

crumble
(lay me down, justin timberlake)

by sheila callaghan

a proposal for
pw's commencement slot 2009

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Do me a favor? As you read this proposal, put on one of your favorite pop songs from middle school. I highly recommend "Tearin' Up My Heart", "Everybody", and, if you're in the mood for a classic, "MMMBop". Did you know there was an original ballad-tempo version on the album "3 Car Garage"? It's great; iTunes it.

t h e s t o r y

Janice is an unusual eleven-year-old. She has the temperament of a troubled toddler but has experienced grief in such an affecting way that she can't help but attempt to confront her own isolation. Just as isolated is her mother, Clara, a gourmet chef who is trying to find a sense of herself and her relationship with her daughter in the wake of her husband's death. Clara's sister, Barbara, is a parent as well: to fifty-seven cats. She thinks her feline experiences will help her relate to Janice. But each of these three women has her own delusions.

Janice and Clara live in an aging and (aptly) crumbling apartment, the Apartment, who is plotting to do away with his tenants before decay can overwhelm him. In their desperation, Janice and Clara are comforted by Justin Timberlake and Harrison Ford, respectively. None of the three men is ultimately enough to pacify the women's mounting frustration and loneliness, and Janice takes drastic action (at Justin's advice) by crafting a home-made bomb from a Barbie doll and various unlikely Christmas presents.

The bomb malfunctions, and Janice's hand is the only casualty. But the shock of this tragedy jolts Clara and Janice back to the reality of their companionship, rather than the fantasy of isolation. They decide to leave their Apartment, avoid their intolerable aunt, and make their lives together again.

t h e p l a y

I came across *Crumble* last summer through Chris Tyler via Playwrights Horizons. I was reading a lot of Callaghan's contemporaries for my own job and had, of course, witnessed the outrageous Fondafest that was Sarah Malkin's production of *That Pretty Pretty; or, the Rape Play* last year. It was one of those clichéd sat-down-to-read-a-scene-and-devoured-the-whole-thing experiences. It came up again in Sock & Buskin, where it was initially a favorite and, over the course of a semester, fell out of interest. I'm nonetheless determined to see it produced here.

To be perfectly honest, I had a lot of trouble articulating my feelings about this play at first. I think this reaction is common and perhaps a factor of Callaghan's sense of uneasy and unsettling humor. This hesitancy is something I'm really interested to explore not only on the page but more importantly with an audience in the room, and I think it applies in any scale. There are several

instances where specific jokes are meant to evoke an uncomfortable pause-then-chuckle, and the play as a whole, I think, functions in the same way.

At any rate, I did some poking around to see what other people were saying about it. I found reviews of the play, of productions, of Callaghan's work, and even just random bloggers musing about its quirks (of which there are many). Most people tend to fall into one of two camps: either the play is a heartfelt work of realistic struggle and grieving or it's an operatic allegory that deals with cultural obsessions and societal-scale tragedy.

The genius of Callaghan's writing is that it's both. There are moments around Clara's kitchen table that I can recall having around mine last night, last year, last decade. But Callaghan economically uses a poetically heightened language to lift us out of that moment and reflect on teenage, on middle age, on the age of pop, and on our own vulnerabilities, both personal and cultural. Where many playwrights get caught up in attempts to simulate everyday speech or access the grit of reality, Callaghan composes with a clarity and an accessibility that evade many of her contemporaries.

t h e p r o c e s s

As she uses these various techniques and tones, Callaghan is consistent in at least one major way: her purposeful theatricality. I feel very strongly that the best theatre is conscious of its nature, the best theatre maker conscious of his trade. For example, I tend to talk less about what the character is doing abstractly and more about what the actor (as the character) is doing with his body/voice/etc. In the same way, *Crumble* is anything but realism; it openly uses theatrical elements beyond plot and character to excite and to provoke and, most importantly, to tell its story.

This convergence of music, movement, and spectacle is perhaps the most exciting part of this project. This is the place where it draws the most from the principles of realism: of finding our own connections to the popular culture and music of the play, the ways our recollections of that genre reflect the same experiences and emotions of Clara, of Janice, etc. In many ways, our rehearsals will mirror and make use of the eclectic stylings of Callaghan's script. Beginning with work on the ever so inviting text, we'll find an exciting mix of scene work, choreography, and tableaux, of trying to tell the story not only through realistic acting, but moving, playing, staging, and, just as importantly, design.

In terms of logistics, I typically have a sense before rehearsal of where people are on stage at specific moments. I learned from a director who was very specific about placement (feet, shoulders, eyes) and the bodily relationships (distance, angle, touch) between actors. But the blocking of it, the movement from picture to picture, is developed on our feet. In rehearsal, I want to look at other examples of people who've played with pop culture. We'll watch music videos, *Pulp Fiction*, and "American Bandstand" and build upon the methods

other such artists have used to cull together elements of music, dance, and acting through popular culture.

A good example of this junction of theatrical techniques is the Overture (not included in the electronic draft – see the production draft in the Hay/Becker, or I have a bound copy). As I see it, the Overture falls somewhere on the spectrum between Richard Foreman tableaux and music video. More generally, rehearsals will begin with a variation on the warm-up I used when I taught jazz dance classes – this kind of work provides a greater focus on the body and mind than most theatre games, and I want what will surely be a cast of mixed dance background to slowly become more comfortable with their bodies moving onstage. Then, to build the Overture, we'll experiment with rhythmic tasks (Clara chopping carrots, Barbara opening the cans of tuna, Janice jumping on the bed, etc.) and add in *NSYNC. As the music builds, the tasks turn into steps, the steps into subtle choreography. Like the overture of a musical, which introduces the major melodies and musical motifs of the show's score, the overture of *Crumble* will draw the audience in, introduce its characters, and leave them wondering what could come of it all.

A character-specific example of my approach is the extremely difficult role of the Apartment. For the first several scenes, it will be very important for the actor to demonstrate his physical relationship to the space. I'll talk in the next section about the ways that he might actually form, change, and attach himself to the space. As the person in control of the space's shape and structure, his fate will be symbolically linked to the fate of the crumbling apartment. Several scenes into the play, the Apartment performs a lengthy monologue which describes the history of his rooms and tenants. During this monologue, my plan is to have the Apartment undress and change into the clothing of the Father from the first scene. This is his tactic (to kill the women by masquerading as their lost father) and the women's fantasy (to imagine their apartment as a placeholder for their lost father).

Through much of the rest of the play, the Apartment is the silent (though chock full of asides) father in the room, reading the newspaper at the kitchen table and comforting Janice when she escapes to her room. As Clara fixes the crumbling apartment, rather than literally pasting on wallpaper, she slowly becomes more physically intimate with the actor playing the Apartment until finally she consummates the relationship ('fixes the radiator'). Likewise, when she fixes the fatal floorboard in the final scene, she is actually affixing the Apartment to the apartment – leaving him physically trapped as the women of his world disappear.

t h e d e s i g n

When I first read the play, I couldn't help but think of an apartment from my own life. At Andover, my friends and I spent a lot of time in this one lounge

way off the beaten path on the campus of the old girls' school. In the attic of this particular building is an apartment owned by the school's art museum that houses visiting artists. I didn't know anything more about it until my last semester, when a bunch of us sat for portraits with this one eccentric painter who revealed its secrets. It turns out the apartment is a registered work of art itself, designed in the 90s by installation artist David Ireland. Ireland's goal, knowing that only his fellow artists would be using the space, was to create a home that works against natural architectural flow. The beams jut out from nowhere, the angles are purposefully disorienting, and the proportions deceive the eyes. Concerned with the 'art of living', Ireland installed surfaces specifically susceptible to wear and scratching, so that the apartment would constantly remind its tenant not only of his or her own inhabitation, but also of all of the artists who had come before. Some pictures:



Of course, if there's one thing that concerns me, Callaghan, or really any theatre maker, it's that same concept: the art of living. The way we inhabit our spaces, the way the world advances and challenges our living in it. And then there are these two apartments (Ireland's and Callaghan's), which might just be trying to kill us. The hostility of (and towards) domesticity is a major theme of the play. The space itself should reflect that tension: I'm thinking each room is raked just slightly counter to the others, fixtures lean precariously over edges, etc. Of course, it will be important for the actors to physicalize this hostility, as well - for example, the sexually charged and aggressive relationship between Clara and the Apartment.

This kind of budget doesn't buy an actual apartment. Thank God. Callaghan's own note cautions against literal interpretation, in favor of the elusive theatrical. I don't have a scenic designer yet, but my focus in staging, and my hope for our discussions about design, is the way in which the space challenges both actors and characters. How does the Apartment use the apartment to provoke the tenants? And vice versa? The example that comes to mind is Father's cell in Les Waters' production of *Eurydice*. The room was a tiny square center stage outlined by wires that the actors were able to connect and manipulate at each of the six corners. It's that kind of interpretive interaction that the actors in *Crumble* need to have in order to give weight to their surroundings.

why pw?

Logistically, *Crumble* is an excellent size for PW and for this slot in particular. It's an ensemble piece, which means a heavy amount of focused group work, but it's an intimate group at that. Likewise, the design will be lighter on the building and heavier on the ways the actors can make their own what space we do construct. Perhaps the most important visual dynamic is that the audience feels they are just as much a part of the crumbling apartment as the Apartment himself. I think the DownSpace affords that intimacy while at the same time allowing for flexibility in configuration and construction.

Thematically, I think this play is a perfect match for PW. Callaghan's mixture of comedy with grief makes for an uneasy reaction in the same way Clara's last joke in the final scene is met with hesitance. Ultimately, though, Janice laughs at the joke, and I think that we're meant to laugh on a larger scale, as well. Student theatre is a perfect place to explore this conflict, this discomfort, and this laughter. There is the possibility for an open dialogue among peers (rather than the professor-student model in the department, for example) that allows for much more sincere exploration of a topic that is so personal and generational.

Likewise, I think *Crumble* is a remarkably good fit for PW's season as it stands. Of course you're not choosing one season all at once with an eye toward

theme, but *Crumble* looks from new perspectives at many of the themes already addressed this season: intergenerational notions of loss (*Air Travel*), popular culture (*Pleasuredome*), pop music (*Metamorphoses*), and the role of art in our lives (*Art*). In that sense, it presents an opportunity to reflect on and advance the season's concerns.

Further, it's a decided fit for Commencement slot, with its intergenerational musings on memory, family, and change and, ultimately, its heartwarming and enjoyable sentiment. I have no doubt that the title and exciting publicity opportunities afforded by the play will attract strong crowds throughout Commencement weekend. The play's appeal reaches past the usual demographics and will cultivate a diverse audience of parents and alumni (including theatre professionals) in unique and valuable ways.

w h y n o w ?

There's something fascinating about the way the popular culture of childhood sticks with a person throughout their adult life. When my parents listen to the soundtrack from *The Big Chill* or when my grandparents swing dance, you know you've tapped into something tied directly to their development - the way they see the world (and deal with it) was informed by the culture that raised them. As we, the children of pop, leave our teenage years behind, it's important to recognize the ways in which that movement sticks with us. Will I be listening to the soundtrack from *Crossroads* when my kids are writing proposals to PW about how dated my taste in music is?

It almost goes without saying that these popular culture elements, especially Justin Timberlake, add immensely to the play's appeal. Not only will his name and the associated musical publicity opportunities draw a large and diverse crowd, but the play will, at the most basic level, resonate with college students of our generation regardless of their theatrical background. I hope, of course, that this pop music fascination will be the connection into the play (both literally in the door and then thematically) for people who otherwise might not have seen it.

In the same way that *Crumble* looks backwards at the culture of our youth, it is also entirely relevant to our current social and economic climate. I think interpretation needs to be an open-minded discourse involving staff, cast, and audience, as well as director, so I don't want to lay on the metaphor too heavily. Still, it's easy to see the ways in which the literal crumbling of the Apartment mirrors the decay of the home, the nuclear family, the aristocracy, and the mortgage crisis. *Crumble* was perhaps our childhood. But it's also our future.

why me?

Theatrically, you know me as a manager (my résumé is attached). But just as for a manager, I think it's important for a director to have training and experience in acting, dance, and design, and I hope you'll agree that it's this experience and my work as a leader and communicator, that will help guide me into this play as I continue to learn as a director.

Like Janice, it's been exactly a year since I experienced a very significant loss linked to my childhood, and it's surprising to me just how much art (and pop music, especially) reminds me, consoles me, confuses me. There's something about grieving along with *The Fray* that is just so trashy and terrible that you can't help but give in. In the wake of all of this last spring, I spent a significant amount of time researching the way that our generation has learned to cope, the way our fears and the fears of our parents affect our lives and, most importantly, our physicalities. I ended up with a bizarre paper that loops together topics as seemingly disparate as H.I.V., the Cold War, and Anne Bogart into the drastic change in our generation's sense of sensuality and our bodies. Essentially, my interest here is the way in which our generation has changed the connection of our bodies and ourselves to art in a way that fundamentally diverges from the trajectory of our heritages. My connection to *Crumble* is the same: I am fascinated with the way that Clara and Janice react radically differently to art (via pop culture), and the way they use art, their bodies, and each other to cope.

t h e s t a f f

Director	James Anglin Flynn '11
Lighting Designer	Oona Curley '10
Costume Designer	Lacey Drucker '08
Production Manager	Drew Madden '10
Stage Manager	Ria DiLullo '11
Dramaturgical Mentor	Katrin Dettmer GS
Publicity Coordinator	Chris Tyler '10

t h e b u d g e t

Set	\$350
Costumes	\$100
Sound	\$100
Props	\$20
Publicity	\$80

t h e c a l e n d a r

Please see the attached. Obviously this is an approximation, and dates will fluctuate depending on personal and production calendars. I'd like to have the show cast by the time MF closes, but the auditions will likely take place earlier that week or even the week before - that particular weekend has at least three shows up at once. I've split the play into digestible beats where I think breaks between rehearsals can comfortably fall. Again, this is all subject to scheduling.

May 2009

- Crumble
- Brown

April 2009							May 2009							June 2009																			
S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S	S	M	T	W	T	F	S													
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
26 Reading Period Coronatus Cast List Posted (at the latest)	27 Strike W/F	28 Read-Through with Staff End of Preregistration	29 Overture, 58 - 61	30 61 - 68	31 68 - 75	1 2
3 Reading Period 75 - 81	4 81 - 89	5 89 - 95 Classes End, Drop, Incomplete	6 Final Exams Review/Work	7 Design Run	8 Run/Work First Half	9
10 Final Exams Run/Work Second Half	11 Run/Work First Half	12 Run/Work Second Half	13 Design Run	14 Dry Tech	15 Dry Tech	16 Wet Tech
17 Dress Run	18 Dress Run	19 Final Dress	20 8:00 PM Performance	21 8:00 PM Performance	22 11:00 PM Performance 8:00 PM Performance	23 2:00 PM Performance 8:00 PM Performance
24 Commencement	25	26	27	28	29	30
31	1	2	3	4	5	6