

An 'Abridgement' Between Nathaniel Dunn's
and the Graveyard

Dwight E. Watson

The 31st LaFollette Lecture
October 29, 2010

www.wabash.edu/lafollette

The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

An 'Abridgement' Between Nathaniel Dunn's and the Graveyard
Dwight E. Watson

PREFERRED CITATION

Watson, Dwight E. "An 'Abridgement' Between Nathaniel Dunn's and the Graveyard." *The Charles D. LaFollette Lectures Series* (2010): < <http://www.wabash.edu/lafollette/watson2010/>>

EXCERPT

Those of us who render play scripts and dramatic action for the stage often traffic with the supernatural and embrace the paranormal. It is widely known that we have a well-established relationship with irrationality, phantoms and apparitions, the incredulous, and all things out of the ordinary. After all, we celebrated with Dionysus and Bacchus—reveled behind tribal and ceremonial masks—danced until we laughed with Saint Vitus; we fabricated visually captivating hellmouths for our pageant wagons, and we helped daggers float and banquets disappear while we gave voice and movement to the ghosts of Banquo, Caesar, and to Hamlet's father. And when the physical stage ghost no longer intrigued, we toured in dramas about heredity and the "sins of our fathers," and then found ourselves in the company of alienated, ghostly characters such as Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. And, now, when the work day in the theater is done, we demonstrate our respect for the supernatural by leaving a "ghost light" on the stage so that spirits may negotiate the playhouse safely in our absence.

The LaFollette Lecture Series was established by the Wabash College Board of Trustees to honor Charles D. LaFollette, their longtime colleague on the Board. The lecture is given each year by a Wabash College Faculty member who is charged to address the relation of his or her special discipline to the humanities broadly conceived.

For more information, contact Dwight Watson, LaFollette Professor of Humanities, Professor of Theater, Wabash College, Crawfordsville, IN 47933. Phone (765) 361-6342. E-mail: watsond@wabash.edu. Website: www.wabash.edu/lafollette

Copyright Dwight E. Watson. This article may be copied without the copyright owner's permission only if the copy is used for education, not-for-profit purposes. For all other purposes, the copyright owner's permission is required. In all cases, both the author and *The LaFollette Lecture Series* must be acknowledged in the copy.

The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

An 'Abridgement' Between Nathaniel Dunn's and the Graveyard

Dwight E. Watson
Department of Theater

Thank you, Gary, for that kind introduction. I am pleased to speak this afternoon and I am grateful to Distinguished LaFollette Professor Leslie Day for this opportunity. It is also an honor to share this time in Salter Hall with the LaFollette family. You are a model of the type of support that will lead us in our campaign in the Challenge of Excellence. I thank the students here this afternoon, trustees, friends and colleagues, and all of those involved in Wabash College Theater, past and present. I include in this talented company the spirited Jamie Watson. I dedicate this lecture to her.

As we entered the Elston House for Pat and Chris' December 13, 2009 Holiday Party, I was instructed by Jamie that this was dinner. She knows I am typically reluctant to eat at social gatherings and she thought I should behave differently this time. And so, I'm standing near a food table with a plate in my hand. Pat Burton, from Biology, had just introduced me to his spouse, Ellen, when a dinner roll rolled off my plate, prompting me to react quickly, catching it before it hit the floor. The Burtons complimented "the catch" and, I, with some modesty, commented on the additional handicap of my bifocals.

Leslie Day appeared in the periphery—to the right—purposefully into view. "Will you be in your office tomorrow?" she asked. "I need to talk to you." "Yeah, sure." I replied. "Is there a problem?" "No, oh, well, I'll tell you now. I want you to give the next LaFollette lecture." I sensed a dramatic pause, followed by twitching and a verbal fumble, but the invitation did not hit the floor. Although, in retrospect, I may have been better off to let it fall, and then kick it under the table. "I'll understand if you refuse," she said. "I'm new to the duties of the LaFollette chair, and maybe I'm asking too late. But don't give me your answer now; we'll talk tomorrow."

Leaving the party, Jamie asked if I had eaten anything. "I was about to" I said, "but then Leslie had this question." "I know," Jamie stopped me. "She wants you to give the LaFollette lecture." "Right. Did she also mention that she might be asking me too late?" "Too late?" I believe Jamie replied, "It's December and the lecture is in October. How much time do you need?" Again, another dramatic pause. How much time? It remains an open question. We have been taught that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and yet, according to Einstein space-time is curved. Tennessee Williams was working with space-time in his play *The Glass Menagerie* when his character Tom said that "time is the longest distance betwe

m

do with how sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly" (16).

I am both linear and non-linear. I feel relatively certain that I have traveled between two points beginning with the invitation to speak to this very moment, but I have been easily diverted, often humbled by reading previous LaFollette lectures, and, unsure of what to say that would justify your presence and the time you spend here this afternoon. I have traveled a long distance but I am still working on the details. If you are willing to accept my indeterminacy, I will try to move forward. But first, a step backwards.

These Fleeting Years, the chronicle of Wabash, begins with an excerpt from the journal of Sandford C. Cox, a fourteen-year-old boy writing between the years 1824 and 1825: "Crawfordsville society is in a chaotic state, but the floating elements begin to show some definite formations. The Baptists talk of building a small house of worship...while the Presbyterians think strongly of building a college north-west of town, between Nathaniel Dunn's and the graveyard" (3). I will leave a discussion of the "chaotic state" of Crawfordsville circa 1824 to the local historians in the audience. And although I have personal history with Baptists and Presbyterians, for any significant analysis of those "floating elements" I respectfully refer you to my friends in the Department of Religion. In this time we have together, however, I will add to Sandford's journal my opinion about the "building" of a college, or, more accurately, a college theater. And although he was rather specific about the college's location, or the physical ground on which it rests, I am mostly interested in the metaphorical terrain suggested by my title: "An 'Abridgement' between Nathaniel Dunn's and the Graveyard."

I could have simplified the title of this talk to just "Between Nathaniel Dunn's and the Graveyard," but that sounded eerily like one of those Hardy Boys books I read in the early 1960s—some might recall the titles—*The Mystery of Cabin Island*, *The Phantom Freighter*, *The Secret of Skull Mountain*, (Between Nathaniel Dunn's and the Graveyard), and so, I added, "An Abridgement." That is one of the things we do in academia. We play with titles. *The Poker Night* was the original title for *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Inside of His Head* was the original title of *Death of a Salesman*. Do titles matter? I think so. When commenting on Bert Stern's first LaFollette lecture title, "Wallace Stevens' Cow," Eric Dean wrote: "It will be noted that subsequent lecturers have continued to speak under somewhat oracular or paradoxical titles" (vii). I'd like to think that mine is oracular *and* paradoxical, slightly mysterious with a touch of the absurd. I usually do not come up with a title until after I have finished a piece of writing, but that was not the case with this talk.

Standing here, I am also violating an important principle of the stage. As a teacher of performance, I direct my students to show and not to tell. In the theater, action has primacy over words. But I work with language in playwriting and I teach dramatic literature, and since words are critical to those tasks, I am not a very good theatrical citizen. I show and I tell—two performative activities, we might agree, that are basic to our nature and our education.

Like many of you, I first encountered the pedagogy of "show and tell" in elementary school. For me the school was Forest Hill Elementary in Burlington, North Carolina. On the north side of the

school building was a baseball diamond where I spent many hours playing in Pee Wee leagues and pick-up games, always quick to assert at the beginning of the game that I was Mickey Mantle first, and, if someone beat me to him, that I was Roger Maris, or, maybe, Whitey Ford, although I rarely found myself on the mound. To lay claim to the name of a baseball great, to make-believe that I was he, was an attempt to own his confidence and skill and thereby ensure my success in the field and place in the line-up. I have, essentially, used the same make-believe mechanism throughout my professional life. On the west side of Forest Hill was a ma and pa convenience store (although we didn't call them convenience stores at the time). The store catered, it seemed to me, almost exclusively to school children and their sweet teeth. The ending school bell would ring, and if there were kids with coins in their pockets, and there weren't many in my neighborhood, it was a foot race to the candy counter.

I was the fourth child among six, a boy sandwiched between two older sisters and one younger. It was, altogether, a happy childhood with loving parents who took care of our needs but struggled with our wants. On certain Saturday mornings it was well known that we could see a free movie downtown at the Carolina Cinema. Well, not exactly, free. The ticket for admission was six or seven Holsum (that is, H-o-l-s-u-m) Bread wrappers, and since there were a number of children in my family, we were quite well-off with that currency.

The movie theater was usually populated with kids, much like me, children of men and women who worked the textile mills and ancillary businesses. We watched B-Westerns and science fiction thrillers. In 1962, when I was ten, I remember going to see *The Day of the Triffids*. It was about plants, a movie about botany gone wild, and I don't mean your run-of-the-mill native wildflowers. The triffids were aggressive, terrifying plants. They possessed human intelligence. They could communicate with one another. And they looked like gigantic asparagus, or, even more terrifying to me, broccoli, on the big screen. The thing is, they could uproot themselves and move about freely, well, as "freely" as roots can walk, or navigate, and that, too, is a scary thought (Particularly if you consider an angry environment and a retaliation of plant and tree life.). The triffids also carried a venomous sting in their whip-like branches, and once they killed you, they'd eat your remains. And there were a lot of remains in this movie.

I mentioned that it was 1962. And, of course, that year holds international significance. It was the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and while at Forest Hill Elementary we did the drills with our arms over our heads resting on our desks, waiting for the nuclear explosion, at the movie theater we were grappling with a different menace, or, at least we thought so. It turns out, the triffids, those locomotive broccoli plants were bioengineered for warfare as seeds released into the free world by the Soviet Union. I did not understand it at the time—the political implications—but it seems we were fighting the Cold War not only in the theater of politicians and military strategists, but at the Saturday morning children's movie. Theater and politics often meet in unusual places.

So, at the end of the movie, the house lights come up, and a man steps up on the stage, and says, "Okay, kids, let's hear it! Don't say bread, say Holsum, Holsum! Don't say bread, say Holsum!" And we did, in unison, chant loudly, over and over, those words: "Don't say bread, say Holsum!" (We were good little comrades.)

Leaving the movie theater, the ushers handed out seed packets of triffids to plant, if were dared. Of course, as soon as I got home I planted them in a garden spot near the house. And, I waited. I don't know what I was waiting for or what I was thinking. Maybe I wanted to prove to my mother the dangers of asparagus and broccoli or tease my sisters about the imminent arrival of these nasty walking plants. When they began to sprout, I was a little surprised and probably a little bit apprehensive. And as they took shape, I showed them to my mother, who was quick to say that I had planted sunflowers. "Those are sunflowers. Those flowers will attract birds and the birds will like the seeds." I must have thought something like, "Well, that's interesting, but, what if...?" To keep an eye on the subject of my discipline, we should remember that the supposition "What if?" and the comparison "As if" are essential triggers in the making of theater.

Show and tell. Here's a book from the Lilly Library where I sometimes browse. I recall former English professor, Don Baker, talking about a browsers' library and that Lilly Library should be a place where students feel free to just browse—to stroll down the aisles and pick up any book and read. I agree with Professor Baker. A browsers' library is important to me. It feeds my journal ideas. For example, do you know that o.o.o. means *of obscure origins*? There is much in the study of theater that is o.o.o. "Break a leg!" that well-worn phrase spoken to actors before they go on stage is *of obscure origins*. While the uncertainty of o.o.o. presents an etymological challenge, it also creates a space for imagination. Here are a few creative theories. It is no secret that theater types are superstitious—and so to wish an actor "good luck" is to bring on the opposite and so you wish her "Break a leg!" instead. Other theories include something more militaristic, as in to "break" or to deviate from a straight line and to make a strenuous effort. It may direct the actor to give his best performance and, in the end, his effort will be rewarded with a "break" or bend of the knee as he takes a bow. Some attribute "Break a leg!" to evoking the acting power of the famous actor Sarah Bernhardt, who acted with a wooden leg, after an amputation. Others speak of the infamous actor John Wilkes Booth, who may have broken his leg when leaping on the stage after shooting President Lincoln. This I know: "Break a leg!" is a ritual pronouncement that moves the actor from off-stage, through a transitional passage, and into public view. Although less obscure, but still transitional, here is another word to consider: Hearse—that vehicle for transporting the dead, is from the Latin *hirpex*, which means "a rake or harrow," and is responsible for the word "rehearse" with the Latin prefix "re" meaning, of course, "again." Hence, it follows, that to "rehearse" as we do in the theater, is to rake over what we have memorized. And so, actors, like farmers, stir up the ground but instead of earth, it is memory.

I need to confess something. The childhood stories I told you were all true to the best of my memory. But, as you know memory or recollection is complicated. The word "memory" seems to flow naturally from the tongue, but "recollection" with its stop-plosive fricatives is problematic. You may have noticed that I react to the sound of words, but I am no linguist and I have very little knowledge of the cognitive neuroscience of memory. But I have read that each neuron that takes part in making memory has a long tail that ends in something that looks a little bit like a brush. The long tail, and, forgive me if I am telling you something you already know, but it is also widely known that knowledge is something an audience frequently has before certain characters in a drama become enlightened—think of Oedipus—just imagine me as Oedipus. What were we talking

about? Oh, yes, the long tail of memory. The long tail is called the axon. And when that axon reaches out to touch a cell neuron, a neuron with a corresponding short tail, or dendrite, the axon and dendrite create synapse. I like the sound of that word—*synapse*! It is truly an electrical word. Actually, I read that synapse is more of a gap or an open space between the axon and dendrite and that it works like a bridge between the two.

And, now, to get back to my confession, I recall all those things I told you about in my childhood except for one thing. I hope this doesn't disappoint, but I don't remember exactly what I did with the triffid seeds—those seeds I got from the usher at the Carolina movie theater. I know I got them, but I do not know for certain if I planted them, gave them to a friend, or tossed them along the road walking home from the movie. I made up the part about how I watched them grow and showed them to my mother. Now, I feel your disappointment in me. You came here expecting me to tell the truth. But, I can't help it. I make things up. That is something that I do. And because of some intuitive sense of unity, of adhering to some ancient principle that a story needs a clear beginning, middle, and end, I felt compelled, no obligated, to make the story complete. Regardless, I think that that ending is possible and plausible, but I just don't remember. While writing this section, however, Jamie had just planted sunflowers in a garden spot. She wanted them to grow to enjoy their large blooms and feed their seeds to the birds. And so, there's the synapse—the bridge between an imperfect memory and my substitution, my distortion, or, if you push the matter, my lie.

Is lying acceptable in academia? I will not wait for an answer. Instead, I will try to redeem myself by lifting the word "fabrication" from Raymond Williams' LaFollette lecture in which he reminds us that in the "quagmire of hermeneutics" the word "fabrication" carries both the intent "to build" as well as "to lie" (22). Then, to rephrase my question: Is fabrication acceptable in academia? Or will I be viewed as belonging to that group of storytellers, criticized by the likes of Plato and Tertullian, unqualified to tell history and unworthy of a high place in the ideal state on earth, in heaven, or, for that matter, that space in between—a good liberal arts college? But as I think about the LaFollette lecture assignment (to discuss the relation between one's academic discipline and the humanities), to make-believe, to substitute, distort, and fabricate are building blocks of my academic discipline, but I will stop at the suggestion that they have any relationship with the humanities, even, broadly conceived. I can only speak of the imperfections of my discipline. It is an impure art: infected, strengthened, and reconstructed time and time again by the talents of many.

As you can see, I am working with very few props up here. Usually, as a director I have artists like James Gross and Andrea Bear to call upon. Their scene and costume designs, like this stunning poster designed by Laura Connors and Doug Calisch, provide an audience an eyeful before the first word is spoken. Evoking the language of theater visionary Robert Edmond Jones, these artists "create environment(s) in which all noble emotions are possible" (27). I must admit that I am not exactly sure what Jones considers the "noble emotions." But I think Warren Rosenberg's LaFollette lecture may help us get to the heart of the matter. Discussing the suffering of Africans on slave ships during the middle passage, Warren said, "We feel compassion when we see ourselves in community with another, recognizing that we too might feel the same pain if only conditions

were different.” He goes on to say, “We must have something like literature to project us imaginatively into their situation, to put us on that ship, to make us feel that we could be one of them.” As a director, for me, that “something like literature” is theater production and performance. As a playwright, that “something like literature” is dramatic action.

This afternoon, I come alone with these few words, this platform, and your living presence. For many years, I have taken a seat among you, looking at this stage, waiting for one event or another to take place. My mind often wanders, as yours may during the course of this talk, which, I think, is not a bad thing—the mind wandering. Citing examples of the creative mind working in conditions of extreme deprivation such as imprisonment, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi asserts that “Anyone in possession of portable rules for the mind has a great advantage” (128). I take this to mean that the mind’s eye and inner monologues may be critical to a person’s survival. But let me be clear: First, I am not saying that you are a prisoner here this afternoon. You have your private thoughts and there is no seatbelt law in Salter. Second, as a teacher and director I prize the mind that is working in good order as much as I prize the spirited mind that is free from regulation—a mind, best described in biologist Thomas Huxley’s words that can “spin gossamers as well as forge the anchors” (86).

Although I could only wish for Huxley’s balanced mind, I know I spend a fair amount of time in gossamer, with a mind that wanders, as I sit out there, like you, looking at the stage. I hesitate to tell you more because once I say this I fear I will launch in you a creative flight. Your imagination will take over and I will be left with only the shell of an attentive audience. And there you will be like dutiful students sitting upright in class, leaning forward, mechanically taking notes and nodding at the right times, seemingly aware of what I am saying, as your mind travels and your fascination finds a more pleasing mental shape.

I know I run the risk of losing you, but here it is: There are ghosts in the wood paneling on the stage wall behind me. That’s right, ghosts. Some are more evident than others and they usually line up in threes or fours. Found in high and low panels, they are defined by line and shape. Some might call them—wood grain. And that, too, is acceptable. You see, depending on your creative temperament, academic proclivity, or “possession of the portable rules of the mind,” the possibilities that exist between the stage and the audience, provide, at least for me, inspiring prospects.

I will come clean here. Ghosts are not altogether absent in the theater. Those of us who render play scripts and dramatic action for the stage often traffic with the supernatural and embrace the paranormal. It is widely known that we have a well-established relationship with irrationality, phantoms and apparitions, the incredulous, and all things out of the ordinary. After all, we celebrated with Dionysus and Bacchus—reveled behind tribal and ceremonial masks—danced until we laughed with Saint Vitus; we fabricated visually captivating hellmouths for our pageant wagons, and we helped daggers float and banquets disappear while we gave voice and movement to the ghosts of Banquo, Caesar, and to Hamlet’s father. And when the physical stage ghost no longer intrigued, we toured in dramas about heredity and the “sins of our fathers,” and then found ourselves in the company of alienated, ghostly characters such as Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. And, now, when the work day in the theater is done, we demonstrate our respect for the supernatural by leaving a "ghost light" on the stage so that spirits may negotiate the playhouse safely in our absence.

So, it is wood-grain for some, but for others, they may be ghosts, soldiers, furies, or, perhaps, a Greek chorus. They could be a celestial order of angels: Seraphim and Cherubim, Thrones and Dominions. Or, even, multiple images of the tormented man in Edvard Munch's painting *The Scream*. It appears these odd shapes, transfigured and anthropomorphic, are trapped in the wood. Trapped, like Ariel, the spirit in Shakespeare's last play the *Tempest*, Ariel, who was once imprisoned in a pine tree by the witch Sycorax, waiting for the magic of a Prospero to be set free. But then, Prospero is quick to remind Ariel:

It was mine art,
When I arrived and heard them, that made gape
The pine and let thee out. (ll. 293-295)

Ariel is twice-liberated: once from his imprisonment in the tree, and after he has helped Prospero with his restoration, he is freed from his service to Prospero. Prospero, too, becomes liberated from his magic. In a moment brilliantly staged by director Michael Abbott in the Wabash production last April, Prospero, performed with equal brilliance by my younger colleague, Jim Cherry, "breaks his staff" and "drowns his book," erasing the stage (literally and figuratively) of his magic, his word.

Scholars and readers draw parallels between Shakespeare and Prospero, suggesting the character and *The Tempest* is the writer's farewell to the stage. To me, as a reader, it is an easy and perfectly sound association. Prospero moves through the play with a poetic maturity that is unmatched by few of Shakespeare's characters. But, we will leave the argument of Shakespeare's greatest character for another day. What I would like to think about now is that Prospero, and his creator, Shakespeare "made gape/The pine and let thee out." I suggest that the "pine" is not just a "pine," a coniferous tree, but an action embedded in words, a book, or a play; after all, before electronic books, they were once connected, weren't they—tree, paper, book? And I think that Ariel is not just an airy spirit but the personification of both judgment and feelings. It seems likely that this is what Samuel Coleridge meant when he said *The Tempest* is "a birth of the imagination" (200). Today, it would be unusual for someone to use the verb—"to make gape." We would say, instead, "break open" or "release." But regardless, "to gape," "to break," "to release," are all actions that a man or a woman might play. And to recognize action in a book is to see that this inanimate life is critical to sustaining animate life.

For some time now I have been thinking about the relationship between dramatic writing, the audience, and that space in between. I think about the impact of the solo voice in monologue and the sound of multiple voices in dialogue. I think about the concert of ethereal ideas found not only in the full-length play but in the single word. It is this layering of language, the surge of memory and feeling, and the tease of "What if?" that entice theater artists to open the book and shake meaning from it.

I am provoked by many playwrights. I mentioned Shakespeare, for one, and I will return to him in a moment, but for now I asked you to follow me to the stacks of Lilly Library to visit another. On the third floor of the library, I find Ibsen. Henrik Johan Ibsen—a corpus of his plays, plays such as *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *Ghosts*. There are scholars writing about his plays, and biographers attempting to sort out his life, a life that began in 1836 and ended in 1906 (Ironically, the same year that Samuel Beckett was born.). Standing in the aisle in front of Ibsen, in the periphery, to my right, there is an interesting coincidence, or, maybe it is the very smart cataloging of our library staff scientists. But here is Ibsen and right next to him is science studies: the *Annals of Scientific Discovery*, the *Record of Science and Industry*, *Reports of the Smithsonian Institute*. If I turn around and look at the books on the opposite shelves, they are heavy with the history and philosophy of science. Theater art and science meet in the most unlikely places.

Turn back to Ibsen, and I remove one book—one play. It is *An Enemy of the People* written in 1882, the same year that his fellow Norwegian artist Munch painted *The Scream*. Sending the manuscript off to his publisher, Ibsen said “I am still uncertain as to whether I should call it a comedy or a straight drama. It has many of the traits of comedy, but it also has a serious theme” (207). Ibsen wasn't known for his sense of humor. His attention to detail and verisimilitude and his ear for ordinary speech earned him the title the “Father of Modern Drama” and not comedy. But, still, if we construe comedy to be about a persistent character at odds with a rigid society, then Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann may be a comic figure. Let's open the book.

The people of a small town depend on tourists who bathe in the town's municipal baths or health springs. The revenue from the baths has revitalized the town, or as Dr. Stockman's brother, who also happens to be the mayor, says “People here have some money again. There's life, excitement! Land and property values are rising every day” (285). The people are living prosperous, and, seemingly, stable lives. But drama, we know, is not about stability. Suspecting there is something wrong with the water flowing into the health springs, Dr. Stockmann sends a water sample to a distant lab, presumably one equipped with a microscope. Later, a report confirms his suspicion that the bacteria in the water is, in his words, “positively injurious to health.” With report in hand, he insists that the people of the community shut the baths down until the contamination issue is resolved. The economic ramifications of such an action startle the people. They choose, instead, not to believe in Dr. Stockmann's bacteria, or “animals,” as one character called them, “things that cannot be seen” in the water. And if you cannot see them, to the scientifically-challenged mind of the late 1800s, they must not be there. The townspeople opt for personal gain over public good, preferring to live “well” even, temporarily, as non-believers. And in the end, Dr. Stockmann is tagged as an enemy of the people.

Is there anything the doctor could have done differently to convince the people? His failure doesn't seem to be a lack of scientific methodology. He raises an important question, constructs a hypothesis, conducts his experiment, shares results, and in doing so, thinks he is doing the right thing intellectually and ethically. On top of that, Ibsen has given him the choicest words and most memorable speeches. In return, Dr. Stockmann forwards Ibsen's canonical themes of individual responsibility and duty to oneself and to others. So, why? Why is Dr. Stockmann ineffectual?

Herein, I believe, is Ibsen's dilemma about the tragic and the comic potential of his protagonist. In a world immersed in a science-based, technological revolution—a world dangerously divided by those with education, power or wealth and those who do not have those things—the inability of Dr. Stockmann to communicate his story not only accurately but persuasively and creatively only widens the divide between the doctor and the people. If not taken seriously, he is dismissed as ridiculous. And the ridiculous coupled with a certain emotional indifference becomes the breeding ground for comedy in a scientific age.

As I mentioned, the *Annual of Scientific Discovery* rests beside Ibsen in the library. On page 141 of the yearbook of 1869, thirteen years before Ibsen published *An Enemy of the People*, there is a description of new gadget, “the novel...microscope.” According to the entry, the gadget “consists of a magnifier” and if “an object be placed in front of this lens...a well-magnified virtual image is obtained” (141). If, presumably, the people of Stockmann's town had actually seen the bacteria, even a “virtual image,” would they have reconsidered their economic decision? It seems possible but not very probable. Ibsen said that his playwriting task was the “description of humanity,” and I would add that if that “description” holds true today, we might see a ghost of Ibsen's play, for example, in the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. As you know, until recently, President Obama had placed a ban, a moratorium, on off-shore drilling after the daily news—the visual image of oil spewing in the Gulf, destroying wildlife and livelihoods. And still, the people and politicians of these affected states often spoke in vague and contradictory terms. “Yes, the oil spill is ruining our summer tourist trade. We want compensation!” “No, there is nothing to fear in eating our shellfish and swimming at our beaches. Come on down!” We struggle to make sense of these contradictions, the language of circularity and regression, as we wait nervously to see if we can cap the blown-out well and fill the gap between our wants and reality.

Like the emerging scientists of his day, Ibsen used the theater as a laboratory and his plays as microscopic lens to magnify the “form and pressure” of his society and, posthumously, ours. But Ibsen was more than a realistic photographer or a lab technician. And although he claimed his task was one of description, his political message about the dangers of the ruling majority was a citation to John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville and their critiques on liberty and democracy, and he may have inspired philosopher Ortega y Gasset to write: “Life cannot wait until the sciences have explained the universe scientifically. We cannot put off living until we are ready. The most salient characteristic of life is its coerciveness: it is always urgent, “here and now” without any possible postponement. Life is fired at us point blank.” The townspeople and politicians in *An Enemy of the People* felt their needs and wants most urgently and could not wait for the good Doctor to explain. Here, at Wabash, as I said, Ibsen rests on the shelf next to science. It appears that political philosophy isn't very far away. Art and science—natural and social—in Ibsen.

The challenges of the twenty-first century require all our mental and creative faculties—in like measure. As I said before, as a director attempting a certain production standard, I must supplement my knowledge and collaborate with others. But collaboration is not without its problems. Accepting the premise put forth by education specialist Lee Shulman, “Collaboration is a marriage of insufficiencies, not exclusively ‘cooperation’ in a particular form of social interaction.” In other words, as a director I know my talent often stops at the scene shop door or

upstage of the proscenium arch bathed in light on opening night. Leaving designers to design, and actors to act, I respectfully enter into the “marriage” because I know, using Shulman’s words, “There are difficult intellectual and professional challenges that are nearly impossible to accomplish alone, but are readily addressed in the company of others.”

Let me be clear about this, however. The intellectual power in collaboration—or to shift the idea to a broader context—interdisciplinary teaching, is dependent on individual talent and the praxis of disciplinary study. When Arthur Miller adapted Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, he put it this way: “Before many can know something, one must know it!” (58). I would add, we must forge and secure the structural integrity of academic majors as we build a solid platform on which our students and their college can be lifted up. That said, I know it is unrealistic to think that there are easy answers to the complex economic and social problems we face. And, so, if shared knowledge and the reciprocities of crossing domains can initiate campus creativity and thereby strengthen the college, as educators are we not obliged to participate? My art, the theater, may very well be deprived of meaning if we remain isolated and divorced from others.

As I have suggested, theater was built on the ideas of integrative learning. It is hybridity. And while it historically envelops dramatic literature, and the acts of interpretation and oral expression, theater is memory, people and patterns, and community. It is as much a “Street Scene” as Bertolt Brecht would call it or a demonstration, a simulation, an experiment or an assemblage, as it is recreation confined to a proscenium stage, picture frame, or a monitor. It is the liminal, the virtual, the avatar, the ghost.

Let us leave the wall, book, and memory to think about the present. Let us think about sound and movement on this stage for a moment. Let us imagine this: the scheduling of events for Salter Concert Hall met a glitch. From the very first performance to the most recent, all events that have played on this stage at one time or another now arrive at the same moment to perform—lecturers, visiting artists and music ensembles—all playing, simultaneously—a whirling dervish of activities—full-voiced and amplified. What would that sound like—compressed to an hour? Or a minute? Or, what about, a moment? If that sound were released in just one moment. Just...*now!* It would be unbelievable. It would make a physicist, a Lew Salter, stand up and take notice. It would be too much to bear.

On the stage, we are interested in the “moment.” Not in the chaotic moment just described, but in organized and arranged moments of *mimesis*—“the imitation of an action,” or more accurately, the re-presentation of an action. Here, I feel the need to take a line from Bill Placher’s LaFollette lecture, now twenty years ago, when he said “one of the functions of the humanities is to capture the transcendent in the single, ordinary moment” (12). In the theater, we attempt to capture moments and we employ the entity best equipped to represent the dramatic imagination—the actor.

Since Gary Phillips awakened the specter of Hamlet in last year’s LaFollette lecture “The Dominion of the Dead and the Witness of the Liberal Arts,” I will continue that wakening with a few ideas about Hamlet and his work with actors. As you know, Hamlet is a gifted thinker—a

phenomenologist of the first order. But does anyone else think it is odd that he used actors and the stage to solve the mystery of his father's death? What kind of CSI technique is that? "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Really? No DNA technology. No forensic biology. Forget demonstrative evidence, "The play's the thing." And so it is. Hamlet enlists the company of actors, these strolling players who just happen to show up at Elsinore Castle, to perform *The Murder of Gonzago*: "I'll have these players/Play something like the murder of my father/Before mine uncle. I'll observe his looks; I'll tent him to the quick. If he do blench, /I know my course" (272-273). And so, Hamlet thinks that this play filled "pastime" will yield sufficient evidence, a "blench," (which is the equivalent of a "flinch") and that "blench" will convince Hamlet of Claudius' guilt. I should not, I guess, be too critical of the young prince. He has had, after all, a terrible time. He is in conversation with the ghost of King Hamlet, his father; and his mother has married his uncle—which may not be quite as disturbing as a mother marrying her son, but it is still in the family.

Hamlet is ridiculous in the sense that he is brilliant and incomprehensible. And his words and actions have been studied by faculties and students, actors and directors with staggering detail. I will focus on one idea. Shakespeare teases us with Hamlet's superb knowledge of the stage—his precise understanding of the actor's art and craft, the mystery of incarnation, and the power of catharsis. His knowledge and reverence for these things play on us so completely in *Hamlet*, that when they (the magic, the stage) are finally released in his "farewell" play, *The Tempest*, it seems entirely proper that Shakespeare's life work is made complete.

In a short scene just before the actors arrive, Hamlet is approached by Polonius, the conniver and court advisor to King Claudius. It is an unwelcomed encounter for Hamlet because he is suspicious of Polonius and he believes the old man to be untrustworthy. Hamlet—contemptuous, circumspect and wily with his words—notices the appearance of the actors, and breaks off his conversation with Polonius, saying, —"for look where my abridgement comes" (261). Later he would call the actors "the abstract and brief chronicles of the time" (268), but at this moment they are his "abridgement." It is a mysterious and paradoxical choice of words, "abridgement." On one level it is easy to assume that Hamlet welcomes the actors as entertainment and that he might "abridge" or cut through the unpleasant and tedious conversation that he is having with Polonius. And although that might be precisely what actors do, to war with the tedious and the boring in life, I am also struck by the noun "bridge" in "my abridgement comes." For me, this is a transcendent moment. It is as if the actors were Hamlet's direct-line connection between two worlds—the real and the imagined, the past and the present, judgment and feeling, innocence and guilt.

There is much I willfully ignore about Shakespeare's and Ibsen's concordance, the literary, social, historical complexity of *The Tempest*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *Hamlet* in order to make a few simple points about the stage. First, theater is about our limitations. It is about failure and suffering and the inane, the joyful, and the ridiculous. It is about stories that are told and retold to us as if our memories are short-lived. Theater is an imperfect art that holds a mirror up to an imperfect world. Second, theatre is about freeing ourselves, audience and performer, as best we can, from our limitations. It is about pursuing an action and experiencing a transcendent moment.

And, if we study dramatic literature that has the power to shape our thoughts, we are reminded of our intellectual linkage to the past. If we read the text aloud, as I encourage my students to do, we awaken our senses and just might feel the heartbeat of a writer (although it may be our own heartbeat), the pulse-like action of a Shakespeare or an Ibsen. If we take the challenge to think and feel as if we were Prospero, Hamlet or Dr. Stockmann, to surrender to their movements and actions, to assume, for all intents and purposes, a well-drawn literary character, a character uniquely created for human inhabitation, we open up the character's world, and, in doing so, we begin to realize an expression of freedom.

Returning memory and dramatic poetry to history, I once again recall Sandford C. Cox, the fourteen-year-old boy quoted in *These Fleeting Years*. Sandford never attended Wabash although he was alive in 1832 when the first college cornerstone was placed between Nathaniel Dunn's and the graveyard. This summer, I visited the graveyard; it sits on a hill surrounded largely by woods and brush. The grass was mowed and the area neatly fenced in. It appears quiet and seems almost forgotten. The grave markers, many with worn and unrecognizable inscriptions, are stationed respectfully among old growth trees. Standing in the middle of the cemetery and looking southwest in the direction of the first Wabash cornerstone, a steep, wooded embankment separates the graveyard from Dickinson's Package Store and Lafayette Avenue. Beyond the avenue are rows of homes and narrow streets. To imagine what the place was like when Sandford was a boy, you would need to remove all the stuff of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and restore most of the land of its felled timber—its trees and forests—the thick canopy that once shaded the early settlers—that shaded Sandford C. Cox and his family.

In the first year of the college, it would have been difficult, if not unlikely, for Sandford to walk from Nathaniel Dunn's cabin to the graveyard. In 1825, the year after he wrote those words in his journal, he suffered a near fatal accident. His brother and sister, one on each side, were sawing down a large tree. And when it fell, it fell on young Sandford, crushing one of his legs. It is hard to imagine that moment as Sandford lay trapped beneath the weight of that tree: the disbelief—the fear and pity—in brother and sister and then others as they rushed to the scene. Once freed from the tree, it was determined that Sandford's leg was so badly injured that it needed amputation. In this wilderness, absent of immediate medical assistance, without anesthetics, and proper surgical instruments, people made do with what they had. Sandford's leg was removed.

Eventually, Sandford recovered, if recovery is at all possible with such a loss. The tree did not kill the young boy. At the age of twenty he became the deputy recorder for Tippecanoe County and later he practiced law, turning an early life of struggle into accomplishment. He was an abolitionist, a station agent for the Underground Railroad, a historian, and a poet. His collection of poems was published in 1867, ten years before his death, under the title *The Evangelist, and Other Poems*. In his introduction he praises the Greek and Roman poets including the dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who, in his words, were “the masters of that class of composition” (10).

He said this about the ancient storytellers: “Homer, and his great rival, Hesiod...recited their poems at the great games, in the presence of assembled Greece. They contended for the palm of

poesy in strains which have descended to the present time, and will continue to echo down the cycles of coming ages” (9). And so my “abridgement” between Nathaniel Dunn’s and the graveyard is the theater and its “strains which have descended to the present time.” It is the stage, not this one, here, but its neighbors: Ball and the Experimental. If there are ghosts in Salter, I can assure you that, for me, the phantasm of sound and movement is very much alive and true in those spaces.

WORKS CITED

- Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1999. 16.
- _____. *These Fleeting Years: Wabash College 1832-1982*, ed. Robert Harvey. Crawfordsville, Wabash College, 1982. 3.
- Coleridge, Samuel. “Notes on *The Tempest*,” *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, ed. Bernard F. Dukore. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974. 600.
- Cox, Sandford. C. *The Evangelist, and Other Poems*. Cincinnati, published by the author, 1867. 9-10.
- _____. *C. Portrait and Biographical Album of Tippecanoe County, 1888*. INGen Web Project, 2009. 707-711.
- Czikszentimhaly, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990. 128.
- Dean, Eric. *The Margins of the Humanities: The Charles D. LaFollette Lectures, 1977-1984*. Crawfordsville: Wabash College, 1985. vii.
- Ortega y Gasset, José. *Mission of the University*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009. 63.
- Huxley, Thomas. *Collected Essays, Volume III*. New York: D Appleton and Company, 1894. 86.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *An Enemy of the People*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917.
- _____. *An Enemy of the People*. adapt. Arthur Miller. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1979. 58.
- _____. *The Complete Major Prose Plays*. trans. Rolf Fjelde. New York: Plume, 1965.
- _____. *Letters and Speeches*. ed. Evert Sprinchorn. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. 207.
- Jones, Robert Edmond. *The Dramatic Imagination*. New York: Theatre Arts Book, 1965. 27.
- Kneeland, Samuel. *Scientific Discovery: or, Year-Book of Facts in Science and Art for 1869*. Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1869. 141.
- Placher, William. C. “The Peasant’s Shoes and the Cross: Christian Theology as Subversive Humanism.”

Williams, Raymond. "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem or Bombay? Tradition and the Liberal Arts." *The Community of the Humanities: The Charles D. LaFollette Lectures, 1985-1990*. Crawfordsville: Wabash College, 1992. 22.

Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 1948. 68.