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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Confessions from an Orthodox Spring

A Thesis Submitted in partial Satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Directing)

by

Anthony Luciano

Committee in charge:

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair
Professor Andrei Both
Professor Judith Dolan
Professor Manuel Rotenberg

2012

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

To my Mother and Father whose unceasing encouragement has been my greatest inspiration.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Confessions from an Orthodox Spring

by

Anthony Luciano

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Gabor Tompa, Chair

When I began to prepare *Spring Awakening* it immediately became extremely personal. The production became a kind of confession. Drawing directly on my own memories as an adolescent, I wanted finally, to give a name to that forgotten alienated creature—his anxieties, neuroses and fears. To somehow liberate that young man from embarrassment.

Seen through the student's eyes, Melchior is at the edge of himself looking blankly at a culture he cannot understand. His erotic awakening forced him to see a morality based on hypocrisy, a hypocrisy that leads him to feel like an exile. Unable to make sense of what he thinks of as an internal and devastating violence he searches for another way. Melchior's journey is a journey towards a liberation. This liberation is more than circumstantial, In every way he is looking for an escape from himself. His is a Metaphysical Liberation.

This liberation stands in stark contrast to the decaying social orthodoxy. As the primary agent of indoctrination the school became the symbol of this orthodoxy. It is the only structure on stage: the dominating force in the lives of all of the characters. Every moment of the play is in some way in reference to the school. Only in the last moment as Melchior looks out beyond the horizon does the school disappear. We see a young man standing on a margin: he has left behind the world before, and will—in the moments after he disappears from view—begin to author himself for the first time.

DIRECTOR'S CONCEPT

Wedekind provides a curious dedication in *Spring Awakening*: “To the Masked Man”. The ascription is equally curious: “—the Author”. Two figures occupy the brief dedication: one unknown and one unnamed. The author, I assume, is Wedekind—but the Masked Man is as enigmatic here as he is in the work itself. Are we to assume that the author is dedicating his first play to a character of his own creation? Or, as I imagine, did a version of the Masked Man appear to a younger Wedekind? If so, it begs the question of authorship--and here the enigma of Wedekind’s dedication is at its peak: if a form of the Masked Man had once appeared to Wedekind, and appeared as he does to Melchior in the drama, has the Masked Man authored Wedekind? Is there not a playful interplay between the author of the drama and the author of the man? A kind of mirror as the author writes into existence the force that authored him?

Its somewhat ironic I realize to express such pedantry about a play that showcases, among other things, the consequences of pedantry; but I can’t help but sense a very personal expression in this dedication. More than autobiographical whimsy, I sense a confession. In making our production of *Spring Awakening*, I couldn’t help but explore this idea of confessing; and by means of a confession I hoped to reach the major action of the play: liberation. The Masked Man appears only to those who have exhausted themselves in the moment of confession. He is the unknown and brings with him the possibility of liberation.

Our production's world is seen through the eyes of the children: an agreed and shared nightmare. A landscape that is fractured and that fades in and out of existence without context; a world where the most basic narratives of life are kept hidden, locked away as if uttering them would summon a storm of chaos and destruction.

And of course, this is precisely what occurs.

It is a world where behavior is closely scrutinized and where the children learn quickly to police each other knowing that they themselves must be policed. The sin of this world is to question, to look beyond the closely held horizon and to acknowledge the stirrings inside each of them.

The awakening in *Spring Awakening* is more than erotic, but it is because of the erotic awakening that these three young people seek liberation. For the first time their bodies are seen as political and moral signifiers. A heavy feeling of alienation begins to emerge. They become divorced from their bodies and from the culture. They begin for the first time to look outside. The erotic body becomes the source of all anxiety, and they begin to seek its mysteries. Wendla searches for something Holy that can only be expressed through her body: she is seeking a physical liberation. Moritz seeks refuge in death—a liberation from his body. Melchior wants liberation from a provincial morality, but his want is more than circumstantial. It is beyond identity and beyond the body: Melchior desires a metaphysical liberation. In the final moments of the final scene he recognizes that, for the first time, he can author himself.

In our production he is the only character who sees beyond the horizon and survives.

But where does this world come from? How to author a world seen by children as a 34 year old man? Here again I follow the lead of my own fictional Wedekind: the confession. I don't mean to suggest that the narrative events are a direct autobiographical account of my own adolescence—they aren't—but the sense, anxieties and perspective of the production most certainly are. I can't lay claim to the precise narrative actions of the play—but I believe these actions are the expressions of an adolescent inside of an orthodoxy. They may be literal in terms of the play's narrative, but they are poetic in scope. How different, actually, is the Hayloft than the alienating winter afternoons spent in the back of my father's Chevy Blazer?

The orthodoxy that the children live under echoes contemporary U.S. moral and political conservatism. An vision of America that is based on an ahistorical past: a completely homogeneous, socially conservative christian landscape. An aesthetic for the nation that is born out of a morality that has "disappeared" and must be reclaimed. A yearning for a United States that is born out of a fiction of the US. An ideal that is an image of an image. And it seems that post-war America is the era most quoted as the high point of American Moralism. So when thinking about what this world might look like the creative team imagined that the time is now, and directly under the influence of this contemporary Orthodoxy. A present day world that borrows heavily from post-war images of the past.

In our *Spring Awakening* this orthodoxy, however, is in decay. It, though still extremely powerful, has outlasted its usefulness. It shows signs of age, but still infects and orders the behavior of all the participants. It keeps close those who are able to live within it, and consumes or exiles those who raise a hand to question it.

In our production the school is the primary agent of indoctrination by this orthodoxy. Choosing to set the play in a fictional Christian Academy in the western United States, the school becomes the symbol of this orthodoxy. The entire play is in reference to it: all scenes happen within it or are framed by it. It is the inescapable fact of the children's life and the one shared space among all of the characters. It is an adolescent hall of horrors. It is filled with desire even as it denies desires.

This ever-present school reaches into the intimate lives of every character. The objects extend into the personal spaces and lives of the families and children. The school desks become domestic furniture: they hold secrets (Hansy's photo collection) and transform into the conference room table, Moritz' coffin, Wendla's death bed and finally gravestones.

In the professors the school's objects merge with the children's bodies to create hybrid monsters that both are and are played by the students. A backpack becomes a hunchback and an old nurse's pillow a belly, etc. These monsters are seen through the eyes of the children, but in this instance they are also created by the children. The professors are being mocked by the students even as the

students are becoming the professors. At first subjected to the whims of the orthodoxy, the students who remain *become* this orthodoxy.

In beginning to imagine what this world of power and decay we started with Andrew Moor's photographs of a decaying Detroit. Many of the images are of abandoned schools, libraries and book depositories. Amazingly these photos do not show spaces boarded up and emptied. They are left standing as they were when still in use, as if one day a plague set upon the city and the inhabitants disappeared leaving everything behind. The relationship these spaces have to decay and order is terrifying. In certain photos a room is preserved but windswept; in others everything is perfectly arranged except for a small section of the room that has been reclaimed by nature; or the space has simply succumbed to time and begun to rot. These spaces are mausoleums to a culture unaware that it has been abandoned.

Taking this as the jumping off point for design we wanted to create a world that incorporated this decay as a gesture of the staying power of the orthodoxy; its action on the students; the way we see the school as a nightmare; and the primary way we see the present as an image of the past.

Following in the way of the confession we researched and incorporated images from our own schools: institutions built in the middle of the last century and objects that have changed little—or not at all—in the past forty years. Our object vocabulary included: lunch trays, basketballs, desks, chairs, p.a. systems, school bells, etc. Specifically we looked to objects from another era, but which are still in useful circulation. The idea was to find objects that were readymade:

practical objects that possessed the power to transport us to our own adolescence. The desks and chairs and school bell were culled directly from the San Diego School District's refuse yard. The hope was that these exhausted objects will become theatrical objects: objects that are of the present, past and memory.

The school desks and costumes had a relationship to time that I hoped would become an essential part of the play: it is happening now, it nods to an image of the past but is also a memory. The entire feeling of the play is born out of my own experience as an adolescent. A feeling of divorce between myself and the experience of my own life; a strangeness and terror when encountering figures of authority; the absurdity of what is known and what is censored; confusion about desire and violence; the conflictual relationship of guilt and liberation in imagining and practicing sex; and always feeling a need to escape. I imagine these anxieties are common, and, in my case, ironic: from what exactly am I trying to escape?

There is no doubt a personal desire here. I hope to give dignity and a name to my own adolescent self. To take ownership of that creature and liberate him from embarrassment. These past anxieties begin to have a new resonance when I think about the end of my time at UCSD. When Melchior looks out beyond the edge of the stage and sees, for the first time, the potential of another life he looks out with wonder and terror. He is at the limit of himself and he is standing on the margin between his past and future. It is particularly potent, for me, that it is Zach Martens as Melchior who is doing the looking. He is an artist

with whom I feel a particular kinship, and our coming graduation is his first moment stepping outside of the Academy. And while this resonance cannot translate to an audience who does not know our particular situation, I cannot help but think of myself stepping forward when I see Zach as Melchior looking out beyond the stage's horizon.

But Zach is only one actor in a company of confessors. The performances for which I am most proud came from actors who were willing to confess. This was part of the process from the beginning. In the initial round of auditions I asked each actor to bring in a parody of themselves as an adolescent, and of an authority figure seen through the eyes of that adolescent. The hope, and I think mostly successfully, was to see the actor's self inside of the character. To see Hansy Rilow or Wendla Bergmann, but to see also the 14 year old Scott Patteson and Sarah Halford. To see a company of actors creating a theatrical confession (my own) by confessing themselves. A world seen from the perspective of the students, and created by the actors as their previous selves.

The hope is that the confession is a gesture which opens the doorway for others to confess. There has been some evidence that this has been the case: emails from strangers; news of students I do not know confronting themselves and their parents because of the production; friends, in spite of themselves, confessing their own adolescent traumas to me unprompted. I can only imagine that these stories are the minority, but they are satisfying. Certainly satisfying enough to continue to ask what is a theatrical confession.

In order to create the sense of a claustrophobic and hidden world it seemed important that we light as little of the stage as possible. In moving from scene to scene I wanted small tight spaces that emerge and disappear giving the sense that there is nothing beyond the tiny area of that scene at that moment. The hope is that the anxieties of the children are evident by the compression of the scenic space, and that the underscoring (heavily processed samples from Berg's *The Lyric Suite*) announces the unnamable desires and anxieties of the children as they become aware of themselves and this compression.

An example: Initially the entire stage is lit—we see the children as children, an entire class united singing loudly and ecstatically. A class photo is taken, and afterward the students begin to disassemble the stage space, crossing paths with each other, writing on the stage left chalk boards without any adherence to line or form. Their anxieties, confusions and groupings emerge. With this emergence the lights fall and the world is immediately tighter. Wendla and her mother in a small pool of light and Wendla wearing a dress that now covers her entire body.

We addressed each act as a separate movement in a larger symphony. The first act begins just as childhood is eclipsed by adolescence. It is a wispy romantic moment when the children awake to their own erotic bodies. This awakening leads to neuroses as they realize that they are alone. Encounters in the world appear and disappear silently, they feel like a dream. Only in the moment of the encounter are these encounters surely real, afterward the

anxieties remain, but the actuality of the moment is suspect. It is a metronomic, gentle even handed world that finally erupts into violence.

In the second act a new awakened reality has emerged. The desires and neuroses of adolescence have been shown to have consequences. The world is more starkly real, and as the stage changes, it begins to take on a darker and more documentarian feel. The alienation of the self and a sense of oncoming danger is palpable. The students are no longer hopeful and romantic, but confused, hurt and afraid. The possibility of escape begins to erode.

The third act is dominated by the orthodoxy righting the deviances of the previous act. It crucifies Melchior in order to protect itself. It is a high contrast, shadowed and sinister landscape that borders on death. The final scene is a graveyard and crossroad. In the moment before dawn Melchior is forced to choose between Moritz' invitation of death, or an unknown horizon—the Masked Man. It is a scene of absence and silence, as the power of the orthodoxy evaporates—its decay is complete. Melchior is forced to choose a way forward: annihilation as a participant in the onstage apocalypse, or to venture into an unknown beginning. In choosing the later the embodiment of his past and future (Moritz and the Masked Man) fade away into darkness. The young man looks forward. His future, like mine, is unknown and unnamed.

We do not see him take his first step.