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**To Practice What I Teach:
Directing the Chicago Premiere of Critically-Acclaimed Play about Dementia**

This past Tuesday night, I opened *The Father*, a theater production about aging and dementia, a subject matter of which I am familiar, and which relates to this country's changing demographics and its effects. The play's impact has already proven to be unsettling and profound – as our audiences are "put in the shoes" of the dementia patient himself. In 2017, I was asked to direct the Chicago premiere of the play at the nationally recognized Remy Bumppo Theater Company following critical acclaim of the show in Paris, London, and New York. As the director of *The Father*, I expand the body of knowledge in my field by my original concept and realization of the production, bringing my professional experience to my students, and enlisting several of my NIU colleagues and NIU alumni to be part of the production team. My involvement in *The Father* thus includes all three tiers of education – research (including on aging and dementia); artistry (overall vision, original concept, and design collaboration); and scholarship (rehearsal room experience to University classroom and vice versa). This presentation focuses on how my directorial practice on this show impacts me professionally as well as my students and colleagues in the School of Theatre and Dance, and the CPVA and NIU communities overall.

In *The Father*, Andre, the play's title character and his adult daughter, Anne, must navigate their changing relationship as they move into a new territory called "aging." Florian Zeller's play engages with many things including loss, what it means to remember, and most crucially, the notion of perception – and the ever-shifting ways we think we know something, or someone. The challenges of growing older alongside a parent overlap with the pain of no longer seeming to be *you* anymore. Called a "new form of thriller," the play takes the audience on a multifaceted journey of pathos and laughter along with a bit of intrigue and suspense.

Founded in 1996, Remy Bumppo Theatre Company produces art “in order to advance deeper understanding of the human condition...and to elevate cultural discourse.”¹ The Company’s tag line is THINK THEATER – and their critically and publicly respected reputation is built on their “consistent, high-quality presentations”² of the works of important playwrights. The vision of Remy Bumppo “is to be a locally and nationally recognized arts organization based in Chicago, renowned for world-class theatre and for excellence in ethical, inclusive, arts-aligned business practices, in mentorship, and in championing the humanities in the community.”³ Thus being asked to direct for such a prestigious company was indeed an important career opportunity for me. As I advance professionally, I am uniquely positioned to engage my colleagues at the School of Theatre and Dance in my productions and numerous NIU alumni as well. On this production alone I have enlisted NIU Professors Brandon Wardell as Lighting Designer, Jeremy Floyd as Costume Designer, Dr. Bob Schneider as Dramaturg, NIU BFA Design/Tech Alum Jamie Karas as Props Designer, NIU MFA Acting Alum Alys Dickerson as the character of LAURA, and Current MFA in Costume Design Liz Galba as Assistant Costume Designer. Hence, this production not only showcases what NIU theater is all about but also elevates the status of our NIU Theater Program in the most exciting Theater town in America. As with any business, there is a hierarchy of Theater in Chicago. Directing at Remy Bumppo – located in the top-tier of theater companies in Chicago following Goodman, Steppenwolf, Chicago Shakespeare, Writers, Victory Gardens, Northlight, Lookingglass, and Court Theaters – has allowed my work – and the work of my colleagues and NIU alumni – to be “published” in front of a new audience and has brought our professional game to a new level.

¹ Remy Bumppo Theatre Company website <https://www.remybumppo.org/about-us/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Research: Entering the overall design process - I was interested in many different artists. Primary among them was Kasimir Malevich, a Russian artist in the early 20th century whose project was to play with geometric shapes in movement, that for him elicit a supremacy of FEELING. Thus his movement was called “Suprematist” art. (SHOW PICS OF MALEVICH) Another artist I was drawn to conceptually – which seems to be complete contrast – is Jackson Pollack. With his drip paintings – and the frenzied nature in them - Pollack too was interested in what it FEELS like to observe his paintings. (SHOW PICS OF POLLACK) So what I did in terms of design – working with my NIU designer colleagues was to look at how we can utilize pops of color throughout the design (which related to the Malevich paintings) and then as the play progresses, to look at how we can start to lose those pops of color as the main character slips ever more slowly into a world of dementia. In terms of the Pollack paintings, I worked with NIU lighting designer Brandon Wardell and the technical crew to have the effect of “moving particles of light” during the numerous scene transitions, which related to the Pollack paintings.

Scholarship: Working on a professional production in Chicago impacts my students in numerous ways. First of all, as a working professional I am constantly learning in the field, and I am able to bring what I learn to the classroom. For example, one of the points of excellence in the NIU BFA and MFA Actor program is that students are trained to be emotionally open and prepared, and to work authentically moment by moment under the imaginary circumstances of the given text. What I learned on this production, by working with our MFA alum, is that sometimes the director (Me) needs an actor to hit a point exactly the same way every time. What that requires is precision and technical skill, and is a point of the training that I believe is not as emphasized in our program as other elements. What I will do, therefore, when I work with students here – either in scene work in class or in student productions – is to more effectively train them how to #1 work with directors who might not have the same language as we do here at NIU – and #2 be able to “hit the mark” (and

not necessarily “feel it”) each and every time. The value of having working practitioners as faculty – as opposed to professional academics in our program – is that we have to constantly learn ourselves, and then “report back from the field” what we discover. Therefore, the more I get to expose myself to the process of learning – and of having to learn in the field – the more light-bulbs of discovery go off, and I am able to bring that to the classroom and to NIU productions. Second, yet on the flip side – to quote *The King and I* – “From your students are you taught” – I also learn from my students and bring that knowledge into the professional world. On this production of *The Father*, my students have taught me to be more “one with them” in the process of working on a role. For example, the actor playing the character of Pierre wanted to discuss the motivation of his character, and why he would move at a certain line, or why he would speak a line in a certain way. Even though he is an established professional actor in Chicago, I made it a point to work with him slowly and closely, as he needed the extra time and attention to do what he needed to do for the role. The importance of the practice of patience when working with actors is something I engage with regularly with students in the classroom at NIU, and thus it is evident that a two-way street exists between the professional rehearsal room and the classroom. The magnificent thing about the arts is that we as artists are in constant discovery mode – not only about what we think about the world but also what we think about the art itself.

I’ll end today’s presentation with the good news that our production of *The Father* has been Jeff-Recommended. The designation of “Jeff Recommended” is given to a production when, after the opening night of its run, at least One Element of the show – i.e., acting, directing, design – was deemed excellent by the opening night judges of the Joseph Jefferson Committee. The entire production is then eligible for nomination for awards at the end of the season. Thus a Jeff-award could be in the offing for Brandon’s lighting design, Jeremy’s costume design, Alys’s performance as LAURA, or my direction. But we will have to wait until October to find out. Thank you.