A PROPOSAL FOR PW 2ND SLOT 2008
BY SOPHIA SHACKLETON '09
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I fought with this play a lot. I’m still fighting, actually. There was a month last semester when I read plays everyday, and spun further and further into a terrible mood because nothing was quite right. I sent so many texts to Rutherfun (for advice) and Elliot (for comfort) that I think they were both ready to come to Providence just to smack me. Through it all, I kept coming back to Chuck Mee. When I first read Big Love, the monologues scared me, so I moved on. Each time I came back, I found another reason to move on – Michael Dean thought it was misogynistic, Byron thought it was kind of average, and I too easily believed them. But I still couldn’t keep myself away, even though I knew there were pieces of it that felt a little wrong – and then Tara reminded me of Chuck Mee’s vision, his desire to create malleable work, and I realized that the fact that the script had some weak spots made this project that much more exciting, because it gave me a reason to really investigate what I did want it to be, and to create something totally new. I’ve fallen in love, but in a messier, more awkward way. And that seems fairly appropriate.

WHY I LOVE IT [THE PLAY]

Chuck Mee attacks emotion in a way that is unparalleled. When actors portray “realistic” emotional journeys on stage, all that is truly being enacted is how emotions appear to outsiders, to people watching. How it feels to be the bearer of those emotions is a completely different beast, something much harder to recreate and pass on to an audience. Mee’s plays aren’t concerned with internalizing emotion; they pull it outside of the mind and body and recreate the feelings for the audience to partake in by using immediate, inescapable sensual tools. One of the reasons I have been drawn to musical theatre in the past is because I am fascinated by music’s ability to access an incredible emotional response without any thought or decision on the part of the audience member. When theatre bypasses the mind and hits the gut, that’s what I want to be a part of.

Big Love is my favorite of Mee’s endeavors because love of all emotions is the most confusing, most impossible to explain. Everyone has tried, but Big Love doesn’t want to explain it - it wants to create it, to realize love as something too big for the mind. This play is about people in a heightened emotional state, a crisis mode, and how they deal with emotions and decisions that they don’t understand. Questions that don’t have answers are what both drive humanity crazy but also keep us going. What a fabulous paradox.

The play also embodies the take on love that is most interesting to me. Big Love isn’t cute, perfect, or planned but painful, passionate, awkward, untimely,
inappropriate and then in the end, unexpectedly, the only completely right thing in the world. The writing structure reinforces this – by using poetry he establishes a well-known romantic realm, a world of sonnets and love songs, but it’s broken and awkward... yet something about it is striking, unavoidably breathtaking. Hot.

I’m drawn to plays that create an experience for the audience, a world that they feel part of and a world that changes them before they leave. Screw bicameral politics. *Big Love* attacks all of the senses, transports you whether or not you want to be taken. Imagine, for example, watching an entire bottle of ketchup get squirted in someone’s hair. You don’t think, you just squirm immediately. Those gut reactions are what we’re looking for. This rationale provides amazing opportunities for design, for creating an experience that completely surrounds the audience and pulls them in.

The show is, at its heart, an ensemble piece. There aren’t main characters, just a team of people fighting through a plot and an emotion that none of them understand. As a theater artist, I am constantly awed by the collaborative power of people, and I think working in this kind of character structure is the most productive way to present a story and create a play.

And MOST of all, I love this show because Mee has given me complete artistic reign over a world that I find fascinating – he has laid out the ingredients of a feast and has told me to run with it. [For those of you that don’t know, Chuck Mee is very open to the editing of his plays, as his work is also cut and pasted from other sources. He calls it the (re)making project]. The play is, while complete, a blank canvas. There are so many options, so many opportunities. Is it a tragedy or a comedy? A feminist play or a proclamation of the importance of male dominance? And it doesn’t end with plot. We can really *explore* this show, get messy and dirty with it. Throw it at the floor and see what the pattern of the pieces looks like. Bounce it off all the walls of pw.
I am not approaching this play as a question of gender politics. That isn’t to say there aren’t amazing questions about gender politics in this play – they’re fascinating and drive the play forward, but they aren’t what I think the play is really trying to get at. I think the women and men in this play see themselves as equals but are confused by the gender roles that society has written for them. They seem to be constantly fighting the part they were handed, and that is what is worth exploring, especially this day and age. People wrestling for better answers.

I firmly believe that this story and all of the characters in it are driven by love. Whether it is to find it, protect it, hold on to it, or to escape it, they’re all lovers, not haters. With Bella and Piero, Nikos and Lydia, and Leo and Eleanor, this is easy to see; they are led by their hearts. Thyona and Constantine, however, are struggling with their desire for love; it rips them apart and eventually destroys them both. They are the characters that truly have something to learn, to figure out - they’re the grit that keeps this story from being a Hallmark movie. Constantine has a slightly better grasp on the situation: he knows he wants love, and he knows that it has power over him, but he doesn’t know what to do when his lover runs away from him.

Thyona, however, decides she must choose between the love of one man and the love of her sisters, the protection of their freedom and safety as well as her own morals. When love is placed in a context that challenges her ability to protect her sisters, when her man isn’t the man she wanted to love, she runs. She knowingly chooses her path, but one outcome occurs that she didn’t plan for – her sisters betray her. They don’t value their freedom as much as she believed, and in exchange for protecting it they leave her in the dust. Congratulations to the lovers! Enjoy your lives together! And there stands Thyona – her sisters have left her behind, the audience hates her for her crimes, and above all, her lover lies dead on the ground by her own hand. She stands, defeated and broken with no one left to love, and so she turns to the only thing that she cares for at that moment, and she lies down next to Constantine and holds him. This is an ensemble experience, but I want to explore Thyona’s story.
I’m no playwright, and I don’t know how to adapt this into the show I want it to be. I’m going to need help. First and foremost, Tara and I have met multiple times about how I want to cut and paste this, and she is going to bring her playwriting genius to the table to work on story in a way that I don’t know how to. I know I don’t like Bella’s judgment scene – it seems like too much of a cop-out, why would you tell the audience all the answers? I want Lydia to have more of a say in her own love scene, because I want to deal with men and women as equals. Giuliano seems a little open-ended, and I’d like to explore his ending. Oed needs to be more equal with Olympia in size; he doesn’t have enough to do right now. The “You Don’t Own Me” bit needs to be seriously reconsidered. Since I have spent a lot of time at Brown discovering how to use music on stage as an exaggerated expression of emotion, I want to add more singing in the place of “You Don’t Own Me” and at more points throughout the show. So those are some examples of things I’m feeling uncomfortable with right now, but plan on reworking with Tara.

Furthermore, if we can get all that accomplished, I’d like to hand off a few specific writing prompts to some Brown playwrights. Chuck Mee’s work is, after all, a cut and paste of other works and it seems appropriate that we would add some Brown talent to the mix, especially because I’m really excited by the playwriting abilities here on campus. Max Posner and Sam Alper have both volunteered their skillz to the cause, not to mention Tara, and depending on how much material we’d need I’m sure I could find other willing writers.

I also want to pull a lot of material from the collaboration of my actors and their ability to play with the script. In order to do this, I want to set up a Caryl Churchill-style workshop experience for the first week. Instead of table work (which this play does not need, intellectualizing it isn’t going to do anything, feeling it is what’s important) we’ll have a playground where we stage scenes ridiculously and we pull things apart and put them back together, and designers can sit in and watch / participate (actor-designer bonding is so underdone), and different activities are planned for each day: for example, one day they have to bring in a prop that symbolizes love, another day they have to make a mix CD that represents a scene or character. Maybe they’ll play their own parts, maybe they won’t. I need to instill a sense of play, craziness, and improvisation so that we can find the feelings of this play together in a way that incorporates all of our ideas. This play should hold a part of each of us. So basically week 1 = some serious Miss Frizzling.
I work best when I treat my staff and cast as though they’re a team rather than people filling specific roles, so this collaborative atmosphere will be very important throughout the entire process. Kevin Moriarty once said to me that he only picks designers he can grab a beer with, and that’s advice I think I’ll live by. I spend a lot of time picking my staff because I need to know that we can all sit down and talk about this play and bounce ideas off of each other – and let me say, this staff is BALLER.

Andrew has been really busy with 1st slot and it’s hard to communicate visually over the phone, so we don’t have a concrete design in place yet but we’ve talked a lot and he’s come up with some really great things. We want to anchor the set with a raised platform, because so much of the action happens on the ground and it’s necessary for sightlines. In the middle of this platform will be a pool, which will function in many capacities – I’m really excited about the incorporation of water, because it can create an amazing variety of effects, whether it be stillness, or sparkling with romance, or splashing violently. [I know there will be some concerns about water in the space but the pool won’t be enormous and Andrew’s very confident that it can be done within the confines of pw safety and preservation requirements]. From there, we want to incorporate some large classic motifs like arches and columns, solid structures within Mediterranean neutral with which the play can reverberate. Light fabric hangs among the arches. Lanterns, party lights. Large terra cotta pots. From there we go a little crazy: there is a good chance the platform will house some trap doors for presents, cakes, balloons to emerge from and dead bodies to disappear into. The arches turn upside down on a second level. Maybe the lights flash. Fans are put in the space to create either a fresh breeze or a frenzy of noise and wind. Unexpected items like oversize clocks and phones, maybe a lawnmower, a laundry line of wine-soaked hats, a bouquet of half-dead half-beautiful roses. That’s what love is all about – passion, irrationality, exaggeration, turning one’s world topsy-turvy so nothing makes sense. There are too many balloons, too many presents, oversize wedding decorations, perhaps Matisse meets Renoir meets Michelangelo meets Chagall meets de Kooning. A maze of styles, worlds, things, and sound that drives our characters to the brink of their emotions and our audience to the edge of their seats. But there’s still much talking to be done.

This is a world of sound. I firmly believe that music heightens our emotional response (hence my interest in musical theatre) and so it is only fitting that music underscores this entire piece. James Hinton, a genius with digital music, is planning to compose an entire score for the show. We want to twist and expand upon Chuck Mee’s vision – he writes in a variety of wedding music as a soundtrack to the piece, and he wants to update, re-harmonize, sometimes digitize, and recreate the wedding themes of the piece. Think strings meet bass beat. Then, while we need to feel the pressing
influence of the oncoming wedding, this is also a play about the different manifestations of love, and in the same way that this is a clash of different styles of love, it needs to be a clash of different music, too. As the situations become more and more heightened, the music begins to get more and more erratic – styles mix, overlap, combine until the death scene where it is an utter mess of sound. And then something soft brings us out of it, something painful but lovely – and we conclude our soundtrack with Lydia and Nikos walking out. But then silence. Horrible, stagnant silence for the first time in the play as Thyona stands on stage, alone.

My style is to create a world that the audience can immerse themselves in. This is created hugely by the elements of set and sound, but also includes little things that draw people into the show - perhaps select disposable cameras available for audience members, like they’re at a wedding. Bows and balloons on the ends of the aisles. Confetti falls in their hair. And maybe they get accidentally sprayed by some stray ketchup in the death scene?
**HOW I ROLL**

While I swear by an attitude of collaboration, I know what my role is as a leader in this project, and I know when to take a stand when I need to. I’m really excited to direct again, but I’m also really terrified – this is a really hard project that I’ve set for myself, and I’m scared shitless. I have, however, learned a lot from my past directing experiences (as well as all my various theater endeavors as well) and I’m ready to put what I’ve learned in motion.

*Rocky* was an amazing experience, and turned out better than I could have ever expected. I had an incredible group of people to lean on, and I learned how heavily collaboration can influence your project. But while *Rocky* was successful in many ways, I made mistakes. Time was such a huge issue because of choreography and music and space constraints that I didn’t use the set nearly as well as I could have, and I wish I had had more time to give my actors for playing and exploring. I am SO pumped for four weeks in the space with no music or choreography to learn – we’re going to eat up the space and spit it out, and they’re going to play their fucking hearts out.

This summer, I spent 11 weeks at the Hangar Theatre in Ithaca, NY as an assistant director. I assisted on three productions as well as taking master classes in directing, and it was an eye-opening experience. I have binders full of material that I learned, but more importantly I got a grasp of what my weaknesses are. I’m really good at aesthetic – creating a world, blocking, coordinating design, and configuring timing. I’m also a powerhouse when it comes to execution – I’m highly organized and I keep on task. What I need to work on is the story I’m telling and the message I want to communicate. Since discovering this, I have been fighting to get better at it, and I think I now have a lot of tools at my disposal to make the story I’m interested in telling come forward.

I also learned a lot about equity rules this summer, and while it may sound super-lame, I think that some of them are very helpful, specifically rules about breaks for actors and deputies. Under equity rules, you must give your actors a five minute break every hour or a ten minute break every hour and a half. I’ve found that this not only gives the actors the rest and refresh time that they need but also helps rehearsals start on time because actors better respect the clock. It is also of the utmost importance that the actors elect a deputy among them who can speak up for the desires and complaints of the cast.

Finally, the big thing I learned this summer is how much personalization a director needs to bring to a text; if you’re directing you need to know exactly why YOU have to direct it...
SO:

**WHY THIS PLAY MATTERS TO ME**

Well first, I need this as a director. I need to try again and see what happens, I won’t be happy if I directed really successfully as a sophomore and then ran away from the challenge for fear of failing. I need to face my fears, and go balls to the wall on this one.

The exploration of Thyona as the protagonist of this story draws on a lot of my own experiences. I’m not bearing the burden of protecting my family or anything so dramatic, but I have a strong personality and I have many a time run away from love because of circumstance. I know too well the display of outer strength to conceal inner weakness. And I have watched many times as a friend has walked off with the partner of their dreams while I’m left in the dust, alone. I’m sick of these weak-woman-strong-man pairings, and Chuck Mee gets rid of generalities like that. I want to learn from Thyona, learn from her mistakes. I need to know that it’s okay when love is awkward and strange. I need to stop running.

I’m also at a point in my life where everything seems to be about making decisions, figuring out what life is all about, knowing what you want, choosing a path – turning 20 (blah blah I’m young blah blah) is a shock to the system in this way, not to mention becoming an upperclassman in college, and what I love about this play is it shows you how chosen paths can be so easily fucked up, how nothing ever turns out as planned. That’s important for me right now.

**AND THEN TO EVERYBODY**

And it’s important for us. Because let’s be real, my problems and personal attachments aren’t mine alone, they’re just reflections of what many people my age feel. We’re all getting torn apart by love. We’re all freaking out about making decisions and knowing which way is up. We’re all a wonderful, messy combination of beautiful and disastrous, and Chuck Mee has one hell of a grasp on that idea.

On a more grounded, “societal message” level, I believe in the strength of women, and I believe that this play shows many varieties of strong females. This is extremely important, not only to our society but also to an industry where there are a lack of good, strong parts for women and our canon is dominated by male writers. That said, this play also exposes our dependence on an other, whether that be through friendship, family, heterosexual or homosexual love. It is okay to fall in love, to sacrifice that independence, to like the fact that men and women (and just other humans in general) have genetic differences that may or may not put us in the position of strength. We need to acknowledge that dependence isn’t necessarily a bad thing, and as long as we value ourselves we can strike a balance. Equality is such an important message in this
play – that we’re all different, and not quite right, but nobody matters more than anyone else. This isn’t a feminist play, this isn’t a misogynistic play, this isn’t a play about homosexual rights and this isn’t a play about immigration or the importance of family. This is a play about how the importances of all of these things coexist together. We, as a world, need to get together already.

**AND WHY IT MATTERS TO PWS**

1. This would be such a great down space show, because it needs to be intimate but expansive – exactly how that space is set up.
2. It’s also, I think, a crowd pleaser, and would draw people to pw; I’m a very audience-oriented director and will do my best to make their butts want to be in those seats.
3. This is a young play – most of the characters are quite obviously our age group (with the exception of Bella and Piero) and its acting opportunities resonate with my generation. The casting range is extremely well-suited to a college environment.
4. The production is a great mix of conceptual art and mainstream, and I’m interested to see that balance of interests in the pw season. Not to mention it appeals to a wide range of people.
5. The theater community <3s Big Love and Chuck Mee – a lot of people are really excited about the prospect of this production and I think some bomb people will audition.
6. Our staff is so baller baller baller baller baller.
7. It starts right before Valentine’s Day. OMG WHAT A GREAT REASON!!!!!

I can’t guarantee I won’t fail. But I’m going to be fighting right up until this show opens to see that I don’t.

**So, pw,**

**Let’s make BIG fat messy awkward horrendously amazing or something LOVE.**

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TEAM, STAFF, FRIENDS, HELPERS, ETC.

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<td>Director</td>
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<td>Stage Manager, Asst. Director</td>
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<td>Writing/Editing/Cutting/Pasting &amp; Workshop Coordinator</td>
<td>Tara Schuster ‘08</td>
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<3 Budget

$390 Set / Props
$200 Costumes
$60 Publicity
= $650 EN TOTALE

I can contribute a bit.
For the miscellany.

*I'm going to look into more money. Rights are $50 more expensive than provided. Late night fund? Sarah Doyle tables? Donated props etc. RESEARCH TO BE DONE.