

## DIRECTING OBSERVERSHIP: LEARNING THROUGH OBSERVATION

In the rehearsal room with Tony Award-winning director Kathleen Marshall

by *Anne Healy*

More than five years ago, I began receiving emails and flyers from Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam, Connecticut advertising an “Observership Opportunity,” where an early career director could join the Goodspeed team for a show and “learn while observing.” From my early days in New York City auditioning for and performing in musicals, I knew what a great learning experience being in the rehearsal room could be, especially with a creative team and performers who were working at the highest level of the industry. But my personal experience to date had only afforded the opportunity given an actor in the rehearsal space. Only a stage director since 2004, I longed for the opportunity to observe and learn from an accomplished, respected, and established director. With this experience, could I expand my directing skills; expand my ability to express a play or musical visually, aurally, physically, and technically? Could I learn what skills and attributes an established director possessed that makes that director effective? Was I modeling effectively to my students, according to current processes relevant in the commercial theatre arena? Those questions and so many more compelled me to apply for the Goodspeed Musicals Observership Program. After my resume and a letter of purpose were reviewed and accepted by Goodspeed, they were sent to Marshall for final review and acceptance. Vetting complete, I found myself in mid-life, as an early to mid-career director, in the quiet village of East Haddam, Connecticut on an early morning in late June for Bagelrama, which marked the opening ceremony to launch the development rehearsals for a new musical about Toulous Lautrec titled *My Paris*.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE—AND A DREAM TEAM!

Assembled on that first morning are the entire Goodspeed Musicals executive and production staff, apprentices, interns and even some volunteer staff. Also in attendance is the creative team, production staff/apprentices/interns specifically in residence for the production. The large rehearsal room is filled to capacity. The *My Paris* musical theatre “dream team” boasts a libretto by Tony, Emmy,

and Pulitzer Prize winning author Alfred Uhry, music by Charles Aznavour who was named Entertainer of the Century by CNN, English lyrics and arrangements by Tony Award-winning composer and lyricist Jason Robert Brown, and music supervision and orchestration by David Chase, who most recently music directed television's *The Sound of Music Live!* A cast of high-profile Broadway performers joins Tony Award-winning director and choreographer Kathleen Marshall.

The prospect of an observership with Kathleen Marshall was both exciting and daunting. Before my arrival, I read multiple articles regarding Ms. Marshall's directing style and philosophy in an effort to get to know her as a director, since an observership does not guarantee a level of personal interaction needed for really "knowing" someone—only a seat in the room. Through my research, I learned that Ms. Marshall came to directing through the world of choreography; beginning as an assistant to her brother, Rob Marshall, in such shows such as *Kiss of a Spider Woman* and *She Loves Me* in 1993. In several written and video interviews, Ms. Marshall talks about the importance of mentoring through assistantships and observerships. In Victoria Myers' "Women and Hollywood" blog, she asks Marshall, "What's something you think people can do to improve gender parity in theatre?" To which Ms. Marshall responded, "I think that one of our responsibilities as women working in theatre is to give opportunities to other women working in theatre.... That can be having them as an assistant or observing on a show."<sup>1</sup> I was delighted to learn that, not only had Ms. Marshall signed on to have an observer for *My Paris* but also she was philosophically supportive of other female directors in the directing arena.

After brief introductions, our first rehearsal begins with some overall discussion of the directorial concept, designer presentations, and finally a table-read and sing-through of the show. Described by the creative team as "historical fiction," *My Paris* tells the story of the rise and fall of Parisian painter Toulouse Lautrec during the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Without exception, each character of the musical is loosely based on a friend, colleague or acquaintance of Lautrec, which allowed for extensive research for both creatives and cast. While the show is specifically about the life of Lautrec, Uhry's story begins to delve into more universal questions of familial relationships, parental approval, love,

companionship, fame, and ultimately art. Through in-depth discussion that first day, the creative team sets the tone for the beginning of the rehearsal period.

The process that follows is a mixture of preliminary staging and choreography sessions with Marshall and her associate director/choreographer David Eggers, rehearsal with the cast, and a series of meetings with production staff. The work sessions with Marshall and Eggers begin in the large rehearsal hall while the cast works music in the other rehearsal space. Marshall and Eggers sketch out scenes and choreography by walking through the staging and experimenting with steps, movement, and shaping of scenes. As an assistant, Eggers provides a sounding board for Marshall's concepts and ideas, providing confirmation through visual demonstration of the movement or choreography. It is interesting to watch the experimentation and development of the ideas and the final formation of the staging: what might have been a very solitary endeavor becomes a collaborative work session in the studio. More interesting, though, is the process of delivering the staging to the cast.

The cast arrives at morning rehearsal on day three with the show learned and memorized and begins work on staging and choreography of the opening sequence. I watch as Marshall first shares the vision of the scene and then begins to lay out the specifics of steps and movement taking into consideration lighting and special effect cues. The process is fluid as Marshall continues to create and adapt her ideas and then determines how the proposed choreography and staging "fits" each actor's body and character. Changes and adjustments are made as she receives feedback and suggestions from actors. Marshall's manner is conversational, clear, and uniformly upbeat; she creates a "great room" and the energy is collaborative. As the actors process the information, I watch as some simply fulfill the direction without question, working through the steps or movement. Others actors jump right in with questions of motivation, logistics, or even alternatives. Marshall is able to work simultaneously with both groups as they begin to shape the scenes. The skill level of these actors allows Marshall to create overall perimeters for scenes without restricting actor input or creativity, which allows the actors to make choices and create characters without rigid directives. I remember noting that during this period of rehearsal, Marshall is more often listening than prescribing.

As the larger musical scenes begin to take shape, attention is moved to the smaller book and solo/duet scenes. Marshall begins with several “table read” sessions with the actors involved, which allows for discussion and exploration into the arc of the scene as well as any perceived logistical issues in staging. Consideration is made with regard to the transition both in and out of the scene and any prop or set issues. At this juncture, the actors are allowed freedom within the scene to self-stage by exploring the scene organically. After working through many incarnations of the scene, retaining moments of clarity and discarding staging and movement that feels contrary to the scene, the actors are left to digest their work; Marshall allows the scene to “marinate” until the next work session. Marshall and the cast spend the next several days working through the script as described above while also continuing separate music rehearsals and coaching by musical director David Guardos up until the first real run-through in the rehearsal studio.

With the first run-through, the creative team gathers to discuss music, script, and structural changes needed. Open discussion begins with respect to script and story issues, placement of scenes, tone, character, through-line and arc, as well as lyric issues. One of the most challenging aspects of the development of *My Paris* is the issue of lyric translation from French to English. It was necessary for Jason Robert Brown to effectively translate not only the ideas contained in the songs but also the poetry and tone of each song, which sometimes changed a song significantly from its original French counterpart. Another challenge was translating a libretto and score, described by David Chase as “authentically French,” to an English version that would still retain its “French-ness” while also meeting the expectations of American musical theatre audiences. With this in mind, extensive notes are taken; script changes are made while additions and adjustments are made to the score. Over the next several weeks, every rehearsal begins with script additions, changes and/or modifications. Additional musical rehearsals occur next door while the script changes are worked in the rehearsal hall. The cast is remarkable with the many changes: some of the changes are large, some small, but the change is constant. With each change comes increased clarity in the characterizations and overall story. Each rehearsal ends with Marshall discussing notes with the cast, and after releasing the cast, discussion with

the creative team about the changes that were implemented and possible future adjustments needed. With a limited amount of development time, everyone involved feels the time evaporating. This type of development work continues until our move into technical rehearsals at the Norma Terris Theatre in Chester, Connecticut about five miles away from the Goodspeed Opera House and the village of East Haddam.

## TECH AND PERFORMANCES

Goodspeed Musicals' Norma Terris theatre is located in another small village up the river, nestled just off of the main square, which is filled with quaint restaurants and shops. Inaugurated in 1984 by Goodspeed for the development of new musicals, The Norma Terris is a 200-seat flexible proscenium theatre housed in a donated and converted former knitting needle factory. The space is perfect for small-scale productions of works in development and draws discerning audiences from all over the area, some of which attend shows at the Opera House as well as theatre in and around New York City. Because of the developmental nature of the shows produced in the Norma Terris, critics are not routinely invited to musicals in development, which allows for continual development of the show through closing night.

Our first venture to the Norma Terris is for the highly anticipated sitzprobe with the orchestra. David Chase created orchestrations of Jason Robert Brown's arrangements of Aznavour's songs utilizing piano/accordion, violin, guitar/mandolin, and string bass. Expertly evoking French cabaret music, the addition of Chase's orchestrations to rehearsals expands the actor's sense of place and time while deeply grounding the musical in its intimate context. This same intimate environment is perfectly suited to the show's new home at the Norma Terris theatre.

At this juncture in the development and rehearsal process, scenic designer Derek McLane, lighting designer Donald Holder, costume designer Paul Tazewell, and sound designer Jay Hilton are all in the house as spacing rehearsals begin with the cast. Along with her associate director Eggers, Marshall alternates between pragmatic questions involving everything from props, to spacing for choreography lifts, to the correct placement of Lautrec paintings hung on the scaffolding structure at the back of the

unit set. Because of the time constraints of the tech schedule, the first day of tech is spent adjusting light cues, sound cues, and actor placement due to limitations imposed by the space. Costumes are introduced immediately in the process in order to begin work on fast changes. Marshall problem-solves with both actors and backstage technicians, and begins making adjustments to actor scene change assignments when necessary, in order to give actors ample costume change time backstage. There is a natural separation for Marshall and Eggers at this point in rehearsal. As Marshall is drawn to larger production issues with designers in the house, Eggers moves closer to the cast in order to answer specific actor questions and concerns, always conferring with Marshall when needed. This aspect of the director/assistant director collaboration is particularly effective in a compressed technical rehearsal environment, where decisions and problem solving needs to happen simultaneously and on multiple fronts. During the next several days of technical rehearsals, I also observe many conferences between Marshall and Eggers, which provides a platform for continued updates, questions or concerns.

Just days before opening, Charles Aznavour arrives from Europe to see final dress rehearsals. Both the cast and the creative team eagerly await his reaction to the production. The creative team anticipates some discussion with Aznavour regarding the adaptation, because, in its current form, the musical is many incarnations away from the original concept developed and staged in London in 2000 as *Lautrec*. Aznavour's reaction is both passionate and specific in its critique which is wholly supportive. Following this rehearsal, the creatives meet with Aznavour to discuss artistic and directorial choices made, based on an understanding of the American musical theatre genre and specifically expectations of American audiences. While the creative team works with Aznavour, the cast returns to the theatre with Eggers to work specific notes from the run. Later in the day the cast has the opportunity to coach songs with Aznavour, incorporating musical phrasing particular to French popular song. As Aznavour works through the main numbers in the show, the musical director and orchestrator work to incorporate any notes and adjustments into each musical number. With Aznavour's departure, the final dress rehearsals are filled with final changes and adjustments to everything from dialogue to light cues as everyone anticipates opening night and our first full house.

Although the show boasts sold-out crowds every night and enthusiastic standing ovations, a production meeting follows each performance. Based on audience response, adjustments and changes are made in every area of production. Further, because the technical rehearsals were so compressed, the mechanics of the run are still being worked out and adjusted. Actors receive notes following each performance and rehearsals are held periodically to make changes and additions. At one point during the first week, Jason Robert Brown sends new lyrics, which were incorporated, rehearsed and incorporated into the evening performance. It is important that everyone involved has a clear understanding of the fluidity of the process, and the almost constant communication between all of the creative team and cast ensures a process that, despite constant change, maintains a clear focus of purpose.

#### OBSERVATIONS FROM THE OBSERVER

My observership ended after the first full week of performances. It was interesting to read rehearsal reports nightly and learn of the changes and adjustments made up until the end of the 30-performance run of the show. Where the show will go from this incarnation, it is difficult to know. However, I do know that with this specific creative team, cast, producer, and the Goodspeed organization, the show's development was maximized and the material, in its current state, was fully realized. I think all involved might agree that the development process for *My Paris* is only on a temporary hiatus; all the while knowing that creating a commercially successful musical is an elusive endeavor.

I've been asked several times, "so what did you learn by observing at Goodspeed?" There is no simple answer. The experience was as expansive as it was specific. As a director, I had the privilege of watching Marshall negotiate every aspect of the development of a new musical as she moved between her creative team and cast. I had the advantage of observing every artistic and directorial choice made without bearing any of the burden of those choices—and in doing so was able to expand my understanding of directing, while also confirming my own artistic aesthetic and vision. Through this experience, I was able to confirm that the collaborative processes and mechanics of development, rehearsal, and performance that we are teaching at the university level are in line with the professional

practice of the craft. Finally, I was humbled by the lesson found in the art of observation. When an artist is quiet, listens, and observes, he or she becomes open to the artistic impulses of others; a place where the collaborative processes flow freely and theatre flourishes.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://blogs.indiewire.com/womenandhollywood/director-choreographer-kathleen-marshall-on-her-process-female-mentors-and-developing-new-musicals-20150318>

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