upon seeing the run, listening to some of the notes that I was given, I realized that there was more to the space than what I was currently using. This Saturday rehearsal allowed me to see other possibilities, how to use the space, levels and what the actors were capable of creating in regards to this space. At the end of the day, I told the cast that I saw their characters develop, and I saw that the actors were capable of taking what they knew and embodying it. So the next step was to let the language guide them into finding those moments of emotion, relationship, and to stop thinking and start reacting. Above all the actors accomplished a lot because they were actively pursuing goals.

At various rehearsal points I would record the actors, both visually and audibly. I would post these on our Google Drive as a means for the actors to both hear and see what they were doing. This was helpful for the actors, especially those in the Regency period because they were able to physically see how they moved in space and take into account their movement and mannerisms. By listening to themselves via the sound recording they were able to take note of their dialect, diction and the rhythm at which they spoke. I am not sure how many of the actors used this device, those that did found it beneficial for their progress.

Something else that I did over the course of the rehearsal process was meet with various actors outside of the allotted rehearsal time. I made it very clear to them from the beginning that I was here to help them. That as a director and educator it was my responsibility to talk, to work through items, and to both ask and answer questions whenever they wanted to. I never felt these meetings to be a burden, unwanted, or a waste of my time. Of the twelve cast members, ten of them meet with me at least once, half of them met with me at various points to continue the dialogue, and Brian met with me frequently. Most of these conversations lasted ten to fifteen minutes and most of the time when an actor asked me a question I would counter with a question. They did not always appreciate it but I wanted them to respond first, to hear what they thought before I provided my insight or opinions. Every time I meet with an actor I saw improvement in rehearsal, I saw different choices being made, and other moments became clearer and more focused. This method works well for me because it does allow the actors to have a sense of the big picture and then find moments when clarity and subtly are key.

Due to a conversation that I had with Brian at one of our meetings, I thought I would try something with the cast. That night at rehearsal, after warm-ups, I asked them each to pick a goal, something that they wanted to accomplish, explore, or try. After the rehearsal I asked for a show of hands if they accomplished that goal. I continued this approach and each time, more and more hands would go up regarding their success. I never asked what their goals were, I never wanted them to share it with others, and I never implied that I would be upset if they did not achieve their goal. By simply asking them to set a goal for themselves I began empowering them, challenging them, and internally making a choice about their craft and what they are bringing to the production. Each time I asked them to set a goal, new things occurred on stage and the

play became more exciting and engaging. Because this was a successful tool, I went a step farther. I had them set their own goal and then I gave them one. The goal I set for each individual was tailored to them and I picked their goal because I wanted to see something different, wanted them to explore something further, or it was a way for me to accomplish something that the actor has not been able to do prior. When we started that night's run, on top of everything else, the actors had two goals to pursue and that was the night that the show went up another level. Together we saw and found new and exciting opportunities, cleaner relationships, bigger physical movements, greater sense of control, but more importantly they were making choices that they never made before and I would say nine out of ten choices were accurate and heightened the scene.

There is so much in this play, so many ideas and themes that I could not play all of them. If I tried to, it would just be a jumble of things so I had to pick one theme to focus on. I thought I had to pick one, but I realized that I always looked at this play as two separate pieces, a love story and a mystery. This is what I focused on, telling these two stories in a non-linear narrative. So anytime that I was with the Regency it was how do we tell a love story and when I was with the contemporary world it was how do we solve the mystery. And it just so happens that both were told at the very end in the waltz. Scene seven showed Septimus and Thomasina's growing affection for each other and Hannah believes she knows who the hermit is but cannot prove it. Septimus and Thomasina share in their love at the end and the mystery is solved when Gus hands Hannah the proof she needs, a drawing of Septimus holding Plautus. Everything happens in the same space, in the same time, centuries apart. That is what captured me about this show; this is what I felt everything was leading up too. This notion helped me guide the cast and I kept reminding and asking them, how do their individual actions and choices impact the story being told? What important information do you convey and why is your particular scene in the play. Quoting from the British television show, *Doctor Who*, I once told the cast, "We're all stories, in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?" I left them with that. I wanted them to tell their story, to tell it in a way that fused the two worlds together in an effortless and beautiful way.