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Directing *Dead White Males: A Year in the Trenches of Teaching*

Emily Eisenman
University of Northern Iowa

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DIRECTING *DEAD WHITE MALES*:
A YEAR IN THE TRENCHES OF TEACHING

A Project
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

Emily Eisenman
University of Northern Iowa
May 2008

This Study by: Emily Eisenman

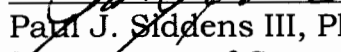
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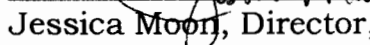
5/1/08

Date


Paul J. Siddens III, Ph.D., Honors Thesis Advisor
Department of Communication Studies

5/9/08

Date


Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

Overview of Thesis Project

I co-produced and directed the full-length play *Dead White Males: A Year in the Trenches of Teaching* for the UNI Interpreters Theatre as my Senior Honors thesis project. Co-producing and directing this project gave me the opportunity to collaborate with fellow students, members of the Cedar Valley community, and UNI faculty and staff. In doing this project, I was able to explore positive and negative aspects of education that had not been discussed in my education courses as of yet, in addition to gaining experience in producing and directing a major theatrical production, which I wish to do in my professional career as an educator.

When I began thinking about ideas for my thesis project, I quickly decided that I wanted to direct a play about some aspect of education to incorporate multiple aspects of my communication/theatre education major into the project. While looking at scripts online, I came across *Dead White Males* on the Playscripts, Inc. website, and was immediately intrigued by the title and synopsis:

Meet Janet, a rookie history teacher who goes from idealist to burnout as she fights insidious internal politics in her effort to truly affect her students. During her tenure Janet learns how to write a proper self-evaluation, censor musicals, and cultivate paranoia in a system dominated by constant accountability and deep corruption. When Janet's mentor has a nervous breakdown while being forced to teach creationism, Janet is called to testify against her, and then something even more tragic occurs in this biting satire of the public school system.

(1)

I was able to read part of the script online, and felt drawn to the story. I could also see that the Interpreters Theatre performance space more than met the

technical requirements that the play presented. I also was interested in the play's frankness about the negative aspects of education presented within it, and thought that it would be an appropriate play to produce at UNI, since our teaching program is one of the most well-known and respected in the country.

One of the things that intrigued me the most about the play was its focus on how new teachers can become disheartened and leave the profession so quickly. As one character asks, "Why is it that teachers have to be idealistic? Why can't we be in it for the almighty dollar?" (Downs 39). Janet does end up leaving her job at the end of the play, but it was because of pressure from outside the classroom, not from the students. During my time in the Teacher Education program, there have been moments when I thought that being a teacher was too much for me, and that I did not want to deal with the bureaucracy of the school system. However, I have always enjoyed being in the classroom and working with students, and that is what assures me that I chose the right major. After reading the script once, I felt a connection to the story and to the characters, and I knew that directing *Dead White Males* would be a good thesis project.

Preparation, Planning, and Production Processes

The planning process for the show actually began last spring, when I first approached Drs. Karen Mitchell and Paul Siddens, the producers of the Interpreters Theatre, about directing *Dead White Males*. They both liked the

play script and agreed that this would be a good thesis project for me, so it was added to the 2007/08 UNI Interpreters Theatre season bill.

As I began planning for the production side of the play, I also began preliminary research about some of the educational topics discussed in the play. Two sources that were very helpful for my proposal were the *Kappa Delta Pi Record* and *Teacher Magazine*. As I prepared my thesis proposal, I found several articles that addressed topics found in the play, including mentorship between rookie and veteran teachers, avoiding burnout, and academic freedom for teachers. During the rehearsal process this semester, those articles helped me understand how some of the events from the play were exaggerations of real life. For example, in *Dead White Males* Doris is made Janet's mentor as punishment for asking a question during a faculty meeting, but in real life, first-year and seasoned teachers both benefit from having a mentor and being a mentor.

About halfway through the fall semester of this year, I started planning for the production of *Dead White Males*. When the fall show at the theatre was done, I began to meet frequently with Dr. Siddens, my thesis advisor and Designer and Technical Director of the Interpreters Theatre, and Janette Pasker, the stage manager, to talk about ideas for the show. In our first meetings we talked about possible designs for the set, special costume pieces and props, and other technical elements. During later meetings, we discussed how rehearsals were progressing and made sure that technical aspects of the

show, such as building set pieces and finding props and costumes, were being dealt with in a timely manner and we were staying on schedule.

I set audition dates for the week after Thanksgiving Break, and before break began, I created audition flyers to post around campus and sent out information online. Over two nights of auditions, fourteen people auditioned for seven roles, which was an average turnout for Interpreters Theatre auditions. (Even though the quantity of people at auditions might seem low, I was pleased with the talent of those who came out.) After the auditions were over I spent several hours making the final decisions about the cast. At the end of that week, I posted the cast list and planned to hold two rehearsals before finals week, so the cast would have a chance to meet each other and read through the script as an ensemble before taking a month off for winter break. One of the cast members had to drop out of the show for personal reasons, but, luckily, I was able to quickly replace him with another actor who I knew would be good for the part.

Rehearsals began right away on the first day of this semester. Shows at the Interpreters Theatre usually have seven or eight weeks of rehearsals before the production week, but this year the spring semester started later than normal, so we only had six weeks of rehearsals before the week of the performances. The first few weeks of rehearsals were dedicated to blocking the show (giving stage directions to the actors). Once the show was blocked, I began to work more closely with the actors to help them connect to the characters so that the play felt like real things were happening within the story,

instead of seven actors pretending to be different characters. At this same time, I also worked with Dr. Siddens and Janette to recruit students to help backstage.

Each week I also attended production meetings with other students and faculty who work with the Interpreters Theatre. We were given a calendar of the semester and were told when certain things needed to be done before the show, such as planning the design for the show poster, gathering cast and crew information for the program, and sending press information around campus. In addition to meetings outside of rehearsal, Dr. Mitchell also observed several rehearsals to give me feedback about my directing and how the play was developing.

As the production week got closer and the show became ready for an audience, I began to sit back and let the stage manager take over the technical elements of the show. During the performance, Janette cued lights, sound, scene changes, and entrances and exits from the technical booth. The only thing I could do was trust the cast and crew, sit back, and enjoy the show.

Description of the Final Work

Dead White Males opened on Thursday, February 28, and had three solid performances. The feedback from the audience was very positive – both about the performance itself and the events that happened in the play. I was able to talk with several current and former teachers after the show, and they said that they were able to relate to the story and the characters of the play. (I also

heard about several education majors who were surprised by some of the events of the play.) Over two hundred people came to see the show over the course of three nights, which was a wonderful turnout for a student-directed show at the Interpreters Theatre.

In addition, the UNI Interpreters Theatre program conducts an assessment of all directors by having cast and crew fill out an evaluation form that is then coded and summarized by Drs. Mitchell and Siddens. The results of this assessment were shared with me and were uniformly positive. The comments and suggestions were very helpful in providing me with feedback to consider for future directing projects in which I engage.

Assessment of the Importance of the Project

This project proved itself to be a good experience for many reasons. Personally, this project gave me the chance to direct a full-length show while under the guidance of several professors who have taught me a lot about theatre and have given me confidence in my own work. I was able to plan and experiment with directing styles, activities, and approaches that I have learned from two directing courses that I have taken for my major; and I had professors from both the communication and theatre departments who were willing to answer my questions and offer suggestions when I had a problem with the process. When I am working in a high school, I may be entirely in charge of the school's theatre department and may not have many outside resources to support my projects, so this was a good chance for me to gain experience

working on my own. At the same time, I knew that I had the support and resources of my advisor and several professors if I came across problems that I could not solve on my own.

In addition to personal benefits, I believe this project also benefited the UNI community. *Dead White Males* explores many aspects of teaching that cannot be fully taught or understood just from class lecture or discussions. For example, how to work with bureaucracy within school administration or dealing with teacher burnout in the middle of the school year. Even though this was a work of fiction, education students in the audience were able to see some truth in the characters and events of the play and realize that they may find themselves in similar situations as first year or veteran teachers. This show gave those both involved and not involved with education a chance to talk about the events and ideas of the play and start discussions about the nature of education in America today.

Final Thoughts about the Experience

Directing *Dead White Males* was a challenging and rewarding experience for me. I was able to gain experience as a director, which will help me in the future as a high school speech and theatre director. On the other hand, I was also exposed to some of the more negative aspects of education that tend to be ignored in teacher education courses. I was also able to take the lessons I have learned from many of the courses I have taken as part of my degree program and apply them to a more real-world setting beyond the classroom.

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