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Reflecting on “the dreamer examines his pillow” - Scene 1

Senior Project Submitted to
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by
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Within the first minutes of John Patrick Shanley's "the dreamer examines his pillow", we are dropped into a rabbit hole of confrontation and love. Donna confronts Tommy, and Tommy confronts himself, chaos ensues, madness is revealed, and we are confronted with our need to make sense of it, but the confrontation at the very bottom of it all is the inevitable disparity and tension between love and sense. It was two and a half years ago when I was first introduced to John Patrick Shanley's "the dreamer examines his pillow", and it is this acute understanding of the potential for chaos and volatility that exists in the human condition that has kept me captivated me for this long. This illumination of the simultaneous need to excavate madness to rationalize, and madness' hydra-headed nature struck me: the revelation that the excavation of madness only causes more madness to reveal itself began to foster in me a fresh excitement about this play as an opportunity to bring forward from the page this eruption of madness from its own excavation in the name of love. The possibility of living in this circumstance where one feels too human, to make sense of the desperations and peculiarities in Tommy within this circumstance of love and confrontation, has been a challenge I have long been eager to take on.

I have also long been attracted to characters who not only seemed strange or unsettling when held up against socialized expectations of how one should act but to characters whose peculiarities were grounded in specific trauma or weakness. When I came across Tommy, it was this aspect of his character that first struck me: his clear manic state that makes us question his sanity as he talks to his refrigerator, and its groundedness in his crippling inability to figure himself out. I was drawn in by his capability to change his mind on a dime and his bizarre behavior that makes him hard to pin down into a type: he is at once both crudely masculine and boyishly uncertain. He can at one moment speak for a full page in poetic prose about why he

believes in god, and in the next write off his behavior with “a man’s gotta do what he’s gotta do.” (Shanley, 181) As the scene carries on, these peculiarities of Tommy’s are not made more clear by means of some epiphany about his past, nor are they neatened into a straightforward psychoanalysis of why he is the way he is, and it is this humanistic denouncement of the notion that people go in a straight line that has been so invigorating to find. The experience of living in the flesh of these peculiarities as an actor is an intensely uncomfortable and awkward feeling, but I have found there is such a clear intangible syntax that has sewn them into the tension of the scene, that this same discomfort allowed us to deepen and articulate a more specific tension in the scene. These characters attempt to find solutions by chipping away at each other only to have more chaos reveal itself underneath each layer, and it is this relentless unraveling and destabilization that has given us fuel in finding the fluidity of the physical life between the two characters. It is also this destabilization that makes the final monologue all the more compelling to me; when it finally offers us an answer, it is that there is always more to learn about oneself.

I also saw Tommy as an opportunity to take the work of analyzing a character out of the realm of “homework” for a scene, and into the thoughts I would be required to have on stage; to bring the mental labor of character work that I am more accustomed to doing outside of the rehearsal room into a union with the required emotional labor of being present in the scene. This challenge also particularly excited me as I have long struggled with approaching scenes from the inside out, oftentimes finding unnecessarily analytic, or even clinical, thoughts controlling my performance. In Tommy however, I found that I could satisfy the part of my actor brain that so quickly jumps to these analytics by simply being in the flesh of the text of someone trying to figure out these questions for themselves. I also found myself genuinely moved by the sensibility

in this play of a deepening of uncertainty, and this has inspired me to go about doing the homework for a role in drastically different ways than I previously have. One of the first things that I knew I would have to do to become Tommy was to accustom myself with his environment, that being Brooklyn in 1985.

As the year is now 2018, the world of the play that these characters inhabit is unavoidably inaccessible to someone doing this play today (particularly someone born in 1996), however, I knew that I had to find a way to get some sense of what this world might have been. So, to get a sense of the world which Tommy traversed on a day to day basis, I took a trip to Cobble Hill in Brooklyn to try to build this world from what I could come across. The area which I visited was undeniably more well-off than where Tommy lived, but it was also not so completely furnished that I wasn't able to find some specific locations within it that I could use to create a bank of sense memory to work from. I also found that this field trip was a prime opportunity to do a kind of character work I had only been curious about trying before this, and that was one of calibrating Tommy's way of listening. I would sit down and read a chunk of the text and then immediately walk through this environment, retroactively taking stock of what each piece of my surroundings meant to me in response.

The first such detail I found was the view of the Hudson river itself, looking across at Manhattan from Brooklyn, that filled me with a great sense of being "othered." As I meandered down a walkway with cars headed to the Brooklyn bridge underneath me, various couples or families around me, and the arrogantly towering shapes of the more "truly NYC" part of the city across from me, I found myself relating more and more to Tommy's sense of being frustrated by the outside world, and his subsequent isolation. I found it at once disheartening and lonely to feel

as irrelevant as I did, being such a small part of a bustling whole, entirely unseen and existing at a vantage point completely overshadowed by what lies across. I found the ideals that created these frustrations alienating. I found myself resenting the cars headed across the river, as if they were embracing the very thing that was taunting me, and I found this resentment all the more satisfying to sit in by viewing myself as an island, as a being that was not simply failing to fit in to his surroundings, but as one that was existing in stark defiance to the ease at which other people found themselves bustling through this system. I found a more rundown area that was on the water and decided that this could very well be the place (or rather an approximation of the place) that Tommy might escape to when he finds himself trapped in his room, perhaps to stew and smoke a cigarette. I let myself sit there for a good twenty minutes, and the longer I remained, I found that the satisfaction of this isolation wore down and gave way to a more intangible anxiety. I still do not have a name for this anxiety, but it is a feeling I continued to use throughout the process as a part of Tommy's mental space, and I found it formed the basis of my work on the moments he has where he is alone with himself.

Not all of the experiences I had on this field trip were as acutely psychological as this one, however, as there were also many things I found that simply helped me fill out the world of this character. I found a small and incredibly cramped convenience store where I decided Tommy worked for a brief period of time before being fired after having paid far too much attention to the cat that would stalk in and out of the "employees only" section, and not enough on the customers. I talked with a homeless man about God as Tommy might have to get a sense of how his behavior would be met by those in his environment (and paid him for his help). I found the wretched bathroom at a children's park that Tommy had to use when his

superintendent cut off his running water after having not paid the bills. These small details all helped serve to not only help me understand the day-to-day of Tommy's life but to give my brain a place to draw from once I entered the scene. I have found that as an actor whose intellect often gets the better of himself, it is of the utmost importance for me to fill in this world, so that these details might fill in the peripheral space of my brain with a greater wealth of my own original thoughts within the world, so as to more easily prevent thoughts from myself as an actor outside this world creeping in. Having built up a sense of environment, I found that I could more fully give myself over to the moments in the play, whether they were directly related or not to the findings I made, by letting my brain's creeping thoughts be my character's creeping thoughts. For example, when I ask Donna why she thinks I'm living in "this garbage can" (because I'm not in good shape), my brain can't flood in what it thinks this moment ought to be because already flooding in is what this garbage can really feel like to live in. The shame of that moment was bolstered by the shame of having been in a dirty bathroom trying to wash my hair when a father came in with his two kids and immediately turned around, seemingly certain that I was a crazy and potentially hazardous person.

The other perfect opportunity for character preparation was a gift from this play quite specifically: Tommy's self-portrait. Luckily, this self-portrait is described as amateurishly bad, so my complete lack of ability or experience as a painter was only a better reason to do it myself. While home for winter break, I would lock myself in the tiny darkroom in the back of my father's studio and give myself over to the discomfort of that environment. As I went about painting, I knew that I could not simply make a self-portrait of myself, as the entire experience would be irrelevant to the character, yet I also knew that if I were to go about this painting

without any ingredients from myself, it could only be representative of Tommy, and perhaps an interesting piece of the set, but entirely unhelpful in furthering my relationship with the character. To deal with this conundrum, I first worked from the one detail of the painting that I related to most (it was also luckily, the most prominent detail): the “one eye big and the other small.” (Shanley, 181) Tommy defends this feature of the painting as being a part of him by saying that “one eye sees too much, the other eye can’t see enough to see my way out of how I feel.” This sensation of both seeing too much too clearly, and the reactive inability to know what to do with this information to deal with the feelings that erupt from it has long been something I have struggled with myself. So I painted from there.

The first hurdle I encountered through this work was an immediate frustration: on the one hand, I had this sensation I was trying to work from, while on the other hand, I felt unable to render it in the painting in any way that felt true to the sensation itself. My first rendition felt so completely artificial at one point that I painted the entire thing over with black paint in a fit of exasperation. I immediately regretted this, and frantically tried to scrape it away with a piece of cardboard. Surprisingly, this worked. The result was a partially concealed face peering back at me through a murk of paint that felt so excitingly in line with my frustrations themselves that I immediately went back to fervently attempting to continue painting on top of this. I quickly deemed it ruined shortly thereafter as the new paint blended completely with all the black paint on the top layer, and I crumpled the whole thing up and threw it away, impatient with my own impatience. Why didn’t I let the paint dry?! Of course, I again regretted the trashing of this painting immediately. When I went home, and my dad asked me how it went, I did not say that I was frustrated and threw away something I ought to have kept working at, but instead began

rationalizing why it was necessary: I needed to throw out the first thing I did to get it out of my system, it was never going to be the final product anyway, I'm excited to start on a fresh canvas, etc. Perhaps some of these may have been true, but none of them were what I most strongly felt or believed about the work. In having begun work on this painting from the place of trying to contain and make sense of all that I feel, the inevitable frustration of the eye that can't see enough led to the object of this painting becoming a beacon for this piece of Tommy, and as I found myself hiding these frustrations, I found myself also further relating to how Tommy hides himself. The way in which Tommy hides in this play is of course quite different from my own rationalizations to my dad, and the stakes are much higher, but it came from the same place: a need to keep the thing that I fear or resent in myself out of sight from those close to me.

As I kept work on the painting and began to get a hang of how I could feasibly and organically make this portrait in a way which could actually lead to a final product, these frustrations began to be balanced by satisfaction. The painting may not make sense to anyone but me, but I know that this one splotch of paint is a comet, and I can remember the motions that gave the jagged crude strokes their particular textures. However, I never felt completely satisfied with the painting as a whole. I would feel satisfied in one instant and look back at it the next day and doubt it all over again. This constant balancing and unbalancing of my inability to truly render what I feel and the specificity and elation of when I feel that it is working helped me ground Tommy in the urgency of digging himself out of the shithole he's living in. I found this particularly useful in the moments where Tommy attempts to unearth to Donna what he believes he has found, such as his monologue about now believing in God and the ensuing panic and doubt that follows when Donna punches holes in his explanations. In this way, I found that as we

began to do scene work with the painting present, it would vary between a looming figure proving the smallness of my defense and a testament to the potency of my own thoughts, alternately giving me both power and weakness, much like the caves Tommy talks about at the end of the scene.

All of this is much more so the preparation for the work rather than the work itself though, which could only begin once we all got into the rehearsal room. The first step in this process was table work. We went through the script and took stock of what these characters were feeling, how we can relate to it, and what insights we felt that the script offered to the world of Tommy and Donna before Donna walks into Tommy's apartment at the opening of this play. I do not feel that sharing all these findings here would be an economic use of space in this essay, nor a particularly useful list, especially as many of these findings did not continue to reverberate throughout the process, but there are a few that we found helpful in guiding our hands as we began to find who these people could be to each other. One particularly helpful decision we made was in what Tommy and Donna's first interactions were like. While my first reaction to the text, based on the intensely sexual nature of their relationship, was that they likely slept together immediately, Imogen (who played Donna) felt strongly the opposite. He felt that after having met at a bar, they did go back to Tommy's apartment, but that rather than having sex likely talked at length and formed a bond that was more quickly emotional than physical, likely heightening the intensity of their sexual relationship thereafter. The meaning that this choice gave to us allowed the sexual nature of our relationship to be based in a trust, not a fervor, and it helped to serve the stakes of the moments where this sexual relationship is brought to the forefront of the scene. We decided that they likely fell for each other at least partially because

Donna yearned for someone to talk to candidly about their life who was not already a part of it, and Tommy had so few people in his life that he was willing and eager to listen.

Once we began to work the scene in earnest, the most immediate hurdle was to keep the moments of the play truthful and grounded while still charging them with the high-octane stakes that the scene so quickly drops us into. We first started to try to work in a similar way in which Nat (our director) and I had worked in a show we had acted in together in the previous semester called “Being Norwegian” by David Greig. This method involved very simply sitting across from each other in two chairs and focussing on slowly saying the words to each other to begin to find what transaction was occurring from line to line and to begin with a focus on listening before muddling the process with blocking. This immediately began to feel very unnatural however as a way to start the work on “dreamer”, as so much of the circumstance and transaction relied on the acute tension and tangibility of these characters’ bodies being in the same space for the first time in months that have such a storied physical relationship. In response to this, we decided to get on our feet sooner than we originally planned, and found that this paid off. We later circled back to working more slowly after we had been able to first live in what the tension of that physical space. Having already explored the physical relationship, we had created an emotional common ground that allowed us to maintain the stakes even as we slowed down so that we could more meaningfully make sense of the transactions in relation to the stakes. One particular moment where these two ways of working helped each other was the moment of brief rest when Donna asks Tommy to get her another beer. Having worked it on our feet with the physical space, we found that this moment was a first for this interaction between Tommy and Donna: a moment of recognition that they are simply in the same place at the same time, simply

sitting on Tommy's mattress and drinking a beer, as if little has changed. Having found this and gone back to a more slow and deliberate process, we were then able to get inside the DNA of this moment and how it sits within the trajectory of the scene, unpacking the specificity of intention from line to line. Donna says "Bail me out, Tommy. Leave me alone." to which Tommy replies "You know I can't do that." "You selfish thing. Then gimme another beer." (Shanley, 185) Tommy's refusal to abide to what Donna wants is not met with the same kind of backlash that other moments where Tommy refuses to comply lead to, and while this was a source of perplexion when we worked it on its feet, slowing this moment back down allowed to find the particular humor that they both manage to embrace for a moment, and this helped us to find how Donna and Tommy manage to still charm each other throughout their vexation with each other.

Another key rehearsal tactic which we employed was the use of repetition. In one particularly helpful rehearsal, Nat simply had Imogen and I repeat the first two lines we say to each other back and forth: "You" from Donna and "You look great" from Tommy. (Shanley, 179) Through repetition, we were able to find not only where these characters are coming from in how they choose to say hello in this moment, but also allowed us to be more fully present in the way we each felt about how we were being greeted. This exercise took us through a much wider range of emotions than I would have expected for these lines, and in running the scene afterwards, we found that the moment of Donna's reaction to this greeting, "You've got to be fucking kidding me" (Shanley, 179) came more organically from the flesh of the interaction. This meaning is again a more intangible one that I do not have a name for, but it helped to raise not only the underlying stakes of the first moments where Donna is asking Tommy about how long has he lived there for and does this place have bugs, etc., but also for me as Tommy, the

curiosity and uncertainty as to why Donna is there. Previously I had found myself relying on having to ask questions of myself such as “How likely is it that Donna knows about me and Mona?”, or “How unacceptably dirty is this apartment?”, etc., and while these questions remained valuable, the heightening of this curiosity/uncertainty based on how Donna greeted me and how this reverberated into the scene allowed for a more dynamic and fluid answer for me (as Tommy) to the question of “why has she come?” and most importantly, “are we getting back together?” More on this question later.

One of the most pronounced ways in which I knew that Tommy was quite different from myself was in how he would physically inhabit my body. Luckily, Nat is a director with a keen eye for physicality and so was an invaluable part of me finding how Tommy could exist through me. They helped me in making my body heavier, and finding how Tommy’s circumstance related to how he carried himself. One aspect of Tommy’s psychological circumstance that greatly influenced my choices in his physicality was his complicated relationship to his own agency. He feels that he is not controlling his life, and yet because of this concern, he is also very actively trying to control himself to better himself. In exploring this through viewpoints, we were able to find a meandering heaviness that was also filled with potential energy and tension. I found that this particular texturing of Tommy’s physical life was a useful means of traversing the space with intention as to the thoughts that Tommy is working through. The aspect of Tommy’s physicality that was perhaps the most difficult for me was in how Tommy uses his hands, as it was very different from my own. In my own life, my fingers are often manically occupied, and so I often use them in very articulate ways when I act, but I had to let go of this for Tommy. Tommy is driven much more by feeling than by intellect, and while I use my hands to lead me

from one thought to the next, Tommy comes much more from the gut. While a more articulate use of my hands proved helpful for when Tommy uses more visually descriptive language, my own natural impulses in engaging with the words proved to be too intricate for the brashness of how Tommy expresses himself, and so we had to hone this articulation through exercises. One such exercise that I incorporated to achieve this was to wear gloves occasionally when rehearsing the scene. This helped to make my hands heavier and demanded that I find new, more broad ways to express myself to Donna.

The other aspect of physicality work that we incorporated into the process was the way in which Donna's presence affects his physicality. We worked on developing the masculine bravado that Tommy uses to try to charm Donna, while also the way in which he protects himself from her when he needs to, and most importantly for this play, the nature of Tommy and Donna's physical intimacy. This led to great revelations about the potential for tenderness that Tommy has, and this proved to be a useful inroad to finding the more tender moments in the scene, and in finding where the love exists between us physically. This development of the physical intimacy between us was also key for giving us a physical language to engage through that we understood. Having allowed this intimacy to develop to the point where this communication was intuitive was vital in keeping the fundamental question of "are we getting back together?"

The question of whether this moment that Donna and I are experiencing is a reunion or a goodbye, or god knows what is so fundamentally important because it is this question that is truly driving the stakes of the scene. There are many topics that Donna and Tommy discuss, from God to Tommy robbing his mother and porking Donna's sister to whether he has any personal

law, but it is this question of where we will go from here that pushes us forward, and one of the most delicate challenges of this scene has been to make these stakes clear as an undercurrent, or engine, that makes all of the confrontation necessary: otherwise all we have is arbitrary confrontation and indifferent love. After the showing of my SPROJ on the Thursday prior to the performances, Jonathan gave me a note that the stakes were not as clear as they could have been, and this note was exceptionally helpful to us as a reminder to keep the need to resolve whether we will get back together or not present in our minds and that this can be achieved by framing our need to stay present with each other with this simple question of “are we getting back together?”. One of the most prominent things I feel I have gleaned from this process is that this consistent simplicity that helps us make sense of particularly dense text is vital to keep alive amidst the complications, as easy as it can be to lose sight of.

When we committed ourselves to the framing of the scene in this way, much more of the work we’d done throughout the process on the current of the scene was able to come alive in the performance. The first moments became alive with uncertainty and anticipation, but not the anticipation as an actor as to what the next moment is, but the anticipation as Tommy as to what this moment between Donna and I would be. When Donna then reveals that she knows that Tommy has been seeing Mona, the more abstractly present understanding I had of how Tommy hides himself became alive in trying to hide what would doom my chances of getting back together with Donna, including my uncertainty that this is truly what I wanted. The understanding I had cultivated of the logic which Tommy uses to defend himself became an active defense of myself out of fear of losing the person I love. When I spoke about God, I was able to use the beauty of the hope that God had given me to paint myself as someone who was

not so much of a mess that they couldn't be trusted, as someone who was still good enough for Donna to continue to love me, perhaps enough to come back. Towards the end of the scene, when I say "you make everything so hard" (Shanley, 192), this complaint became not only about the way in which Donna was making that particular moment difficult for me, but about the whole scene, and so in the following moment when I make an offering for relief, to take a break from "chewin this same fuckin bone till we got no teeth left" (Shanley, 192), it feels like a final plea for simply getting back together because it is easiest, and because this entire ordeal is too exhausting to be able to get back together by going through it. Most importantly, the clarifying of the stakes created a fundamental need to listen to my scene partner which allowed me to maintain presence without having to consciously activate listening as a muscle. I was no longer consciously listening to be able to respond, but already having to listen because there was something palpable and consistent that I needed to get from Donna. It also helped make it clear to me in the moment as to when I was winning or losing, and so when the final moment came when Donna leaves, I could see it coming in the same way that we often do before someone leaves us, and upon being left alone, I could more clearly see what had happened and was filled more fully with Tommy's confusion as to what I could have done differently to win her back, and the uncertainty as to what this conversation she would have with her father would mean for us.

One choice we made for the performances on April 27th and 28th was to incorporate Tommy's presence in the apartment into the pre-show. I let myself live in the space while the audience filed in, and this helped enormously in creating what the moment before Donna enters was grounded in, and therefore what the timing of Donna's entrance meant to me as Tommy in

that moment. It is oftentimes tricky to calibrate the moments in a character's life that we see in a play as one which came about unexpectedly. By plunging myself first into the banality of what Tommy's every day was like, the unordinary nature of the scene as a disruption to my usual routine became more present. This pre-show sequence was also particularly useful to exercise the frustrations that Tommy has with himself. In designing the set (though the word designing is rather loosely applicable in this case), we felt it was important to fill out the apartment with the debris of Tommy's lifestyle to let his environment be more fully a product of his cluttered state. To achieve this, we dumpster dived, salvaged torn bed sheets from the free store, and brought in a broken fan from my dorm. This broken fan became a useful tool in the pre-show as an obstacle for Tommy to attempt to conquer: I was able to engage with much of Tommy's psychological struggles to sort himself out by determinedly trying to fix this fan. Since it was quite in earnest broken, it was also satisfying to be able to fully take on the task of fixing it without any certainty that I actually could. This helped in grounding myself in the physical tension that Tommy is existing through when he speaks to his refrigerator in the opening moments; this pre-show was particularly effective for getting into the physicality of Tommy in general, as it allowed me to calibrate my body fully before having to deal with the words, while still being able to seamlessly transition into the scene. During this sequence I also took out a paint can to work on the painting, which helped make the painting more of an active presence once the scene began. Furthermore, by letting myself exist in the world of the play prior to the conflict, it became easy to clarify why these stakes of getting Donna back were so vital to Tommy's life. As I idly sat trying to read a book on my bed that I was only half-interested in, I found myself already wanting Donna back to give me a greater sense of purpose beyond my own isolated existence. To be able to share this

part of the work with the audience was particularly exciting, and I hope to explore this presence of the “before” in more theatrical work I do down the line, particularly as it seemed to help transform the space of the theater into the space of the world in a more immersive way, while also binding the physical location to the particular psychological tensions of the play.

We performed this play in SMOG, a venue on campus that is most often used for musical performances, and so it was not outfitted by design to accommodate a piece of theater. This space proved to be both a challenge and a blessing, and though we panicked when we were unable to secure a week in The Old Gym, the physical location proved to be more of an asset to us than anything else. The task at hand became less one of building a physical world within a neutral black box, but rather utilizing the very specific aesthetic and structure of SMOG to serve the play. While all of the walls in the space had graffiti on them that was quite distinct, and therefore distracting, we were able to set up the space so that the garage door was the backdrop, which was much busier, and the graffiti became more textural than representative. During an early run in the space, we noticed that this business somewhat engulfed the painting, however, and so we spray-painted a white frame for the painting to be placed in. In fact, the technical issues that we faced all proved to be quite surmountable. We resolved the issue that there were no means of lighting the stage by acquiring photo lights that could be placed on stands. Because of the way in which reservation works for SMOG, we could not give the piece a home for a full week in tech in the same way that The Old Gym accommodates its projects, and so we had to deal with striking every night, as various other projects had the space reserved during the same week. We were actually unable to reserve the space at all during the Wednesday of our tech week, and so teching the show was thusly more hectic and compressed than we would have

ideally preferred. On the other hand, however, this allowed us to take the Wednesday to go into a studio to focus back on the acting before going back into the space, which proved immensely helpful in keeping the technical work from engulfing the piece entirely.

The final piece of this scene that I wish to discuss is also the final piece of the scene itself: the monologue about the caves. This chunk of text was a particularly daunting one to me as the language was so poetic and visually specific while also quite broken up. If I were to title this monologue, it would be “Tommy Has a Vision.” For roughly the first half of the monologue, Tommy is describing this vision, and so I knew this demanded a very specific logic for me to work with in regards to how this vision was operating, which demanded that I could both use the words to communicate to the audience and also do so while actively seeing and living through the moment. To be able to achieve this organically, I played around with different relationships to the fourth wall, and eventually settled on its presence being linked to Tommy’s relationship with God: I did not break the fourth wall in the Shakespearean sense where I was all of a sudden speaking directly to the audience, but I used the physical space of the audience to act as an embodiment for the question in Tommy’s head of whether he is being watched by a higher power. In this way, the audience became an entity that was holding me to a certain standard, and also the entity that I trusted to help me through struggling with myself. It also framed this moment of communication with the audience as one where Tommy could not hide himself: I had no choice but to be uncompromisingly honest because the only being that could hear me was all-knowing.

The second half of the monologue is more of Tommy reflecting on his vision through talking to himself. At this point, the fourth wall went completely back up, and I also used this

moment to come back from the magical space of the vision back into my shithole apartment, which was particularly useful in chaining his reflections on this vision into how they are meaningful to his actual life. Here the clutter on the set was particularly important, as I could see it with fresh eyes having had this revelation. I could see with more clarity the way in which my junkyard lifestyle was how I was hiding, and now that I was determined to be brave, I could make a change. To deal with this, I took time to rehearse the different sections in appropriately different locations: I would go out for a walk in the fields under the stars late at night to work on the first half, and then come back to my messy dorm room to work on the second. Doing this work helped to inform the vastness of what I would see in the vision, the fields and stars fostering in me a sense of smallness in the face of nature and all the cosmic powers that control me, while my cramped room gave me a cage to try to bust out of, to try to make my own banal life encompass the vastness of the outside world.

I knew, however, that this shift from outside to in could not simply be an interpreted choice that I glommed onto the monologue, but that I had to find what caused this shift, which in this case was revelation. Tracking the revelations that Tommy has in this vision was in one hand quite simple, as Tommy is uninhibitedly sharing them on the page, but engaging with them through such poetic language was not easy. This demanded lots of associative work and “dropping in” so that when I would see these caves, I would feel this fear of myself, and so that I could say lines as flowery as “enter away from the ordinary extraordinary twilight I have lived in” (Shanley, 194) without feeling like Tommy the poet instead of Tommy the person. The thoughts had to feel big enough that they could fill my brain enough so that such verbose language felt necessary to give justice to the immensity of these new important thoughts I was

having. Because the language was so verbose, I also did more technical textual work than I did on the rest of the scene, such as marking and working antithesis and taking stock of punctuation. While in the scene itself, Tommy's sentences would meander more and have more of a chaotic form, these sentences were incredibly precise and neat. I found that the more I committed to this very punctual way of speaking, the vision became more and more something that was happening to me, which I could only describe as it came to me, one piece at a time, and that the revelations I had in the second half of the monologue were also found piece by piece. In engaging with this, the submissive nature of "having a vision" became more organic, and I found the pattern of speech bolstering my sense of revelation.

The very last line of this monologue is "God help me I am a free man." (Shanley, 194) This line came to mean something very different to me as my relationship to Tommy progressed over the course of this process. My initial reading on this line was a sense of horror: that Tommy is now confronted with the unsavory fact that he cannot write off anything by pretending that there is a devil inside of him, because ultimately it's all him, and that he has no choice but to face himself. By the end of the process, however, I discovered something new in this monologue: hope. The more I lived with Tommy, the more I felt his desire to be brave, his desire to overcome himself, and that "God help me" is less a desperate plea and more a call to arms. Tommy's fear of himself is one which I think many of us, if not all, can relate to, and in grappling with such immense problems such as how much one can control themselves, and what it means to face oneself, there is something both disturbing and beautiful in Tommy's flaws. He is a being trying to claw his way out of the tomb that he has carved for himself. It is this tension between our freedom and our fear that shapes most all of our anxieties and desires. Few of us

have flown off the handle to the extent that Tommy has as he talks to his refrigerator and makes crude self-portraits, but it is not because Tommy is alien and insane, it is because he is altogether too human. To me, “the dreamer examines his pillow” is about the inevitable confrontation between our own free selves, and our unavoidable condition of being social beings. Tommy exists on the seam between the self and the other, feeling othered from himself, and othered from the world. He plunges into himself, to no longer hold himself away from his own sight, to no longer throw people between himself and himself, and yet everything is Donna, because nobody else knows him. Much later in the play, the character of Dad says “the individual life is deceptive and a dream.” It is this simple truth that we see magnified through Tommy’s madness, as he deceives himself and sees too much, without ever being able to make sense of the whole. He isolates himself from Donna, and starves without her, and he loses his mind. It is this ever-unfolding madness that I believe keeps us going to the theater, to go into ourselves and outwards, in a room full of others, where we can grapple with the boundaries between the id that drives us and the superego that informs us. Theater remains one of the few realms of art where the human is placed front and center, live and present, and if humanity did not involve a certain inevitable dose of madness, if there was not something askew that needed sorting, then we would have no need to confront it on the stage. As I move forward in my theatrical work, it is this desire to grapple with our shared madness that pushes me forward. It is the sharing of this madness that can relieve the pressure of the too much we all feel; this madness of the self grating against the other is what keeps empathy alive through the conflict, and it is what holds the power to bring others closer to ourselves.

Works Cited

“the dreamer examines his pillow.” *13 By Shanley*, by John Patrick Shanley, Applause Books, 1992.