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The Belle of Amherst: A Reflection of Life in Art

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The Belle of Amherst:
A Reflection of Life in Art

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Candidate for B.F.A in Acting
With Honors
May 2006

APPROVED

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Abstract

The goal and purpose of this thesis was the cohesive performance and production of *The Belle of Amherst* by William Luce. The play is a fictionalized account of the life of the poetess Emily Dickinson, taking place in a day late in her life where she reminisces on all her experiences from childhood to the present. Emily is the only character physically on stage, and all the rest are created through her descriptions and representations of them for the audience. The play is also an insight into her poetry, using the actual poetic text throughout the script. The audience never quite knows when Emily is speaking prose or poetry, but every so often a famous line is detected, and the possible context of its writing revealed through the dramatic action. For example, Emily loses the love of her life, Charles Wadsworth, and immediately afterwards she recites the poem with the first line “Will there ever be a morning?” The poem is driven by the particular emotion that Emily is experiencing at the time, and gives a possible explanation of her motivations for writing it. The play is an exploration of her personality as well as her artistry. Indeed, it presents the idea that they are one and the same.

Creating this role required research, preparation, physical warm ups, voice work, months of rehearsal, and lots of writing and cooperative work with a director and assistant. Performing a one-person piece is one of the greatest challenges for an actor, and a perfect culmination to a senior year of a four-year study of the craft. Additionally, a goal of creating this role was to produce the entire show. This included finding a space, acquiring designers, creating sets and costumes, stage managing, publicizing, and producing the event, all of which ended with three performances on March 3, 4, and 5, 2006 in the Sutton Pavilion at Syracuse Stage.

Advice to Future Students

Let me first say this: I believe that doing a creative thesis in performance is a wonderful opportunity and an excellent way to prove to yourself and you are deeply committed, capable, and talented theatre artist. However, there are many challenges you may face on your way to completing your thesis. I found that I had a hard time getting a team of people to help me with everything involved in producing my own show. I underestimated the amount of manpower it really takes to put something up on its feet, and so I waited too long to gather people together, and I didn't press anyone hard or long enough to join me in my efforts. I was lucky enough to find a designer and one production assistant, but other than that, I did everything on my own with the help of my director and assistant director. Also, it put very unfair demands on that one production assistant, as she turned into my board ops and run crew as well. There are three conclusions I drew from this. One: get a stage manager. It is vital to the production quality as well as your mental health. A stage manager will keep you focused, driven, and sane so that you can really focus on the performing aspects more than the production aspects of the show. Two: Get an assistant director. My assistant director was extremely important, as my director was working on multiple projects and was available for limited rehearsal hours. My assistant director was always there and served to be just as important and useful as the director in his absence. Without the AD I would not have had a performance. It just wouldn't have happened without that extra

push and without the additional insight. Three: Assemble this team of people, your director, your assistant director, your stage manager, your set, costume and lightning designers, and your production assistants at least 6 months in advance. It sounds crazy, but after going through the pressures of trying to pull everything together on my own, I would really recommend it. This way, you can feel secure about who you are working with and the support you will have as you fully explore and work on your performance and the character you are playing.

The important thing to remember is that you can handle anything that comes your way, and if you approach something with calmness and with grace, you are bound to win out in the end and get things solved the way you want them to be.

Finally, my last piece of advice is to choose material that you really and truly love, or to choose a professor to work with that you feel similarly about. In my case, I knew I wanted to work with a certain professor, and then together we came up with material that ended up having a very deep impact on me. I was lucky. After having the passion I did for the subject matter of my piece, I would really hope for future thesis performers to work as extensively on something they love, for to say the words you cherish to the bottom of your soul for an audience makes all the difference between a good and a great thesis experience.

Good luck, and remember to have fun with every minute of the work. That is the only way that it's worth it.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to give my deepest thanks to Rodney Hudson, my director. This project was his idea, and it was he who first got me inspired by Emily Dickinson. I will be forever grateful for his teaching, guidance, and support throughout the entire process of creating *The Belle of Amherst*.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge Danny Gordon, my assistant director, to whom I credit the making of this project. Without his help, I would not have been able to complete this on my own, and he was able to work with me whenever I needed a second pair of eyes and ears. He helped bring sensitivity, grace, and power to the piece.

I would also like to thank Meg Abraham and Christine Richards for their work on the piece. Meg for her great spirit and willingness to do anything, and Christine for her quick thinking and beautiful lights.

Lastly, I would like to thank The props and costume shops at Syracuse Stage, Brian Crotty, Company Manager of Syracuse Stage, everyone who stopped by to lend a hand in moving sets and props, and my friends and family for believing in me even when I did not and always encouraging me to keep going and do more.

I thank all these people because in order to create theatre you need a community of giving, caring, loving people. I found that community in Syracuse and I want everyone to know how much it meant to me that they were there for me and that I will remember each one of them for their efforts.

Thank you!

The Belle of Amherst: A Reflection of Life in Art

On December 10, 1830, in the woods of New England, an artist who would help define and shape American Literature through her innovations and genius was born. Emily Elizabeth Dickinson came into the world in the small town of Amherst. Her father was Edward Dickinson, a lawyer and treasurer for Amherst College, which was founded by Samuel Fowler Dickinson, Emily's grandfather. She came from a long tradition of education and citizenship, and attended Amherst Academy followed by Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She was only at Mount Holyoke for one year, as her brother Austin brought her home to Amherst due to illness. Austin was a lawyer like his father, and married Susan Gilbert, and the couple lived next door to the Dickinson Family. At Homestead, the Dickinson estate, Emily lived a life of seclusion, fostering her immense talent for writing, expressing herself through poetry. There is much speculation as to the reason behind her isolation, but in my estimation it seemed as if the breadth of her genius was too much for her to live as a being in the outside world. In order to write as fully, as introspectively, and as profoundly as she did, it was necessary for her to give her full attention to her work, ultimately forcing her to sacrifice many joys of life, such as friendships, family, or love. True, she lived under the watchful eye of her father, whom she respected and admired immensely, and her younger sister Lavinia, who would become Emily's vehicle towards publication, after her death. However, her seclusion was a great contributor to

her poetry. Reading her poems is like being in her room with her, darkened by the twilight of a New England sky, with only the light of a small candle she holds and places on her desk; it is just the two of you united by the words.

Tucked away from the world, Emily's poetry took on a new kind of form, breaking the mold of traditional literature. She used a different kind of punctuation – the dash – that seems to symbolize significant moments in the poems; almost as if they are physical expressions of Emily's own brain synapses as she explores her own emotions.

A poetess friend of mine once told me, "It is as if Emily lived a corseted life and each dash is a gasp of air escaping from her confined reality." I love to think of Emily writing in this fashion, as if each word was as necessary to life as breathing.

Unfortunately, this passion was never publicly expressed. Even though she wrote over 1, 775 poems in her lifetime, only 7 of them were ever published while she was alive. She fought an uphill battle to get her work published, a struggle that is a central plot point in *The Belle of Amherst*. In the play, she is depicted as having a great need to be published, doing her best to send her poems to editors and feeling great disappointment and heartbreak when she is ultimately rejected. Upon this rejection, we see her give up the fight, and she is drawn even further into her isolation. Although she wanted to have her work published, she pinned all her hopes on one man, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*. He did not agree to publish her works, citing her irregular rhyme scheme, confusing punctuation,

and complex themes. In the play, Emily is devastated by Higginson's refusal, but continues to send him her poetry, and eventually develops a great and long lasting friendship with him, calling him her "Preceptor" and herself his "Scholar". She took his advice and grew under his tutorials. Emily's only friendships were communicated through writing, as well as any prospects of love relationships. The depths of Emily's love towards others as well as the direction of that love have been speculated on by scholars for decades. She was so elusive about her romantic attachments in her real life, but she wrote about love painfully, honestly, and with great emotion.

I cannot live with You-
It would be Life-
And Life is over there-
Behind the shelf.

The Sexton keeps the Key to-
Putting up
Our life-his Porcelain-
Like a Cup-

Discarded of the Housewife-

So We must keep apart-
You there-I- here-
With just the Door ajar
That Oceans are-and Prayer-
And that Pale Sustenance-
Despair!

No one quite knows who the object of Emily's affection was. Possibilities include Samuel Bowles, the editor of *The Springfield Republican*, with whom Emily had a long standing correspondence with, Judge Otis Lord of Amherst, MA, who was much older than she, and married, and even Susan Gilbert, who

married Emily's older brother Austin and lived next door to her father's estate. Emily was never public about her love affairs or feeling, she kept them all wrapped inside her world, inside the house, inside her box of poetry. It is as if a shield of armor protects Emily from her deepest feelings of love. This was one of the most important aspects of her writing that I delved into in order to fill the deep emotional well of Emily's unfulfilled love. She carried a huge breadth of true and worthy emotions surrounding the love in her life and valued it greatly, this is clear from her poetry. She is able to write about it splendidly and beautifully, and yet is unable to find it in her life outside her writing. How extraordinary that one who is so articulate, so passionate about love cannot grasp hold of it in reality. Artists, especially ones of such intensity as Emily, often can't seem to balance their work and their art. They are able to find immense heart and soul in their stories, but they seem to lack it in their personal lives. Artists are able to live out through their work what they are unable to accomplish in their other reality. Our art is often our reality, and it begs the question, what reality is the true one? The right one? Or perhaps, more appropriately, the more wanted one?

These questions rose to the surface as I began to search my own soul for connections to Emily's. It is a deeply painful and often regretful thing that artists encounter, this dual reality I spoke of earlier. It weighs on an artists soul, and forces us to make sacrifices. If our passions are as large, as all consuming as Emily's were, are we able to have a full-bodied personal life? In her case, she was not able to do this, because if she had devoted time and

energy to things like love or raising a family or friendships, all things she deeply cherished, she would not have been able to write as she had. This is my belief. Her writing was her lifeblood, her survival. Without it, she would have perished, far worse than she ultimately did. She would have perished in a worse way; she would have been suffocated by her unhappiness at not being allowed to express herself through poetry. To write like her, with that kind of dedication, focus, drive, and introspection took enormous sacrifice. She had to give up the things she may have wanted most to fulfill her deepest desire.

This kind of sacrifice is really what draws me to Emily Dickinson not only as an artist, but also as a whole being. This idea of sacrifice is something I discussed with my director, Rodney Hudson, for many hours of our rehearsal process together. He thought it was extremely important for me to understand the emotions that arise when making those kinds of decisions. What to choose, your love or your work? It is extremely sensitive, but something that I, and most actors can relate to. We aren't able to see our families that much due to the great restraints of rehearsal and performance schedules. We always seem to be involved in some project; we are constantly at the theatre practicing our craft. We work long, late hours into the night, living almost backwards from the rest of the world. Because of this, love and relationships often come secondary because of the demands of our artistry, months on the road performing, hours of time spent researching, reading, rehearsing, working around the holidays to keep everyone else entertained. Ultimately, though, this is the reality of our profession, and these are the kinds of sacrifices that are

made in order to do what we do as fully as we want. Correction, as we need. For we need to perform and act just as Emily needed to write, it is our breath, our water, and our food.

In the wake of these powerful thoughts, something occurs to me. *The Belle of Amherst* is a fusion of two art forms, melding together to portray a zeal for both life and work, combining the power of the written word with the power of the spoken. The text unites actor and writer, through the spirit and essence of a woman who was many things: a true genius, an innovative force, an intelligent powerhouse, a delicate flower, and a shy schoolgirl all at once. Above all though, she was a human just like all of us, with the same weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This is so important to understand when reading her poetry, and although she is worth the thousands of pages of analysis and scholarly attention, I believe that it must be remembered that she was a person, a unique and free spirit that soared clear off the page she was tied to. And as a theatre artist, I had the rare and precious opportunity to present that spirit to the world, through a theatrical representation in a new and different way. I don't think there is really anything more electrifying than that.

I never thought I would be searching through this kind of dense and thought provoking material when I first contemplated the idea of doing a senior thesis. Watching classmates of mine do their own thesis performances inspired me. I admired the guts it took to do a play all by yourself, and I thought that was something I wanted to prove to myself I was capable of in

my senior year of training in a BFA program. Musical theatre majors are required to complete a Cabaret, where they essentially compile a short musical show by combining songs, rewriting lyrics, inventing characters and a storyline. It's a great opportunity, but acting majors aren't required to do anything like that. So, I decided that if I was really serious about doing a one-woman piece, I was going to do it with as much support as I could get, and really immerse myself in a subject. Only what was that subject going to be? At the time, I had no idea, and I certainly couldn't have guessed that I would study an artist who would change my perceptions and open my world to new ideas in ways that will remain in my heart for the rest of my life.

The reason I discuss and analyze so much of Emily's life story is because her biography is an integral part of the passion that fueled the performance of *The Belle of Amherst*. I studied her life, her upbringing, and her poetic style almost as much as I studied my lines. Emily is an artist, an artist whose passion was essential to her body of work. As an artist myself, although of a different nature, I resonate with Emily's overwhelming and undeniable need to create.

For me, that creation lies in the invention of the human being and performing the roles of these characters. As Emily found her life through writing, I find mine through acting. There is nothing more exciting to me than the behavior, language, and physical action of other people. These aspects of human beings combine to create wonderful and fascinating portraits, images and ideas that are reflected back to an audience in an insightful way. To watch

another's emotional qualities lived out on stage connects us all to one another, and the triumphs, joys, follies, and sorrows of all of us. To be an actor, indeed any kind of artist, is to be a part of a long line of tradition and history. In this way, Emily Dickinson can be just as alive in 2006 as she was in 1848 when she began writing at age 18.

Creating the character of Emily Dickinson for *The Belle of Amherst* by William Luce was one of the most wonderful experiences I have yet had the privilege of having as a young actor. I had known for two years that I wanted to perform a one-woman piece, but I just didn't know what piece I was going to do. I also knew that I wanted to work with Rodney Hudson, a professor in the drama department with whom I had not yet worked and whose directing and teaching style I admired greatly. However, he was working with another classmate of mine and I thought he would not have enough time to take on my project as well. Then, one day, he swept me into his office, sat me down, and shooting me a concerned yet stern look he said, "Well, why are you asking other people to direct your thesis?" Before I could even form my response, he said, "I think you should do *The Belle of Amherst*, and I will direct you."

Thus, my great journey through the life of Emily Dickinson began.

I started with the text of the play itself, and worked with that as the basis for creating Emily's character. The script meant a great deal to me, as that text is the words of Emily's mind, her vessel to the public, and her chance to finally speak out loud rather than through her writing. That chance is so rare for a figure that was so private and so focused on the written rather than

the spoken word. However, *The Belle of Amherst* shows Emily's love of words in general, and the feelings associated with each of them and how they affect the reader and Emily herself. Miss Emily was more of an actress than I ever thought, and this quality comes through in the text. William Luce's script is a beautiful, innovative, touching, and funny suggestion of Emily's personality.

So, where to begin? In answering this question, it was essential for me to really create a process for myself. I found that the best way to discover Emily was through physicality. I began working on my body, particularly finding a walk for Emily, and a center of gravity from which she moved. I decided that this was her forehead, as her brain and ideas seemed to guide her through her life more than anything else. I felt as though she was in constant forward motion, and walked from this point in the center of her forehead, as if her head was leading her through life. With this came a kind of speed and flow to her gait that was so important to the progression of her character throughout the timeline of the play. As the play goes on, Emily experiences more and more loss and pain and consequently gets older and older. It was a great journey to experience this age physically as well as emotionally; suddenly the vim and vigor with which she strutted about the stage in the beginning slowed to a smaller, more unsteady pace, slightly hunched shoulders cutting off her heart, which was so filled with heartbreak. It was fascinating to experience this as an actor, for it was as if Emily's body took over mine, and she knew when she needed to slow down or stop and catch her

breath, so I was simply obeying her command. Characters take on a life of their own, and it was a process to build Emily into my own skin.

Rodney once gave me a wonderful piece of advice. During a rehearsal he told me that the truly great actors trusted their impulses and as they became greater actors, they knew how to find those impulses rather than create them. He told me this as a way to explain the way Emily wrote, when we took on the daunting physical task of actually showing her writing. This is such a key part not only of the plot of the play but of the understanding of Emily herself, and the way she wrote on stage was a great insight into her as a person. The behavior said it all. Her impulses come from the air, he told me, and it's like her pen is the only way she can get this idea out from inside her body. Her pen is the vessel with which these ideas are channeled; she herself is the vessel. So, I spent a lot of time sitting at a desk, thinking of her poetry, and experimenting with how she might write them down. Sometimes I would hardly move and all, other times I would throw my hands up in the air and jump up wildly and rejoice in my idea! Finally, we found a combination of the two things that involved the actual gesturing to the air, and a slight movement of the fingers, as if she were scanning the sky and decoding messages she found in the air. There is a great amount of eccentricity that comes through in this kind of behavior, and Rodney helped me to really embrace this and make it a part of her charm, humor, and pain rather than something that was simply farcical. This brings me to the next important point of the development of Emily: her humor.

Humor was an integral part of the creating and performing of *The Belle of Amherst*. The story of the play goes from bad to worse, chronicling all of the losses in her life. Emily lost everyone she was close to, except her sister Lavinia. Their deaths are in the following order: James Francis Billings, her first crush, her great love, Charles Wadsworth, her Father, her Mother, and finally her little nephew, Gilbert. Amongst all this heartache, it is hard to find the joy in Emily's life, as she was so stricken with grief. I struggled with how to approach this when performing the role. How do you keep the audience engaged when you are so focused on sentiments and reflection on pain? Rodney taught me to constantly bring Emily out of the pain and into the joy, the humor, of her life. Humor in this case doesn't mean funny as in a stand up comedy routine. Humor in this case means finding the happiness in life, looking on the bright side of things, or focusing on the things in one's life that bring you joy rather than those that bring you down. This is a rare, special quality in human beings, and something that was very challenging to work on as an actor. However, throughout the rehearsal process, with the encouragement and persistence of Rodney, I was able realize that the further I played the humor of Emily's personality, the deeper the well of emotion underneath would surface.

That, ultimately was the biggest learning experience I had in the entire process of working on this piece. It's the idea in theatre of "playing the opposite intention", meaning that when you are reciting a monologue about a funeral march, you "play" the joy of the love you have for the deceased

person, or the feeling that you can and will overcome the sorrow you may feel. It would be much easier to cry and wallow in the extreme pain that you are feeling, but that is where the craft and skill of theatre transforms life into art. There are things that may be true to life but aren't theatrical, and it's the job of the actor and the director to create a stage worthy piece of art, and often what is stage worthy is not necessarily 100 per cent realistic. This idea comes out of a long tradition of theatre. Naturalism, a kind of theatre that depicted a "slice of life" in the most realistic kind of way completely excluded the audience from participating in the action. In fact, plays were rehearsed without the "fourth wall", or the invisible space between the actors and the audience. Playwrights like Ibsen who gave us such works as Hedda Gabler embraced this theatrical movement. Naturalism soon reshaped into Realism, where plays showed life as realistically as possible, but allowed for other kinds of elements to be used in telling a story, such as dreams, ballets, dances, or other kinds of "non-realistic" components. This allowed the audience to become more engaged in the story and the characters, and fully participate in the emotional experience because of the heightened state of life occurring on stage. In the best case scenario, they will forget that they are in the theatre watching a show and fully enjoying themselves, but that awareness that they are watching a play being acted for them will always be in the back of their minds. For this reason, there are acting techniques that help to create theatrical qualities that are simultaneously realistic and heightened. Trying to walk this fine line is one of the greatest challenges actors undertake in practicing their

art. The use of humor and discovering this humor in the character of Emily Dickinson was a way of fine-tuning this skill.

From text work to physicality, the final stage of creating the role of Emily Dickinson lay in discovering the emotion that fueled her passion for writing and her vigor for life. This was the most sensitive part of the process, identifying my own connections to the material and personalizing it so that I could portray Emily as deeply as possible. It became more personal that I imagined it would, when I experienced a great tragedy in my own life while working on this piece. A dear, close friend of mine was killed in a car accident in October of 2005. I was completely blindsided by it, and I didn't know where to turn. I reached out to family and friends and was comforted by their hugs, words, and love. When I got back into the swing of life, work, and school, I still felt creatively sterile. I began rehearsing again but my emotional connection to the material came up numb. There's no way I'm going to bounce back from this, I don't know how I am going to keep going, I thought to myself. So, I started reading. I started reading my script again, and I started dissecting the poems contained within the text. I started to read other poems too, and started to understand Emily's connection to death and grief. She experienced so much loss in her life and yet she continued to see Death as a friend, as a comfort, as a pathway into another world. Perhaps this was the way she comforted herself, but in my time of need, it was a great way of comforting myself as well. I gathered strength from her point of view, the

idea that Death isn't something finite and ending, but rather something transcending and spiritual that leads us into another realm of being.

My friends turned to words to help ease our deep misunderstanding and heartache over the loss of our friend. I read quotes from many different authors, rationalizing death in all kinds of ways, and they were each beautiful and I respected how they helped each of my friends in turn. My words were Emily's words and there are two poems in particular that I constantly turn to as reminder of the strength of Dickinson's own personal struggles and strengths as they have now become my own.

This is the first poem:

We never know how high we are-
Till we are called to rise;
And then-- if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies.

The second poem is perhaps her most famous. It is also the final poem in *The Belle of Amherst*.

The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church-
Emily Elizabeth-
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls,
My childhood, and the string of spools
I've finished threading.

Because I could not stop for Death-
He kindly stopped for me-
The Carriage held but just Ourselves-
And Immortality.

We slowly drove-He knew no haste-
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility.

We passed the School, where Children played
Their lessons scarcely done-
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain-
We passed the Setting Sun-

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground-
The Roof was scarcely visible-
The Cornice- but a Mound-

Since then- 'tis Centuries-but each
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity-

I never knew how personal this work could become. I didn't use my friend's death as any kind of motivation or fuel for my performance, but I was able to learn so much more than just an acting lesson from my thesis. I was able to learn how art can hoist you up, how art is personal, important, and unique to each of us. Through studying Emily Dickinson and playing her in *The Belle of Amherst* I have learned how to make my art better through understanding the most personal of connections between a character and an actor. Emily's life became easy for me to inhabit, as her point of view became my point of view. I chose to pursue a creative thesis in order to immerse myself completely a theatrical event, and to have the fullest kind of experience one can have in creating a character and playing that character to an audience. However, I walked away with so much more; I walked away

with an intimate understanding of an artist and a body of work that speaks to me as if it were my words, my own breath, and my own spirit. I walked away knowing how important my work as an artist is, and if I can touch someone's life through my performance the way Emily Dickinson's poetry touched mine, I will have achieved more success than any kind of thesis could provide.

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Appendix

The following materials are all pieces of the process of creating and producing this piece. It includes the program distributed at the performance, a copy of the sound design, a copy of the poster for publicity of the performance, and pictures with the set and costume.

Program done by Evelyn Gaynor

Poster design by Danny Rooney

Sound design by Rodney Hudson and Evelyn Gaynor

Pictures taken by June Cloutier

Sets and Costumes by Rodney Hudson, Danny Gordon, Evelyn Gaynor with special assistance from the props and costume shops at Syracuse Stage.

Please Note: Pictures, Word Document, Sound Design, and DVD performance all on CD and not printed materials. Thank you.

