



Play

By William B. Patrick

Photography by Kevin Bubriski *Except where noted*

At the '62 Center's new Summer Theatre Lab, students hone their craft alongside talented alumni professionals who get to flex their own creative muscles.



BEN RUDICK



Act I: Casting Call

“Don’t just play it angry,” Jay Tarses ’61 tells Lauren Hester ’07, who is auditioning for the role of Amanda in Jay’s teleplay-turned-stage play, *Harry Cobb’s America*. Lauren is the fourth student this morning to interpret Amanda, and the furrows in Jay’s brow have deepened with each audition.

Jay leans forward and knits his fingers as Lauren trades dialogue with actor Kevin O’Rourke ’78, who is playing her fictional ex-husband Harry, a flaky, self-impressed TV journalist whose hit show is loosely based upon *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*.

It’s the first day of the first-ever Williams Summer Theatre Lab, where, for the next six weeks, 12 students and 18 professional actors, writers, directors, musicians, producers and a lighting designer—all of them Williams alumni—will gather in the CenterStage of the new ’62 Center for Theatre and Dance to develop and create experimental dramatic pieces as a working theater company.

The summer lab, based on the O’Neill Theater Playwrights Conference, is the brainchild of Kevin and Rob Baker-White ’80, chair of the Williams theater department. In addition to giving students a chance to hone their craft alongside talented theater professionals, it provides a safe haven for alumni to flex their own creative muscles. With *Harry Cobb’s America*, Jay, a TV writer whose credits include *The Bob Newhart* and *Carol Burnett* shows and *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, is experimenting with writing and directing for the stage. Later in the summer, filmmaker Stacy Cochran ’81 will try her hand at a one-act play.

This first morning of the lab, after six auditions, Jay joins Kevin and the students in the glass-walled seminar room outside the CenterStage. The students’ anxiety is almost palpable as they wait to learn who will play which role.

“Hey, listen,” Jay begins. “The audition process is one of the most difficult things there is for an actor. You come in, the director wants you to make small talk, and all of a sudden he’s ready to hear you read, and you’ve got to say, ‘Oh, OK,’ and get right into character. It’s very difficult, and I want to thank you all for what you did today.”

“We’re taking the long view on casting decisions,” Kevin says, trying to soothe the group’s collective nerves. “We’re working on a lot of shows, and we need to do a lot of different jobs, and most everyone is equally capable of doing all these jobs.”

Then, with a few instructions to the students about lunch, Kevin and Jay are gone, hurrying toward Kevin’s office as they debate casting decisions.

“I thought Katie did the best reading for Amanda,” Jay says.

“So did I,” says Kevin. “But Jess could do her, and so could Annie.”

“It can’t be equal,” Jay interrupts. “Just like in real life. Like in show business. You have to break some hearts.”

Act II: Staging

Becky Phillips ’06 is the only student in the Summer Theatre Lab not working as an actor. She signed up, in part, for the chance to work with Julie Seitel ’94, her first Williams design professor and now a New York City lighting designer.

Today Becky faces a substantial challenge. Kevin has designated a corner of

the CenterStage in front of a two-story brick wall as the playing space for every single presentation. His only direction is that the lighting plot be simple but elegant.

But this playing space was designed to be raw. Floor, walls, grid, I-beams, pipes, railings, stairs and ceiling are all a flat, industrial black—relieved only by the brick and some risers with dark chairs. There are hardly any sets or costumes to create much of an environment for the actors, so the lights will have to do almost everything. And Becky’s not exactly sure what Kevin means by “elegant.”

The first presentation is *Heightened Senses of the Blind*, by actor and writer Adam LeFevre ’72. The short play involves two actors who mostly sit on a wooden pallet and talk, which is a snap to light. But Becky also has to plan for *Harry Cobb’s America*, to be performed next week, with eight actors in different locations moving around a lot. She has only today and tomorrow to hang all the lights for both productions, focus them at the right angles, get dimmer numbers assigned to the correct channels in the computer, train everyone and do the first lighting rehearsal.

Katie Edgerton ’08, Edgardo “Eggie” Costas ’07, Zoe Fonseca ’08 and LaVonna Bowen ’06 are already setting pipes. None of them has done much tech crew, and a couple of them aren’t too crazy about heights. But the close-knit mesh of the Eisenhower grid, which is like a trampoline about 20 feet above the stage, makes everyone feel a little safer. There’s no way a person or even a light can fall through.

Becky has given the crew the basics: Empty your pockets, unless they’re



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zippered; hook your tools, which are attached to a phone cord, through your belt loop; make sure every single light is secured with a safety chain. Suddenly, just as Ilya Khodosh '08 and Matt Wilka '06 walk in down below, there's a bang, and Mary Pfister, the program manager and resident mom to the company, yells "Heads up!"

That's what you shout if anything falls through the grid, and Becky can see now that somebody let slip an unsecured safety chain that slammed into one of the chairs underneath. Good thing there wasn't an audience member sitting down there. "That's why it's heads up," Mary scolds the crew, and lighting day suddenly feels even longer.

Act III: Presentation

Darkness. Two lights. Then two men sitting on a pallet. Eggie Costas blows a duck call. Dav Wright '08 says he's wasting his breath, all the duckies are still dreaming.

Dav plays Cal, a bitter man about 40, and Eggie plays his brother, Billy, who's younger. Cal and Billy sit together in a duck blind by a little lake near a small

New England town. It's just before dawn on a chilly autumn morning.

Dr. William Beasley, Cal and Billy's father, was buried yesterday. Suicide. Terminal cancer. Now these two brothers sit and talk and wait for the dawn to arrive on the morning after their abusive father's funeral.

But Cal has brought along his dead father's shotgun, the one he used to shoot himself, and Billy's upset—"It seems real inappropriate." And Cal tells Billy that his little eulogy, yesterday, "That was inappropriate," as if the old bastard wasn't a cold, unfeeling alcoholic who beat his wife and his kids.

Then, the reversal. We thought Cal was the one who helped Dad die. He's the angry, estranged son, after all, the son the father begged for help over the phone.

"Sorry, Pop. Gotta go," Cal said.

It was Billy, the son who had stayed home, who saw his dad's tumor move from spine to neck so, by the end, he could hardly make a fist anymore, it was Billy who steadied the gun.

In the talk-back after the presentation of Adam LeFevre's *Heightened Senses of the Blind*, the actors and small audience

discuss where they feel the play's power resides. Then Professor Bernie Bucky, former chair of the Williams theater department, asks about its implied homosexuality, sparking a lively conversation.

"The sense that we got reading [the play]," Eggie says, "was that this was probably the biggest confrontation that the brothers were ever going to have, and then, for Billy, it was kind of like, 'If I'm ever going to bring this up, it might as well be now.'"

An audience member in the front row jumps in. "I wonder, though, if it doesn't have something to do with why Billy's the favorite son. I also wondered if it wasn't the first time you mentioned it to Cal, and I thought that made the scene a lot more interesting."

"I think a few of the lines at the end are like that, statements that will test how the relationship stands," Eggie replies. "If Cal can take this, well, then everything else is going to be fine. I actually saw it as one of the moments when the two characters are closest and most honest with each other."

"You don't think it was too much, in 15 minutes, to try and get all that stuff in there?" a man in the back row asks.

"I really don't think so," Eggie says. "It's difficult to have so many emotional fluctuations as there are in those 15 minutes, but I actually think the writer creates an interesting challenge. And I don't think it's impossible, or even unrealistic. I'm going to assume most people have been in a situation where sometimes you just kind of start an avalanche and things snowball. You open yourself up to saying one thing ... and then other words just keep tumbling out."



Act IV: First Draft

It's the fourth day of rehearsals for *Prostitutes*, a new stage play by Stacy Cochran '81, and her actors simply aren't "getting it."

Actor John Feltch '80 (who plays Tom, a suicidal john), Caroline Taylor '04 (who portrays Lisa, a remorseless hooker), and Eggie Costas (who's Lisa's 14-year-old son, Ray, or a club kid, or both)—are having trouble understanding their characters' motivations. Without specific motivation, it's hard for an actor to "physicalize" a role—to know how to tell the story with his or her body.

Admittedly, *Prostitutes* isn't too easy to get. It's an intentionally dreamlike one-act play in 11 scenes—most of them shorter than a page and three of them just a series of stage directions that read like shot descriptions for a movie. That's to be expected, though, because Stacy—who wrote and directed *Boys*, the 1996 coming-of-age movie starring Winona Ryder, Lukas Haas and John C. Reilly—has spent most of her career writing and directing films.

After the first cold reading of the play, a student asks Stacy what *Prostitutes* is about and what she wants the audience to get out of it.

"That's the sort of question that someone else should answer," Stacy says. "No matter what I say, I'm going to regret it. This was something where three distinct characters were created and, by their very nature as being characters in a play, are fictitious characters. So all these characters are not people, but they're about people, and they're creations that came from my



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imagination. And yet they came from my imagination via real people, and, in the end, is this someone's dream? Is it Tom's dream? Is it his creative process in his moment of dying that built this structure? Or not? It isn't that it *is* reality; It's that it's *about* reality."

Rehearsing a scene set on the edges of a makeshift coffee shop near Penn Station, John, all 6 feet 4 inches of him, wearing a hat that says TOM in block letters on the front, shoves his frame menacingly against Caroline's Lisa. He locks his gaze on some middle distance, grabs a good handful of her hair and yanks her head back.

"Try to remember. What was I wearing?" Tom demands.

"Let go of my mom!" Ray pleads.

Lisa finally gives in: "An orange sweater."

Now Tom lets go. "That's right. You do remember," he says, grinning.

"OK, OK, that's good," Stacy interrupts. "It's absurd to say, but no matter how tragic the scene is, when you guys make me laugh, I feel like there's some blood coursing through it."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," John agrees.

"But somehow that's not happening here. I wasn't laughing at that. You just



seemed angry, John. That one note all the way through, that anger, and I think before, in the other rehearsals, it wasn't, to me, so literal."

At that, John nods, takes his TOM hat off, rubs his right palm across his forehead and starts pacing slowly. "I know," he repeats, "I know what you mean."

Act V: Rewrite

So if you're the writer and director, and your actors think your play isn't working, what do you do? If you're Stacy Cochran, you re-write the play.

"Listen, in terms of what worked and didn't work, the first one didn't work particularly, so that's the end of story," she says three days after the ill-fated rehearsal, a new text in hand.

"If there's an opportunity to do something that tries to work with the minimum number of words, this is a venue to try it in, right? It's a workshop, so I thought, why write something that's like a calling card? Why not try something completely new? It's not like I didn't want the first draft to work. But each little nugget of that version, because it was so minimal, had to be so precise in its smallness. It had to work perfectly or it maybe wouldn't work at all."

The second draft of *Prostitutes* includes a series of long monologues that guide the actors toward motivations for their characters. These new, quirky solo speeches illuminate their inner desires and torments in unexpected ways, so viewers can almost empathize with the characters.

"I'm excited now," Stacy says. "This is also a whole lot easier to talk about in



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retrospect, since this draft is something everyone's having an easier time with. But I don't even know that it was writable without having gone through the troubles of the first one. Dramatic writing is a funny combination of team collaboration and solitary effort. It's crucial that the piece be one voice, but I couldn't have gotten my own singular decisions to the point where they ended up without the collaboration.

"It was nice to have two drafts of something like this, because it gave everybody a shot at having a new first day. We had one first day that went for a week, corkscrewing down with problems we uncovered—not personal problems, but creative ones. This new draft had the benefit of making us all feel like we started over, together. That's a good thing, I think."

Act VI: Character

Ten years ago, Marc Wolf '84 almost stopped acting. As he tells the students during week four of the summer lab,

he was frustrated with the roles he was being offered. And he thought that if he changed career paths, he'd "probably get involved in something political, try to create some social change," he says. "I was a poly sci and theater major at Williams, and those are the two things I'm most passionate about."

But Marc realized he'd miss theater—"a lot"—and decided to combine his interests in what he calls "documentary-based theater."

His first play was *Another American: Asking and Telling*, about the "don't ask, don't tell" policy—"the whole issue of gays in the military," he says. He performed it as a one-man show from the mid-90s through 2001. On Sept. 11 of that year, he was in Seattle.

"When the terrorist attacks occurred," he says, "I decided to drive back across the country to my home in New York City, and the structure of my new play, *The Road Home: Re-Membering America*, is based on interviews I did with random people I met as I drove home for two months."

He edited the interviews into "a collage or a 're-memberment' of my journey," he says. "I become 22 different people in the play, and I use ... their actual interview words, though I shaped them for performance into monologues."

With only a table, a chair, a coffee mug and a box of Kleenex on stage with him, Marc recreates each character "physically but minimally, with a gesture or accent or some small identifying mark. ... So I'll cross my legs and sit straight for one character, or jump up and pace around for another, use a Southern drawl, stand in front of the table, sneeze and blow my nose a lot, shout, swear, sit still. It depends who I am."

As the students watch, Marc transforms himself into a woman he portrays near the beginning of his play:

I feel like I've gone down Alice's rabbit hole in Alice in Wonderland. Yeah, yeah. The final descent. I think so. It's building up to this, but nothing appears to be what it seems to be. I don't believe anything the newspapers say. Oh, oh, I, I read The New York Times, and I believe it, but I think the truth is just buried under fluff and propaganda, and you have to know what you're looking for, and you have to carefully read it, and that's new.

He plays her with an almost brusque Brooklyn accent, even though, he tells the students, the woman lived off the coast of Washington State.

"I love the documentary form," Marc says, "because the audience becomes me, in a way, and gets to interview the people I met. It's an intimate experience. ... All they see is this white guy on stage, playing different people—men and women, old and young, blacks, whites, Native Americans, Malaysians,



a German tourist—so they have to listen carefully to how these people talk and not just label them, and I like that.”

Act VII: Finale

Haloed by a single light, in a door-shaped opening that suddenly morphs into a balcony, LaVonna Bowen speaks the last three lines of a Wordsworth sonnet:

*in his hand,
The thing became a
trumpet; whence
he blew
Soul-animating strains
alas, too few!*

Composer/musician David Barnes '81, hidden downstage right, blows a long, soulful riff on his blues harp. The lights come up full on the stage. Eggie Costas strides in from downstage left in army fatigues and a dark gray T-shirt, wearing a backpack and carrying a worn portfolio under his left arm. He crosses in front of the audience, saying:

We do not speak like Petrarch

Now Zoe Fonseca, back on the balcony, hollers down:

Or wear a hat like Spenser

Katie Edgerton sashays along the walkway above, saying:

*and it is not fourteen lines
like furrows in a small, carefully
plowed field*

Dav Wright, Lauren Hester, Ilya Khodosh, Matt Wilka and the others deliver their lines from “American Sonnet” by poet Billy Collins. And *The Sonnet Project*, the final presentation of the Summer Theatre Lab, is under way.



The Sonnet Project is actor and director Alexandra Neil's brainchild. Alex Neil was Dianne Thompson when she graduated from Williams in 1977, and her career has included a generous balance of TV and theater, most recently in the three-character play *Match*, with Frank Langella and Ray Liotta, on Broadway in 2004.

But Alex has always loved poetry, and she felt poetry was something unique she could offer the students. “Nobody had really talked about language, and nobody had talked about speaking in verse, which is a huge thing for an actor when you get out in the real world,” she says.

So she showed up for her two-week stint at the summer lab with 50 sonnets she loved and asked the students to help her whittle them down to the 22 that appear in the play.

“The hard part about turning a group of sonnets into a play is that you don’t want to be up there reciting poetry,” Alex says. “It could be really dead and boring, so the hard part is getting the actors to live through it and make it

very personal. That’s where the work is for any actor: To say, ‘This isn’t a poem; this is a piece of text that I’m going to use as an actor to create a world and to find a life and to use as my words about this moment.’”

Alex says Williams theater made her into an actor and that the '62 Center “has that same feeling, like it’s my home.”

Her classmate Martha Williamson '77, one of *The Sonnet Project*’s actors, feels the same way. “Truly,

everything I learned about how to run a show and how to make creative decisions started right here at Williams, because they give you the opportunity to make the mistakes you need to make before you can get it right,” says Williamson, who spent nine years as head writer and executive producer of *Touched by an Angel*. “Williams is famous for letting you fail successfully.” ■

William B. Patrick’s published work includes screenplays, a radio play, two books of poetry, a memoir and an award-winning novel. His latest book is Saving Troy, a creative nonfiction account of his time working with firefighters in Troy, N.Y.

Photos by Kevin Bubriski were taken during the summer lab. Photos by Ben Rudick '08 were taken during dress rehearsals for “Emerging and Returning Voices: A Celebration of Williamstheatre’s Past and Future,” presenting summer lab productions during the kickoff of the '62 Center’s inaugural season in October.