

BENJAMIN STOLL

HON 499C

## **JOURNAL OF PROGRESS**

Week of 1/11-1/17

Coming off of a summer and fall of research and planning, the writing of the play itself has begun in earnest! The majority of research took place during the summer of 2014 and the early parts of the following fall, culminating in interviews with Ted Swartz, a Mennonite playwright, actor, and comedian; and Vesna Hart, a JMU employee whose family lived the horrors of the war in Yugoslavia. With encouragement and validation from Ted, coupled with a framework based on stories from Vesna, the plot and purpose of my play became specific and driven—that is, to examine the courage and/or cowardice of pacifism against the backdrop of the siege of Sarajevo (recreated with fictional circumstances), by observing the actions and relationships of several soldiers/citizens who find themselves taking shelter in a ruined church during a heavily-violent portion of the siege.

My research itself took place in the following three areas: the crossover between art and religion (for lack of a better term... ‘faith’ seems too general); the specific relationship between theater and the Mennonite church; and insights into the worlds of pacifism and the War in the Balkans. The essential question of my Honors Thesis is how theater can express relevant faith-based ideologies in a way that goes beyond the didactic or sentimental. Thus far, that goal remains within reach.

As far as the writing, this first week has seen the writing and re-writing of the opening scene of the play, as well as planning for the finale and the interim. My original three characters became four characters, with addition of the main character’s recently killed wife, by whom that character often is haunted. I hope to have a viable draft completed by the end of January, that I can present it to Ingrid and spend February and the first part of March honing it, leading to a staged reading by the end of March. I’ve met with my advisor and my readers to keep them updated on the process.

Week of 1/18-1/24

This second week included further work on the opening scene, as well as the addition of two more characters—a young married couple who will hopefully stand for surviving innocence, unblemished hope. As long as I can keep them from becoming overly sentimental, I think they will present a great foil for the other three men, who seek to influence one another for or against the war that rages. Additionally, the second scene has been viably breached; my plan to close out this week is to write the final scene, so that I have a clear-cut arc to which I can drive the remaining internal scenes.

Progress has been made as far as the staged reading; I have been in contact with Ingrid with preliminary scheduling, and hope to take that further this coming week. The next step will be to secure a cast, once I am confident I have identified all characters who will be in the play.

Week of 1/25-1/31

Much progress was made with the writing of the first and last scenes; in addition to having the bookends completed, I have now planned the internal scenes and created a framework from which I will expand the meat of the story. The danger is very clear, and the characters are taking a much more complex shape—I am distorting the stereotypical stock characters to make them reflect the world of Sarajevo in a three-dimensional way. I am realizing, however, that I can't lose sight of maintaining that examination of courage and cowardice. At this point, it seems to be folding into a larger motif of clashing wartime mentalities, which is not necessarily a bad thing by any means. But with the latter as the conflict of the play, there should be significant opportunities to question the nature of courage in war.

Week of 2/1-2/7

A significant portion of the writing was accomplished this week. Additionally, I was able to meet with Ingrid DeSanctis and talk through my current story. I found that trying to relay to her the storylines in my head was incredibly difficult, because my goals and storylines were far more complex than I had realized. This was a moment of epiphany, and she helped me simplify the overly complex plot lines, consolidating them into three arcs that intersect in a powerful way. With the conflict narrowed to the poignant violence of the Serbian-Croatian dichotomy, I have a much more visceral way to approach the characters as opposed to giving a lot of exposition regarding what drew them to the church setting in the first place. The bookend scenes (first/last) will have to be revamped now, but the work ahead promises to be much more meaningful and coherent as a story.

Week of 2/8-2/14

With my new story arc on the table, the major portion of this week was spent clarifying character sketches and planning the skeleton of the new scene progression. I'm attempting to keep Branimir as the central character to whom the majority of the psychological exploration happens, but I'm looking at enlarging all the other roles and making it a relatively ensemble cast. Having completed this early planning, next week will include the writing of the rest of the story itself! I have had several moments of extreme doubt, however, that I have no right to tell the story of a war that I did not experience; but I take solace in the fact that Ingrid says playwrights can capture the scope of any story. I met with her to discuss that doubt, and she kept me on the path that I've set out to follow.

Week of 2/15-2/21

Over three-fourths of the play was completed this week. I made new discoveries about character relationships, and did more research into the context of the actual war itself. I've complicated Bartol and Ivona's relationship by giving her a type of trauma in which she does not speak; additionally, I've deepened the conflict between Bran and Luka by making Erika their only connection (which leaves them at ethnic and ideological odds in the wake of her death). Writing and revising, writing and revising. I also did a bit more research for the Reflective/Contextual essay. Draft forthcoming. Progress is going a bit more slowly than I'd hoped thanks to the interventions of life, but I'm confident all will be completed in time. I met with my advisor and we worked out a plan for keeping things in line.

Week of 2/22-2/28

This week was spent editing and revising, as I am planning to send a draft to Ingrid this weekend. We've scheduled a meeting for Monday to talk through the draft so that I will have notes to work through over spring break. We've also planned a reading for the tentative date of March 22<sup>nd</sup>, and Ingrid has intentions to ask Howard Zehr for a reading at EMU as well. I worked on a new version of my essay outline, and I hope to have a draft of that paper complete over Spring Break so that my advisors can give me pointers to clean up by April 8<sup>th</sup>. I kept my readers and advisor updated with my progress, and things look quite promising.

Week of 3/1-3/7

I met with Ingrid for a more in-depth discussion of my draft—I'm thrilled to say that she finds the play compelling and in an excellent place, and I can't describe the sense of affirmation that good news gave me. She also had incredibly helpful notes that I will attempt to fix this coming week. Additionally, she continued to help me to allay my fears of not having a right to tell this story—I've even given some of my doubt to the character of Marcus, which I think will deepen his personality as an American out of place. Essentially, I'm finding that each of my characters has at least one of my own fears as a part of their psyche.

I have a cast on board for my reading, and I've secured Wayland Hall for the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March! My trauma device for Ivona is a bit contrived as it turns out, so I will be playing with locking her into memories of poetry as opposed to strict silence; additionally, Ingrid gave me ways to make the dialogue less "page-pretty" and more realistic. She and I read through a few passages, which was truly helpful. We attempted to schedule a reading before Spring Break, but snow days cancelled those plans. As of now, I will return after break with a revised copy of both script and essay, and we will jump into a reading that will allow me to refine, refine, refine before the reading at Wayland.

Week of 3/8-3/14

By the end of Spring Break, I had an edited full draft that I sent to Ingrid. I filled out the story with a few more character interactions that reinforce my plan to focus on the people, not the politics or the philosophy. But both of the latter topics certainly permeate the work. I'm incredibly pleased with where the play is at the moment, and meeting with Ingrid post-break will help me ready it for the performance on the 22<sup>nd</sup>.

Week of 3/15-3/21

What a whirlwind of writing this week has been. I met with Ingrid, and we made several modifications that have enhanced the overall script—limiting the action to a single location, altering some nitpicky wordings and stage directions, etc. I met with the actors and heard it out loud for the first time on Wednesday; it was such a blessing hearing my words come to life through their talented voices. I was both humbled and pleased by how the story came across, and hearing it out loud helped me understand the last few things to be fixed before Sunday.

I did another rewrite, getting the draft to a standard I was finally ready to share with the public. We did one more practice read through and worked a bit on staging, but Ingrid and I decided that staging isn't the focus of the reading; the *text* is. I had the opportunity to speak with Vesna on the phone, and she had such complimentary things to say that I almost found myself crying out of happiness. I can't believe that I've come to this point where a story of mine that I've given so much blood, love, hate, and time will be shared with others, having the potential to impact them. Sunday is coming quickly.

March 22<sup>nd</sup>—the Reading

I had a wonderful turnout for the reading—somewhere in the neighborhood of forty people who gave up a Sunday afternoon to hear my work. I am humbled and overwhelmed by the response. Colleagues and teachers for whom I have the utmost respect were genuinely impressed by what I had accomplished—they identified with characters, felt captivated by the story, and said that they never felt I was too heavy-handed in my insertion of ideology. There are too many emotions and impressions to accurately record here, but all I have to say at this point is that I feel my efforts have met with a beautiful success. The last phase of the project now is to complete my contextual essay and reflection, and with that, over a year's work will have come full circle.

Many of the people who attended the reading expressed a desire to see the play as full-length as opposed to a one-act, and I heartily agree. This will certainly become a post-grad pet project that Ingrid believes could even see life on a JMU stage in the next couple of years. Comments to that end involve focusing not only on the people, but the physical and visceral world with which they are forced to interact. This would allow me to deepen tension and explore the specific ways in which these people have been damaged by war.

The feedback from my advisor and my readers upon hearing the work out loud was equally humbling and gave me such affirmation. I felt an intense vulnerability the moment before the reading began, knowing that all of these people would hear this work, this part of myself, and I can only describe that feeling as akin to a faith experience. In all truth, this work has been a validation of my thesis' goals.

Ultimately, I'm beyond thrilled with what I've done. I feel so much catharsis having had my story heard, having seen its impact on others, and I cannot wait to see what becomes of this creative work in the future.