

2003

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## Suggested Citation

LeNoble, Shawn, "Pterodactyls: Directing the Move from Page to Stage" (2003). *All Volumes (2001-2008)*. 97.  
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## Pterodactyls: Directing the Move from Page to Stage

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The process for producing *Pterodactyls* (Nov. 2001) started one and a half years prior to an audience member even contemplating stepping into the Robinson Theatre to see a production of a play by the award-winning playwright Nicky Silver. I knew for a long time that I wanted to direct a play, but *Pterodactyls* was not always my choice. Initially, I had thought of doing Christopher Durang's, *Beyond Therapy*, but a simple reading of a monologue changed all that.

I picked up *Contemporary American Monologues for Men* and came across a monologue from the play entitled *Raised in Captivity* by Nicky Silver (1995). This monologue talks of a boy who witnesses his sister's birthday party going to shambles. At the end of the monologue, the clown dies and the sister runs spastically into the street, where a bread truck swerves to miss her and runs into "a mammoth oak tree, shaking from its perch our cat, which fell to an ugly, bloody death, impaled by the truck's antenna and splattered on the windshield" (Silver 21). The demented nature of this monologue made me laugh, but at the same time, I had to reflect on why I was laughing. I found I was laughing because, we, as a society, laugh at sick and demented things. We slow down to see what we can at an accident. We laugh at others' misfortunes. Putting these misfortunes into a play format calls to mind a genre known as tragicomedy. Dr. Robert C. Huber of Cerritos College defines Tragicomedy:

It is a play in which the fundamental and deeply disturbing themes of tragedy are dealt with in a tone that varies between

serious and humorous. It is the most difficult form to appreciate since the shifts between its two modes leave the audience feeling unsteady and uncertain. It is viewed by some as the quintessential form of twentieth-century drama, dealing as it does with themes of moral uncertainty, loneliness and alienation. There is little relief through laughter; catharsis, or happy ending. (Huber 1)

Tragicomedy affects the audience by asking them to laugh at situations that are typically thought of as grim, or too sensitive to talk about.

In *Pterodactyls*, when the audience learns of Tommy's death, it is done so in a way that exemplifies Huber's definition exactly. When Grace says to Todd, "We should bury him" (Silver 139) the audience reflects less on the death of Tommy from AIDS and more on the strange fact that the body has been allowed to sit in the backyard decomposing for several months without burial. Emma's death is the same. Silver does put a strong break into the scene immediately following Emma's suicide, which leaves the audience thought-provoked, but in the next scene, Emma comes out and starts a monologue with, "Hello everybody. I'm dead. How are you?" (Silver 139). In this way, Silver's play reflects Huber's definition because the character's statement leaves the audience in a bewildered state, wondering whether to feel sympathy or humor at the idea Emma is dead.

The Dramatist's Play Service best depicts the premise of *Pterodactyls* as:

An absurdist black comedy about the demise of the Duncan family, and, by extension, the species. Emma Duncan, a hypochondriac with memory problems, and her orphaned fiancé, Tommy, confront her mother, Grace, with the news of their intended marriage. Disapproving at first, Grace acquiesces and puts Tommy to work as a maid.

Shortly after, Grace's son, Todd, returns home and announces he has AIDS which sets off a frenzy of denial-spurred activity. The father, Arthur Duncan, reaches out to his son who is more interested in assembling the dinosaur bones he discovers in the back yard. As the wedding approaches, Tommy falls in love with Todd and when confronted with this news, Emma goes quite spontaneously deaf. It is only during a frenzied wedding rehearsal, after Tommy is informed he's HIV positive and Emma shoots herself with a gun given to her by her brother as a wedding gift, does the possibility that Todd is destroying his family rear its head. As winter descends, the bottom falls out of the farce and the tone is replaced with a more ironic one. Tommy has died (although he's not been buried as "the ground is too hard"), Grace's glamour has been replaced with an alcoholic haze, and Arthur cannot remember that Emma has died. Only Todd remains unchanged. In a final manipulation, Todd accuses Arthur of being responsible for Emma's death, and provokes his father into attacking him. Grace has no choice but to banish Arthur from the house and into what now seems a lifeless tundra outdoors. Left alone with his mother, Todd pours her drink after drink as the months pass, until she too, at last, is dead. Finally, as Todd embraces his sister's ghost, we see the dinosaur skeleton, now complete. No one knows why the dinosaurs lived, or died, Todd told his mother. He suggests the possibility that their end was the natural order of things 'and no tragedy. Or disease. Or God.' (Anon.)

Choosing a play was in itself a huge undertaking. As I examined each script, I had to consider whether or not the audience would take to the script as I had. Every theatre looks at "who is our audience?" and determines what shows to bring into their

season. The geographical area has a significant role in the acceptance of each play. For instance, in Jacksonville, there is a considerable Baptist community. Typically, this community does not support issues that conflict with its religious beliefs. The director has to contemplate whether the focus of the play's subject matter is directed to a specific group, or to a vast audience. In this case, I decided to focus this production to the student body of the University of North Florida. The general college student seems to be a bit more responsive and open to new ideas than society as a whole.

While in Virginia for a theatre conference I purchased and read *Etiquette and Vitriol: The Food Chain and Other Plays* (1996) by Nicky Silver. After reading these plays I knew I would have my directorial debut with one of Silver's works. Ultimately, I chose *Pterodactyls*, not only for its wit and style, but mostly for its subject matter. The complex language in *Pterodactyls* made me feel as though this play would not only entertain, but also educate. Society has made it hard to talk about certain aspects of our world such as AIDS and homosexuality, and this play dealt with these topics head-on.

The notion of society masking and avoiding homosexuality and AIDS is confirmed in the book *And the Band Played On* by Randy Shilts. The author reports that upon publishing a report to the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* by the Centers for Disease Control, "any reference to homosexuality was dropped from the title" (Shilts 68) and went on to say, "Don't offend the gays and don't inflame the homophobes. These were the twin horns on which the handling of this epidemic would be torn from the first day of the epidemic" (Shilts 69). Shilts shows how on the highest levels, the topics of homosexuality and AIDS were avoided. Silver was an example of one playwright who brought these topics to the forefront and portrayed them in his work.

Silver makes it easier to discuss these issues by displaying them in a setting of

wealth and stature, as if to say, “it could happen to anyone” and by also interjecting humor within his text. Neither AIDS nor homosexuality is the focus of the show, but each one plays a significant role. The underlying theme is “denial” as explained by Silver himself:

Well obviously, it’s about denial. Denial’s just dandy if it gets you through the day, but we’re living at a time when, because of AIDS, it carries a terrible price. We have this epidemic because we didn’t want to deal with it. Because as a culture we viewed the people who were dying as expendable. (“Introduction” xvi)

For the actors who played the roles of Tommy and Todd, it was important to understand the fundamentals of AIDS so they could accurately portray their characters. Because the actors had to represent people who have this disease, it was important for them to know why Todd says to Tommy, “You can live a long time. You can live forever with this disease” (Silver 130). This reflection can either be a vision on how living with AIDS has been lengthened by research and drugs or a refusal on Todd’s part to allow any person or thing brings him down. Tommy, as the story notes, is more susceptible to being the weaker of the characters. When directing Tommy and Todd in this production I was given a bit of help. The two actors who portrayed these roles were gay. Because they were gay, this made my job easier, since I didn’t have to explain the understandings of gay relationships and interactions. On numerous times, I caught myself doing just that and had to step back and shut my mouth.

One of the key elements to making a show a great production is the dramaturgical process. *Webster’s Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* defines dramaturgy as “the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation” (381). Gunter

Skopnik suggests an example of how confusing the title of dramaturgy is: “When Prince Schwarzenberg asked Heinrich Laube, the great director of the Burgtheatre in Vienna, what a dramaturg really was, the latter could only answer hesitatingly and shrugging his shoulders: ‘Highness, that is what no one could tell you in a few words.’” (Skopnik 1). This ambiguous reaction could not be truer. My work as a director also involved dramaturgical preparation of the play. A list to explain a dramaturg’s job was compiled by Celise Kalke: (Kalke 1)

1. A thorough text/story analysis.
2. Research into the prior productions of the text as needed.
3. Historical research of various sorts.
4. Attendance of at least one quarter of the rehearsals, the first read-through, and as many run-throughs as possible.
5. Oral or written notes for the director.
6. Attendance at some pre-production meetings.
7. A loyalty to the basic mission and ideas of the production and the text. Maintaining that loyalty in the midst of technical difficulties.
8. Program contributions.
9. Flexibility.

The text/story analysis is the most important element for the director because he/she has to portray the playwright’s story accurately. To do this, the meaning behind the lines must be deciphered. Todd begins the play by entering and explaining to the audience the happenings of the past two hundred and fifty thousand years. His remarks are skewed and haphazard, such as: “Picasso sculpted David, Marco Polo invented pizza, Columbus discovered the New World and Gaetan Dugas discovered the Fountain of Youth.” (Silver 7). Todd jumbles and conflates these historical facts in order to show how “Those who don’t know the past are doomed to repeat it.”

When Todd erroneously makes these comments, he shows how his lackluster attempt at history is setting himself up for a dismal extinction...his own.

Todd exits and the show introduces Tommy and Emma who have recently become engaged. The relationship is awkward. Tommy lusts after Emma while she pushes him off, listing her hypochondriac fears. This conflict establishes a demented tone at the play's beginning of sex and sickness. The only things that characterize Tommy are his movies and his being raised by nuns. Emma is repressing memories that later reveal how Arthur (her father) had molested her years earlier. The mother's alcoholism further adds to the family's dysfunction. Todd returns home to seek shelter and nurturing from a family that he once knew. Having been diagnosed with AIDS, Todd desperately needs his family to acknowledge him, but is left searching for their support.

There were countless references in Silver's work that had to be researched so that they could be presented to the audience as true to life as the text stipulates. Things like: Who is George Cukor and Montgomery Clift? What are all these movies that Tommy refers to? These allusions and many more have to be explained for the director, actors, and eventually, for the audience. It cannot be expected for the audience to understand every joke, but the lines must be presented as if each action is true to life and *not* a joke. Any lack of commitment on the side of the actors and they will not be able to convince the audience of their characters' credibility. Even Silver states this in his author's notes:

This is not to suggest that the actors can perform even the silliest seeming moments with anything less than the strongest commitment. No matter how manic or absurd the action, it is based in real need. If it is not, the moments when a darker truth pokes through will

fall flat. And the ending, when all efforts to maintain a bright façade have passed, will seem to come from nowhere. (Silver 72)

The research helped actors to know what a certain line meant, and how to deliver it. A prime example of this is during the following scene:

GRACE: ...Where do you live?

TOMMY: When I left the orphanage, I took a furnished room on Market Street.

GRACE: I see.

TOMMY: But I had to give it up, tips not being what I'd hoped for.

EMMA: They expect him to wear tight jeans and keep his shirt unbuttoned.

TOMMY: (*ashamed*) Did you ever see *The Night Porter*? (Silver 85)

This is probably one of the funniest lines in the play. At this point in the play, Tommy is being introduced to his future mother-in-law, who inquires about his position at Salad City. The reference is to how he was treated at his job. Dramaturgical work revealed *The Night Porter* is a 1974 Italian movie originally entitled *Il Portiere de notte*. The movie is summarized as, "Thirteen years after WW II a concentration camp survivor (Rampling) and her tormentor, currently the night porter at a Vienna hotel meet again and fall back into their sadomasochistic relationship" ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)). The actor must deliver the line recognizing that Tommy's present job is akin to the sadomasochistic relationship in the film.

When it comes to directing the actors why a line should be read a particular way, it is important to make sure they understand why they are doing a certain action at the same time. The movement in a play is almost like a large choreographed dance. Each action is timed to the words and implied in the script. When Emma says, "Don't eat my hair" (Silver 77), it would

appear quite ridiculous if Tommy were on the other side of the room. The director's job is to make the play appear as natural or true to life as possible. Blocking the movement in the play is just another obstacle the director must overcome in order to present each piece of work realistically.

One of the things to remember about directing though is that each director has his or her own interpretation of the script. We are not so fortunate to have a playwright by our sides saying, "That is not the way it was meant to be portrayed." We have to examine the script and decipher the words to form a picture. One of the best examples of this is the use of the Tyrannosaurus Rex in *Pterodactyls*. Some troupes chose not to use a dinosaur at all (most likely due to financial reasons). Several used the same dinosaur I did, like Provincetown Theatre and Huntington Theatre Company. And still another (Truman State University) used a very interesting representation of a dinosaur which was made of debris that was "dug up in the back yard." It had an axe for a shoulder, a spring for a leg, and hypodermic needles lining its vertebrates. Numerous other items could be found in this sculpture as well. This shows the liberty given to the companies producing these plays. I chose to use the real dinosaur because I felt that any makeshift representation would take away from the sincerity of the show. The dinosaur's history as explained by Todd creates a direct parallel to that of the Duncan family. Todd represents the Tyrannosaurus Rex in many ways. He is a figure of death that enters the family and reminds them of their own mortality, just as the dinosaur's bones do. Even AIDS itself symbolizes a new "ice age" that can potentially wipe out any existence on the planet. The dinosaur's presence on the stage also reflects the saying, "skeletons in the closet" as the dinosaur represents a metaphor for the family's own secrets. As directors, we must make choices, whether they are from which angle to portray the

story, or what meaning we want the dinosaur to depict, and stick to these choices unless they prove to take away from the story.

The twelve-foot Tyrannosaurus Rex was one of the most demanding aspects of this script. Nicky Silver is adamant about having this prop in the show. He himself went through many directors before finding the one that understood that you couldn't just get rid of the dinosaur. I must say that a twelve-foot dinosaur is not easy to come by. If it weren't for the technology of the Internet today it would have been nearly impossible to locate. The dinosaur I finally found was originally built by the Massachusetts College of Art and several Boston artists at a cost of \$4000 for the Huntington Theatre Company and Boston University's 1995 production of the show. A few years later, this dinosaur found its way to Wheaton College in Norton, Mass. I contacted Mr. Mailhot who said he had the dinosaur and I indicated my interest. I waited two weeks to get the travel plans in order and called him back. He had sold the dinosaur a week earlier. I was at odds. He informed me that he had sold it to the Provincetown Theatre Company whose production had ended in August. Three months before the show opened, I told the Provincetown Theatre not to move it, that I was going to buy the dinosaur from them. Two weeks prior to the show, I headed north to retrieve the dinosaur. When I arrived to pick up the affectionately named "prop from hell" there was no one to be found. I finally tracked down a home number (thankfully it was a *really* small town) and was told where the dinosaur was located. Upon arrival, I found the poor dinosaur in bits and pieces in a dark storage room strewn across old chairs and tables and not a light switch to be found. Rummaging through the pieces, I finally gathered the three carts and dozens of bones and wheeled it into the truck. When I returned home, I meticulously laid the pieces out and attempted to construct the beast for the first time. It was mammoth and

though slightly battered, it looked good for a six and a half-year-old prop dinosaur. With the dinosaur safely stored in a large room adjacent to the theatre, I could now shift my focus back towards directing.

The auditions and casting created another trial I had to work through. I had only a handful of people audition and when I reached out to the community for assistance, I did not have much luck there either. The people who committed to me prior to the auditions had backed out and I was left to find new actors. The problem with Jacksonville actors is that there are very few good actors and those few were ready to take a break from acting by the time *Pterodactyls* came around. I went through three “Todd’s,” two “Emma’s,” two “Tommy’s” and a whopping seven “Arthur’s” to complete my cast. This changing of actors was very daunting and tiresome; the cast felt like a football team with their seventh quarterback of the season. Two weeks prior to the show, when we still were lacking someone to play the role of “Arthur,” I finally asked a friend of mine to do me a huge favor and fill in. He was young and had to put aging make-up on to accommodate the role, but fortunately he was a fine actor and saved the show by filling a void. Another concern with casting involved the roles of Tommy and Todd. Because these two had to have intimate relations onstage, I needed them to be comfortable with each other. They had to portray the comfort and sexual intimacy without worrying what the audience would think. Ultimately, I found a cast that meshed together and was quite professional in all respects.

Rehearsals carried on from 7pm - 10pm every night for about six weeks. The task of setting each character’s moves in a smaller rehearsal space proved challenging, as well as dealing with schedule conflicts and general obstacles. Even reserving the Robinson Theatre was difficult. I spent six months trying to reserve the space for an unprecedented three weeks. Financially, the show was slated to cost over \$5000 and I

had to seek assistance from many people—including getting the money up front from my employer. The only money that was confirmed was an extra \$200 granted by Club Alliance. I was not told I would get financial assistance from Student Government until one week prior to the opening of the show and even then it would be cut significantly from what was requested. By that time, I had already accumulated a significant amount of receipts for the monies put into the show. The rights to perform the show and scripts came to around \$500. The dinosaur racked up \$1000. Printing was also above the \$1000 mark. The set rental was \$2000. None of these things could be trimmed down without jeopardizing the quality I was thriving for. As it was, I ordered just enough programs that by the last night I had two remaining.

Whenever money could be saved, was. A man by the name of Jon Scherf was a little savior to me. Representing his own company, Zag, Mr. Scherf designed my poster and program for free and has since committed to other projects for the Corbomite Players Theatre Club at no cost. My goal was to make this as professional a show as a college could do, starting with the program. When Mr. Scherf first showed me the design for the poster, I was giddy for hours. The format was 11” X 17” poster that was to implement certain characteristics of the script, such as the dinosaur and the gun. I especially liked black to represent the darkness of the show, but the rest was up to him. He used the dinosaur and a gun to represent the nature of the play. The focus of the dinosaur and the climatic point with the gun established an ominous tone and foreshadowed the plot for the audience. The poster had to draw the eye to it to provoke a person into wanting to see the production. The only unfortunate thing about the design was that it was made to be “four-color black,” which is the most expensive type of printing available, but it was necessary for the quality desired.

A week before the show opened, the production moved into the theatre. Things were slowly coming into order. The set was the first thing to be moved in. This colossal set was what was needed to portray wealth by representing a mansion in Main Line, Philadelphia, the setting of the show. The twelve-foot walls and width of the set helped denote the wealth. The truck arrived with the set, and slowly the students unpacked it piece by piece. A faux floor was laid on top of the stage and the process was started. Wall by wall, the set took the shape of what would soon be the house of the Duncan family. Next, we moved the furniture into place. Fortunately, one of my cast members had an antique living room that fitted nicely into the set and provided the stature that the show required. We brought the furniture in and for the first time, the actors were able to experience life in the Duncan household.

On October 22, “hell week” began. “Hell week” refers to the week before a show goes up. It consists of long days and lots of stop-and-go work. This is the week that the technicians move in and set the lighting and sound and it is also a time when the director can see just how much the set affects the blocking. The actors finally get to use the doors and learn to climb stairs. That night, the dinosaur was assembled for the first time in the theatre. The play called for the dinosaur to be constructed as the show progressed, which proved to be challenging, because the twelve-foot dinosaur took up half the set. Throughout the next few days, we would have many fights with that prop. Constructing it during the show was a hassle, because it did not always want to cooperate. It also was badly in need of some repair work. I got some spray foam and molded cracks and holes and fixed broken bones and repainted it as best I could.

Throughout the rehearsal process I was in talks with Nicky Silver to see if I could entice him to fly in and do a workshop for us, but unfortunately he could not make it.

The publicity for the show was rather good. *Folio Weekly* ran an article and the *Times-Union* put us in their “Best Bets” column. The *Folio’s* article talked about dragging the dinosaur from Massachusetts, while the *Time’s Union* acknowledged our production and mentioned the dates.

The only obstacle at this point was finding a stage gun that actually fired when it was supposed to. I searched for days and finally on the day of the show, I found one at Players-by-the-Sea Community Theatre, but had to go to Jacksonville Beach to get it. Upon reaching the beach, I waited for over an hour and a half to get this prop. I made it back to the University with ten minutes to go till the gun was to be fired. The trip was nerve-racking and I missed over sixty percent of the opening night’s performance. Because I took responsibility with having the gun backstage at the right time each night and fired at the appropriate moments, I never really saw the show from beginning to end. I made it a point also to tweak the show throughout the run. I changed the ending (curtain call) three times in consecutive nights. The first night, I had a tableau that represented the characters in their order of death, but it was hard for the audience to know the show was over. I thought by changing the order in which the blackout, bow and tableau occurred, it would help, but it did not. The final change just eliminated the tableau altogether. This proved to be helpful for each and every performance. The final night, I was videotaping the show and the batteries died after the first act, so there is no full version on tape of this production.

The night the show closed was a very somber time for me. As the show ended, tears formed in my eyes. I spent over eighteen months working on the show and within a few short hours, it was over. So much time and effort went into each part of this production, that it was almost like putting an old dog to sleep (you don’t want to, but you know you have to). *Pterodactyls* was every part of my day, evening, and

night. I watched as the dinosaur came down the last time and realized I would no longer get to enjoy the efforts we put into this production. The next day, the set was taken down. We spent eight hours putting it up and it was taken down in less than three. The lights were restored to their original placement and all the borrowed props and lights were packed and sent off. The dinosaur was dismantled and some little pieces and the head were given away. The bigger pieces like the carts and legs and torso were wheeled outside to be thrown in the dumpster, because they were too frail to save and there was no storage place to keep the dinosaur. Three months later, I received a call from a director in Los Angeles looking for a twelve-foot dinosaur. Like me, he had tracked it down person to person, but I was the one who had to tell him it was now extinct.

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