

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Creating the Ensemble: A Student Collaboration on Caryl  
Churchill's *Cloud Nine*  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* was written for Joint Stock in 1979. Although Churchill wrote the play in isolation, the work was devised from a three week workshop. This collaborative effort culminated in one of Joint Stock's and Caryl Churchill's most controversial and successful productions to date. In 1994, The University of Calgary hosted a revival of *Cloud Nine*, performed by seven student actors, and accompanied by an eleven member student orchestra. The reinvention of the performance text with a student ensemble is the primary focus of this work. Chapter One of this thesis examines the nature of the ensemble from the director's perspective. Chapter Two explores the playwright's history, the making of *Cloud Nine*, and pertinent theory and analysis for production. Chapters Three, Four and Five review production aspects beginning with casting and the workshop, then the design and music collaboration and finally, the rehearsal process. Chapter Six provides the performance evaluation.

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To Brian Smith and Patricia Benedict, I offer my sincere gratitude and respect.

To Nanny

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page .....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication .....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Epigraph .....	vii
Chapter One: The Ensemble .....	1
Chapter Two: The Politics of <i>Cloud Nine</i> - Representations of Gender, Race, Class and Power.....	22
Chapter Three: The <i>Cloud Nine</i> Ensemble.....	54
Chapter Four: Design and Music Collaboration .....	75
Chapter Five: The Rehearsal Process .....	96
Chapter Six: Evaluation of the Performance.....	136
Bibliography .....	150
Appendix 1: Act One Ground Plan .....	154
Appendix 2: Act Two Gound Plan .....	155

But if there isn't a right way of doing things you have  
to invent one.

*Cloud Nine*

## Chapter One: The Ensemble

### A Philosophy of Ensemble

It began as a workshop on 'sexual politics': it concluded as one of Joint Stock's most successful productions to date. It has been performed to audiences around the world with successes on Broadway, in a vast array of regional theatres, and dozens of university productions. But in 1978, when director Max Stafford-Clark asked actor, Tony Sher to participate in the workshop, his response was:

What could it possibly mean? Sex was sex and politics was politics and putting them together surely took the fun out of both. (Ritchie, 138)

It would not be until one year later while watching a revival of the production that Tony Sher would recognize the power of, and truly appreciate his part in, the making of *Cloud Nine* (142). It would not be until 1994 when I would have my chance to realize the power of this play, and realize it I most definitely did.

I remember making my lists of plays from which the graduate committee had to choose a suitable one for me to direct. The last question on the survey (I had to complete one for each play) was why I would want to direct that particular play? My advisor, Patricia Benedict, and I shared a good laugh upon recalling my answer to that question, for it was the same answer for each of the ten plays I had selected: "It would be a good ensemble piece." In retrospect, I still cannot see any other suitable answer. Yes, the subject matter varied from play to play,



and each one had its unique strengths and attractions, but the overriding quality of my final selections hinged on the ensemble nature of each piece.

This compulsion towards ensemble work was inspired through much of the work I had done as an undergraduate actor at the University of Winnipeg and continued in the nature of the work I chose to do as a director. Little did I know, however, just how significantly the ensemble work I had previously done would contribute to the success of my production of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine*. This would prove to be the culminating effort of all that I had tried and tested as well as a challenge to me in certain areas that I had never before encountered.

To begin, I want to talk briefly about how the nature of ensemble work has influenced and shaped my work as a director so that the reader may have a clearer understanding of the principles which colour my working methods when I refer to them in subsequent chapters. I will begin by defining the most essential characteristics of ensemble, how they shape and define my entire process.

Translated from French the word ensemble means 'together.' To my mind this immediately suggests the abolition of the traditional hierarchy of the director - actor relationship as well as the director's relationship to every other individual involved in the process. The approach I take to directing is influenced by several elements that nurture and strengthen this non-traditional ("female"), method of creation (Innes, 451). The following outlines

the basic elements of commitment, generosity, collaboration, and trust:

1. Commitment implies that whomever I work with will have the utmost respect for the material at hand. The actors will come to work with a strong personal commitment and passionate desire to give their all, to communicate the story. Likewise, the designers, stage management, production and technical staff and all assistants will be equally committed to their work.

2. Generosity is the essential characteristic that colours the working relationship between the members of the ensemble. We are each of us responsible for giving everything we have to the process before us. We care for each other and allow ourselves to be cared for by each other. We come to the work as openly as the child comes to the parent for love - perhaps the most rewarding experience the process has to offer.

3. Collaboration is the foundation of the ensemble experience. As a director I prefer to see myself as a guide on the journey. Though all artistic decisions must meet with my final approval, every member of the ensemble has an equal voice in the process. In the case of *Cloud Nine* we already have the written text and as such need not concern

ourselves with collaborating to produce a text. Instead we turn our attentions to collaborating on the performance text.

4. Trust precedes every other element of the ensemble process. Without trust the creative potential of the working relationship and all that is to develop from the collaborative effort will never reach the possible heights that await those who are willing to give themselves over — body, mind and soul — to the experience before them.

It is only fitting that I now explore the relationship between actor and director in the context of the above mentioned elements as much of this thesis concerns this working relationship.

The actor is the living, breathing, feeling, thinking being through which the story will be performed. She might be an exceptionally skilled and trained artist, or she might be a virtual beginner with great potential and will therefore require different things from the director. Despite the numerous differences that a director can expect while working with actors, commitment is mandatory for all.

If an actor cared little about a text's arguments and ideas a director might think twice about working with her. The audition process can serve the director very well in discerning the actor's thoughts regarding the material and whether or not a particular actor has the desire to commit herself to the often arduous process of rehearsal. Not every actor is equipped with the same

inner discipline or dedication as the next. It is therefore in a director's best interest to seek out through thorough auditioning that actor who holds the most promise (among other things) of committing to the project. When there is mutual respect for the work then anything is possible.

Possibilities are unlimited when a company of actors is willing to give everything they have during the rehearsal process and throughout the run of the show. The manner in which actors conduct themselves while working — their capacity for generosity — does not only imply courtesy (inside and outside the rehearsal hall), but speaks of their ability to give to their fellow cast mates all that they can for the good of the production. The advanced actor will graciously aid the beginner in need and in turn will be responsive to learning with and from that actor as well. Inherent in the actors' understanding is equality of voice and value as performer. Whenever possible, decisions are made by the democratic consensus of the group as is true to the nature of collaboration. This was especially true in the case of *Cloud Nine*.

Collaboration precedes the rehearsal process beginning with the design team who meet together to create the *mise-en-scène*. While traditional, non-collaborative efforts often exclude sound or lighting designers until the end of the process such is not the case here. Each element of design carries equal value and weight and should therefore be integrated accordingly. The presence of every member of the design team inspires thought, creativity and productivity as each designer is free to (and is encouraged to) make suggestions and offer knowledge and insight to each

element of the design. The designers' knowledge of every part of the whole influences and aids their approach to their own work.

The collaborative effort of the actors, director, and stage management also contradicts the traditional hierarchical approach. Although the director still exists within the ensemble, her relationship to the actor and to the process is best described as the central collaborator. Often, as is the case with *Cloud Nine*, the character roles are of equal size and thus lend equal value to each actor — there are no 'stars.' Mutual respect, among all members of the ensemble including the assistant director and stage management is of the utmost importance. If there is respect for each member of the ensemble (and for the process), facilitating trust amongst the group can be effortless.

Creating and strengthening trust between the director and actors and amongst the entire group is a never-ending process that continues throughout rehearsals to closing night. Regardless of an actor's experience, trust is essential to the productive, collaborative working relationship. It means finding ways of working that elicit positive results. Creating a working environment that is conducive to giving, to taking risks, to exploration, and to bringing out the best in the actor is of prime importance. Working on extremely emotional material, for example, necessitates such an environment. Putting the actor at ease, encouraging her in her work, acknowledging her struggle with difficult moments, suggesting alternative strategies, and reassuring her of her progress will help to instill and strengthen trust. Actors are often insecure about their work and at times

might approach it with trepidation and timidity. The director who can guide the actor through these rough periods will most probably be treated to some very fine results for it is at these times that some of the most incredible work can be achieved. It is invigorating for both actor and director alike, a testament to the paradoxical nature of creativity.

As trust between actors and director develops so too does the trust between actors develop. Observing the working relationship between the individual actor and the director is the best indication to others as to what will be offered to them. The director establishes the atmosphere; the rest of the ensemble follows in turn. The desire to commit, to be generous, and to collaborate arises from the continuous development of trust.

Every member of the ensemble is a human being with a personal investment in the project. It is my regard for the actors, the assistant director (when I am fortunate enough to have one), stage management, the designers and every other invaluable member of the production team that defines the nurturing approach I take as a director. This is the foundation of my philosophy towards establishing an ensemble company.

### **The Joint Stock Ensemble**

The term 'ensemble' has been loosely thrown about, often misused, and certainly appropriated by those whose idealistic visions of theatre insist that their company be different; everyone will have equal personal and artistic responsibilities, there will be no 'stars,' all in-flowing cash (of which there will be

an abundance) will be equally distributed amongst the company. But, is this in fact what the true nature of ensemble companies is all about? John Wilk proposes that "[t]he idea of an *ensemble* acting company is an organizational philosophy" (1). He continues by likening a theatrical ensemble to a musical performance:

the simultaneous performance of all the instruments of an orchestra, or of all the voices in a chorus...the creation of a whole performance work coordinated from its several pieces.(1)

It is precisely this idea that I find the most conducive to defining the nature of ensemble as it applies to my work. A closer look at the Joint Stock Theatre Group explores the nature of ensemble as it relates to the creation of our ensemble for the purposes of reinventing the performance text of *Cloud Nine*.

In his introduction to *The Joint Stock Book: The Making of a Theatre Collective*, Rob Ritchie begins:

It is hard to imagine a more foolish ambition than creating a theatre company, let alone one that tours new plays. The attempt has been known to have ruinous consequences: several people who have tried in the past now live quietly abroad; many are alcoholics; and I know of one psychotherapist who completely redecorated her waiting room with fees paid by an aspiring artistic director. The company was to have been called 'Bang'. All that remains of this troubled vision is ten square metres of fitted oatmeal in a back room in Maida Vale. Others have not been so lucky.

(11)

Although a bleak depiction, it is unfortunately all too often true that most present day efforts to set about creating an ensemble company end in failure. But, this has not always been the case. It has been in the last few decades that such ensemble theatre began to thrive in a new age of politics and sexuality.

The youth of the 1960's permeated their surroundings with an exuberance that scarcely left any aspect of life untouched, unchallenged, and unchanged. It was a time when the voices of a young generation, students and the working class would not be ignored and when, as Michelene Wandor states "the day-to-day lives of ordinary people could be politicized and changed, and that the quality of relationships between people were as important as greater material benefits" (Understudies, 13).

'Sexual politics' and 'cultural politics' radically influenced this generation's understanding of their role in society. When I spoke with British theatre artist (director, actor, playwright, and artistic director) Libby Mason, she recounted the student and workers protests of the 60's as being the 'catalyst for change':

It was a time of great upheaval and excitement. Things were changing all around us and we were the ones responsible for making those changes...politics, as we knew it, would never be the same. The theatre that emerged at that time was alive, new. It challenged mainstream commercialism by representing alternative views that were much more appealing because it represented our voices which were rich in diversity. It was a time of great experimentation. (July 5, 1997)



The emergence of fringe and feminist theatres resulted as cultural and sexual politics became a mainstay in the everyday lives of this generation.

During this time women began to explore the nature of their oppression in the form of consciousness raising groups. Meetings evolved from being a form of therapy to becoming a vehicle for direct politicization, focusing on a variety of issues such as woman's visibility in politics, the workforce, academia, and her role as artist. Some CR groups aligned themselves to specific aims such as introducing women into the political arena. Another avenue of exploration was separation — the need to see women apart from men and define women's roles on their own terms and analyse those roles in society (or theatre). The term 'sexual politics,' popularized by Kate Millett in 1969, began to infuse British alternative theatre with "important questions about the way theatre is organized, produced, and distributed" (Micheline Wandor qtd. in Goodman, 28). By examining the reification of women, gendered roles and the division of labour, theatre acquired political purpose which varied greatly depending on the alternative group to which one happened to belong.

Theatre underwent many transformations as a result of the changing times; the abolition of formal censorship now allowed for representations of homosexuality which were previously illegal, as well as other controversial and taboo subject matter. Furthermore, theatre now had the working class interests at heart. It was instrumental in portraying these lives, these voices, and dramatizing the relationship between the New Left and a

bourgeois ideology. The début of collective collaboration began as a direct result of the abolition of censorship in 1968, which introduced "communal script creation" (Innes, 451). Previously scripts were submitted to and approved by the Lord Chamberlain's office, after which changes to a text could not be implemented. Researched subject matter, improvisation and the artist's point of view became integral for the development of new texts. This new collaborative way of working established a female approach to writing, an alternative to the "male power structure" of creation where the author writes in isolation, owns his text and is situated at the top of the creative hierarchy above director and actor (451).

In Britain, CAST, Cartoon Archetypal Slogan Theatre, was the first alternative political theatre group formed in 1964. Skits were performed in the streets in agitprop style and were "deliberately provocative and propagandist" (Goodman, 50). From this group evolved the AgitProp Street Players in 1968, who later became Red Ladder in 1973. Although it would be several years later, it is precisely from this climate that Joint Stock began making theatrical history in 1974.

Unlike those companies whose ensemble efforts ended in failure, The Joint Stock Theatre Group would eventually be recognized "for ensemble work of the highest order" (Ritchie, 11). But, to begin, it is essential that the reader understand the history of Joint Stock, their working method, and their mandate.

Founded by David Aukin, Max Stafford-Clark, and David Hare, as an 'umbrella organization', the concept of Joint Stock, as Aukin recounts,

...was pure: to provide work on a one-off project basis for those who had been associated with fringe groups . . . there was to be no permanent acting company but merely a modest administrative structure which would enable projects to happen. (100)

Ritchie identifies the structure of the company in terms of their aesthetic standards, but first cites how their initial success with *Fanshen* paved the way for their future:

Here was a play about revolution, approached with an evident seriousness and played in a disciplined manner that surely sprung from a shared ideology. Brecht was mentioned by the critics; a degree of humourlessness - a sure sign of political conviction - noted. Moreover, having enacted the turning over to communism of the Chinese peasants, the company promptly applied the process to itself, eventually establishing a collective, abolishing the post of artistic director and subjecting all aspects of the work . . . to democratic discussion and control. (12)

Several things happened to initiate the evolution of Joint Stock. Fringe theatre became less popular for those writers who now desired to entertain larger audiences with plays "that tackled large public themes requir[ing] physical and financial resources beyond the reach of the average fringe outfit" (13); Discouraged by the need to continuously produce commercial theatre to fund

experimental work, Bill Gaskill left the Royal Court as its artistic director. Meanwhile, Max Stafford-Clark and his company of six actors called Traverse busied themselves with workshops "concerned with breaking down the conventional actor/audience relationship . . . methods [which] were to shape the early work of Joint Stock" (15). Eventually Gaskill and Stafford-Clark would join forces to form Joint Stock, obtain an Arts Council grant of £12,000, and tour their first production of Heathcote Williams's documentary novel *The Speakers*. Veteran fringe actors and commissioned works by Stanley Eveling, Barry Reckford, and Colin Bennett, to name a few, would "consolidate the company's reputation" (16). And then came *Fanshen*, the production from which Joint Stock gained recognition and respect (including a 300% increase - £40,000 - from the Arts Council), and from which developed the beginnings of Joint Stock's working method (17).

The name Joint Stock "encapsulated the ambition to act as a platform for those with a common interest in new work" (15). This "ambition" materialized into a "shifting collective," as Aukin describes the company's turning point:

Sitting around in a circle in the rehearsal room, the company examined its own structure and organization, and concluded that the company belonged to the co-operative of actors, directors, designers and administrators; no longer would Max or Bill or David or I be responsible as 'management' for running the company and deciding the projects. This would be done by the collective, and, quite uniquely possibly, for this country at least, a formula was developed whereby the

company would function as a shifting collective; the current company would be responsible for setting up the next project and, like a chain letter, the next company would do likewise. (100)

Although Joint Stock has always striven to "create conditions in which new work can be produced to the highest artistic standards" (13), their evolution, declares Ritchie, "has been more marked by a refusal to adopt fixed principles governing the choice of projects than it has by any ambition to reach a shared political view" (12).

To this end the same can be said for their presentation of material, as Aukin points out: "the company that had been set up to have no defined style, indeed to embrace a diversity of styles and talents, rapidly developed its own distinctive house-style, a style that came through, whatever the composition of the group" (100). Thus, Max Stafford-Clark's name for Joint Stock (the 'colourless company') aptly describes the chameleon-like nature of its structure and approach as the company "takes on the complexion of the material with which they are working" (12). The result was a process which might aptly be described as the Joint Stock method or style.

With the exception of Caryl Churchill there has never been another writer who has written specifically for Joint Stock on more than one occasion. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, *Cloud Nine*, *Fen*, and finally *A Mouthful of Birds*, co-written with David Lan, are Churchill's contribution to the company's history. As for the lack of any prolonged relationship with other writers, Rob

Ritchie suspects that this may be due to the following: "the pressures of the workshop, the obligation to write under the constant gaze of the actors, is too public an exposure of a craft more easily controlled in private" (30). This may be better understood in terms of the process itself.

Simply put, the process consists of the company researching and workshopping a subject over a three to four week period whereupon the writer leaves to write the play over a period of several weeks or months, as the case may be, returning with the final text to be revised if necessary, rehearsed, and finally, performed. It is in this manner that each of Ms. Churchill's plays have been written for Joint Stock. The essential advantage to this method is that it allows for in-depth exploration of the characters and the situations in which they exist. Because the detailed research is done by the actors over a lengthy period of time (equal to that of a rep company's entire rehearsal period), the final characters are devoid of generalized or superficial attitudes or feelings. Ritchie recounts the workshopping of *Fen* and what it enabled the actors to bring to the rehearsal text:

To live in the Fens, for example, and work on the lands provides an opportunity to absorb a sense of a place and its people that has an obvious practical value: tones of voice, styles of behavior, patterns of work and recreation, can be tested against what is known or assumed in advance about the community. (31)

Although the advantages are obvious, Ritchie also warns the reader not to 'idealize' the process, explaining that the actual

gathering of material through encounters with the locals and observations of the environment may result in "nothing more than vague impressions, a collection of puzzling details" (31). It is not until the group convenes to tell accounts of their experiences that "the generalization breaks down and much more contradictory impulses and feelings are caught" (31). It is precisely at this point of departure where the actors discover "conflicting tensions within an individual life [that] restore[s] a complexity to character work" (31). Ritchie further declares that it is through this group work that there "evolves a sense of responsibility to the people whose experience is to be dramatized" (31).

*Cloud Nine*, however, went right to the hearts of the actors themselves, for it was from their own experiences and lives that this text materialized. Instead of moving from the outside inward as they did with *Fen*, Joint Stock embarked on a more radically personal journey for the collaborative process of *Cloud Nine*. The actors themselves were not chosen solely on the basis of their acting skills, but in relation to their sexual orientation as well. And while it is one thing to explore the nature of sex and sexuality within the context of a written text, it is quite another to explore these issues within a purely personal context in order to develop the text. It is no doubt safe to assume that this would require an enormous amount of respect and trust among a group of virtual strangers. But what are the implications for the student acting company creating the performance text? The requirements for acting the *Cloud Nine* text now needs to be explored in the context of the preceding discussion of ensemble theatre.

## **Envisioning the Student Acting Ensemble of Cloud Nine**

While I had no intention of casting this production based on the actors' sexual orientations, I knew that the company I would eventually cast would require a willingness to delve into their personal experiences and perceptions regarding sex and sexuality when and where the text necessitates, and furthermore, to share this information in a group setting. The mature and controversial subject matter demands that the ensemble be able to approach the exploration of the text with maturity and an open mind. The degree to which we excel depends on how we bring ourselves to the process and into the world of the play.

As the director, it is my responsibility to establish an atmosphere conducive to the development and reciprocation of respect and trust. The extent to which I exemplify commitment, generosity and a willingness to collaborate will serve to enhance the overall rehearsal process instilling in the ensemble the desire to do likewise. My ability to guide, to communicate the importance of these aspects, will no doubt influence the ensemble's reception and subsequent reciprocation of these aspects.

While it is true that as individuals we will differ in our political ideologies, it is also true that as an ensemble we will need to share a desire to communicate the text's political ideology. As such the ensemble must have, or develop, an awareness of sexual politics as it pertains to the text. It is not my desire to change any person's view of the world throughout the rehearsal process, but if this does occur through the experience gained in the process



then so much the better for the individual. This is not entirely within my control, nor do I take responsibility for this task. What I do have control over is casting individuals whose political ideologies are not so far removed from the text so as to inhibit or resist its exploration. The material and the presentation of it will present sufficient challenges for those individuals who already possess the specified criteria, never mind those who do not. The challenge of respecting differing points of view from within a shared belief system will be only one of many that we confront along our journey.

If we can collaborate from within a 'shared ideology,' a common ground from which our desire to communicate allows us to subjugate our 'individual idiosyncracies' then we will certainly have the foundation for possibilities. If we bring ourselves to the work fully committed, if we focus our attentions on being generous and if we are willing to give ourselves over to the text and each other, then we will build on possibilities and achieve success.

When each individual becomes united in action — when we are capable of trust — it is then that we have arrived at the heart of this idea called *ensemble*.

## Chapter Two: The Politics of *Cloud Nine* — Representations of Gender, Race, Class and Power

### The Playwright

By the time Caryl Churchill had written *Cloud Nine* in 1979, she had already contributed more than twenty years of her life to writing for radio, television and the stage. In succeeding years she would prosper with numerous mainstage productions and a degree of acclaim and recognition of which aspiring women playwrights can only dream.

Caryl Churchill was born in London, England in 1938 to middle-class parents. Her father was a cartoonist, her mother a model-actress who encouraged Caryl's theatrical pursuits which varied between Christmas pantomimes for her family and behind-the-scenes work in summer theatre. Her family lived in Montréal, Québec, for seven years, after which she returned to study English Literature at Lady Margaret Hall College, Oxford where she obtained a BA. in 1960. Her interest in writing novels was supplanted by an interest in play writing when a friend asked her to write a play because she needed something to direct. Her first play, *Downstairs*, eventually went to the Sunday Times National Union of Students Drama Festival in 1959 (Cousin, 9).

By age twenty-three Caryl had written more student productions, married barrister David Harter, and won the Richard Hillary Memorial Prize for Outstanding British Theatre. Future awards would include the Obie Award (1982-1983) for distinguished work off-Broadway for *Top Girls*; the runner up for

the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize (1983) also for *Top Girls*; and the winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize (1984) for *Fen*. But it was the opening of *Owners* in 1972 at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs that would establish her status and acclaim as a playwright both in Britain and the United States. *Owners* was "a watershed in her career. . . the first stage play to receive a professional production" and marked the beginnings of her working relationship with the Royal Court where she later became the first female Writer in Residence (Cousin, 15).

Lizbeth Goodman's *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own*, outlines Churchill's writing career in three stages, charting her development as a 'solitary' writer (1958-1972), to writing 'independently scripted plays' through collaborative processes (1972-1979), and finally to writing 'successes in all genres and writing contexts' (1979-present). It was during the middle stage when she began collaborating with *Monstrous Regiment* and *Joint Stock* that she developed her voice as a playwright because of the nature of the working method: "Working closely with actors and directors on an approach to performance which encourages innovation and flexibility has facilitated the daring experimentation with structure that is a notable feature of her plays" (De Lauretis, qtd. in Goodman, 91). Goodman suggests that this 'flexibility' was the catalyst for future commissions, such as Max-Stafford Clark's, Churchill's first commission for *Joint Stock: Cloud Nine*. But it was during the early stage of her writing career, when she was newly married, that her political voice began to emerge.

Catherine Itzin's interview with Caryl Churchill provides an informative account of the playwright's political development. Churchill remarks of the early years:

I didn't really feel a part of what was happening in the sixties. During this time I felt isolated. I had small children and was having miscarriages. It was an extremely solitary life. What politicized me was being discontent with my own life - of being a barrister's wife and just being at home with small children. (279)

After several life-altering occurrences spanning a period of more than ten years, Churchill "gradually [began] to intellectualize what was always an intuitive socialist (and feminist) perspective - to analyse and to understand her own personal experience in terms of class society" (279). Her writing focused on exposing social injustices such as her TV play *The Legion Hall Bombing* (1978), about Willie Gallagher, sentenced to twelve years imprisonment by a British court in Northern Ireland. In it Churchill describes the 'Diplock Courts' where the 'judge sits alone', there is no jury, and confessions elicited by threats or force are allowed as admissible evidence.

At that time Churchill was not quite sure of her "function as a political playwright" and admitted that "I'm not sure what it all means. I just do it" (281). Her radio plays *Identical Twins* (1968), *Not . . . not . . . not . . . not . . . not enough oxygen* (1971), and the TV play *The Judge's Wife* (1972), "tended to be about a bourgeois middle-class life and the destruction of it," a recurring theme in this period of her work (281). Churchill's personal and

political views culminated in her first major stage play, *Owners*, produced at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1972. But it was not until the middle stage of her writing career, her collaborations with *Monstrous Regiment* and *Joint Stock*, when the writing of *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining In Buckinghamshire* (1976), would mark a "departure from the expression of personal anger and pain to the expression of a public political perspective, which was itself the source of the anger and pain" (285). Dominant themes of sexual politics, economics, patriarchy, oppression of women — their roles in society — and oppression of people in general pervaded her writing. Her work with *Monstrous Regiment* made Churchill "more aware than I had been before of what I was doing" (285).

Finally, in 1979 Churchill combined 'thematic and theatrical' subject matter and the conventions and structure employed to illustrate it in her first commissioned and astoundingly successful play *Cloud Nine*. "For the first time," Churchill remarks, "I brought together two preoccupations of mine - people's internal states of being and the external political structures which affect them, which make them insane" (287).

### The Writing Process

By the end of 1977 *Joint Stock* was facing financial difficulties and was facing the very real possibility of ending its short-lived run as a permanent company. It had even announced a "temporary closure," but eventually the decision was made to stage fewer scripts (Ritchie, 23). The future of the company

depended on the success of the season's only two productions. Max Stafford-Clark was assigned to direct one play - originally envisioned as a work about emigrants to America - and invited playwright Caryl Churchill to join Joint Stock once again.

Caryl Churchill expressed her desire to do a play on the topic of sexual politics "that would not be just a woman's thing" (Thurman, 54). Upon hearing this, Stafford-Clark agreed, and the two began planning the three week *Cloud Nine* workshop.

Assembling actors for the workshop was not the usual task of conventional casting; actors were chosen for their acting experience as well as their sexual orientation to represent a broad cross-section of sexuality. Tony Sher, one of the participants, likened the group to a "Noah's Ark of human sexuality," recalling the members: "a straight married couple, a straight divorced couple, a gay male couple, a lesbian, a lesbian-to-be, at least two bisexual men, no bisexual women, and then, of course, the usual large number of heterosexuals" (Ritchie, 139). The actual production would require fewer actors than the workshop which is simply another aspect of the Joint Stock process.

The group soon immersed themselves in the issue of sexual politics. They read Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, Jean Genet, and Frantz Fanon, and from more obscure treatises like Andrew Hodges and David Hutter's *With Downcast Gays*. Miriam Margolyes, recalls the 'truth sessions' where each actor took a turn telling his or her life story, sexual and personal history, secrets, and fears, and notes that "the power of such moments will never leave" her (138). It was these sessions that taught them the "real

meaning of sexual politics," declares actor Tony Sher, recollecting how revealing themselves made it apparent that "each of us was . . . brain-washed by different upbringings and prejudices," yet no matter what they thought they knew, no matter how 'liberal' they thought their views were, they were "proving to be wrong" (140).

The group's sexual diversity provided them with experiential knowledge. However, because of the narrow span of their ages they lacked any reference of experience from an older generation. Perhaps it was fate that the group befriended a middle-aged caretaker who - although initially reluctant to have anything to do with them - one day joined their workshop and told them her life story. Her miserable childhood and abusive relationships with men came to an end when she finally "met one who was different and with whom she had finally, in her middle age, been able to experience her first 'organism' " (139). When the group asked what that experience was like she responded: " 'It was like being on cloud nine'," hence, the title for the play (139).

Along with the personal stories, Max Stafford-Clark devised improvisational and acting exercises that would provide a practical source of discovery for the actors. One improvisational exercise incorporated playing cards to designate status. A card is drawn and the number of the card represents the individual's status; a two is low status and a ten is high. They became adept at differentiating between comparable states say, for instance, between a five and a six, but the more 'sophisticated' work came when actors had to incorporate status in specific situations. Eventually they included court cards to represent gay people -

they could not resist the queen - and the joker to represent a police officer. While at some social event the court cards had to try to pick up another gay person without being caught by the police.

When the workshop ended, Churchill went off to write the play. She was dissatisfied with her original concept of exploring three-generations of a family set at the "grandfather's funeral, where the dead man talked to his wife while the children bickered among themselves," and instead, she says:

I returned to an idea that had been touched on briefly in the workshop--the parallel between colonial and sexual oppression, which Genet calls "the colonial or feminine mentality of interiorized repression" (Cousin, 38; Churchill qtd. in *Plays: One* 245).

She returned after twelve weeks with only the first half completed. The first half, set in a British colony at the height of Empire, says Tony Sher, "was near-perfect and hardly required so much as a comma" (Ritchie, 141). The second half was not as successful the first time around, and after having "her baby being subjected to group molestation and battering," Churchill went off to rewrite the second act while the company rehearsed Act One (141).

Churchill wrote several versions of the second act ranging from a series of monologues to a setting "in Clive and Betty's bungalow on the rainy southern coast of England," but none proved successful (Cousin, 39). Finally, the setting became "'the children's territory' of a park" whereby the characters "return



temporarily to the status of children" as they embark on a journey towards self-discovery and change (Churchill, qtd. in Cousin, 39).

She returned a short time later with, as Sher recollects:  
a new and improved second act . . . now clearly a descendant  
of the workshop with its central characters our own  
generation, with monologues reminiscent of our life stories  
and a silent gay pick-up reminiscent of the card games.  
(Ritchie, 141)

The Victorian era was not only ingenious as a setting for the first act alone, but its relevance to the setting for Act Two becomes apparent as Churchill says:

I felt the first act would be stronger set in Victorian time, at the height of colonialism, rather than in Africa during the 1950s. And when the company talked about their childhood and the attitudes to sex and marriage that they had been given when they were young, everyone felt that they had received very conventional, almost Victorian expectations and that they had made great changes and discoveries in their lifetimes. (qtd. in *Plays: One*, 246)

And so, Churchill's "two preoccupations . . . people's internal states of being and the external political structures which affect them," are translated as she explores sexual identity and the power structures at work in society in *Cloud Nine* (Itzin, 287).

### **The Play: Theatrical Form and Political Reform**

In a personal interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, Caryl Churchill discusses her alignment to feminism that

"is far more closely connected with socialism" and maintains that while the two are not "synonymous," she feels "strongly about both and wouldn't be interested in a form of one that didn't include the other" (77-78).

Socialist feminists believe that the oppression of women is caused by two major systems: capitalism and the patriarchy. The two are interconnected and unless both systems are dismantled nothing will change as Mark Pickett Palma recognizes in his summary of Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate*:

Even under socialism women will remain oppressed unless the defeat of capitalism is accompanied by the defeat of patriarchy. Economic independence and freedom are worthless without a different view of women's roles in the society, both biological and social. But even though the economic aspects of patriarchy can be altered by material means, through a change in the mode of production, its biosocial and ideological aspects can be altered only by nonmaterial means, through a rewriting of the psychosexual drama that has been producing men and women as we know them for a very long time. (18)

The "rewriting of the psychosexual drama" is exactly what Caryl Churchill attempts to do in *Cloud Nine*.

Act One is set in colonial Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, while Act Two takes place in a London park one hundred years later, but the characters have aged only twenty five years. A man plays a woman, a woman plays a young male child, a man plays a young female child, and a white actor plays a black

servant. Ghosts appear and disappear. Actors are double-cast and, in some instances, triple-cast, and depending on how they are cast (for there are a variety of possibilities), the interpretation of the particular production and its performance text can alter significantly. Theatricality plays an important role in Churchill's drama as the production of meaning and the strategies she uses to reinvent history — past and present— are inseparable from her politics. The political reform that Churchill desires affects the very form of her drama. But the political commentary does not operate solely on the level of subject matter for in seeking to change conventional society Churchill simultaneously changes conventional theatre. It is this that I find to be the brilliance of Churchill's craft; she takes that which must be seen to its extreme. The medium becomes the message as the two are inextricably woven together into a symbiosis of theatre and politics.

The medium in this case is both her text and her theatre. Churchill presents her subject, the structures of oppression and the effects they have on individual lives and society in Act One, and the searching out of alternatives in place of traditional or conventional relationships in contemporary society in Act Two. Her dramatic techniques, however, not only serve to cast doubt on our perceptions of these power structures in Act One, they in turn allow us to actively question the possibilities facing the characters in Act Two, while simultaneously empowering us towards social change. Furthermore, the employment of certain dramatic strategies challenges traditional theatrical convention and our

very sense of what theatre is, while creating possibilities of what it could be.

At the top of Act One, we are first introduced to the characters as they enter singing "Come gather, sons of England, come gather in your pride," "a spirited evocation of British imperialism" (Churchill, 5; Kritzer, 113). The characters speak their first lines (with uniform upper-class accents) in rhymed couplets, a form of dialogue common to the popular theatre and melodramatic style of the Victorian setting. Churchill uses the device to simplify that which is ironically rather complex as there is nothing simple about what we see.

Clive, "father to the natives...and to [his] family so dear," as he introduces himself, is the patriarchal ruler of this lot (6). It is through Clive that the plot unfolds, beginning with *his* introductions of *his* family and those in *his* employ. The style is farcical in its rapid pacing, and it works because of Clive's actions. It is his incorrect presumptions about the other characters which challenge his authoritarian role as well as his reactionary or dismissive responses to their truths and his subsequent struggle to maintain control that encapsulate the comedy of this act. It is comedic because the audience recognizes the challenge of a theatrical convention known as cross-gender casting while simultaneously enjoying the secretive interactions of the other characters.

We are first challenged by Churchill's dramatic device of cross-gender casting in the introductions when we see certain characters trying to be what they are not. Betty, Clive's wife,

intended to be played by a man, "live[s] for Clive" and her world revolves around doing what she can to please him (6). She attests that she is "a man's creation" and that "what men want is what she wants to be" (6). She has no sense of the value of herself as a woman. She is defined by her relationships to others; her mother, her children and her husband. Joshua, the black servant, written to be played by a white actor, declares that he "is black but oh my soul is white" and the only one he lives for is Clive (6). His longing? To be what white men want him to be. Edward, Clive's son played by a woman, is "dearly" trying to please his father, "but finds it rather hard as" we can see (6). And we do see. Clive, however, does not see the man, the white skin and the woman respectively, and consequently his authority is questionable. The remaining characters are diminished by Clive, in particular the female child through the dramatic device of having Victoria represented by a doll that can be tossed about from one character to the next.

In Act One, Victorian moral codes reign supreme. They are the power structures that oppress and repress within the confines of marriage and the family. Cross-gender casting does not only expose the hidden agendas of gender, sexuality, race, and colonialism through the gender and identity of the actor in relation to the character he or she plays. It also transcends the traditional dramatic device of disguise insofar as the character's attire is not an actual disguise. It is 'reality'. Betty does not cast off her dress to reveal the man beneath as Rosalind does to reveal the woman. Betty simply is the woman. The man underneath is

her longing to be the thing that men want her to be. Churchill asks that we accept this symbolic reality and in so doing our laughter at the incongruity of what we see is tempered by rather serious implications.

Just as Betty does not value herself as a woman, neither too, does Joshua value himself as black. Edward, on the other hand, is played by a woman to highlight "the way Clive tries to impose traditional male behavior on him" (*Plays: One*, 245). Churchill further explains her casting of Edward "for a different reason-- partly to do with the stage convention of having boys played by women (Peter Pan, radio plays, etc. )" (245). What is at work here is both a symbolic technique as well as a clever comic device. Much of the humour comes from the implied contradictory casting as the spectator and characters alike are aware of the impossibility of the characters achieving Clive's expectations of them; the repetition of their introductory lines "as you can see" underscores this point.

The style and structure of Act Two differ greatly from the first act. Instead of the linearity of Act One we are now confronted with a "looser structure" that parallels the characters' search for meaningful relationships whether they be with others or themselves, for example, as we see in Betty's journey towards herself (Churchill, 246). Gone is the patriarchal oppressor, as represented by Clive, and the societal codes of behavior which ruled the time. Present are the obstacles of past conditioning and personal idiosyncracies which the characters must confront on their journey toward meaningful relationships and alternatives.

In Act Two, Churchill employs the cross-gender casting technique (of four year old Cathy) to provide the counterpart to the Act One casting of Edward, and "partly because the size and presence of a man on stage seemed appropriate to the emotional force of young children," says Churchill, "and partly. . . to show more clearly the issues involved in learning what is considered correct behavior for a girl" (qtd. in *Plays: One*, 246). The other characters are played by actors of the same gender which contributes to the second act's realistic style.

Each of the characters is at a point of departure, and some have already departed from conventional relationships to those that would accommodate their personal desires to the fullest. We first learn that Lin has left an abusive husband and has retained full custody of Cathy. Edward, wanting desperately to cling to Gerry, realizes there is no hope when Gerry leaves because he does not want to make a 'marital' commitment to Edward. Edward ends up having a ménage à trois with his sister and Lin which prompts him to move in with them. Martin, Vic's husband, while espousing feminist thought does not live by it. He submits to Vic's decision to live with Lin, however, and eventually shares in the child care of both his and Vic's son Tommy and Cathy. Betty, the closest individual in the drama to being the protagonist, adjusts to her life without Clive although initially with much trepidation. She celebrates her departure from dependence to independence in a delicious monologue where she discovers herself in a celebration of her own sexuality. She accepts the choices her children have made and she, herself, attempts a pick up, unfortunately with the

gay Gerry. We do take comfort in the fact that this will probably be only the first of several attempts.

Churchill presents us with another theatrical device in Act Two that further distances the spectator from the drama. The spectral imagery that appears throughout the act "challenges norms of consistent linearity through a theatrical manipulation of past and present" as does the incongruity of the characters' ages and time scheme between the two acts (Kritzer, 112). In Scene Three Lin, Edward and Vic try to invoke the goddess and instead are visited by Lin's dead brother, Bill, who was killed fighting in Northern Ireland. Ghosts of Act One appear as Betty rejoices in her newfound independence. Her mother, Maud, reprimands her behavior while Ellen pleads with Betty not to forget her. Clive reappears to admonish Betty's behavior as well, but this is offset by the conclusion: the silent embrace between Betty of Act One and Betty of Act Two. It is this embrace that marks Betty's acceptance of her Act One self, "acknowledging their continuing oneness" (127). It is simultaneously the end and the beginning.

#### Actor/Role vs. Sex/Gender

Radical or cultural feminism asserts that "the patriarchy is the primary cause of the oppression of women" (Case, 63-64). It is a sex/gender system which enforces a "socially-imposed division of the sexes, the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (Rubin, qtd. in Palma, 81). Furthermore, Kate Millett, says in *Sexual Politics*:



Sexual caste supersedes all other forms of inequality: racial, political, or economic . . . unless the clinging to male supremacy as a birthright is finally foregone, all systems of oppression will continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation. (20-21)

Caryl Churchill casts against gender in order to expose the role of gender identity in society and its relationship to patriarchal dominance and to show (from a patriarchal viewpoint) "that gender and social definitions are natural concomitants of physical differences" (Howe Kritzer, 120). Women and other oppressed peoples, such as the gay and lesbian characters, are forced into subservience or silence in their role(s) in all spheres of society, whether they be in the family, the workplace, or in bed, and Churchill brings these issues to the forefront in *Cloud Nine*. A closer look at the characters and the power structures which oppress them reveals the playwright's use of cross-gender casting to disrupt notions of gender as well as to address other relevant thematic implications.

## Act One

Amelia Howe Kritzer, in *The Plays of Caryl Churchill*, remarks that "Clive, who governs by patriarchy's and colonialism's divine right, constitutes the stable sun at the centre of this microcosm. His desire is law" (117). This is an apt description to say the least. Clive has the power to do what he pleases, when he pleases, and where he pleases, whether out of desire or duty. He

is the only character who does not play a role, per se, because he is completely "at ease" being the "representative to his Queen in Africa," and "master" of his household (Russell, 158). He is the "*pater familias* and colonial overlord" (Fortier, 78):

This is my family. Though far from home  
We serve the Queen wherever we may roam  
I am a father to the natives here.  
And father to my family so dear. (6)

But his treatment of his family makes explicit all that is "negative in the stereotype he portrays" (Russell, 158). Betty dotes on Clive, rubbing his foot when he returns from his "long ride in the bush" (7). The sight of Betty at his feet serves as a visual image of her subservience. Clive's very presence frightens Edward into submission when, in Scene Three, Edward, caught playing with Victoria's doll, acquiesces to his father, and asks Clive to "please beat me and forgive me" (38). While Clive admonishes Betty for her affection for Harry, Clive is free to carry on illicitly with Mrs. Saunders. His language is "aggressive and sadistic", his desire self-satisfying (Russell, 158):

Caroline, if you were shot with poisoned arrows do you know what I'd do? I'd fuck your dead body and poison myself. Caroline, you smell amazing. You terrify me. You are dark like this continent. Mysterious. Treacherous. When you rode to me through the night. When you fainted in my arms. When I came to you in your bed, when I lifted the mosquito netting, when I said let me in, let me in. Oh don't shut me out. Caroline, let me in. (21-22)

Clive satisfies himself, but denies Caroline the same pleasure. Furthermore, when, at the end of the act the affair becomes apparent to Betty, Clive blames Mrs. Saunders and has her leave the premises.

Although Clive's behavior is duplicitous, "Clive defines sexuality and sexual standards in the way that best serves his own sexual desires; everything else is deviant" (Howe Kritzer, 117). But Clive must rationalize the perverse behavior of others in order to maintain the power structure that keeps him at the helm. The farcical nature of the act resides in the fact that Clive is oblivious to the destruction of his beloved empire and the Victorian moral codes of behavior that govern gender arrangements.

Betty, played by a man, serves to subvert the spectator's notions of what constitutes the feminine, exposing "every gesture and speech to question, as each gesture or speech becomes a gesture of gender construction" (Howe Kritzer, 120). It is hilarious to view Betty as Clive's "little dove," "so delicate and sensitive" (8), and then later to watch her aggressive physical assault against Mrs. Saunders. Churchill's instructions for the actor playing the character tell us that "there is nothing particularly weak, poetic, hysterical about Betty, only Clive's image of her. She throws and catches ball excellently" (Fitzsimmons, 49). Churchill plays with our perceptions when, depending on who Betty is paired with at a particular moment, the nature of the relationship is questionable. For example, when Betty is paired with Ellen we see simultaneously a heterosexual and homosexual relationship. Sue-

Ellen Case and Jeanie K. Forte elaborate on Churchill's "new feminist theatre practice:"

[Churchill compound[s] the desiring female subject of the drama with the theme of homosexuality. . . . The portrayal of homosexual identification can serve as a kind of confrontational politics, operating in opposition to the conventional gendered identity of the heterosexual. This can be perceived in the portrayal of the homosexual couple, which either foregrounds the gendered behaviour of the heterosexual couple as a cultural construction by imitating it, or subverts it as a model of love/desire by enacting a homo-gendered attachment. When the homosexual couple imitates heterosexual behaviour, one member of the couple assumes a cross gender identification and the other member responds with the appropriate gendered behaviour. . . . Churchill's use of cross-gender casting makes even the heterosexual pairs in text seem artificial, when played by members of the same gender onstage. (From Formalism to Feminism, 65)

We witness this process at work when we see Betty with Clive, and Betty with Harry, and conversely when we see Harry with Edward. Betty, like Clive, acts out of duty and in ways that reflect her upbringing. Her dependency on Clive to the point of self-abnegation is illustrated when she declares:

I live for Clive, the whole aim of my life  
Is to be what he looks for in a wife.  
I am a man's creation as you can see,

And what men want is what I want to be. (6)

She declares to Ellen that "Clive is her society" (14), to Harry that she has "duties" (19), and to Ellen once again, "that women have their duty as soldiers have" (50). She believes that "there is something so wicked" in her and apologizes profusely to Clive for her indiscretion with Harry (39). But, when Edward ridicules her inability to throw a ball, to which Betty concedes, her dependence is no longer comic. Her self-esteem and confidence are non-existent; what exists are her roles of mother, wife, and daughter imposed on her by a patriarchal society.

Maud, Betty's mother, carries the same attitudes as Betty and indeed has handed down the appropriate behavior to Betty. Maud is just as concerned with duty as Betty, and reminds her that "men have their duties and we have ours" (14). Maud's relationship to Betty parallels Betty's relationship to her children. Betty's concern for her children's warmth and health is replicated by Maud's concern for Betty's warmth and health (11). Furthermore, their relationship to each other is parallel to Clive's relationship to Edward. While Clive does his duty "to teach him to grow up to be a man," so, too, does Maud as she says, "Betty you have to learn to be patient. I am patient. My mama was very patient" (6, 15). The roles are passed down through the generations to preserve the power structure of patriarchy.

Harry Bagley is the stereotype of the adventurous explorer. His sexuality is exaggerated to the point that he will indulge in sexual relations with anyone and everyone including Joshua, Edward, and Betty. His secret is exposed when he sexually

approaches Clive, who responds: "The most revolting perversion. Rome fell Harry, and this sin can destroy an empire"(46). Harry immediately seeks Clive's help to rectify his 'disease'. He adopts society's attitude towards his sexual orientation and agrees to marry for redemption saying, "I suppose getting married wouldn't be any worse than killing myself" (47). Once again duty to England is primary, and this 'sin' is a "direct threat to colonial occupation" (Case and Forte, 65). In an ironic twist, Churchill presents us with the newlyweds-to-be: the gay Harry and the lesbian Ellen. We laugh at the absurdity of the situation, but we are forced to confront society's insistence that homosexuals conform to a heterosexual society. But in employing the conventional device of the marriage, Churchill mocks the patriarchy and subverts a theatrical convention traditionally known to "mend all tearings in the social fabric" (65).

Edward is perhaps the most painful character to watch throughout this play. While the cross-gender casting underscores the comic incongruity between what he is and what his father wants him to be, he is terribly misunderstood by those around him. Not even Harry respects Edward's homosexual feelings as is clearly evident when, at the end of one of Edward's romantic adventures that he has invented, Harry negates Edward's emotional outpouring by posing an irrelevant question regarding the circumstances of the story:

Edward: . . . and I take my knife and stab it in the throat and rip open its stomach and it lets go of you but it bites my hand but its dead. And I drag you onto the river bank and

I'm almost fainting with pain and we lie there in each other's arms.

Harry: Have I lost my leg?

Edward, too, is aware of his duty, even at such a young age. While Edward is to love and respect his father — after all, as Clive says — it is "through our father we love our Queen and our God," as a boy, he "has no business having feelings" (38, 25). And, while he successfully asserts his power over Joshua, demanding, "You move when I speak to you, boy," Edward's predilections are towards his sister's doll and his mother's necklace (41). However, the power of the patriarchy manifests itself in repression for Edward and we see the inevitable results as he manipulates situations to ingratiate himself to Clive. For example, he manages to escape persecution for being caught with the doll and the necklace by declaring that he was "minding" them, indeed, that he was "protecting" the women (13, 53). Clive responds favorably to Edward's 'manly' gestures. That Edward identifies with the feminine world is of no surprise either as he spends most of his time with the women. When Clive notes this fact, he invites Edward to spend more time with him and Harry, an ironic twist that again causes laughter from the spectator as Clive is the active agent who perpetuates that relationship. At the end of the act, Edward's hatred towards Clive has grown to such proportions that Edward does nothing to warn Clive about Joshua's attempt to assassinate Clive.

The Ellen/Mrs. Saunders character combination juxtaposes the homosexual with the heterosexual, the subservient with the

independent, innocence with experience. While Mrs. Saunders represents sex to Clive, Ellen's sexuality, on the other hand, is incomprehensible. Peter Gay elaborates on this in *The Tender Passion* :

In 1811, the House of Lords found for two school mistresses who had sued the grandmother of one of their pupils for asserting that they were guilty of "improper and criminal conduct." Despite circumstantial and picturesque testimony about the way the two ladies carried on in bed together, the Law Lords vindicated their purity from a sheer failure of sexual imagination. "I do believe," Lord Gilles said, "that the crime here alleged has no existence..." (qtd. in Randall, 98)

Ellen's innocence and ignorance of sexual conduct is clear when she asks Betty for advice before the prenuptial:

Ellen: Betty, what happens with a man? I don't know what to do.

Betty: You just keep still.

Ellen: And what does he do?

Betty: Harry will know what to do.

Ellen: And is it enjoyable?

Betty: Ellen, you're not getting married to enjoy yourself. (50-51)

Betty responds predictably; even sex is regarded as a duty. Mrs. Saunders, however, does not need marriage to indulge in the 'sensation' she so enjoys. Indeed, her enjoyment of her independence is clear when she says: "There is only one thing about marriage that I like" (47). It is Mrs. Saunders who



represents the advent of feminism with her liberal sexual views coupled with an economic independence as she declares: "I shall go to England and buy a farm there. I shall introduce threshing machines" (52).

Joshua, Clive's 'boy', is completely dedicated to his master, but in the end pays a high price for being the willing victim in Clive's world. His earnestness to serve Clive is both humorous and destructive because he completely annihilates himself for the man whom he serves. It is also through Joshua that we learn how Western Christianity has its place in the hierarchy of empire, when, after telling Edward an incredibly beautiful creation story, although it is prefaced as a 'bad story', Joshua denounces it as false saying: "Of course its not true. It's a bad story. Adam and Eve is true. God made man white like him and gave him the bad woman who liked the snake and gave us all this trouble" (42). The implications Joshua raises with this response are twofold: Western Christianity is the only true religion, and women are the root of all evil. Joshua's final action is political. The image of the black servant taking aim to kill the representative of colonial power, an action which announces the demise of empire, "the bitter end of colonialism," reverberates through the blackout at the end of Act One (Churchill, 246).

## Act Two

The shift to Act Two is akin to entering another world. Churchill asks us to take imaginative leaps with time, space, style, language, character, thought, and...possibilities.

At the top of the act we are confronted with a four-year old girl, Cathy, who sings:

Yum yum bubblegum  
 Stick it up your mother's bum  
 When its brown  
 Pull it down  
 Yum yum bubblegum

Whereas Act One is characterized by an enclosed world, with rigid social codes, formal, sharp, and witty language that creates the act's farcical style, where the patriarchy deems anything other than heterosexual activity as deviant, Act Two presents a complete reversal as characters meander through the park's open spaces and paths, exploring possibilities, choices, and change in their relationships with others. The action is reflected in the realistic style; the language is a mixture of the crass, colloquial, and intellectual, reflecting diversity in character and sexual orientation. Heterosexuality takes a back seat to every other imaginable combination. Churchill writes:

In *Cloud Nine* having the historical first act wasn't so much to have a background scene saying 'this is how we came to be as we are'; it was more in order to show the sorts of changes that people even now felt they'd had to make. (Churchill, interviewed by Lynne Truss, qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 47)

And make changes is exactly what the characters do. With the absence of the patriarchy, as represented by Clive in Act One, the characters have a freedom of choice that now allows them to do

what they please, when they please, and where they please. Women and gays dominate the act, but hierarchy of character does not exist; no one voice, attitude, or value is portrayed as the correct one. The conflict, however, resides within the characters as they are confronted with trying to overcome past conditioning and modes of behavior. But, as Churchill declares, "all the characters in this act change a little for the better" (qtd. in Kritzer, 123).

To begin, there are Lin and Vic. Lin has already made change in her life by leaving her abusive husband. Vic is married to Martin, a husband who "helps with the washing up and everything," but is soon to leave him (58). The two women complement each other: Lin is the practical one who does and says what she feels, while Vic is educated and analytical. When Lin says she hates men, Vic responds: "You have to look at it in a historical perspective in terms of learnt behavior since the industrial revolution," to which Lin retorts, "I just hate the bastards" (59). Lin yells at her daughter, Vic, and Martin, when each one in turn exasperates her. While she lets Cathy play with toy guns and dress in jeans, she would desperately take a job in a boutique in order to afford sexy clothes for Vic's pleasure. Vic's perspective is to stop Lin from "collaborating with sexist consumerism" (75). And, while Vic criticizes Lin for having "no analysis" Lin quickly responds, "No but I'm good at kissing aren't I?" (75). Vic's perception of Lin's inconsistency is neatly tossed back at Vic, as Lin claims: "I've changed who I sleep with, I can't change everything" (75). She reinforces this point when, during

the invocation/orgy scene, Vic attempts to turn the orgy into a lecture reasserting the importance of understanding "the theoretical background," because "You can't separate fucking and economics," to which Lin quickly responds with "Give us a kiss" (83).

The relationship between the gay couple, Edward and Gerry, contrasts with the women's relationship. While the women come together, the men are on the verge of separating. Gerry does not want the wife that Edward wants to be. In a monologue recounting a sexual experience he has on a train, Gerry confronts the audience with his preference for uncomplicated, indeed anonymous, sex with no commitment:

I opened the door before the train stopped. I told him I live with somebody, I don't want to know. He was jogging sideways to keep up. He said "What's your phone number, you're my ideal physical type, what sign of the zodiac are you? Where do you live? Where are you going now? It's not fair." I saw him at Victoria a couple of months later and I went straight down to the end of the platform and I picked up somebody really great who never said a word. Just smiled. (67)

What in Act One was closeted in shame, in Act Two is exposed as freedom of choice and expression.

Edward's difficulty of overcoming past conditioning is slightly different from Vic's or Betty's. Edward was raised to be the man, but rebelled against that conditioning and continued to secretly fulfill his 'feminine' desires. His desire to be Gerry's

wife, however, bestows on Edward another set of problems. While he no longer plays with dolls, he cannot readily change the feminine in him, nor does he apologize for it. His desire to be a woman is illustrated at the end of Scene Two, in his longing to have breasts, and his declaration: "I think I'm a lesbian" (80). He finally realizes that it is futile to force himself on Gerry, however, and winds up forming a relationship with Lin and Vic. He finds true fulfilment and autonomy in this relationship, and no longer has the need to be anyone's wife. Ironically, in Scene Three, when Gerry calls for Edward, it is a clear indication of Gerry's desire to have him back.

Martin, Victoria's husband, is the character who most closely resembles the patriarchal Clive. While seemingly well versed in the rhetoric of feminist thought, claiming to be writing a book on women from the woman's point of view, it is clear that he is unable to put the principles into practice when he claims:

I'm not putting any pressure on you but I don't think you're being a whole person. God knows I do everything I can to make you stand on your own two feet. Just be yourself. You don't seem to realize how insulting it is to me that you can't seem to get yourself together. (72)

While Martin desires to give Victoria "rolling orgasms" like he "gives other women," he is unable to perform, and blames her because "technical information" requires "a different part of the brain"(71). He protests that he accepts the changes Victoria makes in her life, but it is more an act of submission than encouragement, attesting to the fact that Martin believes in and

has difficulty changing his conditioning. In the end, however, Martin's concern for his son Tommy and sharing the child care of Cathy suggest that he, too, has made some positive changes.

The present day setting and structure of Act Two are most vividly underlined in the character of Cathy. Her playfulness and decision-making processes replicate the indecisiveness of other characters as is illustrated in Scene One, when, after Lin has given her several suggestions of activity, Cathy decides to paint, and then in the next instant says: "I don't want to paint . . . What shall I do? You paint. What shall I do Mum?" (56). Her paradoxical nature, dramatically emphasized by the cross-gender casting, is supported by the fact that she likes to play with guns as well as play dress-up. She insists that Lin "wear a skirt and tights" when her friend comes for tea, because "Tracy's mum wears velvet" (70). Our perceptions of what is appropriate childlike behavior and our notions of conditioning are constantly challenged through Cathy. Theatrically, Cathy also provides a direct link between the acts through the cross-gender casting and her "farcical energy that animated the first one" (Kritzer, 122).

Betty is perhaps the one character who has the greatest challenge in overcoming her past conditioning. Now much older, single and fearful of the world before her, she struggles in her search for autonomy. She still fusses over her children, does not understand them, and believes that women "have to suffer a little bit for beauty" (62). Her sense of herself as a woman is still entrenched in self-abnegation portrayed in the following exchange with Lin:

LIN: Don't you like women?

BETTY: They don't have such interesting conversations as men. There has never been a woman composer of genius. They don't have a sense of humour. They spoil things for themselves with their emotions. I can't say I like women very much no.

LIN: But you're a woman.

BETTY: There's nothing says you have to like yourself. (73)

But Betty does change. She finds work and earns her own money for the first time in her life. Her discovery of self is one of the most affirming moments in the play as she delivers a monologue celebrating the day she realizes herself as a sexual, autonomous being:

It felt very sweet. It was a feeling from very long ago, it was very soft, just barely touching, and I felt myself gathering together more and more and I felt angry with Clive and angry with my mother and I went on and on defying them, and there was this vast feeling growing in me and all round me and they couldn't stop me and no one could stop me and I was there and coming and coming. Afterwards I thought I'd betrayed Clive. My mother would kill me. But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them. And I cried because I didn't want to be.

But I don't cry about it anymore. Sometimes I do it three times in one night and it really is great fun. (96)

No longer does she exist for others, at least not for her husband and mother. When she suggests buying a house for them all to live in, we see that she has not fully accepted the idea of living alone nor has she fully released herself from the role of mother. In an attempt to reconcile being alone she invites Gerry to dinner and claims "but if there isn't a right way to do things you have to invent one," the very observation that encapsulates the characters' journeys in this act (94). It is also through Gerry that Betty discovers Edward's sexual orientation, but refuses to blame herself because "he seems perfectly happy" (95). Even the spectral images of Act One who return to admonish Betty's behavior are ineffective. The final moment of Betty embracing herself attests to her personal success.

### Considerations for Production

The actor/role pairings that Churchill has devised are arranged so that an actor playing a particular role in Act One cannot play that same character in Act Two. There are many pairing options; as Churchill says: "[T]here is no right way, just varying possibilities" (Methuen, viii). I am particularly interested in the following combinations:

Betty/Edward

Edward/Betty

Ellen/Mrs. Saunders/Lin

Maud/Victoria



Harry/Gerry

Clive/Martin

Joshua/Cathy/Bill

I am attracted to these because of a revealing article I read by Mark Thackery Brown called *"Constantly Coming Back": Eastern Thought and the Plays of Caryl Churchill*.

Brown investigates Churchill's plays "in light of Eastern traditions and assumptions" (25). Churchill, herself, said that during her schooling at Oxford she was "strongly interested in Buddhism, and that sort of thing" (Thurman, 54). Brown acknowledges that aside from the "overt references to Buddhism" in *Owners*, *Not...not...not...not...not Enough Oxygen*, and *Top Girls*, other Churchill plays "are infused with assumptions and implications that can be linked to counterparts in Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, and Jain thought" (Brown, 25). Certain assumptions include the idea of permanence in this world as being unattainable, and the "concepts of collective or historical karma and individual karma, as well as cycles of rebirth" (41). Employing dramatic devices of changes in historical settings, the incongruity of time/character age, and actors changing roles "heighten[s] the contrast between the two periods but reinforce the concept of historical and individual rebirth" (43). Aside from providing the production with several bits of juicy irony, the pairings I find appealing would also support the theory of the effects of the characters' past conditioning, and their struggles to overcome them.

For example, the pairing of Clive/Martin, and Maud/Victoria pokes fun at the patriarchal Clive of Act One when in Act Two Vic states: "I don't get on too well with my father either" (58). The implications operate on a multiplicity of levels: symbolically, Vic has married her father and is about to divorce him and thereby release herself from all that he represents to her. That she leaves their conventional marriage is yet another poke at the patriarchy; that she leaves Martin for another woman is poetic. Martin functions as the patriarchal residue from the first act; his powerlessness in the second act serves to illustrate his (or Clive's) karmic debt in this sense.

Another example is the Harry/Gerry pairing which supports the foregrounding of the gay characters in Act Two. Where once Harry's sexuality was mired in shame and secrecy, Gerry is free to celebrate his sexuality. The pairing also raises the notion of 'once a queer, always a queer' suggesting that homosexuality is not a matter of choice. Being gay, on the other hand, is, and Gerry is now free to enjoy who he is.

The Joshua/Cathy/Bill configuration has both amusing and serious implications. While Act One Joshua is a victim of oppression and discrimination, Act Two Cathy has the freedom to play. In keeping with the idea of reincarnation it is amusing to see the First Act black servant now present as the white female child. Joshua's desire to be white has transpired, but in the female form, suggesting that he will gain certain privileges (being white), but that he might also come to know 'female/woman,' the very thing he belittled in a previous life. Joanne Klein also

suggests that through this combination "Joshua the exploited black has become Cathy the exploited child" which fits neatly with the concept of karmic debt (67). As well, all three of the characters are, in some way, associated with guns which provides a direct link between the characters, politics and history. While Joshua represents the 'killer' of empire, Bill represents the legacy of colonialism through the present day political turmoil in Ireland. Devoting themselves to their 'masters' — both representative of the same political 'evil' — cost them their lives. Cathy's fixation on playing with guns and her request for her uncle's gun provides a link to the historical and the political while commenting on the more serious implications of this legacy.

The Betty/Edward, Edward/Betty combination is only one of several possibilities that have been used in previous performances. Churchill suggests that this combination "throws an interesting emphasis on that relationship, while Betty/Gerry gives Betty her chance to be dangerous" (Methuen, viii). I am attracted to the former for numerous reasons. First, it is interesting to note that Betty is played by a woman in Act Two because "she gradually becomes real to herself" (Churchill, qtd. in Kritzer, 125). And paired with Edward (and vice-versa), she becomes doubly free of Clive when she divorces him in Act Two, reclaiming both the woman and the child that Clive imposed upon. When we see her trying to pick up Gerry, we are reminded of the Edward-Harry relationship of Act One. And while Betty is unsuccessful in her attempt, the suggestion of friendship is, at the very least, heartwarming.

Edward/Betty nicely parallels the Betty/Edward combination where Betty of Act One is oppressed as a wife, later in the male body of Edward in Act Two, enjoys the 'wifely' role to the dismay of his partner, Gerry. The irony is underscored by the fact that the actor playing Gerry was Act One's Harry who needed Betty to be "safety and light and peace and home" (19). As Betty in Act Two 'becomes real to herself,' so too does Edward who refuses to apologize for himself and finds a comfortable living arrangement that allows him to be who he is.

In considering the character pairings, however, I also have to consider the actors' suitability to them. As such I will first cast an ensemble of actors and then later (during the workshop period), cast the actors to the roles.

I should, by now, be able to answer (almost) any question asked of me by any member of the ensemble. From Churchill's evolution as a writer and the creation of *Cloud Nine*, to exploring some of the text's complexities as a dramatic work, addressing related feminist thought and other influences in relation to my directorial approach, I find myself well prepared to enter the next phase of production — the auditions.

## Chapter Three: The *Cloud Nine* Ensemble

### Casting

October 10, 1994...Thanksgiving, and the first rehearsal of *Cloud Nine*. How appropriate. I arrived at the Reeve Primary at 7:00 p.m. to a group of enthusiastic actors immersed in physical and vocal warm-ups. My message regarding the need for discipline, the need for tuning in body, voice, and mind had been heard loud and clear. I observed this group of student actors for a few short moments. This is my family for the next six weeks...these are my babies whom I will protect, nurture, and hopefully inspire to produce their strongest work to date. It is a symbiotic relationship, though, and I know that I, too, will grow and develop as an artist being nurtured, protected, and inspired by them. It is the nature of the work and it is this relationship that is at the heart of my vision of *ensemble*. But how did we get here? It all began several weeks previously in a rigorous casting process that I have been developing and refining over the past three years.

If you were to ask any director how she or he casts an actor for any given role their answer will undoubtedly be something along the lines of "The best actor for the part.". This answer is rather ambiguous, however, and can entail a myriad of meanings. The 'best' can mean the actor who is the most skilled if vocal projection or sensitivity to the text's language is of special concern, or the actor who has the highest potential of achieving the director's vision of the role; the actor who, at the auditions,

demonstrates an instinctive knowledge of the character so similar to the director's that his or her work will be quite minimal. This 'low maintenance' actor will hear the director's instruction, assimilate, and produce the desired response as though it were the actor's invention alone. In the case of *Cloud Nine* I had many qualities to consider, but I would not say that external qualities or technical skill level were among my priorities. I was forming a creative ensemble, a family, and although the basic requirements for the work were essential, there were many other qualities I needed from the actor. Although I began with the individual actor what was especially vital for the success of the production was how that individual might lend himself or herself to the group as a whole. My concern was with relationships, not with individual roles.

Casting took place over three days: the first two I allotted to individual auditions and the third to call-backs. The process was one that I had previously tried and tested (with wonderful results) on my recent production, *Lear's Daughters*. Only slight variations were implemented to suit my purposes for this production.

First, the actors were instructed to prepare a monologue from the play as well as a song, for although a classically trained singing voice was not a criterion, the ability to carry a tune was a must. Having the actors prepare a monologue from the working text has its advantages:

1. The director can discern to some degree the actor's work ethic. Did the actor read the entire play? How much time did the actor spend preparing for this audition? What is their response to the piece? To the text? Does the actor give me an intelligent and sensitive response?

2. Unlike a prepared monologue that I may or may not be familiar with, the prepared piece from the working text allows me to actively assess the actor's work. I can give the actor specific direction and observe how the actor receives, interprets, and translates (by doing) that direction. For example, I might suggest the actor deliver the monologue as if she were confessing her sins to a priest or begging a loved one's forgiveness for a wrongdoing. I am then able to judge simultaneously the actor's ability to take direction as well as our ability to communicate with each other. If the actor has noticeable potential but is stilted by nerves, I might have her pace back and forth to free her up physically which allows the actor to take her focus off the text and herself, often leading to surprising results. After this portion of the audition I proceed with the dreaded 'cold reads'.

A cold read is acting a portion of the text that the actor has not prepared. I inflict this procedure upon my auditioners simply to test in yet another way the actor's ability to take direction, and more importantly her ability to commit to whatever it is she has interpreted my direction to be. My instinct guides the selected

pieces, usually reflecting areas of concern that I might have such as whether or not the actor has the potential to deal with extremely emotional material, or to what extent the actor is limited by inhibitions. Finally, trying the actor in different roles allows me to see the possibilities of casting. I might not see an actor's potential to play a certain role until I actually try her out in that role. I am cautious, however, not to use the cold read as the sole or primary measure of an actor's ability as too often very good actors fail miserably at them, and conversely the opposite is true of the weak actor. The actor's ephemeral achievement might fool the director who will then invest an inordinate amount of time coaching this actor because she is unable to reproduce what came so easily to her in the audition.

I tend to use the cold read only when I am very keen on working with a particular actor. After ten to fifteen minutes of auditioning an actor, I then decide whether or not I want to see her participate in the group auditions later in the evening and let her know accordingly. Although this is never a pleasant task, it is, of course, a necessity. After three hours I have my first short list of actors and prepare for the group auditions.

The group auditions are invaluable to the audition process. They enable me to explore the possibilities of relationships by incorporating scene work, storytelling, games and exercises of focus and concentration, which are the most essential aspects of the process. During this time I can observe which actors are most willing to let down their guard, to work openly and generously with their fellow actors, and those that are not. "But aren't all



actors going to be on their 'best behavior' during an audition?", one might ask. The answer of course is "Yes." And, I have had the unfortunate experience of casting a seemingly generous, professionally spirited actor only to find the prima donna lurking below the surface ready to wreak havoc in an otherwise wonderfully creative rehearsal process.

What I have learned from reading Robert Benedetti's *The Director At Work* is his belief "that actors who are serious about their own growth turn in better performances than those who are merely eager to please" (90). I interpret this as the actor who, while incorporating the above mentioned protocol, seeks to do her best work and not simply concern herself with whether or not she is pleasing the director. Benedetti focuses on the following questions in ascertaining where the actors are in their development: "Have they approached the audition as an opportunity for growth? Have they selected material that means something to them? Are they in touch with their surroundings? Are they eager for the input of others?" (90). It is always during the group auditions that this becomes the most apparent.

After a fifteen minute group warm-up, we assemble ourselves in a circle for a round of storytelling. *Cloud Nine* has specific requirements of its actors that include being willing to openly discuss attitudes and feelings about sex and sexual politics. I needed ensemble members who were not the least bit reticent about sharing themselves in this way. Because the play explores the nature of sexual relationships in numerous variations, it was essential that the cast members have a certain maturity and a

strong degree of political awareness. The degree to which they feel 'comfortable in their own skin' would most definitely figure in this process.

I asked everyone to tell a story portraying their first 'sexual' experience. But by this I did not mean the actual physical act. We were to tell stories of our first contact with or recognition of anything sexual, which ranged from stories of the strange sounds we heard coming from our parents' bedrooms that we would only recognize in years to come, to finding our mother's personal hygiene products while snooping through her bathroom cupboard, to dads handing their sons books to read, or to nothing — nothing at all from our parents in our homes, but rather from our friends, on the streets or in playgrounds where, it was agreed, most learning about sex or anything sexual took place. The similarities between the experiences of our company and those of the Joint Stock Company were amazing and amusing. And, this was two decades later. That sexual repression was still so prevalent at this point in the 21st century, threatening yet another generation, was an important finding. Although I knew that this was not a 'dated' play, I did not expect its relevance to be so vivid. Discoveries such as these would continue to surprise me throughout the coming weeks. After much laughter, some embarrassment, and numerous poignant moments, the storytelling ended much to everyone's disappointment. It was now time for scene work.

I had made copies of the particular scenes that I wanted acted and divided the actors into groups designed to facilitate

interaction with specific roles and individuals. I saw many different combinations of actors playing a variety of roles. I had reams of notes and possibilities. Time was up. My mind was racing. Everyone was thankful that they had been given so much to do. The consensus among the group was that even if they were not chosen for the final callbacks they felt they had been given more than a fair opportunity to 'show their stuff'. The evening had come to an end. Visions of actors would dance in my head...

...until the next night, when the process would be repeated anew.

The final callbacks were structured in much the same way as the group auditions of the previous evenings. However, more time was allotted to every aspect of the process. The warm-ups were more thorough; I took the group through a full physical and vocal warm-up, and games such as Zip-Zap-Boing, and Murderer were extended to everyone's delight. Storytelling and scene work followed in the same manner and the audition process came to a close, at least for the actors. The time had come to make some rather difficult and crucial decisions.

I have been taught, and have taught, that casting is 90 per cent of a successful production. I have been known to cast against type, and to take big risks casting someone who might not be another director's first choice, someone whom others might think is not capable of handling a certain role. I will cast an actor not because of her level of skill development, but because of her potential, because the individual is ready for the challenge. She may not be as 'good' as so and so, but she is someone with whom I

want to work because I feel connected to her on an artistic level, and she is hungry for the chance to grow. She probably also has something in her that will 'feed' the group in a way that no one else can. I also feel confident about my skills as an acting coach (though I still have much to learn), and so I am not terribly concerned that the production will suffer if her acting is not on par with the other members of the ensemble at this moment in time. One thing is certain, no matter what choices I make regarding casting, the responsibility of working with those choices is mine. To understand the process of the actor is a must for any director. The more knowledge and practical experience I have, the more readily I will be able to aid the actor(s) when they struggle. Faith in them and in myself, faith in the process has always brought about the best results. I have a motto while directing: "For every problem there is a solution." Together we explore problems, and together we find solutions. Together is, after all, the meaning of the word 'ensemble'.

Casting is pure creativity in itself, like putting the pieces of a puzzle together. The *Cloud Nine* puzzle needed seven pieces. At one time I had thought about casting nine actors so that I might give some mainstage experience to a couple of first or second year students who had not yet participated in a university production. My thoughts changed though as I reviewed the implications of the character pairings and what this would mean for the actors and audience. To have one actor play the role of Mrs. Saunders, for example, without playing the juxtaposing role of Ellen would alter the interpretation of the performance text significantly. Instead

of seeing one actor playing two opposing characters; one, the model of independence and heterosexuality, the latter the subservient, blossoming lesbian, we would have two actors doing the work. The audience would have much less to process. The visual cues that the audience receives from one actor playing both characters differ greatly from those the audience receives with two actors playing the roles; although both characters exist on stage they would do so at a greater distance from each other thereby lessening the comparison of their sexuality, their status, and their roles in society.

A delicious irony exists when we see the same actor as Mrs. Saunders having an affair with Clive, and then later as Ellen, attempting to express her love for Betty, Clive's wife. Aside from the acting challenge, there is the hilarity of watching an actor huff and puff on entrances or button up in full view of the audience because of impossible costume changes which add splendidly to the theatricality and farcical nature of Act 1. Furthermore, it is the same actor playing these two women in Act 1 who becomes Lin, the lesbian single mother, who ends up in a relationship with Vic (Betty's daughter), in Act 2. I imagine Lin as the 21st century product of the Ellen/Mrs. Saunders combination. To disrupt this parallel would alter my interpretation of the performance text. It is for these reasons (and similar others) that I decided against casting more actors than required.

Seven. Seven people to tell this story. Each had to play at least two roles and in two cases, three. Some would have to play a character whose gender differed from their own. Some would

have to play characters whose sexual preferences or orientations differed from their own. They would all need stamina to endure a lengthy and rigorous workshop and rehearsal process. They would need the fortitude to persevere through learning the songs, for although they could each carry a tune, the compositions of Ken Hall and Brigit Knecht would demand much more from them. This, of course, was not known at this point in time. Finally, we would each need to give ourselves over to a text and a process that would challenge each one of us as students, as artists, and as human beings.

The seven actors I cast each exhibited the greatest potential to achieve all of the above. Their desire, generosity, sensitivity to the text, subject matter, and their fellow actors, combined with their individual political beliefs made each one of them invaluable to the group. They were a diverse bunch whose personal backgrounds were as varied as their levels of acting experience. Ah, but here exists a lovely parallel: Ms. Churchill's text is as much about living (in harmony) with human beings of varying degrees of difference as it is about anything else, not unlike our own company's task, and not unlike our everyday lives. And this, I believe, is at the heart of *Cloud Nine*. And so, the final list of names read:

Claire Adamson

Jason Bryden

Heather Kennedy

Ryan Luhning

Dianne Lyons

Greg Schneider

Jason Thompson

The cast list was approved by the producer, Brian Smith, and hung in the drama hall for anxious students to finally learn the results of their efforts. In just a very short time our journey would begin with Sunday afternoon workshops covering a four week period, followed by six weeks of rehearsal, and finally two weeks of performing. I could hardly wait!

### **The Workshop**

In the days of theatre antiquity (the 70's), when arts councils were generously granting large sums of money to artists in need, there did exist this quaint little method of rehearsal preparation commonly known as 'workshopping'.

Sometimes theatre companies would create collectively using the workshop process from which they would gather all the material needed to write a play. Sometimes plays were already written and the workshop was used to enable actors to delve more deeply into the workings of the text and its characters. Generally, anywhere from three weeks to three months was allotted for workshopping, depending on the nature of the work being done. It was an invaluable part of the creative process and it still exists today although primarily as a means for playwrights to further develop new works when a substantial amount of the writing has already been completed. Occasionally, even today,

the odd company may be fortunate enough to win the rare favor of arts council funding under the guise of production grants. Unfortunately, all aspects of production (rehearsal, set, design, wages, costumes, props, rental of space, etc.), including the workshop, have to be financed by a grant that more often than not is inadequate. Often, other financial backing is not only needed to ensure the project's security, but required if any sort of grant is to be allotted. Long gone are the days of being handed funds on the proverbial silver platter. And even playwrights themselves are never assured of receiving workshop funding. It is akin to winning a lottery.

We won the lottery! Just imagine the incredible feeling of appreciation to have been given three hours for four consecutive Sundays to workshop our production. I was ecstatic. I could introduce the actors, stage management, and musicians to the text that much sooner. Instead of there being this extended dormant period between casting and first rehearsals, the ensemble could begin working immediately. The actors dearly wanted to employ accents and I could not tell them "No." The eleven member orchestra was gearing up to write an original score. Should they not be allowed to begin as soon as possible? The actors had little, if any, voice and movement training. This text demands a tremendous amount of vocal and physical agility. Why not get them into training as soon as possible? And, certainly the research, the reading, the interviews and related outings that each of us would participate in over the following weeks warranted a



prompt commencement. The examples are many. The hours were few. Thanks to the goddesses (and the producer) for workshops.

September 18, 1994 marked the first day of workshopping. The agenda for the afternoon read:

1. Voice and Body: Alexander Technique-basic exercises to introduce them to this method of relaxation
2. Articulation Drills: Face exercises and tongue twisters
3. Breathing: Assorted exercises to promote breath control, enhance projection, increase awareness of vocal power
4. Chester Lorincz: Accent work
5. Abby Charchun: Victorian 'movement'
6. Relaxation Story: Peace meditation
7. Assign scene and character to actors

This was, for the most part, the schedule we adhered to. Each element was allotted a certain amount of time, but I could be flexible had we the need to spend more or less time on one element or another. The voice and body work was introduced immediately so that the actors could integrate the exercises into a daily routine, thereby giving them the opportunity to make real progress in the next couple of months. The accent work was quite amusing to listen to and watch. It was reminiscent of being in elementary school speaking the times tables in unison with the teacher. Chester was meticulous with detail and provided the cast with a good foundation from which they could practice. Abby Charchun, my wonderful assistant director, undertook the movement portion of the workshop. She had researched Victorian etiquette and taught the women and Jason Thompson, who played

Betty, how to properly walk (with books on heads), sit, stand, gesture and so forth, while dressed in corsets. I was not too concerned about Jason's progress though, as Churchill advises that "if the actor just plays the person in that situation and doesn't worry about playing a woman, it will probably be fine" (File On Churchill, 49). Jason was completely free to just "be."

At the outset of the workshop period, I took the opportunity to discuss my own work ethics and philosophy of ensemble. I also outlined my experiences as actor, director and teacher. And, in no uncertain terms, I made them aware of our responsibilities to each other and the work. While this may sound like an authoritarian approach it is tempered by including myself in the guidelines I set for the company. Experience has shown that it is an advantage to be clear about my expectations on conduct. I also wanted to acknowledge them individually as human beings making a personal investment in this project and so gave them the chance to voice their desires and needs.

As a written exercise, I asked them to respond to several questions about the play and what they wanted to attain from this experience such as; what terrifies you? what excites you? what do you want to take from this experience? give? what are the most positive and negative aspects about this play? When they had finished, they laid their written responses in a pile on the studio floor. We then set about reading them. It is a non-judgemental exercise because the responses are unsigned. Anonymity made the exercise safe while instilling a sense of equality among the individual members of the ensemble. This

was also the first step in preparing them for future storytelling that would be done non-anonymously. It would only be a matter of time before I realized fully that this particular group did not seem to have any difficulty in letting down their guard.

I ended the first workshop with a relaxation exercise. With lights dim, and music low, I took them on a meditative journey. Beginning with their bodies and minds, I made suggestions describing their physical and mental feelings to induce a relaxed state. After I felt certain that they had attained a relaxed state I then began to describe their physical environment, all the while noting the changes to their surroundings as we moved through meadow, forest, pools of healing water, and so forth, until returning to where we began. It is a revitalizing exercise which most (if not all) actors tend to adore. It is simply a wonderful relaxation technique that any individual can employ even without the aid of a narrator. Before the actors left, I assigned them characters and scenes to present. I had selected a cast, but had yet to cast the roles they would be playing. This would be my next task.

On September 25, 1994 we met for our second Sunday workshop. After the vocal and physical warm-ups we gathered around to watch the scenes the actors had prepared. The scenes were provided not as a rehearsal exercise for them, but rather as a tool I could use for casting. I had made some tentative decisions about roles, but wanted to remain open to all the possibilities. My final decisions depended on several considerations: Who would be best suited for a particular character? Would one actor's

strengths serve a particular character more than another actor's, and if so, how? Which actor was ready for, or needed a specific challenge? And, was the corresponding character (i.e.: the Act Two character) suitable for that same actor? It took me a great deal of thought to decide on character pairings. Casting the actor to play them was not going to be any less thought consuming. But taking the time to cast left me feeling quite positive and secure about the choices I made. The actors themselves experienced mixed feelings of joy, for receiving the particular roles they had hoped for, to fear, for receiving a role they did not expect to play. I reassured them that while at times I might be 'loony', this was not one of those times, and that I was as confident in their abilities as I was in the decisions I had made. Trust. We would relearn this word's meaning many times over as our work and relationship progressed.

Our initial meeting with the musicians held some unexpected surprises as well. As I had not yet cast the roles, a read-through for the orchestra's sake allowed me another opportunity to hear the actors' voices. While the members of the orchestra listened, I watched with some amusement as people shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, or laughed in shock at the blatant sexual references. When the reading ended, all but one student remained. The one who could not said that it morally offended her and that she could simply not participate. That a mere read-through was affecting even one student this way only strengthened my beliefs about the importance of this play. This also marked the first time that any production would incorporate

student resources and talent from the Music Department to such a large extent. It was an enormous undertaking.

In addition to learning the orchestra's arrangements, the song "Cloud Nine" in Act Two needed a melody. I thought it appropriate that the cast create this piece and so set some time aside for us to 'jam'. Unfortunately we were less than successful in our attempts at composing, but we did learn what we did not want. It was an earnest effort, and we shared a few good laughs before calling it a 'wrap'. A couple of the melodies were inspired, they just lacked that certain something that the song required. This was an intuitive moment more than anything else. I knew the right melody would present itself to us; when and how was another matter. In the meantime, we had to move on with the next item on the agenda: storytelling.

Throughout the workshop and rehearsal period the ensemble would participate in storytelling exercises. There were four sessions in all, covering topics such as oppression, sexual discovery and negative experiences in relationships. These were designed to integrate our own personal experiences with those of the characters in the text. The Joint Stock company had an enormous advantage in this respect as it was from their own lives and experiences that Caryl Churchill created *Cloud Nine*. They did not need help empathizing with certain characters or situations—they lived them. We, on the other hand, needed to explore some unfamiliar territory.

In my experience the most positive results have always come from storytelling. Recall, if you will, that this is also one of

Joint Stock's methods of workshopping regardless of whether or not they are familiar with the material. And, indeed, these exercises proved successful. Not only were we better able to relate to the characters and their situations, we also began to relate more closely with each other. The bond developing among us was becoming stronger with every meeting. This wasn't a surprise to me, however, as I had the pleasure of experiencing this phenomenon of ensemble work on several occasions. But to share this with yet another cast was truly a gift. If you want to witness the art of listening, watch an ensemble listen to their fellow actors as they relate personal anecdotes. This giving and receiving trust is crucial to ensemble work. It is our greatest strength, our greatest ally. It is what teaches us how to tell the story of the play as one voice. It is the foundation of what we create and, inevitably, give to our audience.

Storytelling sessions did not always take place through a formal, exercise-based medium. Whenever beginning a workshop or rehearsal I like to ask the actors how they are feeling, physically and mentally. It is important to be aware of any concerns or dilemmas that might affect their work so as to provide certain exercises, if possible, that might aid an actor going through a rough period. Sometimes it is the work, sometimes it is personal, and sometimes it is both. One of our informal chat sessions revolved around the audience. How would our friends react? What would our parents think? Some of us were leery about even inviting them. How would we handle walk outs?

Sharing our hopes and concerns in this forum was simply another contributing factor in the strength of our ensemble.

Along with the above mentioned exercises and discussions, we also immersed ourselves in a great deal of research. *The Female Eunuch*, *With Downcast Gays*, *Heart of the City*, *Bingo*, by Rita Mae Brown, *Invisible Lives*, by Martha Barron Barrett, and handouts of definitions from *The Lesbian Sex Book* comprised the reading material available to the cast. Because the reading was quite extensive, I wanted to ensure that they had sufficient time to cover the entire list if they so desired. The workshop allowed me to introduce them to the material well before the rehearsal period during which we could then discuss our findings and our responses. Much of the cast read all that was available to them or, at the very least, those particular works that were significant to their individual understanding of the characters and situations in the text. And each of us familiarized ourselves with the handouts to ensure a common vocabulary of terms. Not only was I was impressed by the cast's disciplined nature and desire to devour my suggested readings, but their initiative to do and to read additional research was inspiring. And on two separate occasions the research came to us.

We were very fortunate to welcome to our workshops one gay and one lesbian couple for informal discussions on everything and anything we needed to know about the lifestyle. All four people were very gracious with their time (and with our ignorance), as we bombarded them with questions and asked for clarification of assumptions. They discussed their 'coming out',

their families' responses of support or otherwise, their recognition of being 'different' from the majority of their friends while growing up, and their experiences of prejudice and acceptance in a predominantly heterosexual society. The meetings were enlightening for all of us. The advantage of having actual people converse with us added the human element of storytelling that books could not.

While storytelling provided a verbal and emotional tool for bonding, games and exercises would provide a physical bonding. The acting program at the University of Winnipeg presented me with the great fortune to be directed by a woman named Libby Mason. Actor, director, teacher, playwright, and mentor, Libby taught me the fundamentals of ensemble acting. She introduced me to the many physical exercises that I would inevitably pass along to the actors I would one day direct. And so it was, in these workshops, that the members of our ensemble began a physical relationship with each other. Once again, I had the opportunity to introduce the actors to a new way of working. Ball work, for example, allowed them a physically active outlet while simultaneously encouraging the importance of ensemble playing. Gathered around in a circle, we began by calling an actor's name while passing a ball to the corresponding actor. This progressed to calling out character names of the first act and then the second act, and then combining the two. Following this, we broke the rigidity of the circle and began walking around the room while continuing with the game. There are numerous objectives to ball



work which I discuss in more detail in the chapter on rehearsal for which the game became an intrinsic part.

Suffice it to say, the workshop provided the time to establish the foundation of our ensemble, affirming my foresight in requesting a workshop period. It was among the most notable elements contributing to the success of our production and I truly cannot imagine (nor thank goddess need I) what we would have done without it.

The auditioning, casting and workshop period were completed. I was reeling with excitement and ready to dive into the rehearsal process as I mused on where we had been thus far. Beginning with the evenings of auditions and all the eager students who worked very hard to be cast (and when no one yet knew what was in store for them), to the workshop where the selected ensemble of actors were immediately immersed in a rigorous and invigorating process left me (almost) breathless. It had already been an exhilarating experience and we had not even begun rehearsals. This really came as no surprise for I was collaborating with some of the most wonderful artists — not among the least of whom happened to be the designers and the musicians.

## Chapter Four: Design and Music Collaboration

### Design

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have worked with Jules Conn, who designed the set and costumes, and Sheena Ross, who created the lighting design, on this production. Sheena and I had previously enjoyed a very successful collaboration on *Lear's Daughters*, and so we were experienced with each other's method of working. This would be a first for Jules and me, and although we have not worked together since, I hope the future might hold the opportunity for us to do so once again.

We began our collaboration in the summer months of 1994. Preliminary meetings were infused with excitement about the project: this was also Jules' MFA production, and all three of us shared an unbridled enthusiasm for Ms. Churchill's text. Initially, discussions revolved around Churchill's theatre — her penchant for subverting theatrical convention (and form) of all kinds in order to challenge our assumptions of what theatre should be, while maintaining an accessibility for contemporary audiences. Was it possible to elaborate on Churchill's concepts within our production? How could we incorporate, through design, the very ideas that she expounds? Given that we were in the Reeve, a.k.a. 'the coffin', a supposedly modular performance space, we had the freedom to indulge ourselves creatively.

Our first dilemma arose out of the requirements for an essential design element, sound — in this case a live orchestra. Sheena and I had already experienced the power of live music in

*Lear's Daughters*. Brigit Knecht, Keona Mundy, and Beth Paul, who played violin, flute, and viola respectively, were a vital element throughout the rehearsal process and production. Their contribution was invaluable. The collaboration between themselves, the actors, and myself marked the beginning of a working method that Brigit and I would have the opportunity to explore once again, only this time on a much larger scale. But the design question was: how could we accommodate the musicians in the set?

This question was among the first of many that we explored in our discussions regarding the set, particularly the stage configuration we would use in 'the coffin'. We eventually narrowed down the stage configuration to three possibilities: an endstage (proscenium) arrangement oriented toward the opening into the Secondary, the existing modified thrust with the 'biscuits' removed to open up the pit beneath a suspended platform; or juggling the seating risers around into an arena/in-the-round configuration. First we had to check with Don Monty, the technical director, to find out if all three were achievable.

Our thought about constructing an orchestra pit was soon vetoed because of the implications involving the floor of the Reeve Primary. Although the individual blocks of the floor were originally designed to be rigged to a hydraulic system, allowing various levels and positions, this system was never installed, leaving only two options: all in place or all out. It would mean having to leave the floor in place as a permanent configuration,

after the production, which would most likely present difficulties for future productions or classes held in the theatre.

Another idea was to position the members of the orchestra above the stage — yes, in the rafters. The very real problem with this, not to mention some musicians' fear of heights, was the difficulty they would have getting their instruments up incredibly narrow staircases (how on earth could Tim Sproule set up his drums, for example). Furthermore, once they were up there they would not be allowed back down until the show ended. (And never mind the fact that it was completely against the regulations to have anything above the audience that might fall on their heads — a bow, a drumstick.) Even with all these obstacles, the main problem was that the musicians would not be able to see each other to know when to take their cues. That then left us with two alternatives. Jules and I talked quite extensively about my experience of working in the round and his fondness for that particular configuration:

Jules: Well, there is the straight proscenium, or working in the round.

Kelly: Oh my God.

Jules: (Laughter)

Kelly: Which of the two appeals more to you?

Jules: (More laughter and a knowing smile)

Kelly: Just thought I'd ask.

Jules: Well, thank-you.

Kelly: Do you think it will work? Oh my God.

Jules: Yes.

Kelly: What the hell. Let's go for it!

And that is how working in the round came to be.

Working in the round left us with only one viable option for orchestra placement: the Reeve Secondary. We had hoped that the triangular configuration could include them within the performance space without giving them 'primary' focus. Unfortunately, this was impossible because of orchestral requirements for space, individual lighting, acoustical arrangement, and cueing.

The wonderful thing about working with Jules was his uncanny ability to take anything I said, whether it be a very literal idea, or abstract thoughts regarding a variety of the design elements, and translate them into tangible works of art. This is, of course, his job, but I was truly astounded by his imaginative approach to certain aspects of the set. Nothing was impossible for him, only a pleasurable challenge.

The first idea I had was what I thought to be a very literal image of a cloud for the shape of the stage. Of course the title of the play is a metaphor for elation, but I wondered if it was somehow possible to translate this into a practical construction. The cloud would be used as the verandah playing area for Act One, and then somehow break apart for Act Two, representing the two very different structures of both acts of the play. The idea of Act One being whole, ruled by one dominant force, juxtaposed by the fragmented structure and non-existent dominant force of Act Two was what I attempted to articulate to Jules. If the cloud could break apart for the second act, thus creating paths in the

park setting, this would then complement both physically and metaphorically the ideas and circumstances which compose the act. I have to admit that I thought it was a rather hokey idea at first, and I was a tad reticent to express this to Jules, but he quickly reassured me that no idea was too crazy or simplistic. Preliminary discussions should consider everything and anything, like word association, if you will. Just as the actor should not censor herself, so too, a director should not censor herself. One never knows what ingenuity lurks behind the most seemingly banal or absurd ideas. And such was the case with the idea of the cloud.

I raised the question of how certain thematic elements could be depicted in the set such as: interior/exterior, closed/open, rigidity/fluidity, oppression/freedom. These were my articulations of the thematic and physical atmosphere that I felt needed to be addressed in relation to the set. The physical configuration of the cloud as stage would certainly enhance some of these aspects, but not alone.

One of my concerns regarding the Act One set was how we could create the feeling of space as being both interior and exterior, although not simultaneously. Scene Three depicts the flogging of the stable boys as the women wait inside the house, under the guise of being protected. But how could the platform all at once transform from the verandah to an inside parlor or living room? And how could we simultaneously create not only interior, but an atmosphere of extreme oppression?

The answer lay in Jules' brilliant imagination. He devised two twenty-two foot high shutters and placed them at stage right and stage left. The implications were incredible. He had found the solution to the interior/exterior dilemma and then some. The shutters could be manually operated to open and close, and with Sheena's lighting design we were able to create the illusion of light pouring in from 'outside'. The diffuse lighting cast on the women inside combined with streams of light pouring through the shutters from the 'outside' created an eerie feeling of claustrophobic tension that permeated the playing of that scene. This design idea was a favourite was a favourite among all of us.

The shutters also created a proscenium stage. The audience surrounded the stage in a triangular shape with the large block of the audience at the base of the triangle, and two sections of audience creating the sides of the triangle formation. The rake/ramp was situated at the apex of the triangle, creating yet another conventional form: a thrust stage, still surrounded by audience on three sides. The shutters, positioned at stage left and right at the base of the triangle created the proscenium for all sections of the audience; the audience at the base of the triangle looking through to the sides, and the audience at the sides looking through to the base. The implications of this were twofold: not only were we able to create the traditional stage of the Victorian Era inside the round for Act One, but the shutters created the perfect image of the action being framed, an idea I had expressed to Jules in earlier talks regarding the set.

The idea of family and the way it operates throughout this text plays an important thematic role. The structure of family in Act One is a direct result of the domineering patriarchy, and, as such, the implied hierarchy maintains that the man rules his family as he rules his country. Of course, Churchill shatters this illusion of family. The idea that people (and situations) are not as they appear to be (even that permanence is an illusion in itself) led me to explore the idea of the family portrait as the beholder of all that is true and all that is artificial, of all that was and all that changes. A family photograph gives us certain information: who we resemble from the past, the economic status of the persons photographed based on their attire, the sex of the individuals, and certain assumptions regarding the family based on its size. But certain assumptions can be inaccurate. The family conceals just as much as, if not more than, it shows, as Churchill illustrates for us. My question was how could we articulate this idea and implicate the audience in it. What we infer from a family portrait, or in the human beings that we meet in our everyday lives, is not always true. Our expectations that people adhere to prescribed manners of being — i.e., societally imposed constructions of what it means to be a girl, boy, woman, man, son, daughter, wife, husband and so on — can easily be disrupted. In other words, to what extent can I include the audience beyond their active role as spectator, as Churchill's text demands by the very questions it raises?

This is where the shutters worked so splendidly because they provided the borders, the frame, as it were. The idea of the family portrait, of framing the playing, not only included the



players, but extended outward to include the audience so that while we watched the actors we could also look beyond to watch each other.

(For Act Two the shutters were relegated to the fringes, the 'wings' beyond the main playing area, where they were lost to the present-day immediacy of the park setting, but hovered at the periphery of awareness, like ghosts from the Victorian past.)

The family portrait idea also worked as the catalyst for Act One costuming. The sepia tones of old family portraits were the inspiration for the costume colour scheme. Ivories, beiges, and browns of varying shades and hues were chosen to complete the wardrobe of the Act One characters. The set, too, embodied the sepia tones with the natural woodwork of the platform and its built-in benches, the shutters, and the rake/ramp. Although the wood was painted, the effect of the painting added to the natural quality of the wood, creating a lived-in affectation, as well as evoking the rich landscaped hues of the African continent which were brought to life with Sheena's exquisite lighting design.

Initially, Sheena and I discussed the climate of Africa in conjunction with the structure of the text. We began with lighting to evoke a hot, dry climate which would get progressively hotter through to the end of the act. Act One, being highly stylized, needed to carry that into the lighting, evident in one fashion as the very rich red sunset that filled the end of Scene One. She also capitalized on the tall shutter units, first by projecting the Union Jack on the closed louvres during the opening anthem; then pushing light through them to cast patterns across the stage

(enhanced by extra gobo units), specifically for the flogging scene. With the beatings delivered, the shutters were thrown open, and as the full bright heat of the outside flooded the stage, the action was propelled back out onto the verandah.

The rake was an important lighting area for several special instances outside of and isolated from the governor's house. The opening introduction of the extended family began with a special tableau at the top of the hill and filled out the playing space as they descended into it. Clive & Mrs. Saunders were revealed in their peculiar tryst in much the same locale with even more heat beating upon them than they could physically muster themselves. Later on, a cool wash upon the slope made for a strong contrasting winter motif as Joshua carols his poignant interpretation of "Good King Wenceslas" across the veldt.

Joshua's other special moment — his rendition of the creation myth — was beautifully backlit at the fringe of the verandah, casting a halo effect around him and Edward, lending that mythic quality to the tale.

This particular design process was definitely the most exciting one in which I have had the pleasure of playing a part. The highlight of our collaboration was being invited to designer/professor Sheila Lee's home on Hornby Island off the British Columbia coast. For one whole week we feasted on clams and other delicacies, drank copious amounts of wine, gazed at the deer who frequented Sheila's garden, enjoyed leisurely strolls through dense, lush forests or along vast stretches of white sandy ocean shoreline, picked (and ate) buckets of juicy raspberries, all

the while diligently brainstormed on the design elements for *Cloud Nine*.

Well, perhaps not every moment of the day. "All work and no play..." as the saying goes. When it was time to get down to collaborating though, it was never a problem. Why would it be? We were surrounded by an inspirational environment, our own 'wilderness safari,' without any worries except where we wanted to go exploring that particular day. We truly enjoyed each other's company, and we were all very excited about the project. Sheena Ross was especially pleased to be included in the process from the outset. Too frequently the lighting designer is brought in at the end of design/technical development. In this instance, her voice, like everyone else's, was equally important in our collaborative effort.

Once we began brainstorming, not much could get in our way. We fed off of each other's imaginations quite nicely. I was surprised at how the designers were able to work with what I thought to be inarticulate and abstract thoughts. But they reassured me that that is part of the process. Their knowledge of the history, the landscape of both Africa and London, and the culture of the two eras, was invaluable to the process. They both came equipped with wonderful pictorial sources to better inform me in our discussions. Images of the Victorian family, colonial occupation in Africa, landscapes of the African continent, and more, made concrete that which I had only imagined or had stored in memory from nondescript movies I had seen in the distant past. Some of the costume ideas had their foundations in

the pictures we saw. Of course, the ideas had to be developed, and that was very satisfying.

In regard to Act One, we discussed the idea of farce and how the first act is a "cleverly sustained piece of cartooning," as one reviewer commented (Fitzsimmons). How does that translate into the costumes? We talked of Edward as being the little man. Does he then become the replica of a little Clive? Betty's attire is even more significant: is it just any dress that she wears or would a wedding dress illustrate the point better? And how does the dress comment on her situation? Does it and should it restrict her movements? And how does that affect the actor playing such a unique and presumably unfamiliar role? And then there is the challenge of dressing the actor playing both Ellen and Mrs. Saunders. How do we integrate two looks into one outfit? If something must change, what's the most economical quick-change, whether behind the scenes or in view? Not only that, but the character of Mrs. Saunders has two separate costumes: she arrives on the scene wearing jodhpurs and must reappear in a 'skirt for two,' at the top (literally, on the rake) of the next scene.

We thought that Edward as a miniature Clive, replete in colonial officer's fatigues with pith helmet, would be rather fitting, highlighting the irony that he is anything but, and distinctive from the stereotypical Victorian little-boy-in-sailor-suit image. Moreover, the 'manly' look did for Dianne as Edward what the wedding dress did for Jason as Betty. That virginal bride image poked at the institution of marriage and its presumption of the woman as property — a jewel in the father's crown. Her glowing

white 'perfection' counterpoints Clive's admonitions that "Women can be treacherous and evil. They are darker and more dangerous than men." (Churchill, 39) As an added touch, Jules took the liberty of exaggerating the leg-o-mutton sleeves, which, as well as being highly comical, suggested to me cartoonish musculature, reminiscent of Popeye after he eats his can of spinach. This was all the more fitting when Mrs. Saunders and Betty brawl at the end of the act. Finally, the restrictive nature of the costume — the mock corsetting and bound forearms — evoked the Victorian restraints upon the feminine bearing and expression. Symbolically, her hands are tied and her inner being is imprisoned.

On the other hand, Mrs. Saunders' sexual freedom is embodied within the fullness of her skirt. Its expanse allows complete access for another human being, not unlike bedclothes, inviting a sexual romp, but specifically on her terms and for her pleasure. Ironically, Clive's fears of being "swallowed up" by a "dark female lust" (Churchill, 40) come to fruition with his preferred mistress.

Curiously, the 'darkest' of the women in the design is the dowdy mother, Maud, in her withered brown velvet dress and nightcap-like headdress, suggesting that her days are over. She is now the sterile geriatric, devoid of sexuality, cloaked in mourning for her lost youth. Indeed, she would be left off in a corner with very little attention paid to her by the other characters — if she allowed it.

At the other end of the spectrum, the black servant, Joshua, is played by a white, yet still dressed in the pretentious, immaculate serving-white of the civilized savage.

And then there's Harry. The Great White Hunter. Indiana Jones in darkest Africa. The ultimate macho man in his 'Marlboro Man' trench and slouch hat, riding in to swoon the women and children — and men!

Act Two costumes introduced the colour of the modern era. The outrageous, oversized, trendy little-girl outfits for Cathy epitomized the childlike quality of the act — exuberant exploration of a whole new world. Jules and I had discussed my intention of setting the second act in present day London, instead of the 1979 setting of the text. At the time of the original production, 1979 was present day, and in 1994 the fashion styles were retro 70's, so we thought this would work very well with the design scheme.

In hopes of updating the play to the 90s, we wanted to put all the characters into familiar, comfortable, recognizable clothes. Jules provided a series of sketches of suggested looks, indicating a progression in costume changes throughout the Act, which we presented to the cast to inspire them to discover the 'perfect' outfit for their own characters. In fact, the actors were to bring in their own attire, whether from their personal closets or that of friends, and relations, to enhance the natural, lived-in feel of the 'costumes.' Although they frequently provided a pair of shoes or a shirt or sweater, perhaps even a whole dress, they seemed reluctant or unable to provide entire outfits suitable to the quirky roles they were to play. More frequently, suggested or offered

items would be directed toward parts they did not have to play. Lacking the budget to do any wholesale shopping for contemporary attire, we were left to the vagaries of cast-off or second-hand merchandise, which gave us much more of a 'retro-70s' look than originally intended or preferred.

Churchill's ultimate decision to place Act Two in a contemporary children's playground within a London park makes the perfect physical metaphor for what the characters experience throughout the Act. When Jules and I discussed the initial idea of the cloud, an important feature of that image was the ethereal quality that dissolved into another look — from castle into swan, for example, or, in this case, from colonial verandah to the different areas of the park. Paths would be created once the structure of Act One was broken apart, symbolically dismantling the monolithic imposition of the Empire upon the wild, untamed wilderness of Africa. Now the physical structures were re-assimilated into the natural world. Instead of Man imposing on Nature, now human beings explore themselves and their world within Nature.

The most distinguishing feature of the Act Two set was the abolition of limits and boundaries — the feeling that the world continues out beyond the playing area into the world of the audience and indeed even outside the theatre itself. The lines and atmosphere soften from the rigid edges and borders of the Empire to the curves and free-flow of the urban retreat. The space no longer dictates limitations but allows freedom of choice. Characters could now enter and exit from any of three directions

— all of which seemed to connect to one another beyond the audience's immediate view — and were free to choose any path. The immensity of the world they inhabit is no longer a thing to be feared and tamed (Africa of Act One), but a place that welcomes and invites self-discovery. The landscape is now open and accessible; the ominous shutters of the first act have been pushed to the side, and the looming/overhanging tree borders that enclosed the colonial homestead have now swung open to broaden the horizons and include the audience.

Even the ramp/rake that sealed off the compound of Act One was pushed off into the Secondary, expanding the rolling parklands that way and enveloping the musicians into the pastoral setting as well. Early intentions of resetting the musicians upon a gazebo/bandstand or having them stroll as minstrels throughout the space were deferred because of the orchestra's physical and spatial demands. Instead, chairs and music stands were loosely positioned in an arc across the 'hillside' (the rake) at the visible edge of the park. Although not entirely integrated into the main playing area, they were more directly 'onstage,' rather than set off in a (not-quite-)traditional 'orchestra pit.' As well, they were able to change from concert blacks of the formal first act to brightly coloured t-shirts and blue jeans for the more laid back second act.

All this helped make the entire park setting much more open, relaxing and inviting. Despite the departure from the farcical quality of the first half of the show, we wanted to preserve a light-hearted, playful feel to the sexual explorations



and misadventures of part two. The outdoor setting (as opposed to one script's description of it being "inside the hut of a one-o'clock club") would allow more emphasis on the children's playground portion of the park.

As a further invitation to play in this bright new world, we added a teeter-totter to the remnant pylon of the first act structure. The child's toy provided a symbolic commentary on the balance of power in relationships, while the playful actions upon it served to counterpoint much of the 'serious' adult conversations.

The process of lighting this bright new world of Act Two was much more straightforward; we replaced much of the potent heat of Africa with the dappled cool tones of the London park. Each scene specified a particular season and time of day, ranging from Winter through Spring to a mid-summer night and a late Summer afternoon. We established a more naturalistic feel to Act Two, which would determine what creative liberties we would allow ourselves to take. Several instances where we could indulge stylistically, thus taking this act beyond its naturalistic qualities, included isolating Gerry and Betty for their monologues, and incorporating a more dramatic effect for the spectral appearances.

The evening orgy also required particular candlelight effects, both as onstage practicals and in special reinforcement from the overhead plot. Predominantly cool blue nighttime wash helped isolate the pocket of warmth, enhancing the mystery in the dark recesses of the park. This particular scene with its abruptly changing light sources made cueing more of an issue than it was in

other parts of the show. This technical challenge was deftly settled, not unlike every other point of our collaboration.

I honestly cannot recall one moment of tension between myself and the designers. I do not think that is selective memory either. If there were any tense moments, I never heard about them. I think we all related to each other with the utmost diplomacy and tactfulness. Sheena and Jules were two of the greatest calming influences from the beginning to the end of this process, and I will be forever grateful to them for their professional spirit and friendship.

## Music

I met Brigit Knecht in September 1992 when she was a student in my tutorial section for Introduction to Dramatic Literature. I learned then that she was a music student, studying violin. In October 1993 I passed Brigit in the hallway, and before I could walk away I heard somebody else asking her (in my voice) if she would ever consider playing live in a theatrical production.

At the time I was in the process of compiling a list of potential MFA directing projects, and although I did not yet know which project I would be developing, I certainly had a favourite on which I focused my attentions — *Lear's Daughters*, a collective collaboration written by Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group.

Thankfully, Brigit agreed. Of course, neither of us knew what we were headed for, but had we known, we would have done it all over again. Indeed, our first succesful collaboration

inspired us to work together again. When I came to her with the news of my imminent directing of *Cloud Nine*, and asked her what she thought about a collaborative effort with an entire orchestra, she readily agreed.

She was attracted to the opportunity to work in a different artistic environment, one which veered from the rigid demands placed on the technical aspects of performance mastery, emphasizing instead the freedom of creativity and collaboration. Within the context of theatre, she felt the overall atmosphere was more important than the usual trauma of missing a note or jumping a beat.

Whereas with *Lear's Daughters* the music seemed to score itself — nursery rhymes being such an obvious choice to underscore that work — *Cloud Nine* left us with "no clue as to where to begin" (Knecht). Brigit began cleverly recruiting an orchestra by speaking to several music students about the unique opportunity this upcoming project would present. She roughly outlined what the process would involve and managed to recruit about a dozen musicians to a reading of the script. Although their reactions may have matched hers ("Oh my God!"), we only lost one at that stage.

Brigit immediately encountered difficulties by not being able to rely upon well-known tunes to underscore the drama. At the same time she could not allow herself to be overly influenced by specific sources or references in composing new music for this production. At the very beginning she brought in Ken Hall, a double-major in composition and performance, to share in the

responsibility of scoring the work. They began reading the script and analysing its thematic content in search of the ideas needed to develop the proper melodies, rhythms, and sounds for both South Africa of a century ago and modern-day London.

We worked together through the script to decide which scenes would benefit from underscoring and to determine where transitional music would be required. In collaborating, I would express particular ideas; Brigit would take these ideas, go away, and translate them into music, returning to rehearsal with her precious creations to either be "used, modified or chucked" (Knecht). Much improvisational adaptation occurred right in the rehearsal hall. At one point, each actor was paired off with a musician and instrument deemed appropriate, and sent off to explore the role musically and to develop and bring back a character 'theme.'

Once engrossed in the process of writing for the stage, Brigit discovered several maxims that differentiated this work from her usual music theory. Drama determines the music; the story plays the melody; and the dialogue beats the metre. And like many other phases of theatrical production, "less is best" (Knecht).

In all the musicians produced over two dozen pieces of music for this show, ranging from thirty-second transitional snippets to fully orchestrated production numbers. Brigit and Ken each wrote an original song: Brigit composing "Come Gather Sons of England" while Ken developed "A Boy's Best Friend." Brigit spent many hours listening to fanfares and Edward Elgar, Benjamin Brittain, and other British composers in order to develop

the eleven parts she needed to adapt from "Rule Britannia" for her work. In addition to the above mentioned compositions, some of the more memorable and moving pieces included Edward's "Crocodile Dream," Joshua's "Creation Story," and "The Flogging Scene."

They wrote "Crocodile Dream" before seeing the actual staging of the scene, hoping it would fit the timing as they could best determine. Their main purpose was to evoke mood with sound effects produced by their instruments. Ken began with a flutter-tongue on the flute; violins entered with glissandos; bass added tremolo (better known as "scrubba-dubbas") achieved by moving the bow as rapidly as possible back and forth across the strings; ponticello bowed across its bridge to produce a "weird, squeaky sound"; then filled out with clarinet and some percussion.

Joshua's "Creation Story" and "The Flogging Scene" transpired in the same manner, influenced by the musical composers' interpretation of the text. For "The Flogging Scene" they used paper held between the hammers and strings of the piano so that struck keys would flap upon the paper to produce distorted sound. They also plucked piano strings by finger nails to approximate the "thwack" of a whip, and tapped a pencil upon them for other notes.

Nikki Elson also provided African drums to accompany the flute, clarinet and seemingly endless low bass tone that drove "Creation Story."

Numerous works were adapted and rearranged for many scenes of the show. Vivaldi's "Four Seasons: Spring" arranged for string quartet was re-arranged for two violins, viola and bass to underscore the hide-and-seek of the family picnic scene. Act One's final scene, the wedding, required three different works: Handel's Finale from the "Water Music Suite," Bach's "Brandenburg Concerto #3, First Movement," and Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik, First Movement". The latter two, originally scored for string quartets, were performed by just two violins.

Act Two's musical requirements were substantially less and consisted of the "Batman & Robin" rap, "Tommy's Lost," "Goddess Music," "Dead Soldier" (a distorted "Taps" played from off in the carpentry shop), the "Cloud Nine" theme song, and transitional music from "In an English Country Garden."

All in all, Brigit, Ken, and the entire orchestra produced an incredible variety of music worthy of Churchill's theatrical tour-de-force.

## Chapter Five: The Rehearsal Process

" The world of today can be described to the human beings of today only as a world that can be changed." Bertolt Brecht

I have done all that I can to prepare for this day. Months of reading, planning, analysing, discussion, research, and collaboration with numerous people have led me here. I have a specific course of action, a road-map of the journey we are about to embark upon. I am also flexible, knowing that some roads will take different turns or not be travelled at all, and therefore have left some of our options wide open. I, too, am a passenger on this journey. I don't want to know all the answers, the results. Like any of the actors, I, too, want to share in the experience of discovery as it happens — this is the creative process. I will be the guide of our journey, but I expect the other passengers will show me a thing or two along the way, decide which road we will travel down, the direction we will take. The actors' experience on this journey will influence how and where I guide them, so it is impossible for me to know all the answers at this point. My responsibility is to bring the players to the play.

### The Warm-up

Inside the Reeve Theatre our actors are gearing up for what promises to be the beginning of something extraordinary. These students are surpassing even my expectations. I watch this dedicated group fully engaged in vocal and physical warm-ups, as

they stretch, jump and run while emitting elongated vowel sounds, tongue twisters, or the musical scale to the rafters, to their fellow actors, or in projected whispers across the room. After several more minutes, I ask them to wind it up and begin their group work. No, it is not therapy — at least not in the traditional sense.

The group work consists of a variety of games and exercises that the actors engage in to aid them in whatever area they most need help. By this I mean that it is the actors' responsibility to check in with each other and find out where they are: mentally, physically, and emotionally. They don't stop to have a discussion, but rather find the appropriate exercise that will best suit their needs.

For example, if concentration is at a low (perhaps they've just completed a gruelling mid-term earlier in the day), they might elect to play "Murderer" which calls for both mental concentration and physically active participation. The game begins with everyone gathered in a circle. One person then begins by walking towards another who must then look to someone else in the circle to release her. In other words, Ryan walks to Heather, Heather looks to Greg for help, and Greg calls out Heather's name to release her. She then walks to Greg, while Ryan takes her place in the circle. Greg then looks to Claire for help, and the game continues on in this fashion until eventually what you see is this criss-crossing rhythm of people engaging in active giving. I say 'giving' because it is most important that everyone focuses on the person being advanced upon so that she has ample



help when in need, which brings us to the heart of the game: it is not the person being advanced on that calls out for someone to help her, it is the person with whom she makes eye contact that must call out her name, thus releasing her from the circle. If the player is not released before the approaching player makes contact with her, she is 'murdered'. As the game progresses, no longer is it necessary to call out the player's name to release them, a look will suffice; the ensemble becomes accustomed to helping each other from simply looking into each other's eyes. It is quite something to watch the actors running to and from each other as they become proficient at this game. It is easy to see how this particular exercise might well serve the ensemble throughout rehearsal and especially in performance.

Giving the actors the choice to decide for themselves what it is they require instills discipline and confidence in the very early stages of rehearsal. I have found that there are varying degrees of confidence amongst actors, just as there are a variety of ways to instill it. The earlier I can begin this process, the easier it will be to hand over the production to the actors on opening night.

The actors enjoyed a number of other games. One game in particular became ritualized and, I believe, held a source of superstition for them. The actors form a circle and one actor begins by counting off starting, of course, with "one." Moving counter-clockwise, the next actor then says "one" and the following actor then says "two." Back to the beginning with "one," "two," and then "three." The counting continues, always beginning with "one," until the group reaches "twenty," whereupon

bystanders witness the group burst into fits of whoops and hollers and thunderous applause for their adroitness at playing the game. They use this game to measure their level of concentration and to determine who, if anyone, is lacking focus. Although seemingly simple in theory, it is easy to lose track of the number last arrived at if one is not focused. The result? "Begin again," I would tell them, provoking further frustration and a temporary sense of hopelessness. Their desire to succeed, however, transcended any negativity towards the game, and eventually aided in their success. "Counting" was to become a pre-performance ritual. The cast would not quit until they had conquered the game, for to do so was regarded as a bad omen!

Much time was allotted for group work, whether it was in warm-up games or acting exercises in order to develop a solid group dynamic. Nurturing the actors' strengths and acknowledging their weaknesses involves the director in many aspects of their personal lives.

I used to believe that it was best to leave all 'baggage' at the rehearsal room door; it did not matter what had transpired during the day, whether the dog had died, a test had been failed, or a relationship had ended. To a certain extent actors must detach themselves from the worries and struggles of their own lives when it comes time to rehearse, but to a greater extent it becomes sheer hypocrisy to tell an actor to 'use' herself while simultaneously expecting the actor to censor herself.

This is one of the reasons why a group warm-up is essential. First, the group becomes aware of the state of their fellow cast

mates and they learn to adapt accordingly. Second, sensitivity to one's colleagues will result in a harmonious working environment, thus increasing the level of productivity while possibly even restoring some level of optimism to the actor(s) in despair. Third, it allows the director to see if an actor is having a particularly difficult time, especially in an ensemble of this size. Ignoring the fact might just increase resistance to the evening's work and lead to a clash of wills: the director yelling at the actor to get herself together, the actor feeling humiliated or even more worthless than when she began rehearsals. Truthfully, what quality of work can one expect as a result?

A director's awareness can be most advantageous; she can encourage the actor to use herself just as she is if it is appropriate for the work being done, which can often lead to surprising results and at the very least be therapeutic in a safe environment. This is not to say that therapy should be or is the primary (or even secondary) purpose of rehearsal, but to dismiss the possibility of acting as being therapeutic would be naïve. Recall, too, if you will, that this particular play was devised from people's own personal experiences. It would be remiss of the director to ignore, or censor, her actors when the success of this production is dependent on their personal relationship to the material.

On the other hand, if the work requires the actor to engage in a way that is in complete contradiction to her immediate emotional state, the director can then gently encourage her to take a different approach, use a different strategy. It is much easier to suggest an actor do the opposite of what they are doing if they are

truly doing something for which there is an opposite. In other words, if the actor is invited to use herself fully, chances are that she will commit fully to the work, creating specific, clear choices from which the director is then more able to articulate what it is she saw and whether or not the actor is working in the right direction. Provide the environment that inspires the actor, rather than one which paralyzes her.

Another exercise that deserves mentioning is ball work. I previously outlined some elements and benefits of ball work in the workshop portion of the thesis. It is in rehearsal, when actors become that much more familiar with the text and their characters, that this exercise employs new levels of challenging play.

Once the actors had mastered fluency with the basic principles of ensemble playing, I introduced a new concept to the game. The actors, while standing in a circle, throw, or bounce, or roll, toss, hand-off, or do whatever they feel physically captures the corresponding emotion they attach to the ball. So, one actor might yell "anger" while whipping the ball at another actor in the circle. Conversely, another actor might softly speak the word "anger," while ever so slowly and determinedly handing the ball to another actor. They begin by drawing upon themselves; then I introduce another facet: play the game in character. Now the exercise takes on a completely different dimension; the actors begin to develop a stronger sense of relationship between characters while at the same time exploring the many emotional levels of those relationships. Finally, when the actors have their

lines memorized, an actor will begin by speaking her lines, at any point in the text she desires, while physically manipulating the ball in a way that corresponds to her physical action. For example, if Dianne, while playing Edward in Act One, Scene Two, chooses to begin with "It's your fault. You can't throw. I hate you," we might see her throw the ball at Greg, the actor playing Clive, **accusing** him with the line "It's your fault." Dianne would then need to retrieve the ball, as the succeeding line also belongs to her, and continue by perhaps **berating** Greg with "You can't throw," while manoeuvring the ball in a way that corresponds with her action - berating. Finally, Dianne might whip the ball at Greg, **attacking** him with the line "I hate you." Greg must then retrieve the ball as it is he who has the next line. The game continues with the actors either completing that particular scene, or beginning another.

An actor is free to begin at any point in the scene (or monologue) she chooses. It is up to the other actors to figure out where she is in the text and respond accordingly. Some of the benefits of this exercise are fairly obvious: the actors have a group activity which helps them to memorize their lines, and it makes the actor(s) aware of any weakness in this regard. Some of the greater benefits include:

1. Clarifying any generalized action: if the actor chooses to **accuse** another character it will be quite clear as to whether or not they execute the action fully and specifically.

2. Working the pace: the essential objective of this work is to keep the ball moving. If, at any time, there is a weakness of any sort, the pace will be affected. The ideal pace for a production is perhaps one of the most difficult elements to achieve. Ball work such as this demands energy, focus, and concentration from the actors — the very things needed to achieve an ideal pace.

3. Strengthening the ensemble: the cast develops a sense of play that is focused, energetic, specific, and above all gracious. While one or two people are involved in the moment of play, everyone else is focused on them, sending them their energy, their support, their desire for them to do their very best.

This exercise teaches them the importance of giving and the effects thereof — if one person falters, the entire group falters.

The warm-ups are over. The hard work begins.

### **Establishing a Common Vocabulary**

There are numerous theories on and approaches to acting. Even within one particular school of thought there exist different theoretical interpretations and, not surprisingly, many different approaches to that training. My basic approach to acting is the Stanislavsky system that was taught to me at the University of Winnipeg. I do, however, employ techniques and exercises devised by teachers and theoreticians whose approaches to the

craft differ quite extensively from Stanislavsky's. For this production of *Cloud Nine*, however, I will use some of the basic tenets of the Stanislavsky system as a communication tool, not as the omnipotent approach to every single aspect of our work. It is reasonable to assume that there will be some variation in our approaches to working; therefore, flexibility is required. To demand that we all observe the identical working method can be restrictive and debilitating. Again, I need to inspire, not paralyze, the actors.

The following introduces the reader to some of the basic principles of Stanislavsky, and my application of them for this production.

While it is true that there are numerous ways of translating the written text into performance, it is also certainly true that what is required for a performance is that 'something happen'. As obvious as this may sound, it is still possible (and all too often actual) to see a production that is devoid of any such thing. Brilliantly designed sets, exquisite costumes and technically skillful and flawless staging have, on several occasions, fooled me into thinking that the production I am watching is absolutely incredible — for about the first fifteen minutes. Then I get frustrated, bored and sometimes angry. I begin to lose interest in the characters; I simply don't care about them. Oh, I might, for awhile, be captivated by the actor(s) stylized movement or the argument put forward by the text, but eventually my eyes begin to glaze over, my program becomes an adventure in origami, and

my watch cannot possibly tick fast enough. My complaint? There is nothing happening. It is as simple as that.

The word 'drama' comes from the Greek 'draō' meaning: "do." It is safe to say, then, that when I watch a dramatic production I should expect to see something being done — something happening between the actors on stage — not a poetry reading, nor puppets whose moves have been carefully choreographed and whose performances lack intention, meaning and soul. Acting — action — is the 'doing' that occurs between actors on stage. As a director it is my responsibility to aid the actor in doing so that the text's idea(s) and questions are clearly illustrated. I begin with action.

Explaining the concept of action to student actors always presents a challenge. Beginning actors insist that acting is feeling; that emotions are the backbone of a great performance; and that personality, costume, accents and the spoken words are what, essentially, create a character. While each of these elements has its place within a performance, it is primarily action that is required to articulate meaning.

An actor can execute any action wherever and whenever she chooses regardless of the presence or absence of costume, accent, make-up, set, props, and even words. Personality, the qualities we ascribe to an individual, is the set of actions we witness being committed by the particular individual in question. We perceive someone as being kind because of what they do. Conversely, we call someone assinine because of the vile actions they have committed on another person or persons.



At this point students are usually still very much with me, happily nodding in agreement. However, when I proceed to tell them that for every line of dialogue they are committing an action, even if it be a single word, their enthusiastic nods begin to wane. "You are what you do," I tell them, "and if you aren't doing anything then you shouldn't be on stage." I quite clearly recall Jason Thompson wholeheartedly thanking me when I began to explain my method of working as being based on action. I told them that they are responsible for figuring out what it is they are doing every moment they occupy space on the stage. But rather than explain with words, why not show them by example?

I had them come up in pairs and present different lines of text, first without any sort of direction, and then with specific instruction as to their actions. It was evident which of the two was more specifically producing clean action, intention and meaning. The cast began to realize the difference; when they had something specific to do it meant more to them personally. For example, if their action is to seduce their partner with a particular line, then they can do so without hesitation. Take the following sentence: The brown bear is chasing the dog. The sentence itself does not, to my mind, imply anything seductive. However, if I were to ask an actor to seduce another actor with that sentence, they could do so quite easily. The words, in this case, have no bearing on whether or not the action can be executed. So, too, the actor will learn that words are not always worth their literal value. Depending on the circumstances, the words 'I love you' can mean many different things and, therefore,

require different actions. Could we not just as easily reject someone with those words? Using this exercise, the actors were able to use themselves fully (vocally and physically) without worrying about the words, so that their actions became one with the words without anything being imposed or artificial. Furthermore, when the actor became the recipient of a fully executed action, when something specific was being done to them, they noticed the difference in their response to the work — it made them feel the need to react, and they were inspired to reciprocate with action. They also began to realize the enormous amount of work that lay ahead of them.

I continued on with the concept of action by referring next to scene objectives. Simply explained, a scene objective is the goal or action that the actor wants to achieve by the scene's end. Let us take Act Two, Scene One, for example, where at the very end of the scene Lin asks Vic if she'll have sex with her. It would be safe to assume that Lin is definitely interested in Vic. We have evidence of this from the outset of the scene when Lin incessantly chats up Vic and proposes that the two of them go out sometime. A scene objective for the actor playing Lin, then, would be to pick up Vic. The actor must then create a strategy of action whereby everything she does complements her objective. So, throughout the scene, she might, for example, comfort, console, or compliment the actor playing Vic, in order that she achieve her objective. How she plays the individual actions, how she plays the pick up, is another matter for exploration. That the actor has made choices and that these choices are justified and have

meaning to the actor is what is important. This is the responsibility of each actor. Now that they understand the basics of my working method, we can communicate in a common language and begin working: translating the written text into the performance.

### **Actor Work: Role and Relationship**

'Character' work is an on-going process that never ends until the last performance. Even then, actors have been known to continue analysing their roles for hours, days, weeks, or sometimes even months afterward (depending, of course, on the severity of the reviews), waking in a cold sweat in the wee hours of the morning with the answers to what they should have done. Alas, the time is long past for doing. One can only hope that the next time will be different. And truly, it is not worth losing sleep over. At any rate, the more preparation an actor can do, the better.

Extensive improvisation exercises contributed greatly to our rehearsal process. We first began improvisation to explore the concept of action. I created analogous situations to the text so that the actors could explore specific aspects of the text in the context of the exercise. Pick ups and breakups, in a variety of contexts, served as the foundation to the scenarios. I would begin by stating the circumstances of the improv while suggesting to the actor(s) what his or her objective might be. It became the actor's mission to play out the scenario according to what they wanted from their partner. If one actor's objective is to get another actor

to have sex with them, then everything done in the improv scenario should correspond with that objective in mind. We spent a fair amount of time working with this basic improv format. The actors enjoyed the freedom to play while also learning the value of having something specific to do on stage. Their purpose for acting became much more focused, while at the same time it allowed them to discover crucial insights about listening and playing in the moment. Improvisation is perhaps one of the most valuable tools for the actor, not only for those reasons mentioned, but also because it exemplifies the idea and the need for generosity.

Action is the means through which the actors progress in a scene and, as such, requires the participation of both actors. Improvisation teaches them that acting is not about words so much as it is about what actors do with those words. When an actor invests her entire being into what she is doing, she is giving the other actor a gift — generosity — something done to the other actor so that they can respond and reciprocate with action in kind.

While the style of Act One is certainly farcical, requiring adherence to the conventions of farce, in particular pace, there is also a Brechtian style of acting that must be incorporated by the actors to carry out the implications of the text fully. The cross-gender casting, the direct address to the audience with the character introductions, and interruption of the dramatic action by music and song are among the conventions Ms. Churchill employs to distance the spectator from the performance so that the spectator's experience is transformed from the merely passive to

an active participation. As was discussed in Part Two of this thesis, our notions of gender are severely disrupted, thereby forcing the audience into active participation through a process of re-questioning notions of gender construction. But what are the implications for the actors who have to act these specific roles? How does the actor not indulge in the sentimentality of the moment? More precisely, how do I direct them not to do that?

I believe the process began with the storytelling sessions. There were several themes we concentrated on throughout the rehearsal process: sexual discovery, first sexual experience, oppression, and relationships gone wrong and our ability to overcome them. Every story told had its moments of poignancy, humour, sorrow, rage, a virtual smorgasbord of the emotional spectrum. But the one most essential and telling element of everyone's storytelling was our desire to give something to each other. This was not an exercise in indulgence or therapy. This was truly an exercise in giving: the tears that were shed were not by the storyteller, but by those of us who listened; the rage that we felt was induced by the humility of the teller. Each storyteller managed to distance themselves from their experience; even when at times a particularly difficult moment for the teller could have been indulged in, the actor would push through, remembering that this was an exercise in sharing, giving. Furthermore, the exercise showed the actors, whether or not they were conscious of it at the time, how distance influences their present commentary on past events. Where at one time an individual might not have been able to get past a certain moment

without bursting into tears, now that same person might still feel the emotional turbulence, but instead of indulging in the emotion, she might comment on the situation through other means, by giving the audience a look or making a gesture that suggests a purpose to the telling of the story. The storyteller no longer relives the emotional experience, but rather comments on the event(s) in order that the audience receive the point to the story. That the actors understand the idea of commenting on what they are doing is crucial to the playing, and success, of Act One. They must be conscious of playing a role, or roles as the case may be, because the actors are the vehicles through which the re-questioning of gender takes place, and therefore they must be active participants in the re-questioning. The conscious act of playing a role is what enables the actor to distance herself from the situation, thus preventing any desire to sentimentalize, or indulge emotionally in any given situation. In other words, the storytelling, the performing, must be an active experience, not passive, for all involved — audience and ensemble.

Storytelling also became the bonding tool for our ensemble. Because of the intimate setting of the exercise and the personal nature of the stories being told, many of which had never been told to another living being, each of us were committing ourselves to trust each other. This exercise was essential to the process. While not every rehearsal process calls for such a high degree of personal soul-baring, this particular production does. I followed a lead from the Joint Stock rehearsals and never looked back.

Because the text was not created from our personal experiences, we had to find a way into the experience of the text that would allow us to empathize with its circumstances and situations - to make it our own. We had to explore sexuality and all the ramifications thereof because this is what the play is about. Storytelling helped us to build this trust and respect among our diverse group which created the parallel to the story of the text: human beings living with human beings, being free to make their own life choices, to express their desires, hopes, dreams, and fears without being subjected to humiliation, degradation, and persecution by oppressive systems of power. The strength of our ensemble grew immensely as a result of the storytelling exercises. We became a family in the truest, most positive sense of the word. Our diverse voices were well on their way to creating one voice through which the *Cloud Nine* story would be performed.

The idea of creating distance, of the actors commenting on the action, on their roles, was also strengthened by another exercise I introduced to the ensemble, called Photograph Pictures. I was inspired by this exercise after reading one reviewer's comment that suggested Churchill's performance text "reveal[s] character development through a series of snapshot encounters" (Coveney, qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 43). In keeping with my idea of the family portraits that I mention in Chapter Four of this thesis, I instructed the actors to create images, snapshots if you will, from Act One scenes that would capture the essence of the scene, or portion thereof. Once the actors had decided on which particular moment they wanted to explore, they would then run into the

space and strike a pose. This exercise brought the actors closer to understanding the depth of their relationships and the roles they play. The underlying tension of certain scenes, underscored by the juxtaposition of the artificial mask and the reality of the characters' true natures, brought the text to life. We could now clearly begin to see how the comedy and the pain formed a symbiotic relationship in the text. Playing the truth of the moment, while eliciting howls of laughter from the spectator, would simultaneously cause the spectator to question that moment because the character's experience is anything but funny. For example, Harry and Ellen's wedding at the end of the act portrays an hilarious and yet painful situation where the two gay characters must wed to conform to society's codes. The entire idea of the wedding as celebration, the beginnings of a new life, restoring of all things good and harmonious, is an age-old comic convention. Churchill subverts this convention on a number of levels by having the gay characters assume the traditional heterosexual roles. In this case the characters would rather kill themselves or are terrified of what is to become of them. The social commentary is both amusing and painful as are the characters themselves. Play the role. Capture the moment in a photograph. What is the result? The moment that Jason Bryden and Claire Adamson created — a frigidity of action/emotion that we might expect from two people who were about to be executed. We spent almost two hours playing this game, but only for Act One as the nature of concealing and having to play a role dominates this act.



One of the most invigorating exercises of Act One was what I call the evolving action exercise. The actors worked in pairs, and occasionally threesomes, and were instructed to choose a particular moment in a scene that captured the essence of the scene as a whole. Each actor memorizes the one line of that moment that belongs to their character. The lines must follow each other as they are written in the text. They would then begin by joining hands, for example, and in a neutral stance and voice they would say the lines, repeating them over and over while simultaneously doing a corresponding physical gesture. If they began by holding hands, the gesture would evolve into a virtual tug-of-war, each actor pulling the other actor toward them while saying their line. The purpose of the exercise is to explore the nature of a moment. Often times our interpretation of a specific moment does not reach its potential until we allow ourselves to see just how far a moment can be taken. Action, relationship, and emotion are laid bare through this exercise as the actors take their intentions as far as they can go. We are able to vividly see what really lurks beneath the surface so that we truly understand what it is that we must conceal, or conversely, exploit. Edward's love for Harry, and Harry's shameful feelings regarding Edward made a particularly poignant example when Dianne and Jason explored the following lines:

Edward: Just hold me.

Harry: When you can't sleep.

The two actors allowed the exercise to move them to a desperate pleading and a painfully forceful rejection. They understood,

finally, the essence of their relationship, and in future were able to produce that moment with economy and ease, imbuing it with all the underlying emotion the moment required. Not only did their actions become crystal clear for this moment, but every other moment shared between these two characters was enriched with a deeper understanding; the actors had connected themselves with the roles they were playing. We spent a good deal of time on this exercise exploring a variety of moments with many combinations of characters until we had completely and thoroughly exhausted ourselves.

The role work we explored in Act Two differed from the Act One exercises because the style demanded it. I implemented relationship-based improvisational exercises that allowed the actors to explore their journeys through the relationships with which they were involved. For example, one exercise had the actors sitting back to back, repeating a specific sentence that I had invented for that particular pair. Lin and Cathy, for instance, repeated the line, "You are the most important person in my life." Betty and Vic did so with "I want to know you." Vic and Edward used "I'll protect you." Lin and Vic repeated "I really like you." Edward and Betty, "I want you to be happy." Edward and Gerry repeated "I love you." There was no particular outcome that the actors needed to achieve, no right answer or feeling. The exercise was simply used to strengthen the relationship between the actors and their roles, to create yet another layer to the actors' work. As simple as it sounds, it had rather profound effects on the actors as each of them discovered some new level of understanding to their

own role as well as being able to empathize more deeply with those characters with whom they were inextricably connected.

Max Stafford-Clark's status improvisation also became a favorite among the group. Beginning with playing cards to designate status, we worked through a series of improvisations whereby the actors had to incorporate status into the scenario. For example, if it was one actor's objective to end a relationship with their partner, I would purposefully give that actor a low status card (e.g.. a two or a three), giving the actor an added obstacle. Now the actor's difficulty in achieving the objective is twofold; not only does the actor have to deal with the unpleasant task of ending a relationship, but as well, she must do so from an inferior perspective. After many rounds of status improv explored in a variety of contexts, I took the game one step further. Employing the same strategies used by Joint Stock, I created an art gallery in the Reeve Theatre by using the twelve foot high movable partitions to define the playing space. Each of the actors, as well as the stage manager, Sean Ellis and his assistants, Dodi Enno and Larissa Innes, took part in the exercise. Everyone chose a card and acted according to their status, only this time I incorporated the court cards to represent gay characters. Those players who selected the court cards had to seek out other gay players to form a relationship, while taking the utmost care to not disclose their sexual orientation to the wrong player - a heterosexual player. Eventually, I added the joker to represent a police officer which added another element of danger. The police officer would pose as gay, working undercover to expose the gay

player. The improv ended when the gay couple had successfully eluded the cop or conversely, when the cop had fooled a gay player and consequently arrested him or her for their deviant behavior. The actors benefitted greatly from this exercise. They began to understand the secrecy and caution (and perhaps fear), that surrounds the gay person who simply wishes to do what the privileged heterosexual takes for granted: to make intimate contact with another in public situations. These improvised situations carried over to scene work quite nicely. A simple reminder of the danger of being exposed was all that was required to infuse a particular moment with meaning and clarity.

Another exercise explored the nature of psychological gesture. I had chosen a specific line of text for each character, instructing Abby to whisper the line in the ear of the particular actor to whom the line belonged as he or she lay on the theatre floor, eyes closed, relaxed, as neutral as possible. The actors were instructed to verbalize and physicalize their responses to their particular line as soon as they felt the impulse to do so. Some of the lines included Martin's "Just be yourself"; Betty's "But I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them"; Edward's "I think I'm a lesbian"; and Vic's "I am more intelligent than him. I am brilliant." The actors' responses varied, both vocally and physically, between triumphant exclamations and serene expressions. This exercise provided the actors with connections to the text on emotional and physical levels. Again, the purpose of the exercise did not necessitate any appropriate or correct response. It was meant to free the actors in a way that

would allow them to explore impulse and instinct, so that they could then implement their discoveries, whether significant or not, into their work in the second act.

There was extensive work done in exploring what was unknown. Questions regarding specific relationships or their individual lives, for example: What has happened in the past 25 years? What memories do Vic and Edward have of growing up with Mom and Dad? How long have Vic and Martin been married? How did they meet? Why did Lin marry? Who was he and how long did it last? What is Gerry's profession? Where did Gerry and Edward meet? What was it that made Betty finally decide to leave Clive? What was Lin's relationship with her father? I asked them to think about who they loved and why: What did they give you? and what can you offer them? Then I asked them to make a link, to connect their personal storytelling sessions to their roles and relationships of Act Two and decide what if anything they could use in playing their roles.

This was all homework — for the actors to do, to think about on their own time. Subsequent rehearsals explored these questions in the form of improvisation. For example, I devised an improv between Cathy and Lin that began with Cathy requesting a bedtime story which led to her curiosity about her father and forced the issue from Lin. Another exercise had Edward and Gerry exploring the nature of their relationship, situating them at home, examining their private life away from public view.

Because the nature of Act Two requires the actors to maintain a lively pace, I set up a rehearsal wherein we engaged in

childhood games — hide-and-seek, hug tag, red-light-green-light, mother-may-I, dodge ball — to bring them back to that playfulness we fondly link to childhood. Aside from being an immensely enjoyable rehearsal/recess for all the actors, it also instilled in them that youthful exuberance they so much needed to sustain Act Two's momentum. In subsequent rehearsals the actors would return to these exercises, specifically hug tag, as part of their warm-up.

One of the most beneficial exercises in the Act Two process was the character interviews. The actors were previously informed of the exercise: one-by-one they would enter, 'in character,' the playing space — a circle defined by the ensemble — and proceed to answer a barrage of questions posed by those surrounding them. This forced the actors to fill in the gaps, create histories for themselves, make choices and decisions regarding their personal thoughts and feelings, and would reveal to them where their understanding of the role was weak or needed further attention. For those of us in the circle, asking the questions, we learned as much about the respondent's character as he or she did. Particularly poignant moments emerged from Betty's revelations about her relationship with Clive, as well as Victoria's past with her father compared to her present with her husband.

This exercise deepened the playing of Act Two, more fully developing the human beings on stage, imbuing them with all the layers that complete a multi-faceted character. This most provocative and enriching work allowed the actors to solidify

their identities, making it invaluable to their process. Jay Bryden, who played Gerry, found the spontaneity of the exchange situated the actor in an entirely vulnerable position provoking nothing less than honesty, whether or not he could give an immediate response. It forced "human connection amongst ourselves in order to make that connection to the audience." (Bryden)

We also had a 'movie night.' One scene that was especially entertaining to rehearse was Act Two, Scene Three, the invocation of the goddess. Before we began exploring this scene (which was rather straightforward), the entire cast assembled at Heather Kennedy's to watch "Goddess Remembered" and "The Burning Times," both produced by the National Film Board of Canada. The first of these films deals with matriarchal culture and the goddess, her many faces and representations. "The Burning Times" captures the craze and hysteria surrounding the witch hunts across Europe during the late Middle Ages. Although its subject matter did not relate specifically to *Cloud Nine*, I took this opportunity to enlighten the cast regarding yet another era dominated by oppressive systems. The film portrays the abusively corrupt power of the patriarchy (in this case, the institution of religion) and the ensuing plight of the persecuted, especially women. Although I did not specifically preface this evening, I had hoped these viewings would lead them on their own to a new level of understanding and appreciation of the impetus behind some 'feminist' texts, Churchill being a prime example.

The evening turned out to be remarkably successful. The ensuing rehearsal of the goddess scene in light of their newfound awareness connected Claire, Jason, and Heather to the historical milieu of the invocation. Primarily for Heather as Vic it reinforced her purpose to convince Lin and Edward of the necessity of reclaiming a history that we never had and to desperately try to call it forth, despite the subsequent futility of her efforts.

The role work we encountered gave us the foundation from which we could approach the staging of the two acts. Along the way there would be various other exercises that I would incorporate into the rehearsal process as I saw the need. Of course, extensive text work also contributed to the foundation, much of it having been explored in the workshop process and on the actors' own time. We would return to the text repeatedly throughout the process in conjunction with what we happened to be working on at a particular moment. I, myself, had established an intimacy with the text through a pre-rehearsal strategy called the Structural Analysis.

### **The Structural Analysis**

While studying directing with Philip McCoy in my first year at the University of Calgary, I was taught how to construct a structural analysis of a text for performance. In previous productions I have employed various other techniques of plotting text details, such as character notes, staging, and the necessary technical elements of lighting and sound, but no technique was



ever quite as succinct and organized as the technique taught to me by Philip McCoy.

The structural analysis (also referred to by some directors as a french scene chart), allows me to record every single aspect of a production. The structural analysis accounts for the entire world of the play in performance and reveals information about production details such as the onstage and offstage time of any one character, the estimated playing time of the entire production as well as technical requirements and significant aspects of props and costumes. I begin by constructing a chart that lists in columns the page number, scene number, character names, props, lighting cues, sound cues, as well as an additional column for any directorial notes regarding the scene (or portion thereof) in question. I work my way down the chart, plotting character entrances and their stage time. Whenever there is a break in the action, whether it be caused by the entrance of another character, the exit of a character, a sound cue, or the end of a scene, I note this in the appropriate column and then proceed to the next line to begin the next segment. I record the page number of the text, as well as the estimated playing time of the segment. A page of text is worth approximately one minute of playing time. I equate one page with 1.00, which allows me to record, for example, a section of a page as either .25 to represent 1/4 of a page, or 1.75 to represent 1 and 3/4 pages. When the analysis is complete, I then total the number of sections to get the corresponding minutes of playing time. It is a fairly accurate system, and it is quite useful in estimating the overall playing time of a text, giving

me a better idea of the playing time of those bits of business, such as songs, musical interludes, and comic business, that exist only in print.

Charting the character stage time allows me to see which actor needs to be where at any given moment, and in this particular play, especially with the stage configuration as it is, this is a necessity. For example, I wanted to stage the sex scene between Clive and Mrs. Saunders on the ramp. In determining the feasibility of doing so, I had to take into consideration the amount of time Claire Adamson would need to run around back stage from the Reeve Secondary to make her next entrance as Ellen in the Reeve Primary. Not only does she need to get to the entrance of the house, but she also needs to make a costume change. Will she have enough time? Plotting these changes prepared us for this and so I knew in advance to request several dressers to work backstage. As it turned out, Claire had three dressers to help her with difficult changes, and with several practice runs she was able to do many of the changes on her own.

A particular feature of the structural analysis that I find most beneficial is the column for writing notes regarding the playing of the particular section. It is here that I might assign a sub-title that encapsulates the essence of the scene, or perhaps a specific note regarding the acting. I do this as I analyse the play in preparation for rehearsal so that when it comes time to rehearse that section, I am well aware of any obstacle or required element before we begin. I can mention the specifics to the actor(s) or perhaps stage management, say, if a particular prop is

required, so that no time is wasted because of any lack of preparation.

The structural analysis also plays an important role in preparing me for meetings with stage management and designers. I am able to record first impressions of needed props, lighting and sound cues, as well as set and costume requirements. This facilitates productive discussion and, I believe, can be a very useful tool in the early detection of any potential problems or concerns. Overall, the structural analysis is most beneficial as an exercise in getting to know my show inside and out. Many directors would agree that creating the perfect pace, the tempo-rhythm of the play in performance, is the most difficult aspect of the process. The Structural Analysis is incredibly beneficial in this regard as it can reveal important implications for achieving the required overall tempo-rhythm. Virtually every aspect of the production can be analyzed and recorded, giving me more time to concentrate on the actors.

## Staging

*Cloud Nine* has proven to be the most challenging and exciting play I have yet to stage. Aside from the obstacles of performing in the round (or in the triangle, as it were), the contrasting styles of Ms. Churchill's text demand that I, too, 'change roles' from Act One to Act Two.

Act One's farcical style demands a quick pace; entrances, exits, delivery of dialogue, comic business, scene transitions, and costume changes have to be precisely executed to sustain the

tempo and rhythms of this act. Any delay at a crucial moment would cause a gaping hole in the flow of the action. Not only must I contend with this, but the playing area itself — the various levels of the platform stage, the rake, and the ground floor — present numerous possibilities for playing. I needed to create images that physicalize, and hence lend meaning to (whether on a conscious or subconscious level), the thematic structures at work in the text, such as the physical relationship between Clive and any of the other characters. As I have previously mentioned, I was very excited about elaborating on the theme by creating family portraits, as this was a way I could comment on Clive and his relationship with his family.

There are also specific spatial concerns — the relationship of the stage/players to audience — that performing in the round requires. The various vertical heights of the main platform added another dimension of difficulty; a certain amount of guesswork, approximating audience sightlines in relationship to the actors, challenged my ability to stage the action with as little masking as possible. I say guesswork because we were working with a taped replica of the stage, as is customary while the actual set is being built. Although the dimensions were marked, it is sometimes difficult to keep track of the actual dimensions, not to mention the transition for the actors who have been used to playing on a flat surface, and now must adjust to differing heights and widths of stairs. All these considerations led me to pre-plan the blocking of Act One, which imbued my role as director with an authoritarian approach. The time constraint is of no little importance. I am

well aware of the adage 'less is best' as it applies to simplicity and economy of movement on stage, but I needed to take advantage of this where the planning of the staging was concerned so as not to waste any time in rehearsal. That I had to do so for Act One would also contribute greatly to the sense of freedom the actors would acquire in Act Two. The very structure of Ms. Churchill's text was indeed lending itself to my directorial approach.

I requested photocopies of the floor plan to enable me to stage on paper what it was I wanted to see happen on the stage. Generally five to six pages of text could be plotted on one sheet, with the exception of the more complicated scenes such as the end of scene four, entitled 'Wedding Proposals', when several characters enter and exit in quick succession, a particularly amusing series of moments. This page portrays an almost illegible series of arrows denoting the entrances and exits, which closely resembles the continuous motion of a revolving door. I worked through the entire act in this fashion, trying to determine any and all possible obstacles.

We began blocking Act One, Scene One, on October 13. The first image of the actors as they descended the rake/ramp into the playing space served as the initial metaphor of the imminent decline of the Empire. The first line of the song, sung by Clive alone, added to his role as authority figure. Completing the first verse on the ramp, descending to the main platform in unison with the tempo of the music for the second verse, led them to the first of a series of family portrait images incorporated into the staging of this act. Even though we staged a couple of the acting

exercises in the round, it would still take a bit of time for the actors to adjust to playing to all sides of the audience. A couple of the actors had worked with me on *Lear's Daughters* and were used to hearing me yell out "Use the whole audience!" The others would get used to this over time, until it was no longer necessary for me to do so. As they became adept at using the space, they would slowly rotate from either left to right and back, or vice-versa, while they introduced themselves to the audience. As the introductions end, all characters exit, with the exception of Betty, and the action begins with Clive's entrance.

With the exception of Scene Five, I allotted one rehearsal per scene so that the scenes could be staged in detail, taking into consideration all the set specifications, props, costume changes, while also planting in the actors seeds for thought regarding the acting. Our routine was to block the scene, working in as much detail as possible, and then run the scene as often as time would permit. Working through an entire scene in this manner allows me to see the flow of the action and all the images I had predetermined. How is the space being used? Quite a bit of the action takes place on the verandah, and I wanted to utilize as much of the other portions of the stage as possible. Portions of scenes such as the game of Hide and Seek, and the ball playing business worked well in the open spaces around the verandah, allowing me to make use of that space. Is the staging as economical as it could be? Are the actors' physical relationships creating the metaphors that I had envisioned?

A wonderful example of this occurs in the seduction scene between Clive and Mrs. Saunders. The physical metaphor here is the hunt. Having Clive pathetically chasing behind Mrs. Saunders like the proverbial dog in heat, begging her to relieve him of his perpetual erection, worked exceptionally well as they crossed the stage on a diagonal and continued to the topmost point of the rake/ramp. It is here where the sex act took place. I could not resist using the rake as the visual cue for the male erection, and since it is only Clive that is, in the end, satisfied, I thought it doubly fitting.

Is there minimal masking occurring? Where is it a problem? Will the levels of the stairs and the platform rectify this? I was happy to see that most of my initial staging made the transition to the real stage without requiring too many adjustments. There were the odd moments where actors masked each other, but for only a few brief beats. The actors themselves became accustomed to sensing any masking problems and so made their own adjustments when they became more familiar with the demands of playing in the space. The trickiest bits were the large group scenes that took place on the verandah, but in the end every sightline was accounted for.

If one actor exits and does not have enough time to make her entrance at an opposite location, what alternative do we have? Good question. Stage right is being favored far too often, so how can I adjust the staging to better balance the playing areas? It was simple enough to rectify this. I simply adjusted a couple of

the smaller scenes to be played at stage left, and balance was restored.

All these questions and more run through my head as I watch the first run, scrutinizing every move like a cat on the prowl. At times I interrupt the playing to make any necessary changes. There is no sense having the actors learn the blocking if they are just going to have to unlearn it. Find, or at least make the attempt at finding, the solution so that time is used efficiently. As well, I am always open to bypassing a difficult section if an immediate solution is not forthcoming, in which case I tell the actors that I need to have a look at this on my own time. Or, if time allows, I encourage the actors to use their own resources, to show me how it might work. If it works, great. If not, we try an alternative, or leave it for another time. I try, when possible, to allow the actors to have input on staging. For the reasons I have mentioned, this particular act does not lend itself well to this, but there are moments or sections where it is possible. Furthermore, as the actors become more sensitive to the style and the space, they also become much more adept at knowing what a particular scene might require in terms of the staging. Often I need only give them their entrance and perhaps the area of the stage I want them to use, or not, and ask them to play the scene.

Two prime examples of this occurred in the staging of Edward's rafting adventure and Joshua's creation story. I encouraged the actors to *physically* tell the story. For example, I thought the rake represented the raft rather well and so instructed Dianne to use the base of it to re-enact Edward's dream



instead of just reciting the lines. Physicalizing the story also complemented her role as the child, exuberantly playacting.

Again I 'suggested' that Ryan use the verandah's built-in bench and environs to dramatize Joshua's creation myth. Perched above the enraptured Edward, he weaves the tale of the Great Goddess and the Tree, leaping between levels, shifting between the two forces to emphasize their struggle which shapes the universe. It was a truly magical moment; Ryan seized the hearts and imagination of both Edward and audience, transporting all to another realm, illuminating a tempting alternative to traditional western Christianity.

An actor's intuition is a great source of creativity. When the cluttered motion I have contrived on paper is surpassed by the actor's simplicity, I will wholeheartedly thank that actor for making us both look brilliant! It is also in the student actors' best interests that I give them the opportunity to explore their ideas regarding staging as it is likely some of the only practice they might ever receive in this area.

This method of staging allowed the actors the opportunity to memorize blocking while enabling them to explore character interaction and physical relationship to audience. Only so much can be expected from the actors during an initial run of a newly blocked scene. Patience is required as they adjust, adapt, and assimilate to the new environment in which they find themselves. The first run through of Scene One timed in at 25:15, the second at 19:10. Once an actor knows where she needs to be at a specific

moment, from where she needs to enter and exit, and where she is in relation to other actors, she is then more free to act.

This is the paradox of staging: restrictions give way to freedom. So, too, will the actor be less inclined to refer to the text, not wanting to disrupt the flow of the action, and so will try with all her might to maintain her focus on the other actor(s). Again, this takes time as well. Although the actors managed to shorten the playing time quite significantly after only one run, there was still much more work to be done. Once transitions and movements crystallize, the scene begins to take on a life of its own; the actors begin to work in unison to tell the story.

Act Two, on the other hand, presented us with a completely different challenge. Instead of the pre-planned blocking of the previous act, I used what is commonly known as 'found blocking.' This act's structure maps the organic nature of the characters' journeys which paralleled my approach to the staging. To begin I told the actors the location of the scene, the specific playing area, and asked them to 'show me the scene.' After the actors played out their initial interpretation we then set about shaping the scene moment by moment.

At one rehearsal I asked each of the actors specific questions regarding their scene objectives in order to connect psychological impulses with forms and styles of movement. For example, I asked Jason Thompson, playing Edward, how he would be affected if he entered the first scene with an objective of keeping his homosexuality a complete secret, as if his entire life depended on it. It brought back to mind the status improv (the

playing cards) exercise because it evoked the element of danger. To Claire's Lin I provided the thought "I really, really want her" to fuel her pick up of Vic. And of course, Ryan needed to focus on being the centre of attention as Cathy, more specifically, insisting on getting his way. Since he had spent a couple of afternoons at The University of Calgary Daycare observing and playing Barbies with the children there prior to rehearsals, he could immediately connect.

For each of the actors, this technique worked very well. It added yet another layer to their work and strengthened their actions and intentions within the scene. Subsequent scenes were rehearsed in a similar fashion with the intention of making every moment specific.

Just as the actors needed to be specific in what they were doing, so did I. Again, as with Act One, I wanted to find — or create — the appropriate metaphors that would connect the playing area to the particulars of the scene. Betty's monologue, for example, was placed in the most isolated corner of the park, which enhanced what she herself celebrates: "I felt triumphant because I was a separate person from them." The bandstand doubled as a train platform for Gerry's monologue about picking up anonymous gratification on the regular commute. The elevation of that platform and its proximity to the one block of audience emphasized Churchill's empowerment of the gay voice. Conversely, heterosexual potency (or lack thereof) as represented by Martin was effectively displaced during one of his tirades to

Vic while sharing a teeter-totter, which landed Martin on his better side.

Whereas Act One required careful choreography throughout, the only instance for it in Act Two was the staging of the 'big production number,' the title song of the show. I separated the actors into three groups, giving a verse to each, and then reconfigured the groups for the fourth and fifth verses, playing up the transitory nature of liaisons and relationships in this sexually permissive society. "Cloud Nine" concluded with the actors turning out to the nearest exits and strolling off nonchalantly as the orchestra transitioned into Scene Four.

### The Music Process

Interspersed throughout the rehearsal process were scheduled meetings with the orchestra. The first exercise that brought actors and musicians together was borrowed from a technique Brigit and I used in *Lear's Daughters*. Each actor was paired with a musician who played a particular instrument that seemed to suit the particular character. For instance, the young Edward was matched with Ken's flute to correspond to the young voice; the double bass approximated Maud's heavy-handedness; and a violin provided an ironic accompaniment to Betty's delicate veneer. They were given approximately half-an-hour to create physical stories and character themes to underscore their individual roles. We then reassembled to be treated to wonderfully entertaining pieces of storytelling with accompaniment. The themes that were developed from this

exercise were integrated into Act One, underscoring each character's entrance.

Once the musicians had created and scored a predetermined piece, they brought it into the hall for rehearsal with the actors. The first and most challenging piece was the opening, "Come Gather Sons of England," which required the untrained actors to sing in parts. The harmonies were difficult to master because the formation of actors for the 'family tableau' did not place together like registers or shared melodic strains. It took some time (and rearrangement for practice) to learn all the parts and then be able to deliver them consistently in the actual positioning.

Another problem piece was Dianne's lament, "A Boy's Best Friend." Aside from the complexity of the song that she found difficult to present, the acoustics of the Reeve, which draws sound straight up and away, did not help carry her lovely, soft voice over the volume generated by the orchestra. I borrowed a newly-learned term from Brigit, which I repeated ad nauseam to the musicians: "Pianissimo! Pianissimo!"

Despite several other minor stumbling blocks in meshing music into the show, the ambiance of the live orchestra added immensely to the overall production values. Two personal favourites that most notably enhanced the performance were the unique overture and the jazzy "Cloud Nine" song. Emerging from the preshow music, a subtle beating of African drums and chanting off in the distance intensified until it was joined by the trumpeting of "God Save the Queen" to lead into the first number. An absolutely brilliant bit of musical inspiration, the sounds

immediately established the place and time to begin the show, very effectively evoking the mood of colonial Britain in Africa at the fraying edge of the Empire.

The title song grew out of a strange and wondrous circumstance. It came to me at 2:00am one morning, following a long evening's rehearsal that would not allow me ready sleep. Almost beneath the bedclothes, I began humming a tune; I have no idea from whence it came. (Perhaps the muses granted me the inspiration in return for sharing my ability for purely textual interpretation with the musicians.) I recorded it on a small dictaphone and brought it into rehearsal the next day. Putting myself on the spot, I had to sing my idea for the assembled actors and musicians. The musicians then picked up the tune and elaborated it into "Cloud Nine" in true improvisational jazz form. It was definitely a favourite among the cast.

### Consolidation

The first three weeks were spent doing ensemble work, role work, music and staging. The two distinct acts felt like rehearsing two separate plays. Week four was spent tightening up the scenes, working physical bits (such as the ball playing, wedding proposals, and Betty's lost earring), storytelling, perfecting monologues, scene transitions, pace, running and re-running music. The fifth week concentrated primarily on allowing the actors to run the show, solidifying pace, cleaning and clarifying moments of the actors' preference, and readying the actors for tech week. Fortunately, we enjoyed a smooth tech week: a couple

days for Q-to-Q, two tech runs, a dress rehearsal, and then preview. By the end of tech week the actors were in excellent shape and were more than ready for an audience, as was I.

The dynamic of our working relationship made for an inspiring, enriching and fulfilling process. The extent to which we concentrated our efforts on generosity and trust was clearly evident in the strength of our ensemble by rehearsals' end. We were more than eager to give to others as we had so selflessly given to each other during the past six weeks of rehearsal and four workshop sessions. Possibly, we would change their world a little as we had ours.

## Chapter Six: Evolution of the Performance

Looking back on what we accomplished with our production of *Cloud Nine* brings a smile to my face. It is a wonderful feeling to know that I was a part of creating a work of art with an extraordinary group of individuals, each so dedicated and committed to a project and a process that required enormous courage and endurance. I do not doubt that it will be some time before I have the privilege of experiencing such a journey as this one has been. To all of you who contributed to this production, I thank you. It would not have been possible, nor the same, without you.

It is not difficult to recall opening night. The memory is as clear as if it happened only last week.

I had arranged to meet the actors late in the afternoon, around 4 p.m., in the Reeve Theatre. I had prepared a ritual to complete the process of handing over the show to them, even though they truly had made it their own by that point. We sat in a circle as I spoke to them about the journey we had been on together, and of our imminent arrival. I took them back to our very first meeting in the workshop stage of the play when we each responded anonymously in writing to questions I had asked them. These were some of their responses:

Q: What terrifies you the most?

A: Not doing creative justice to the opportunity at hand. Not sucking the last bit of marrow from this bone.



Not having as much fun as may be had while doing exceptional work. Not fulfilling Kelly's expectations.

A: Failure. Risks are always prone to failure. I know we won't FAIL as far as performing and directing and the production go, but I want people to walk away after they see the show, questioning themselves, their lovers, their sexuality.

A: I'm frightened of rejection by a group — I want to be a strong part of making this a fabulous experience for everyone, but I know that when I start to get stressed I get negative and I usually impose negativity upon others. I'm afraid I'll do that and lose good working relationships, even though I never intend to do that.

Q: What excites you the most?

A: To grow and develop a process within a group that will culminate and climax into an incredible performance. . . to learn an incredible amount from everyone involved in the play, as well as our own individual selves.

A: Inspiration and learning. I want this to be an opportunity to improve my craft, create with this group of people, and change an audience member or two. Who knows what we'll make?

A: The group; working with others that I respect. The play. I feel honoured, scared and joyful at the same time.

Q: What do you want from this experience?

A: I can hardly wait to experience the others. Also, reaching a group dynamic of epicurean enlightenment.

A: I am excited and frightened to be spending six weeks in close contact with eight other people. . . that we are going to experience the pit of hell together and come back with an amazing show that will both amaze and amuse our friends.

A: Sex, sensuality. Things that people never discuss openly in "real" life.

Q: What do you want to give?

A: 100% of everything I have to give.

A: Everything, and I expect the same in return.

A: To encourage everyone to give as fully as I want to.

Q: What is the most negative aspect of this play?

A: I can't think of one.

A: Not being able to try all the possible character combinations.

A: Canadian actors doing British accents! (Just kidding).

A: How we victimize and are victimized by others. How people influence us to perceive ourselves in ways very different from how we really are.

Q: What is the most positive aspect of the play?

A: The acting challenge.

A: Everyone in this play is part of an ensemble - there are no leads, no walk ons. Definitely a feeling of equality.

A: It can't help but affect everyone and anyone who watches.

After I had finished reading these responses, there was absolute silence. Hearing their own words once again after such a long interval, after not having experienced the fears and negativity that some supposed they might, after realizing that they had indeed accomplished what it was they had desired and hoped to do, and after realizing that they had more than surpassed my expectations, gave each of us such an incredible feeling of accomplishment, of "epicurean" proportions, as one person said. We had come so far, and it was bizarre to be sitting in the theatre ready to give it to an audience.

I reminded them of how they had learned to take what others had to offer and give it back two-fold. I reminded them how they had learned to trust each other and that nothing could interfere with that. And, finally, I reminded them of the importance of their group dynamic, that the strength of their ensemble, and its upkeep, was now their responsibility — as it had been their creation. I then took them through an opening night warm-up, geared towards their opening night energy, but I also made it clear that they should, by now, have a very good sense about what it is they need for a warm-up. And, of course, they did. Before I left them, I lit a candle that I had made, and

together we all made a silent prayer or wish, if you like, for opening night. I left them alone in the theatre.

Hours before curtain and I am a nervous wreck. I remember asking Lisa Roberts if she could iron my outfit because I could not deal with the silk, that is, burning it. I was one big knot of nerves. I walked and walked the halls, hid out in the costume shop, and finally had to make an appearance when it was time to see the actors one last time before curtain.

Joining together in a circle, we held hands, and I asked them to look at each other one last time, and to love each other out there. They have a gift to give the audience - an incredible story. Tell the story. Share it with the audience like it is the most precious gift you could possibly give them, and it will be. As I left I heard them begin to count. I was so extremely proud of this fine group of actors, and I knew that no matter what happened out there that night that they would be absolutely wonderful.

I finally took my seat. I had no fingernails to speak of and so could not bite them, and instead proceeded to shred my program. I could always get another one. The house was filling up quite nicely. (Could we please just get on with this?) Ah. Front of house is closing the doors. Pre-show music fading . . . ( here we go) ... lights fading ... and lights up! They look fabulous. Excellent opening song. The audience is laughing! Thank the Goddesses. Okay, now I can relax, and enjoy.

Of course, it was not as easy as all that. I was up on the stage with the actors every single moment of the play, and could not relax until the final curtain. This was not an indication of my

faith, or lack thereof, for I had every faith that the cast would meet their challenge head on and succeed beyond all our expectations. We had worked very hard on every detail. They were well rehearsed and more than prepared. But, it is live theatre, and anything can happen. I need not have worried though. It was a huge success! I couldn't have been more pleased for everyone, and especially pleased for the actors.

I did not see every performance during the run of the show. I saw opening night, the second show, and the final two performances. This was actually the first production I had directed where I did not see every performance. This was the first production where I experienced what I had previously thought to be a rather a strange phenomenon; the need to not want to be at every performance.

I could not understand why a director would leave after opening night. Yes, perhaps other commitments necessitate a director's early departure, such as might be the case with the director in the professional theatre where productions run at least three weeks or more. But, if the director could be at every performance, then why would she not be there?

What I experienced was a complete handing over of the show, the proverbial cutting of the umbilical cord. For the first time in my directorial history I was able to give over to the ensemble whatever control I had as their director and with all sincerity say, "This is now yours." This giving, the ability to trust, is not really any different from what the ensemble must do every night they perform, for indeed they must give and trust with

every fibre of their beings, and in so doing are saying to their audience, "This is now yours." I believe it is a level of humble confidence I felt, knowing that we had done everything we could to prepare and trusting that the ensemble had learned what they needed to learn to be a whole, unified and independent group that would exist apart from me, and nurture each other through the process of performing as we had learned to do during the process of rehearsal. What I realized is that I, too, had learned and could reciprocate those things I had worked to instill in the actors. It is a freeing experience, simultaneously selfish and selfless. It is the best sort of selfishness the theatre has to offer; giving to make others feel positive to make one's self feel positive. It is the best that life has to offer.

Returning to the theatre to watch the final two performances was a bizarre experience. The distance I felt from not having been there for a week situated me as more of a spectator than as the director of this work. I was certainly able to look at the production with a stronger objectivity than I was able to on opening night. And still, my overall perspective of having created something incredible was not jarred in the slightest. There were, however, two aspects of the production that I would have liked to change.

The first I consider to be a complete oversight on my part. The song "A Boy's Best Friend," sung by Dianne Lyons as Edward in Act One, should have been the music hall melody as it was written. However, during the rehearsal process, composer Ken Hall asked if I would consider letting him write an original score

for the piece. I agreed, without first considering the implications this would have on the style of Act One. While Ken Hall's version turned out to be a beautiful, sentimental melody, it is not at all what was required in keeping with the Brechtian style of the act. At the end of scene three, we witness Edward's repression manifest itself as he learns to be the 'manly' boy Clive is raising him to be. Edward reprimands Joshua, ordering him to do an errand and calling him "boy" just as the stereotypical Master denigrates his slave. Edward then recoils from his mother's embrace and in the next moment begins to sing the song. However, the song should not have been a sentimental melody. To create the greater irony, to distance the spectator from the action, the song should have been the upbeat music hall number it was meant to be. It was not until after the production that my designers Jules Conrí and Sheena Ross pointed out this fact regarding the original version. It was my mistake, and I do not know how I could have ever overlooked this matter.

One other aspect of the production that both Jules and I were not quite satisfied with was the Act Two costumes. It was our original intention to have the actors choose articles of clothing from their own wardrobes, but for some reason this never came to fruition. We could have been more firm on getting the cast members to bring in articles of clothing or complete outfits and while some did, others did not. Both Jules and I saw the character of Gerry, for example, dressed in a stylish, contemporary suit, but had to settle for what could be found in wardrobe. The result was not exactly to our satisfaction. I suspect that the ensemble was

somewhat reticent to 'dress' themselves for any number of reasons, whether they had the appropriate attire or not, but we could not seem to impress upon them how this was just another aspect of ensemble that would flourish with their input. In retrospect, I do not view this as a glaring flaw in the production as a whole, but rather a tiny thorn in an otherwise brilliantly designed production. As the designer, however, Jules' opinion might differ somewhat on this matter.

Aside from the above mentioned elements, I could not help but revel in the ensemble's ability and remarkable strength at playing together as a group. I had never before seen such sustained unity, love, and giving among a group of actors, and I was especially proud of what they had achieved and continued to nurture throughout the run of the production. It was difficult to criticize the acting for this fact. Although it could be argued, and indeed has been argued, that some individual performances were consistently stronger than others (and yet those others had many brilliant moments too), I still feel that the inconsistencies among the actors' technical skills or levels of experience were compensated by every actor's ability to play with fellow actors — the overall consistency of playing by the ensemble. Those spectators who chose to focus on the individual performances without first acknowledging the ensemble playing missed an exhilarating theatrical experience. Of course there are going to be varying degrees of expertise and skill among actors. This goes without saying. But, I can honestly say that there was not one member of the cast who did not meet and surpass the challenge



they were given. There was no weak link, and I know that each actor would concur with me on this point.

I am also very proud of how all the production values came together to create a unified whole. Set, costumes, lighting, and music all converged splendidly without one dominating the other and most importantly without dominating the acting. I believe we used every element to its fullest and in so doing, did a great service to Ms. Churchill's text. There were some who remarked that they thought we had taken Ms. Churchill's text beyond the written word in the most positive way. The multifaceted set, for example, worked in such a way as to include a variety of stage configurations, paralleling Churchill's use of the many various conventions of theatre in her text. The setting of Act Two in present day as opposed to present day London, 1979, also added another dimension to our production; as Churchill plays with time, so too, did we. And, finally, the influence of Eastern philosophy on Churchill's thought and writing influenced my own thought regarding the character pairings between the two acts.

There was some criticism regarding the acting in Act One. One individual suggested that the actors went too far with their characters, that their playing was too broad. I interpreted this remark as meaning too cartoonish, not grounded firmly enough in reality. In fact, Act One *is* a "brilliantly sustained piece of cartooning"; the pain of the characters' situations is underscored by the comedy (Innes, 462). I was always insistent that the actors play the truth of the situation and that they should never play for the laughs. I believe the many positive remarks from

numerous spectators who were deeply touched by the characters and story of Act One as well as Act Two attest to this fact. Churchill, herself, insists that "the feelings and characters of the first act should be played for real, so that we do care about them as people. Otherwise the second act loses out too..." and that "if the first act does just go as farce it's for one thing not a very good farce and for another sets up expectations of a kind of entertainment that aren't met in the second act" (Qtd. in Fitzsimmons, 48). The audience's enjoyment of Act Two was indeed a credit to the first act. Another person remarked that Jason Thompson's Betty was too much the woman, that I concealed too well that Jason was a man playing a woman, and that perhaps it would have been more appropriate to have him smoking a cigar with hairy arms (possibly tattooed), and have Jason use his normal speaking voice. Well, I disagree. Jason knew from the beginning that he was not to play a woman, that he was to play himself in the situation, as Churchill instructs. That his voice was ever-so-slightly affected, that his gestures and mannerisms were ever-so-slightly effeminate was not intentional on Jason's part, nor was he directed to act in this fashion. Neither Jason nor I detected any noticeable change in his vocal quality between Act One and Act Two. I believe the audience's laughter on his introduction of himself as Betty attests to the fact that they knew full well that Jason was a man playing a woman, and that we were not trying to hide this fact. Indeed, why would we? This is one of the most crucial aspects of the play — that the audience be completely aware of the cross-casting in order that they

actively question what occurs throughout the play. Again, I heeded Churchill's advice that "[i]t's important from the beginning the audience realize what kind of thing they have to pay attention to, and that is essentially the same throughout the play — the relationships between the characters, their relationship to their society, the pain and humour that come out of that. . . (48).

In retrospect, I am somewhat delighted by the criticisms. I had worked on a scene from *Cloud Nine* in my first year of directing at the University of Calgary and was told that Act Two is by far the more difficult of the two acts. I thought the opposite at the time, believing that the style of Act One would surely be the more challenging and, hence, the more difficult. However, the potential hazard of Act Two, I was told, is to let it become pure naturalism. Although it is naturalistic, it is best described as a heightened naturalism; to let it become less than that would be deadly. Apparently, we were able to successfully achieve that stylistic requirement, for there were no negative criticisms regarding Act Two. I would like to think that I am an eternal optimist for relishing that distinction. But, it is also amusing to me how even with the many accolades we received for this production, including a brilliant review in *The Gazette*, I still hear the criticisms the loudest.

I must admit that I do have one other rather large regret — not standing at the end of the final performance. Oh, how I wanted to stand up and cheer and yell for those actors, but my own sense of decorum would not allow me to do so. My own teachings really had rubbed off on me. I was standing in my

heart though, and I consider myself extremely fortunate to be able to say that.

All in all, I am proud of what we accomplished. I am very thankful to have been able to give Ms. Churchill's brilliant text an arena for discovery and re-discovery. I am especially proud of the degree of trust which we all aspired to and found — within ourselves and each other. The final moment of the final performance exemplified this when the actors took the stage on the periphery to view (for the very first time) Betty's and Betty's embrace. Momentarily, they pondered what my reaction would be to their spontaneous gesture but concurred that I would appreciate having the entire ensemble present. After ten weeks of intimate work, they knew me well. It was a private moment that brought tears to my eyes alone.

Positive and negative criticisms aside, I believe I speak for (hopefully) everyone involved in this project when I suggest that we experienced the rare phenomenon of creating theatre the way most theatre artists would ideally desire. The successful collaborative effort stands as a testament to the power and potential of ensemble work and to the unlimited possibilities of what student actors can achieve.

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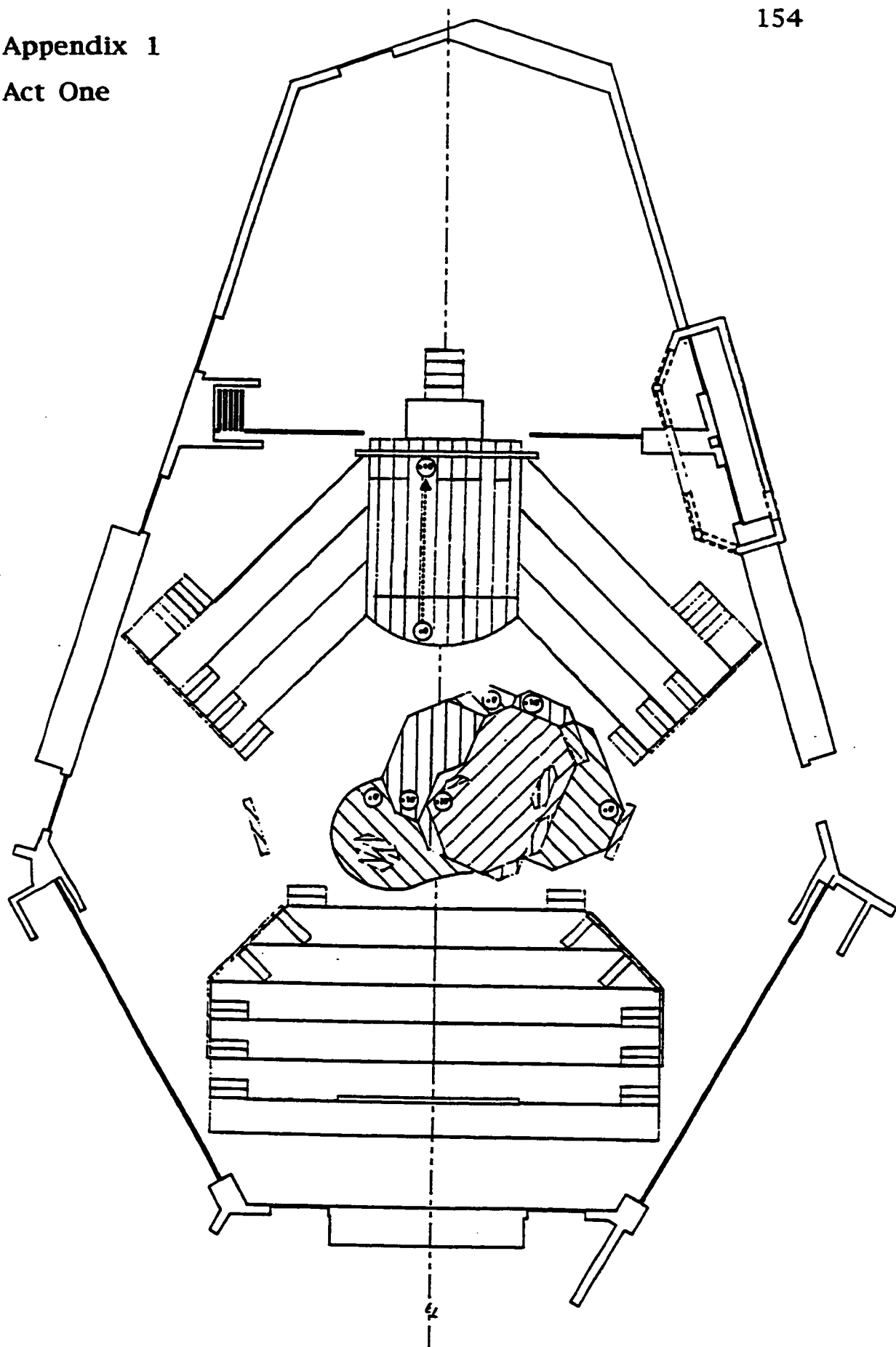
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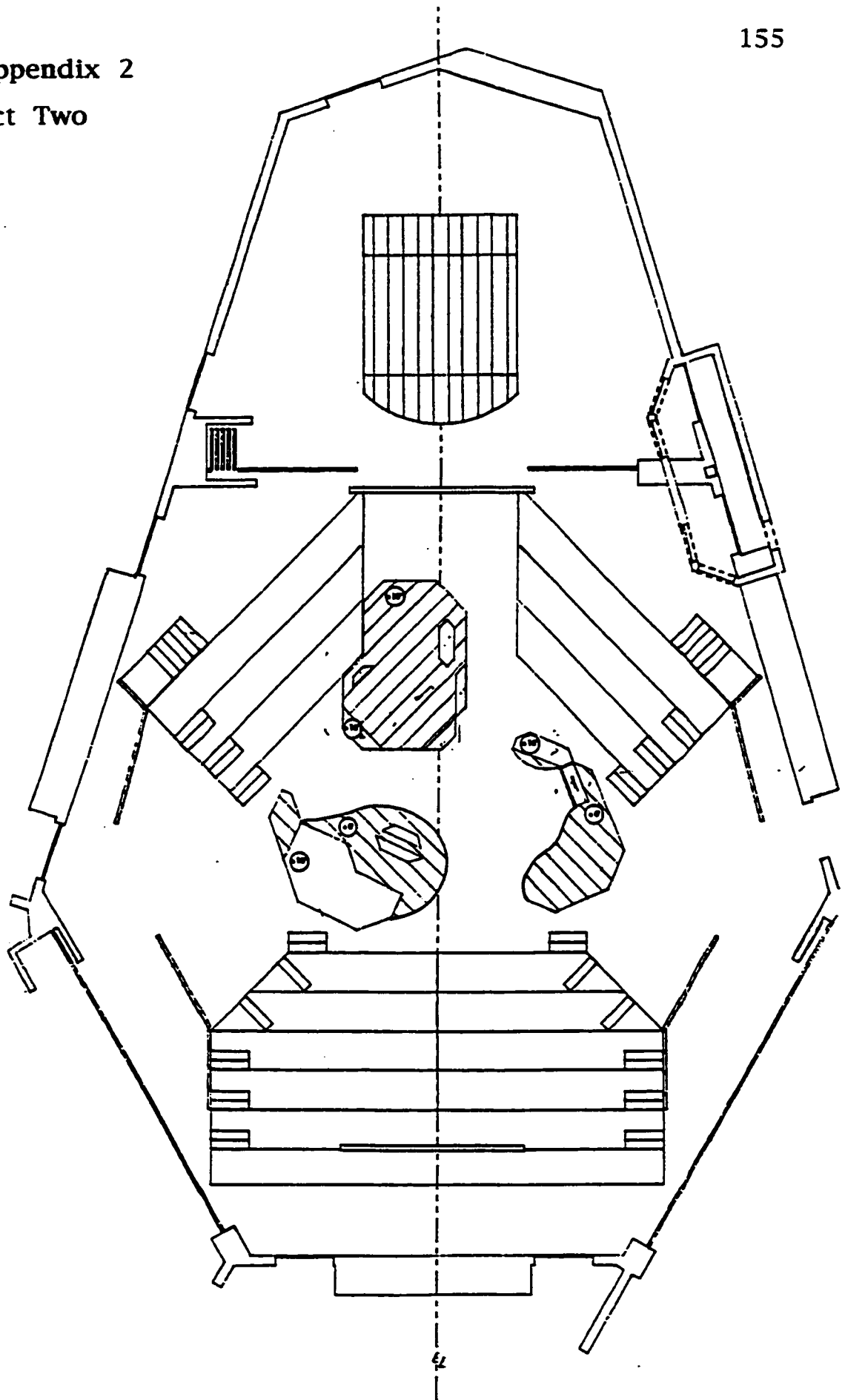


## Appendix 1

## Act One



Appendix 2  
Act Two



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