

7-9-2009

The Hyphenated Playwright: A Speculation on Opportunities for an Emerging MFA

Terry Davis

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**THE HYPHENATED PLAYWRIGHT:
A SPECULATION ON OPPORTUNITIES
FOR AN EMERGING MFA**

BY

TERRY S. DAVIS

B.A., Eisenhower College, 1975

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Dramatic Writing

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2009

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ABSTRACT

Few playwrights in the history of theater have earned a living from their writing. Certainly contemporary playwrights append other theatrical duties to their title to make a living. How, then, will the current crop of MFAs function in today's theater with their newly-minted degrees in dramatic writing? The author suggests that finding suitable role models could help clarify the post-graduate path and, using himself as a model, compares his own work and theatrical history to two working playwrights, Steven Dietz and Emily Mann. In those two examples, he finds encouraging possibilities as a writer as well as potential models for moving forward in the business of theater.

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Terry Davis

MFA Thesis

March 18, 2009

The Hyphenated Playwright:

A Speculation on Opportunities for an Emerging MFA

When a play washes onto a stage, it brings with it a great many theater artists and adjutant personnel: producers, directors, designers, technicians, actors, running crew, ticket sellers, ushers, publicists, maintenance staff. However, the one person first responsible for that play — the playwright — spends, proportionately, the least amount of time in the theater of any of these and seldom earns his or her living solely from the plays he or she creates. While all other theater artists and others in attendant positions can, demonstrably, earn a living in the theater, playwrights, on the whole, cannot.

Historically this has always been true. William Shakespeare was a member of the acting company for which he composed his plays. Henrik Ibsen directed his own works. George Bernard Shaw directed and served as a theater critic. Oscar Hammerstein II staged the first production of *Show Boat* and co-produced several of the musicals he created with Richard Rodgers. George Kaufman was as well known for his directing as his writing career. Moss Hart directed and produced plays and musicals and co-owned a Broadway theater with Kaufman. Throughout history, Western playwrights have filled more than one function in the theater.

Certainly, living American playwrights rarely serve in that single capacity. Paula Vogel, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, now serves as the director of playwriting programs for Brown University and will soon chair the playwriting program at Yale

University (Robertson). Charles Mee, recipient of the lifetime achievement award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, teaches playwriting at Columbia University (Columbia). Moises Kaufman, a Guggenheim Fellow, is the co-founder of the Tectonic Theatre Project (Tectonic). Warren Leight, a Tony Award-winning playwright, serves as a producer with television's *Law and Order* franchise (Stelter).

Multi-award-winning playwright Tony Kushner told *The New York Times*, “Playwriting is in a lot of trouble now,” adding that even someone who has “a string of successful plays cannot make a living at it.” His pronouncement came on the occasion of his being announced as the first winner of the Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award in September of 2008, an honor accompanied by \$200,000, twenty times the money that came with his Pulitzer Prize. William Zabel, on the board of the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, the organization issuing the award, is quoted in the same article as saying, “We want people to realize the theater is important, and that a playwright who gets the award is important to our society and our culture” (Cohen). Mr. Zabel’s stated hope — and the award itself, apparently intended to rescue the stature of the craft — reveals that playwrights are not currently important to our society or our culture.

That revelation is not news to those of us who work in arts marketing. The common benchmark we marketers use for Americans interested in live theater is pegged at a little over 10% of the population. Indeed, according to the National Endowment for the Arts, attendance for live, non-musical plays was measured at 12.3% of the population in 2002. That number did not change significantly for 20 years according to NEA measures. Attendance was 11.9% of the population in 1982 and

13.5% of the population in 1992 (“2002 Survey” 2). Given the U.S. Census Bureau’s estimate of our population as just under 288 million people in 2002 (“Population Estimates”), that means about 35 million people attended a play sometime during that year. A significant number, to be sure, but compared to moviegoers, theater attendance is a relatively minor activity. According to a study issued by the Motion Picture Association of America, 172 million people attended movies from July 2006 to June 2007 (“Movie Attendance” 3), which they acknowledged was an off year for movie attendance. This number does not include those who never attended a movie in a theater but did watch movies in their own homes. By the numbers, live theater — and the people who create it — serve a minor function in American society. But we who create theater — I include myself on that side of the fence as well — do not do so for quantitative measures. While we would all no doubt appreciate a greater interest in our chosen art form, we make theater because we must. As Gary Garrison, now Executive Director, Creative Affairs for The Dramatists Guild of America, told those of us attending a playwriting intensive at the Kennedy Center in the summer of 2006, “Nobody asked you to be a writer.”

Where does this leave those like myself graduating from the numerous dramatic writing programs much like the one here at The University of New Mexico (UNM)? What can we emerging playwrights expect to do with our freshly-framed degrees? And what greater or broader or deeper knowledge — about our own processes as theater artists as well as about the making of theater in general — can we bring to the theater we will yet create?

For the remainder of this analysis, I will offer myself as a yardstick of sorts against which others graduating with advanced degrees in theatrical writing can compare themselves as I examine the theatrical realm and what might await me. Perhaps these explorations of my prospects will serve as some kind of template for others who also seek to make a career after earning their degrees. Moreover, because I am older than the typical graduate (I will be 56 when I receive my diploma), I may be able to provide a somewhat longer view than some others of my fellow graduates.

Enter the Not-So-Neophyte

In the spring of 1992, I took my first class in playwriting at UNM. The instructor was Isaac Chocron, an internationally celebrated playwright from Venezuela, whose first lesson was that you cannot write *for* the theater unless you had some knowledge *of* the theater. His advice to the dozen or so of us aspiring dramatists was to get to know the theater, to baptize ourselves in the theatrical pool by volunteering for a local company so we could come to understand what theater was. I remember feeling a bit smug. By 1992, I had been an actor, director, producer, choreographer, set designer, lighting designer, sound designer, costumer, and props master. I had built and painted flats. I had hung lights and run a follow spot. I had crewed shows and selected costumes. I had also been a marketing manager, a theatrical agent, an usher, and a ticket seller. I had designed posters and written news releases. I had filled every function listed in the first paragraph above, and more, and even been paid for some of them.

I was, too, a devoted patron of the theater, spending any spare money on tickets. I was both teacher and student, teaching acting classes and studying every aspect of

the many performances I attended. As an autodidact, I read about theater performance and production at every opportunity. By the time I took that class with Isaac Chocron, I had been immersed in theater all my adult life. What I wanted to find, what I was there to learn, was something about its origins. Eventually, I determined that I would pursue a degree in dramatic writing so I could fathom the headwaters of theater — how a script is formed and wrought into existence, how words on a page form the basis for plays audiences pay to see and the retinue of theater artists seek to produce and perform. Yet I have always had one on eye on the moment after I earned my degree. Once I emerge from the halls of academia, blinking in the artificial light of the larger theatrical world, what place could I find for myself? Indeed, what place is there for anyone earning an advanced degree in Dramatic Writing, especially given the fact that seldom have playwrights functioned, much less prospered, solely in that province?

This was all a different world than the one I remembered from my original, adolescent forays into theater. Certainly forty-year-old memories are a faulty basis for knowledge, but when I first dipped my toes into the theatrical stream as a high school sophomore in the late 1960s, playwrights, it seemed, earned a living without hyphenated duties attached. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller were still writing. Edward Albee was exciting people with his new works. The often disparaged Neil Simon earned praise for having four different plays running on Broadway at the same time. When I began to pursue my degree, these, among several others, were the role models I had for playwriting, first impressions being what they are. These writers often learned their craft as apprentices — e.g., Neil Simon labored amongst a host of others writing television's *Your Show of Shows* — or learned from their “mistakes.” Now, our

universities turn out dozens of playwrights annually, sending their proteges out into our theaters clutching their freshly-inked MFAs and their expectations for respect.

Given the evidence cited above, the safe prediction is that emerging playwrights like myself will not make a living on our words alone. In my case, I clearly need new role models. Following in the footsteps of Arthur Miller or Tennessee Williams is no longer a workable plan. Perhaps it never was. In the hagiography of my hazy memory, I gauze over the parts where they both earned sizable sums for movie rights and screenplays, frequently looked on with contempt by playwriting purists.

So, what writers today are finding their way through this apparent miasma and how, and how do I compare to them, both as a writer and a theater artist? Are there lessons in my search that apply beyond my own peripatetic career to others emerging into the field, clinging to their various diplomas and varying degrees of hope?

For fresh role models, I determined to find writers whose works resembled mine in some discernible ways, where I could draw parallels to their methods and their results. I looked for writers who worked in other capacities — reality and Kushner's assertion being instructive — in theater, in its connected realms or in academia. I also sought a vaguely defined kindredness, artists whose work and works seemed comfortably comparable in some small way to mine. I found two. While my own career cannot match theirs in the luster of the names we each can drop, there are, nonetheless, instructive points of comparison, aspects which go to prove that I, too — along with any of my fellow MFAs — can become a productive if not well-compensated hyphenated playwright, eager to contribute to the theatrical repertoire.

Steven Dietz

As Steven Dietz said in an e-mail exchange:

Playwriting chose me. I didn't see a play till I was in High School, and I made it through a basic college theatre degree without ever meeting a playwright. It simply was not on my horizon, since I was going to play second base for the San Francisco Giants. My last year of college, I was encouraged as a director — and having been assigned a one-act play to direct, I decided to write one instead. It was pretty bad, as I recall, but I realized (as foolish as this sounds) that plays were not just found at the library. You could actually make one up and write one down. The following year my car broke down in a Minneapolis snowstorm in front of an old church on Franklin Avenue. I went in [to] use the phone. It wasn't a church, after all. It was the Playwrights Center. I was home (E-mail Interview).

He started his theatrical career at the Center as resident artistic director in 1980, working with Lee Blessing and August Wilson, among others. He began writing scripts in earnest in 1983. Since then, his plays have been produced by over one hundred regional theaters. His association with those regional theaters is what intrigues me most. His plays have spent little time in New York. That marketing choice offers an interesting lesson, an option for emerging writers like myself. As he told *Playbill* On-Line, "I haven't built my life around having my plays in New York, I just haven't" (Jones). Most have been developed by a retinue of regional theaters, including Arizona

Repertory Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, the Guthrie Theatre, and the McCarter Theatre.

Among his titles are *Lonely Planet*, winner of the PEN USA West Award in Drama; *Sherlock Holmes: The Final Adventure*, for which he received the 2007 Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America; *Fiction* and *Still Life with Iris*, both recipients of the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays Award; *Last of the Boys*, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; and *Silence*, an adaptation of the novel by Shusaku Endo and winner of the 1995 Yomuri Shimbun Award, the Japanese equivalent of our nation's Tony Award.

Since becoming a playwright, Mr. Dietz has continued to direct at many regional theaters, including Actor's Theatre of Louisville (for their Humana Festival), Seattle Repertory Theatre, Denver Center Theatre Company, San Jose Repertory Theatre, and the Sundance Institute.

He created quite a stir with his series of articles in *American Theater* magazine: "Doom Eager: Writing What We Need to Know," "Developed to Death," "An Audience Manifesto," and "A Modest Proposal: On Training Directors for the New Century."

Mr. Dietz earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Theatre Arts from the University of Northern Colorado. He teaches playwriting and screenwriting at the University of Texas at Austin and I had the privilege of attending a workshop he led as part of the Playwriting Intensive at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 2006.

As he taught, I was struck by his very pragmatic attitude about his work. I'm not alone. Austin playwright Kirk Lynn said,

“Meeting someone like Steven who can sit alone in a room and wrestle with the universe before being on time to take his kids to the Spaghetti Warehouse gives me great hope. It gives me a road map to 90 percent of what I think I want in this world. It makes Steven Dietz something more than just a successful writer and director living in our community. It makes him a role model” (Faires).

Emily Mann

Emily Mann found theater in high school. “One of my teachers said, ‘Oh my God, you really have a director’s mind,’ so at 17, I directed. [...] I did find that I found where I was most alive early on in my life: in the theater in high school” (Phone Interview).

Like Mr. Dietz, she also began her professional career as a director, first apprenticing with Tony Richardson in London and then accepting the Bush Fellowship for directing at the Guthrie Theater, thus earning an MFA from the University of Minnesota. By that time, the mid 1970s, she had recorded long conversations with a woman named Annulla Allen in London, conversations she eventually turned into a one-person play, *Annulla: An Autobiography*. Her monologue hews so tightly to the words her subject spoke that she credited the woman as co-author. The style she adopted for her first play stuck, a form she refers to as “Theater of Testimony” (Greene 81) and she began sculpting a series of plays out of the words of others: *Still Life*, based on recorded interviews with a Vietnam vet, his wife, and his mistress; *Execution of Justice*, based on the transcript of the trial of Dan White, who shot Harvey Milk, and interviews with others associated with or affected by the incident; and *Greensboro (A Requiem)*,

crafted from interviews she recorded with people from both sides of a deadly racial incident in North Carolina in 1979. I truly connect with Ms. Mann's extensive research as well as her inordinate, perhaps innate, sense of history and how it informs our lives today.

Ms. Mann also adapted the works of other writers into plays: *Nights and Days*, originally by Pierre Laville; *Betsey Brown*, adapted with Ntozake Shange from Shange's novel; and *Having Our Say*, based on a book by centenarians Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany. She also adapted their story for television, winning a Peabody Award.

Throughout this period, she also continued to direct plays, by others and by herself, working largely in Minneapolis, Louisville, and New York. She was an associate director of the Guthrie Theatre and later resident director for the BAM Theatre Company in Brooklyn, New York. She was appointed Artistic Director of the McCarter Theater in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1990, a position she still holds today.

While Ms. Mann continues to write plays — adaptations such as *Meshugah* from a novel by Isaac Bashevis Singer and *A Seagull in the Hamptons* based on Chekhov's *The Seagull* — she also maintains her career as a freelance director. She has directed productions at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and the Roundabout Theatre Company in New York. Her direction of Edward Albee's *All Over* won her an Obie Award and she was nominated for a Tony Award for directing *Having Our Say* on Broadway. She directed the original production and subsequent Broadway production of Nilo Cruz' Tony Award- and Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Anna and the Tropics*. Coincidentally (in the context of this thesis), she directed the world premiere of Steven Dietz's *Last of the Boys* in 2007 at the McCarter.

Her most recent script, *Mrs. Packard*, is based largely on the writings of a 19th Century woman committed to a mental institution for liberal viewpoints that ran counter to her husband's Calvinist beliefs.

Her career flourished in spite of the advice she got as a student at Harvard University's Loeb Drama Center to consider working in children's theater since women could not make a career as a playwright and director (Potier). A graduate of Harvard (B.A, 1974), she also holds an Honorary Doctorate of Arts from Princeton University, where until recently she taught in the Program in Theatre and Dance.

Terry S. Davis

To provide the fullest understanding of how I compare myself to these two theater artists, I offer a summary of my own career in theater.

I, too, began in high school, as an actor, playing Tranio in a production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in 1969, the first in a string of over 75 roles in my life. Once I got to college, I also began directing. As a junior, I was the first student ever chosen to direct a main stage production at Eisenhower College and was asked the following year to direct a musical in the college's theater season, another first.

After graduating from college, I helped found a summer dinner theater company, which produced two to three musicals each year. I served as actor, director, producer, and marketing director for the company. I was also elected president of the board of the Broome County Civic Theatre in 1978, a community theater company in my native Binghamton, New York and directed and acted for that company.

I moved to Albuquerque in 1980, and began again as an actor, working at the Adobe Theatre and The Vortex Theatre. Within two years, I was directing for The Vortex. I also accepted my first professional directing assignment, *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* for Albuquerque Civic Light Opera Association, in 1985. I directed two other musicals for them in subsequent years.

Professionally, I took the standard advice and kept my day job in public relations, advertising and media. In 1986, I merged my vocation with my avocation by accepting the position of Marketing Director for Albuquerque Little Theater. I was named Marketing Director for the New Mexico Repertory Theatre in 1988.

I continued acting, accepting my first (under) paid role at the Wool Warehouse in *Same Time, Next Year* in 1989. That year, I saw a production of *The Beggar's Opera*, adapted by a local writer-director and was inspired to write my first script, *Taking Stock*. Shortly after, I began taking classes in playwriting at UNM. I was also asked by the local Mystery Cafe franchisee to write a script for his company. I completed "Guns and Poses" in a year and followed that with three more scripts for him over the next several years.

In 1996, I took the position of public relations director for Popejoy Hall, UNM's performing arts presenting operation, which brings touring musicals, plays, musicians, and dance companies to the state. I eventually became the group leader for marketing operations at Popejoy, a position I still hold, and in 2002, I officially entered UNM's MFA program for Dramatic Writing as a part-time student.

My script *The Family Frost* was co-winner of the Jean Kennedy Smith Award in the Kennedy Center's Michael Kanin Playwriting Competition in 2006.

Our Approaches to Writing

Ms. Mann, the daughter of an historian, clearly understands the value of her subjects' words. Her method in the testimonial dramas she creates is to take the hours and hours of words her subjects speak and, without otherwise altering them, whittle them down to a couple of hours of theater. She cites a similar process for her adaptations from other works. In describing her adaptation of Singer's stories for *Meshugah*, she said, "[Singer] used to go to lunch, and someone would tell him their story, and he would write that as a short story. That's how he worked. The material is so raw, you can still see the seams, so in a lot of ways, it's a continuation of a documentary work" (Greene 89). I appreciate her adherence to strict truths in her work, a practice I follow even while I compose rather than transcribe words for my characters, because I want them to ring as honestly in our world as it does in theirs. I spend a great deal of time learning the history, the profession, the possible experiences of my characters so I may write them more truthfully.

For example, while writing my latest work for this dissertation, *Teaching Moment*, I spent hours reading through comments by teachers posted to various on-line forums. I read education trade magazines and a variety of articles that discussed education issues. I traded e-mails with a friend of mine, a retired teacher whose stories helped me to craft some of the conflicts in the piece. I also completed the first draft of the play while teaching a course at the university, the first time I had ever led a class for an entire semester.

For the two characters not working in education, I dug into their professions as well, learning a little something about bricks so the comments by the bricklayer about his profession would make sense. For the woman who works in the factory, I delved into food manufacturing processes to understand what her workday might be like and why she so fiercely defends her son's dignity and his right to a decent education.

I found personal moments, too, from my own experiences that informed some of the characters. In particular, while directing a theater piece for a child abuse program, I worked with one young girl whose family lived in a motel while we rehearsed. On a few occasions, I would drive her back to the motel or pick her up from there. More than once, I got to see how this essentially homeless family lived. That view of that condition informs the circumstance in which Jeremy, the student in *Teaching Moment*, finds himself. Given that glimpse into such a circumstance, I found it possible to extrapolate from what I had witnessed to give Jeremy an emotional through line that begins with him hitting his teacher. While I have never been homeless, that simple connection opened up a world of possibilities for my character.

A common instruction to writers is "write what you know," a lesson I have struggled with since I first decided to try my hand at crafting drama. Certainly if I adhere to that dictum, I have far less need for such thorough research. Happily, I found that both Ms. Mann and Mr. Dietz work in fields, cultures, and time frames that are not their own. Ms. Mann's writing career demonstrates a courage to tackle subjects far beyond her ken. When asked by Alexis Greene about her body of work and its relationship to her life, she said:

It's a really aggressive act to say, I get to talk about war, I get to talk about the justice system, I get to talk about the holocaust, I get to talk about whatever the hell I please. It is not a male province. It has to do with me. I'm part of the society, I'm part of what the justice system is about, I'm part of the decisions about war. I choose to take part in that discussion. (94)

Mr. Dietz answered the question quite directly in his essay "Doom Eager" for *American Theatre* magazine. He argued quite forcefully that if actors could be cast in any role, regardless of race, sex or any other trait, playwrights should not be restricted in their topics, either, that to do so was tantamount to censorship.

What value is there in taking refuge in the idea that "I'll never know how a woman/man thinks. I'll never know how a black/white/Hispanic/Asian person thinks. I'll never know how a gay/straight/lesbian/bisexual person thinks. I'll never know what it's like to be a veteran, or a Native American, or a mother, or a white supremacist, or a brain surgeon, or a spy, or an Olympic athlete, or a communist, or a dock worker, or an anti-abortion activist, or Jewish/Catholic/Muslim, or a disabled person, or a southerner, or an orphan, or a high-fashion model, or an 18th-century poet, or a feminist, or a foreign visitor, or the Amish, or a Republican, or a person with a terminal illness, or a father, or the homeless." No, perhaps you won't. But be advised that you have chosen a profession in which it is your *mandate* to be an explorer, not a curator of your society. (58)

He goes on to say that a writer should:

... be brave enough to “write about what you need to know.” Write about cultures that mystify you, write absolutely everything you think about the opposite sex, write about strangers who intrigue you, write with gusto about the people who you will never meet, write with abandon about anything outside of your experience that fascinates, frightens, inspires, angers or seduces you.

Clearly, he is urging writers to create from an unconscious standpoint, but it is precisely that point that can create issues. How does one know what one is unconscious of? Ms. Mann had that very problem when I discussed a prevailing theme in many of her works.

Davis: Several of your plays deal with society’s urge to segment itself.

Is this a theme you’ve seen in your own work, a focus you’ve chosen?

Mann: People have told me that. I don’t know that I consciously know it. I can’t comment on my unconscious or subconscious, can I?

Davis: I often think you don’t want to tamper with that.

Mann: Exactly, exactly.

That exchange indicates not only her ambivalence to the issue, but mine as well. I have often been concerned about confronting the monsters in my closet. Should they become too familiar, would I lose the impetus to confront them — unconsciously — in my writing? Would they lose their power to fascinate, frighten, inspire, anger or seduce?

While I have resisted confronting my inner demons head on, I have insisted on writing beyond my own life, as Mr. Dietz implores. I have written about a black woman

railing against the fact of her mixed race heritage, a 19th Century schizophrenic woman who stood up for women's rights during the French Revolution, a young man born to a Mexican father and American mother, and an elderly Taoseño involved with a younger woman while his wife remained bedridden at home. Of course, I am none of those, but I choose to write about human conditions, about people working through the obstacles of their daily lives. I want to show how we humans are more alike than we are different. If I can only write about the specifics of my life — what I know — I will never make that case. I am in the characters I create, regardless of their race, sex or color. Ms. Mann made much the same comment when she described how she shows up in the characters of *Still Life*, a play she based entirely on the words of her three interviewees: "I'm every character in *Still Life*. The whole piece comes out of me" (Greene 83).

Isolated Characters in Our Plays

One of the constants I find in the work of Mr. Dietz is the sense of isolation that his characters have — from each other, from their circumstances, but largely from the rest of the world. That isolation cuts across his work from his earliest to his most recent and across genres, from comedies to dramas to children's plays.

In *Last of the Boys*, Ben makes a home in a remote location in California, a place Mr. Dietz describes in stage directions as one where "[y]ou got lost out here, you'd need directions" (9). In *Fooling Around with Infinity*, Mac and Jesse work jobs that isolate them from the rest of the world, buried a quarter-mile beneath Utah in a missile silo. In *Lonely Planet*, map store owner Jody sequesters himself in a shop no one needs anymore and away from the reality of AIDS that surrounds him.

Mr. Dietz also wrote a play called *The Rememberer*. Joyce, a young member of the Squaxin tribe in 1911, is forcibly taken from her family and put into a school that has as its purpose the eradication of Indian ways from children of area tribes. However, she has been designated by her grandfather as her tribe's rememberer, the one who passes customs and heritage down to subsequent generations. At the end of Act One, the school's nurse asks Joyce if she would like to serve as the nurse's aide. She then asks Joyce the Squaxin words for doctor and medicine, which Joyce tells her.

NURSE WARNER [...] Okay. One more. How about "remedy." What is your word for "remedy"? (*JOYCE stares at her, then looks away.*) ... Joyce? (*JOYCE keeps looking away.*) Well. Maybe there isn't one. Not all languages have words for the same things we do. (*JOYCE looks back at NURSE WARNER.*)

ADULT JOYCE [who narrates the play]. There was a word for it. But, no matter how long I stood there, I couldn't think of it. I couldn't remember it (55).

A letter the nurse hands her informs Joyce that her grandfather, the tribe's rememberer, has died. Miles from her home, with her memory of her tribe's language and customs fading, she feels more pressure than ever to return to her Squaxin people, to take her appointed position with her own tribe, but she is not just a student at the school: she is a captive. In the second act, Joyce tries to escape but cannot and finds herself needed as a deadly outbreak of influenza strikes the school, killing many of the students. The bodies of those students are placed in the basement of her dormitory until they can be buried. Descending into the basement to provide an accurate count for the

military unit arriving in an hour to bury the bodies, she discovers a young boy, thought to be dead, awaking amongst the bodies. She begins to understand that she was needed at the school, the place where she felt most isolated, if only because she saved the life of this one boy who might well have been buried alive.

Characters in my plays and screenplays also find themselves isolated, either by circumstance or by choice. In my screenplay *Lines*, Miguel isolates himself from his American grandparents and insulates himself from the pain of losing his parents by focusing on editing and publishing the family newspaper. In *She Was*, Theroigne de Mericourt is isolated inside an insane asylum and, further, by her madness and pre-schizophrenia political views. In my latest script, *Teaching Moment*, teacher Marshall isolates Jeremy in a box. Initially Jeremy rebels against the treatment but discovers that his isolation allows him peace and a place in which, finally, he can express himself.

In *The Family Frost*, Alan returns to his childhood home on Sentinel Point in the Thousand Islands region of upstate New York to tend to his father who has Alzheimer's Disease. He describes how he felt after turning off the highway to drive that last mile and a half.

ALAN. I drove past the summer cottages, looking vainly for faint signs of life. Only a handful are year-round places and in the last quarter mile -- the actual spit of land that thrusts itself out into the river to make the point -- only one house was inhabited this time of year. I felt like I was in school again and the bus had just dropped me off at the highway, the only kid whose house was on Sentinel Point.

After most of a year passes, he spends a lonely Christmas with his father who is well past any ability to communicate. The two also survive an overnight ice storm that costs them their power and their heat. Alan wakes up the next morning after the storm has passed.

ALAN. The storm left everything covered in ice: trees, power lines, houses. Everything fairly shimmered as though sheathed in glass. Tiny prisms of color danced on the edges of every object you saw. Only when you looked more closely did you see the damage: tree limbs snapped and hanging precariously by the slimmest of fragments; antennas twisted and dangling off rooftops; birds by the dozens lying frozen on the ground. And it was cold. So very cold.

Certain he can no longer endure his father's disease and the deprivation of social contact he suffers — only partly a consequence of his role as caretaker — he places a pillow over his father's face as he sleeps. Deciding whether someone else should live or die seems to me one of the loneliest decisions one could ever make. Alan does not kill his father but finally emerges from his isolation with a broader understanding of love and family.

The characters in Ms. Mann's plays find themselves isolated as well, but the barriers that surround them are most often societal rather than personal. In *Having Our Say*, the Delany sisters suffer through segregation, watching as Jim Crow laws take hold in North Carolina and change their accustomed ways of dealing with the white men and women in their lives. In *Greensboro (A Requiem)*, the divisions of race are the cause for deeply felt hostilities in a community and, by extension, our nation. In *Mrs. Packard*,

several women have been committed to an insane asylum because of their sex and their male-dominated society's intolerance for outspoken women.

In *Execution of Justice*, the words of several people, dropped in at various points, reveal the way the defense attorney and others offered the jury in the Moscone/Milk murder trial a way to give defendant Dan White the lightest sentence possible, to allow those jurors a way to protect their heterosexual community from the "perversions" of homosexuals proliferating in San Francisco.

- In the fourth line of the play, a cop says, "Yeah, I'm wearing a 'Free Dan White' T-shirt." Later, he says, "See, Danny knew---he believes in the rights of minorities. Ya know, he just felt---we are a minority, too" (263-4). The divisions are very clear very early in the play.

- Defense attorney Schmidt confronts the first prospective juror by asking, "Have you ever supported controversial causes, like homosexual rights, for instance?" The juror responds, "I have gay friends ... I, uh ... once walked with them in a Gay Freedom Day Parade." Schmidt dismisses him. Questioning a third prospect, he tells him, "The jury serves as the conscience of the community" (267-8).

- During Schmidt's opening statement, he carefully draws more lines. "Dan White came from a vastly different lifestyle than Harvey Milk, who was a homosexual leader and politician. Dan White was an idealistic young man, a working-class young man. He was deeply endowed with and believed very strongly in the traditional American values, family and home ..." (272). The distinction between Dan White, who upholds "traditional" American values, and Harvey Milk who, by all such comment, clearly does not, is now complete.

- Once the jury announces its decision — voluntary manslaughter for both killings instead of murder in the first degree — the character Moscone’s Friend tells the audience, “If he’d just killed George, he’d be in jail for life.” A Young Mother addresses the audience: “To this jury, Dan White was their son” (341). Those two statements sum up the rift that was used to give the jury the excuse it needed — probably wanted — to give Dan White as lenient a sentence as possible.

The whole of the play distinguishes Harvey Milk as being “other,” a distinction that allows the jurors the choice of “sticking with their own” and leaves the audience to understand the issues of the divisions we, as a society, create.

Isolation, then, gives us each the opportunity to sharpen the conflicts within our material. As Mr. Dietz pointed out, “Solitude is a common and powerful tool for any dramatist, I suppose, because it seems to beg the next action: when will that solitude be shattered or changed? (E-Mail Interview)” Certainly none of the three of us has a lock on isolation as thematic material. For example, Shakespeare mined that territory thoroughly in *King Lear*. However, finding that common factor with two of my contemporaries does offer some measure of encouragement as I find my way forward in this business.

The Political and the Personal

Mr. Dietz often cites a tenet from Bertold Brecht as central to his drive to write what he does: “The modern theatre mustn’t be judged by whether it manages to interest the spectator in the theatre itself — but whether it manages to interest him in the world” (Ballet 144). His execution of that philosophy yields plays that tend toward the

personal with his characters caught up in issues larger than themselves. They embody the politics of his plays in microcosm. In *Lonely Planet*, Carl brings Jody the empty chairs of all the people they know who died of AIDS. Mac and Jesse in *Fooling Around with Infinity* sit at the command console for nuclear warheads and challenge each other through their own brand of brinksmanship to fill time until the launch order comes. In *God's Country*, we watch the Boy start the play with the Pledge of Allegiance and end it by twisting it into a pledge to the Aryan Nation.

In his play *Last of the Boys*, Lorraine has tracked down her daughter, Sal, to a remote corner of California where she finds her in the company of two Vietnam veterans. Drinking with Ben, she starts to spill her own connection to the war.

LORRAINE. I never told her. I never told Sal about her dad. Whenever she asked, I just said he left me for someone else, because, hey — and I don't care how this sounds — that's exactly what it *felt like*.
(Beat.) God, we were *kids*. My Daniel ... my Danny was a little boy who got his draft notice. And I was a little girl who couldn't tell him — I put him on that plane and I *never* told him —

BEN. What?

LORRAINE. That I had a baby in my gut and not a clue in the world.
(Pauses, drinks.) Left on a Monday. I got some letters from basic training, saying he was shipping out. Next thing I know the Army is calling — telling me my husband is MIA. *Don't I know it*, I said. My Danny's been MIA since he first got his draft notice. We're eighteen years old and he reads that thing and I watch this ... *fog* ... just ...

cover his face. And I tell him that I love him and that I want to spend my life with him, and that ... *fog ... just ... does not lift.* To this very day I listen to people debate that war and what it *did* and what it *meant* and I just want to SHAKE those idiots and make them understand that that war was NOTHING BUT A VAST GLOBAL CONSPIRACY TO *BREAK MY FUCKING HEART.* (*Pause, still hard.*) As you can see, I'm *over it.* All in the past. Doesn't bother me at all.

BEN. He didn't make it home?

LORRAINE. Showed up on the Wall. Still MIA. *God — the lengths a man will go to get away from a woman* (34-5).

Each of his characters in the play embody a political statement. The names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial — The Wall — show up again, tattooed in their entirety on Sal's body. Ben assumes the persona of Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense during the war, to rationalize his — and our nation's — actions there. Jeeter tries in every way to embody and keep alive the authentic spirit of the Sixties. Because Mr. Dietz chooses to show us how the politics affect specific people, we see those politics become personal.

For her part, Ms. Mann states plainly that the best plays are political. "From Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare to Kushner, Marc Wolfe, and Adrienne Kennedy — from poetic drama to documentary theatre — the great plays of an age are invariably the political plays of an age" (*Political Stages* v). Her work certainly reflects the political in personal lives. So many of her plays are taken from the worlds of real

people and bring into focus such political issues as racial tension, homosexuality in society, and the Holocaust. In *Still Life*, Vietnam veteran Mark creates art that expresses the violence that was done to him and by him in the war. The Delany sisters of *Having Our Say* embody the survival of African-Americans through one hundred years of racial divide. Aaron in *Meshugah* becomes a repository for the Holocaust stories of so many of the Jews he meets.

In her most recent script, *Mrs. Packard*, the title character takes on the struggles of women as she fights against her institutionalization. Her husband, with the general consent of male society in 1860s Illinois, has her declared insane for her religious views, which run counter to his own. The asylum's doctor meets with her to find a way to send her home.

ELIZABETH. I wonder...if I'd known I would ...belong to my husband...
should I have married at all.

DR. MCFARLAND. Mrs. Packard! That would have been a--a
calamitous choice for you to have made, I should think, a
passionate woman like you!

ELIZABETH (flushes). ...I...I could never, ever regret having my six
beautiful children, don't misunderstand me, but... the price to pay is
quite high, don't you think? I now better understand those women
who choose not to marry. I could never understand them before! Or
women who want to vote? I'm thinking very hard about them at the
moment...

DR. MCFARLAND (horrified but laughing). Good heavens! That is certainly not the cure I had hoped you would take away from this institution, Mrs. Packard! My dear, it is quite clear you're an exceptional woman... and if I were in the least bit unethical, I'm afraid I'd keep you here forever! I'd never want to let you out of my sight! (HE laughs, with irony:) But, sadly, I am a good man. (THEY both laugh. SHE, uncertain. Pause) Now...Let's use your prodigious mind... to find a solution to your dilemma, and I shall call that solution... a cure. (looks at her pointedly) Do you understand me?

ELIZABETH. ...I'm not sure...

DR. MCFARLAND. Well, then... Let's get to the heart of the matter, shall we? What is this about your saying you're... (finds it in his notes) the personification of the Holy Ghost?

ELIZABETH. Wh-what?...I never said that. That would be ... crazy!

DR. MCFARLAND (with a smile). Yes, ...indeed. And it greatly concerns your husband that you did.

ELIZABETH. No, no! What I said—perhaps it isn't clear— is that the Trinity only makes sense to me if it consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Female Spirit. That is, the Son is the fruit of the love between the Father and the Holy Ghost. This idea has been discussed for centuries, Doctor.

DR. MCFARLAND (also with a smile). Really? And suppressed for centuries as heretical. Mrs. Packard, think! Your husband is a minister of the faith.

ELIZABETH. I don't care! It isn't heresy. The noun in Aramaic for Holy Spirit is female. It is a feminine noun.

DR. MCFARLAND (taken by surprise). ...Really?

ELIZABETH (getting animated). Yes! And Jesus of Nazareth spoke Aramaic. Our good Lord Jesus Christ would not eliminate women from every possible interpretation of his Word. He assumed a knowledge of the language.

DR. MCFARLAND. Yes, well... (clearly fascinated)

ELIZABETH. What may be of some confusion is I have said that as a woman, I represent the female spirit in earthly form, just as you, as a man, represent the father and the son. You may not agree with this interpretation, but it is not delusional.

DR. MCFARLAND. Yes, well... it is even... quite interesting, Mrs. Packard. But you must be practical! What you have just said is irrelevant.

ELIZABETH. Irrelevant! Why?! ...Why not discuss what is clearly interesting?

A BEAT.

DR. MCFARLAND. ...If you and I were to have met under different circumstances, perhaps the two of us could indulge in ...stimulating

dialogue, but I am here to help you return home to your husband and children, post-haste. You must begin by promising me to keep these... thoughts to yourself.

ELIZABETH. No. I don't want to.

DR. MCFARLAND. Mrs. Packard, be reasonable! You must see that you cannot hold forth on these ideas in your husband's house.

ELIZABETH. But Doctor, my children—

DR. MCFARLAND. No, no. Sh-sh-sh-sh-. I cannot be more clear. You have not given a response acceptable to your husband's teachings, and that must be our prime concern. (18-20).

Mrs. Packard ultimately triumphs, but at a terrible cost to herself, to her children, and to her fellow inmates. Each of them suffer personal consequences for Mrs. Packard's struggle to gain some measure of independence from her husband.

My own work makes politics personal as well. Black woman Tanisha upends history by seducing white man Dan into bondage and photographs him, humiliated and bound to a post in *Exposures*. High school football player Trace asserts his own masculinity by publicly molesting his girlfriend after he finds out that his coach is gay in *Point After*. In *Lines*, Miguel crosses the border illegally to document the means and lengths that Mexicans employ to find greater economic opportunity in the United States.

Like Ms. Mann, I, too, have written of the fight women have faced in gaining equal rights. In *She Was*, Theroigne de Mericourt fights for the adoption of women's rights during the French Revolution. Fellow revolutionist Gilbert Romme listens to her

arguments and tries to make clear to her that because she has no embodiment of her political argument, she has no hope of winning.

GILBERT. You have no villains.

THEROIGNE. I don't understand.

GILBERT. You have marched at the head of columns. Surely you understand.

THEROIGNE. Teach me.

GILBERT. Who did you march against?

THEROIGNE. The king.

GILBERT. Precisely.

THEROIGNE. You talk in ciphers.

GILBERT. The king is your villain. We can easily rally people against him. But when you try to rally the women, who are your villains? Against whom will you lead your march?

THEROIGNE. All the men who do not side with us. All the men who would suppress us.

GILBERT. You can't march against every man in France.

THEROIGNE. I can, if I must.

GILBERT. Would you ask a woman to rebel against her husband? He provides her with food. If she rebels, she would find herself out on her bottom.

THEROIGNE. Not if all the women stood with her.

GILBERT. Are you going to clothe her? Are you going to feed her?

THEROIGNE. Yes.

GILBERT. With what? You can provide her nothing without a man to sign the note.

THEROIGNE. Exactly my point.

GILBERT. Would you march against me? I am a man. Rally the women of France to march against me.

THEROIGNE. That is absurd. They don't know you.

GILBERT. They do not know the king, yet they march against him.

THEROIGNE. He is a figurehead.

GILBERT. And you have no figurehead to stand in for all French men.

THEROIGNE. Do you at least think my cause is just?

GILBERT. Would you ask King Louis if the cause of the rebellion against him is just?

THEROIGNE. But you are not the villain.

GILBERT. I am a man, am I not?

THEROIGNE. There are no villains in this battle. Giving women equality is not a matter of heroes and villains. No one loses.

GILBERT. You wish to fight a battle with no villains and no losers?

THEROIGNE. In this battle, everyone wins.

GILBERT. Then you have no battle.

Sympathetic though he is, he cannot convince her that her cause is doomed. He offers an embrace as he leaves. She mistakes his motives. Gilbert tells her, "And so you have discovered another complication in your fight: sex. Good night, mademoiselle." Not

only do the politics become personal in this exchange, we see that, really, they must, that all politics must become personal to succeed, to gain traction.

Certainly we three writers find drama by engaging the world, by engaging ideas and their realization, just as our forebears have for centuries. Ms. Mann described the mandate she finds in writing such works: “It just keeps haunting you until you grab hold and wrestle with it. I tried to run away from all of them. They were so scary and they were so big. That’s when I knew I was on to something. If it meant so much to me that I wanted to turn away, then clearly they were powerful and needed to be looked at” (Phone Interview). All playwrights wrestle with the ideas that continually haunt our society. Mr. Dietz noted in “An Audience Manifesto” that society should ask its playwrights to do just that. “We should encourage our theatre artists to go where we dare not. We should thank them (grudgingly, at times) for revealing to each of us, individually, what our boundaries are – social, sexual, religious, political. We should applaud them when they help us either draw the line or, willingly, step over it” (9).

Most recently, I wrestled with the political in shaping *Teaching Moment*. In early conversations about the project, I said I did not want to write another play about No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the controversial legislative act that currently governs our educational system. What I found was that I could not leave it out. While ultimately I believe the play goes beyond NCLB, the tests mandated by the law and the philosophies that underpin it clearly drive the action of the play and test Marshall to rediscover his own beliefs about the field he has chosen. This was a topic that I could not deny, a boundary I had to cross.

How Directing Informs Our Work

Both Ms. Mann and Mr. Dietz explore cultures, peoples and circumstances beyond their own lives as directors, too. Mr. Dietz tends to take on new works, having directed the premieres of John Olive's *The Voice of the Prairie*, Kevin Kling's *21-A* and *Auguste Moderne*, Len Jenkins' *A Country Doctor*, and Paul D'Andrea and Jon Klein's *The Einstein Project*, among many others. He also has directed his own plays, but only after their first production.

Ms. Mann may be as famous for her directing talents as for her scripts. She has directed, as noted above, on Broadway, off-Broadway, and regionally, including the Mark Taper Forum and the Guthrie Theatre. She has also directed world premieres, including *Miss Witherspoon* by Christopher Durang, *The Bells* by Theresa Rebeck, *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* by Anna Deveare Smith, and *The Perfectionist* by Joyce Carol Oates, among others. She has frequently directed her own works, often for their premieres, including *A Seagull in the Hamptons*, *Meshugah*, and *Betsey Brown*.

She discussed how she finds it easy to keep the functions of playwright and director separate as she directs her own new works.

I like to remove myself entirely and look at a play as a director and see how I'm stimulated by it. I like to work with the actors so that I know immediately if it's an acting problem, a directing problem or a writing problem. If it's a writing problem, I can fix it. I don't have to take the playwright to dinner and say, "Look, I know you don't want to touch a word of your perfect script, but this isn't working." If I can't come up with a solution and I know it's a writing problem, somebody will often

say something—it could be the janitor—to give me insight into it. I find that I direct my work best when I actually trust the script and say, “This is a good text,” as I do with Ibsen or Chekhov or Mamet (Savran 157).

Her effort, she declares, in directing all new works is to put the play and the playwright first.

When I direct a new play of a fellow writer, I listen to the writer because the writer knows more than I do, the director. It’s inevitable. It has to be true. Now at a certain point a director may know more than I about how this production should go. That I would understand as a playwright, to step back. That happens to me directing my own work. I suddenly know better as a director than I did when I was writing how it should go. [...] As a director of a new work, I’m very careful to be as invisible as possible in the production, that what shines through is this new play. It’s not about me. It’s about giving birth to a production of this play that gives the play out to the audience, and really introduces it into the repertoire, into the literature, and it’s a failure if it’s about me (Phone Interview).

Being both a director and a playwright, however, she finds that the two disciplines feed each other as she goes about making theater.

I wrote *Mrs. Packard*. Then suddenly it became blazingly evident to me what [Shaw’s] *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was, and I had to do it. Now that I’ve just finished opening *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* last week, what does that mean in terms of the next play I pick up? My guess is it’s

going to make me even sharper and even clearer about the passion and potential of language and how the language informs character and absolutely specific moment-for-moment work, down to the punctuation. I know that will help when I'm writing, it will help in the next play I direct, the next play I read to see if we're going to produce [it]. It all works together (Phone Interview).

Mr. Dietz finds a different problem from wearing the dual hats of writer and director.

[T]he director in me clearly writes much of my plays. I tend to be a structuralist, at heart. This can be helpful; this can get in the way. It's all a matter of the writer in me pushing the boundaries of my director-conceived "structures" — rather than just accepting them as a form that needs to be filled with words. (E-Mail Interview)

He did encourage directors, especially new arrivals to the craft, to be adventurous in the texts they direct and the means by which they do so in his essay "On Directing" for *American Theatre*:

The emerging director must become as fearless and facile as the art form itself, wrestling with the demands of many texts — classical and new, realistic and experimental — as well as the challenges of many collaborators: writers, performers and designers with a variety of interests, styles and passions (55).

That squares nicely with his encouragement to playwrights to be adventurous, but he also insists that directors — and writers — understand the craft. While directing

at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis, he worked with writers like Lee Blessing and August Wilson in the early stages of their careers. He gained some very practical lessons from the experience.

I was watching these writers just do their work. And I assumed that's what a playwright did: got in, rolled up his or her sleeves, and made the words better. Made the story better. It wasn't until later that I realized, no, a lot of playwrights don't do that. A lot of playwrights are arm-folders. They walk into the room, and they fold their arms, and they don't want to collaborate (Faires).

In spite of that very practical approach to making theater — either as a writer or director — he also encourages us all to keep a sense of whimsy.

I've got plays sketched out in my notebooks where the director and the structuralist in me has laid them out so firmly that I've diminished my interest in writing them. What I tell my students is that you have to be careful to remember the play's initial impulse, and make sure a little madness can always creep in" (Longenbaugh).

My own directing assignments have varied — *Cinderella* and *Sweet Charity* for Albuquerque Civic Light Opera, *I Hate Hamlet* for Albuquerque Little Theatre, *Talley's Folly* and *What a Man Weighs* for the Vortex Theatre. When reviewing a script to direct, I find my way in through the characters. Certainly that may not be an unusual approach for someone who started as an actor, but I find that interest also sparks the ideas for the plays I write. When directing, I start working with a script to discover, as much as possible, the writer's initial intention. Like Ms. Mann, I trust the playwright. I scour stage

directions in the acting editions of the scripts to determine whether they were likely written by the playwright or noted by the stage manager. I carefully review punctuation. I read lines aloud to get a sense of their rhythm. I find what comments I can from the writer to glean from those remarks anything I can about intent. I work to find the origins of the work, wherever possible. My intention is never to bring a concept to the work from outside it. I seek to find clarity from the script itself, from what life the writer breathed into the work from the very first. Once I feel I know that, I am more able to bring that script to the stage. Now that I have personal knowledge of how writers work, I feel more confident in my skills as a director.

I bring those same skills to my work as a playwright. If I find that I am having difficulty with a scene, I may read it aloud to see where the dynamics shift. I trust the actor in me, as I do when directing, to find the character's pulse, rhythm, and timing. If I, the playwright, have given myself, the actor, words that are hard to speak, words that jar for that character, words that ring hollow, I know I need to send myself back to the keyboard for more work. I also trust the pure director in me to hear the problems in the shifts in dynamics: within a character's speech, in the dialogue between characters, in the pauses I've created. Those are the times that I am happy to be both playwright and director. The second skill helps me with the first.

Those are largely craft issues, of course. The actor in me also asks what emotion drives that character and how that emotion changes and grows. When I studied acting, I learned two basic approaches to creating a character. We called them Method and Technique. The first is a means of building a character from the inside out, pulling emotion from within to command for the portrayal of the character. The second works

from the outside in, putting on the physicalization of specific emotions, but those muscular gestures ultimately generate the emotion within the actor for use in portraying the character.

As an actor, I prefer to work with the latter approach. This is also how I approach writing. I am not, typically, someone who deals in overtly histrionic pieces, characters whose struggles are borne out in breast-beating and wailing. My characters most often shift in subtle ways, through small moments. While writing a play, I am as often caught up in the puzzle of the piece as I am the emotional needs of the characters. When I finish a scene, my next impulse is to determine what traps I have set for myself, what corners I have painted myself into. Once I resolve the mental exercise of that, I can move to the next moment of the play.

Mr. Dietz and, to a lesser extent Ms. Mann, both strike me, to some degree, as fellow puzzlers. Clearly Mr. Dietz talks about how structure confronts him as a writer rather immediately, that the director in him is sitting at the keyboard along with the writer in him. Ms. Mann, working with so many historical and actual occurrences, begins with a subject that intrigues her, gathers the facts and data of the circumstance and starts distilling them down to their emotional, playable essence. Both are seeing the puzzle as well as the pulse of the piece.

Teaching Teaches the Writers

Both my new role models teach. Mr. Dietz, as mentioned above, teaches at the University of Texas at Austin. Ms. Mann restricts her teaching to master classes these days, but takes a great deal of pleasure from the process.

When I'm teaching well, I've learned something, so I'll sometimes do it to be rejuvenated. I find that by talking with these young people on a high level — they usually can meet me at that level and ask good enough questions that I get jostled — I have to rethink things. I have to think through in a clear enough way that I can then answer it clearly, so I find I'll also learn from my students. I find teaching an opportunity for me to grow. It's quite selfish (Telephone Interview).

Certainly finding inspiration from your students is nothing new, but deliberately teaching to gain those bursts of insight seems instructive.

On the other hand, Mr. Dietz, not surprisingly, takes a very pragmatic approach to teaching.

I have to walk my talk. I'm on deadlines for plays; my students are on deadlines for me. I feel that continuing my professional work (which was the goal of the position they created here at UT) gives me insight into my students' predicaments, and allows me to share my process with them at those moments that it may dovetail with their ongoing work. (E-Mail Interview)

When he travels to work on a script in production, he brings students with him so they can see firsthand what he does on the job. "It's watching me cut, watching me change, and in some way really demystifying the process" (Faires). Clearly teaching reinforces the process of playwriting for him. He views writing for the theater as his job, takes that job very seriously, and seemingly approaches it with the same conscientiousness he would expect of any tradesman.

I found both inspiration and reinforcement of my own knowledge on those occasions I got the opportunity to teach. When I taught acting, I assigned Michael Shurtleff's book *Audition* as the text. His description of multi-layered characters synthesized in words what I had been attempting to do as an actor. By teaching his precepts, I learned them more clearly, more deeply. Now as I write (or direct or act), I try to create characters that provide the dimensions Shurtleff describes, drawing them as fully as I can.

In the fall of 2008, I made time to teach a theater history course on the American musical. I assigned the students a script a week to read, thus using the musical libretto as the basis for our discussions. We began with musicals from the early 1900s through the last decade of the 20th Century. As we studied the development of the art form, we discovered that the scripts improved from one decade to the next, that the writing got more complex, more assured. As we reached the so-called golden age of musicals, I introduced my students to the six basic precepts that Lehman Engel prescribed for writing a good musical libretto: feeling, subplot, romance, lyrics and particularization, music, and comedy. Leaving aside lyrics and music, Engel's advice might well apply to any script, especially when you understand that he defined romance broadly enough to include romantic notions or ideals.

By forcing myself to present that material to a group of students, I found a sense of clarity about theater and its creation. As nurses say, "See one, do one, teach one:" watch a procedure, do the procedure, teach the procedure to better learn it. To learn a craft really well, it helps to teach it. Or as Mr. Dietz put it, "It's undeniable that having to articulate your craft to others can reinforce that craft within you" (E-Mail Interview).

Ours, as each of us has found, is an art form that constantly feeds itself from many directions.

How It All Comes Together

Since theater is a collaborative art — playwrights have to work with directors who have to work with actors, and so forth — the first collaboration for Ms. Mann, Mr. Dietz and myself is internal. We have to reconcile the competing voices of our various theater personae and get them to work together for creating the script. Playwright and teacher Jeffrey Sweet said in an online forum that Lanford Wilson told him "The first draft is written by the writer, [t]he second by the critic" (Sweet). As a process, that means that the writer puts down on paper what he feels; subsequent drafts are subject to revision by the various critics we all carry in our heads. Wilson's description carries a very purist attitude where his other voices seem not to tread on the process until after the first draft.

Of the three of us, Ms. Mann seems to come closest to that idea. When I asked her for a reaction to that quote, she said:

I write the first draft and then a trusted few people who know a lot about the theater, playwriting and me read it and give me their frank and honest critique. If something they say rings a bell, or if they all say the same thing, I then seriously consider rewrites. (E-Mail)

When asked the same question, Mr. Dietz acknowledged some grayer areas in that process.

I would tend to agree, at least in my own work, that the first draft has a bit more madness to it — it is generating itself rather than interrogating

itself. My goal, however, has been to try to blur the line between these generative and interrogative steps — to have them co-exist — with the goal being that the first draft has some aspect of critical thinking built-in, and the subsequent drafts have, comparably, some aspect of new creation to them. (“One More”)

While writing *Teaching Moment*, I found that I could trust my own instincts more, that I could, in fact, reach toward the idea (ideal?) that Lanford Wilson posits. Certainly forty years of working in all other areas of theater has given me a massive crutch as a writer, one I lean on far too often. Whenever I get to some sort of writerly impasse, I can turn to the director (or actor or producer or marketer) in me and come up with an answer. I find more and more that I am willing to listen to the storyteller first and turn to those other (very helpful) personae only to help me make revisions.

Certainly what I have gained from the study and practice of making theater from scratch during the acquisition of my degree is a more complete understanding of what drives its creation. All of us theater artists have stories we must tell. Some of us write those stories down so others may give them form and dimension. While many writers may be content to simply provide the words, others of us want to do more. We want to work in the theater, not just at our keyboards. We like the social aspects of theater as well as the solitude of writing. We like the shared work that plays require as well as the sole responsibility for a play’s inception. With history, current theatrical economics and social realities dictating that there can be no such thing as an unhyphenated playwright, it seems far better to choose theatrical designations — -director, -actor, -theater professor — to append to our titles instead of -line cook, -receptionist, -maid.

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Teaching Moment

by
Terry S. Davis

SETTING:

Marshall Wright's classroom, a portable schoolroom which is part of a small Midwestern town's high school, furnished with desks, chalkboard, bookcase, a file cabinet, a working sink and a resolute door, all of which are practical. A dictionary sits open on the top of the bookcase or elsewhere in the room. There is one window which is in the door. Mounted on one wall is the intercom.

CHARACTERS:

Marshall Wright — nearing 60, struggles to teach, often wondering why he should anymore

Jeremy Taylor — rail thin, scruffy, sullen, uncool; his eyes light up given the right impetus

Ace Tancredi, school principal — squat and tough, a former coach still trying to lead his team

Angela Bales, Jeremy's mother — timid, but ferociously protective of her children

Steve Bales, Angela's live-in boyfriend — a little too sure of his own knowledge and opinions

ACT 1 SCENE 1

Last period of the day. MARSHALL is in a tight light.

MARSHALL

So the old man goes through his daily ritual. Here it is, the start of what could be his eighty-fifth day without catching a fish. Hemingway is showing us how limited we humans are in our capacities to change our worlds. And that's a theme you can use in your essays -- hint, hint -- on the state exams.

The end of the period bell rings. We hear the sounds of students leaving.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

And they're off. Don't forget your vocabulary lists for Monday. Next week we start prepping for state tests full time.

General groans.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Jeremy, I need to see you before you leave.

The sounds fade as the light expands to reveal the classroom. JEREMY is drawing on his hand.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

(reading from his class book)

All right. Jeremy Taylor. I have here that you owe me several assignments. Your last three vocabulary lists. Sorry, last four. Your analysis of the Mark Twain short story, your personal essay and your poem. Those were all due at least two weeks ago. And those are just the major assignments.

No response.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Could you even acknowledge that I spoke to you? That there are two of us in the room?

No response.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

I see. Jeremy, you now have the lowest grade in class. You were pulling Cs a few weeks ago. Can you tell me what happened?

No response.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Well, it's entirely up to you. If you start handing in --

JEREMY

WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?!!!

MARSHALL

Just calm --

JEREMY

You want my poem? Would that shut you up? All right! This is my poem!

MARSHALL

(overlapping)

Jeremy! Back in your seat. Sit back down!

JEREMY

WORDS! ARE! SHIT!

He writes the words on the blackboard.

MARSHALL

(overlapping)

Jeremy! Sit down! Sit down! Jeremy! What is your problem?

JEREMY

(overlapping)

No! Stop talking! STOP TALKING!!!!

Jeremy jumps Marshall, knocking him down, and starts flailing at him.

MARSHALL

Jeremy! Stop! Stop it!
Hey!

JEREMY

Stop talking! Stop! Stop!
Talking!

Jeremy looks at Marshall, who is bleeding from his forehead, lets out a long wail of frustration and runs out of the room. Marshall rises, picks up his grade book and places it on his desk. He goes to the board and starts to erase Jeremy's message. He erases "Shit," then stops. He looks at it for a long moment, adds a question mark, looks at it again, then erases it all. He returns to his desk and squares the grade book. It's not right. He squares it again. It's still not right. He squares it again.

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 2

TANCREDI, STEVE and ANGELA are now in the room with Marshall whose forehead is bandaged. He also has one slightly black eye. The board has been erased.

ANGELA

I'm sorry. I -- don't know why he did that. I mean --

TANCREDI

It doesn't matter why he did it, Mrs. Taylor. He did it, so I have very few options now.

STEVE

What options?

TANCREDI

Bottom line is that we need to expel your son.

ANGELA

No!

STEVE

You can't do that.

TANCREDI

Yes I can, Mr. Bales. The law gives me the authority to --

ANGELA

But -- but I want Jeremy to go to school.

TANCREDI

You can send him to another school.

ANGELA

What other school?

STEVE

This is the only school in town.

TANCREDI

Other parents have sent their kids to Cedar Ridge.

STEVE

That's twenty miles.

TANCREDI

Of course, you'd have to pay out-of-district tuition.

ANGELA

We can't afford that.

STEVE
We're fucked!

ANGELA
Steve, please --

STEVE
No! We're fucked. You don't give a good god damn about Jeremy, do you?

TANCREDI
I've got over 1200 students in this school.

STEVE
So, you get rid of a few, it makes your job easier, right?

ANGELA
Mr. Tancredi, I -- I work two jobs and it's not enough. Steve was -- was layed off six weeks ago. We can't afford to -- to keep a roof over our heads. How can we afford tuition and -- and driving Jeremy to Cedar Ridge and back?

TANCREDI
I'm sorry. We can't have students hitting teachers, it's --

STEVE
You do this, you understand he's not going back to school.

TANCREDI
If you don't send him to school, the state will consider him a truant.

STEVE
So, piss on us.

ANGELA
We can't afford this.

TANCREDI
That can't be our concern.

STEVE
Well, what the hell is your concern, then? Huh? I thought you were supposed to make sure kids stayed in school. Get an education. We tell you that if you don't keep Jeremy here, he's not going to school. And you say you don't care?

TANCREDI
With all due respect, Mr. Bales, this is an issue between the school and Mrs. Taylor.

STEVE
Just because I'm not his real father doesn't mean I don't care. I care a hell of a lot more than you do!

TANCREDI
I'm looking at the larger picture here.

STEVE

You know what? If we had money, none of this would be a problem right now.

TANCREDI

This has nothing to do with money.

STEVE

Oh yeah? When's the last time you bounced some rich kid?

ANGELA

I just want Jeremy to get an education. It's his only chance to -- to get out. To not be stuck like me.

A moment.

MARSHALL

Maybe there's another way.

TANCREDI

Where are you going with this, Marsh?

MARSHALL

You assign him to detention. With me.

STEVE

Yeah! That'll work. *(scoffs)*

MARSHALL

Why won't it?

STEVE

You're the one Jeremy pounded.

MARSHALL

I'll --

ANGELA

Will you -- will you treat him okay?

STEVE

Ange --

ANGELA

I mean, will you treat him -- with respect? Are you going to treat him like -- like he's a human being? Because he's really a good boy, Mr. Wright. I don't know why he hit you, and I'm -- I'm sorry. I really am. But he wants to learn. I know he does. He was always so -- curious.

STEVE

What would you do with him? In this "detention"?

MARSHALL

I would try ... to teach him.

TANCREDI

This isn't about teaching. It's about punishment.

MARSHALL

But there's an opportunity here. Don't you see? Jeremy comes to my classroom after school. For a detention period. But we use that time to -- teach him.

STEVE

There's got to be someone else to do this.

TANCREDI

How many teachers do you think I have here?

MARSHALL

Everyone wants to keep him in school. Am I right?

ANGELA

Yes. Very much.

MARSHALL

Then, what other options do we have?

Everyone looks at Tancredi.

TANCREDI

All right, all right. We'll try it your way. But the first sign of trouble, he's gone. Are we clear?

ANGELA

Thank you, Mr. Tancredi. Mr. Wright: thank you. If you do what you've promised -- and treat him right --

She and Steve leave. Tancredi waits for them to be gone.

TANCREDI

Who the hell appointed you the white knight? I thought we were on the same side on this.

MARSHALL

You could have stuck to your guns.

TANCREDI

Sure. Make me look even more like a schmo. No, thanks. Shit. I hired you when no one else would and this is the thanks I get?

MARSHALL

That was five years ago ...

TANCREDI

All right, never mind. It's done. So, what are you going to do now?

MARSHALL

I don't know.

TANCREDI

They're going to expect progress. Hell, I'm going to expect progress.

MARSHALL

I know.

TANCREDI

You're going to have to drill him, Marsh. Just like we've talked before. That's the only way with kids like him.

MARSHALL

White knight to drill master.

TANCREDI

In fact, drill him for the state exam. He's gonna need a lot of work for that. And you know we need as many kids as possible to pass. Just open up his head and pour shit in.

MARSHALL

That's not what I promised I'd do. Just now?

TANCREDI

You said you were going to teach him.

MARSHALL

I just told his mother that I was going to treat him like a human being.

TANCREDI

He's not a human being. He's an animal. And if I were you, I wouldn't stick my neck out for him.

MARSHALL

When a horse throws you, you get back on the horse. Isn't that what they say?

TANCREDI

This kid's no horse. He's a junk yard dog.

MARSHALL

The corollary is that if a horse throws you, it's not the horse's fault.

TANCREDI

How close to retirement are you?

MARSHALL

Not close enough.

TANCREDI

Close enough to -- to --

MARSHALL

Coast?

TANCREDI

To keep doing what you been doing.

MARSHALL

What happened to Matthew Ryan?

TANCREDI

From last year? He dropped out.

MARSHALL

And Duncan Stephens? And Chris Herrera? Remember Chris?

TANCREDI

They couldn't hack it. No skin off your nose. You did your job.

MARSHALL

Did I?

TANCREDI

They failed, not you.

MARSHALL

Maybe, maybe not. We'll never know. But that's not what the state exams say. The kids fail those exams, it's our fault. Right? Isn't that the way it works? I taught those kids the way you told me to. The way you told us all to do it. And they dropped out. Or they failed. Either way, they're not learning anything. Ace, I appreciate the fact that you gave me this job. And that I can finish out my career so I can get my retirement. I know I owe you for that. But what do I owe the kids? I hear what the students say about me. And the other teachers. I don't want that to be my legacy. I don't want you and I to be the only ones at my retirement party.

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 3

Days later. Last period is over. Marshall retrieves an old satchel and pulls from it several folders and books and arranges them carefully on his desk, needlessly squaring corners. The door opens and Tancredi leads Jeremy into the room. Tancredi shuts the door. Jeremy wears a slightly soiled bandage on his right hand and lugs a beaten backpack, largely empty.

TANCREDI

All right. He's yours.

MARSHALL

Jeremy -- welcome back.

TANCREDI

(to Jeremy)

You. Find a place to sit.

MARSHALL

Please.

Jeremy heads for the back of the class.

TANCREDI

What have you got planned?

MARSHALL

I have a number of possibilities.

TANCREDI

But --

MARSHALL

I'm going to teach. I've got stuff to cover. Don't worry ...

TANCREDI

I can still take him down to detention.

MARSHALL

No, thanks.

TANCREDI

Then drill him, Marsh. Just drill him. Every day. Just open up his head --

MARSHALL

And pour it in. I know. It's one of my options, Ace. I promise.

TANCREDI

You want me to stay? 'Cause I could --

MARSHALL
No, thanks.

TANCREDI
I'm gonna stay. Just for a few --

MARSHALL
Please. Let me -- try this. Let me do this.

TANCREDI
You're sure?

MARSHALL
No, but --. Yes. Sure enough.

TANCREDI
(pointing at Jeremy)
Nothing from you. Nothing. We clear?

JEREMY
Yeah, fine.

TANCREDI
'Cause I can take you straight to detention. You oughta be bowing down to Mr. Wright here for doing this.
(to Marshall)
We got the intercom open. You need us, you yell. All right?

MARSHALL
Thank you, Mr. Tancredi.

TANCREDI
All right. And let's open this window up.

Tancredi takes the paper out of the door's window and leaves. Finally:

JEREMY
So, we just gonna sit here?

MARSHALL
Move up to the front, please.

Jeremy moves.

MARSHALL (cont'd)
Thank you. We're -- We need to start again.

JEREMY
What do you mean?

MARSHALL
Clean slate. Day one.

Whatever -- JEREMY

MARSHALL
Jeremy, we have a month of afternoons together. I thought it would be best if -- if there were new -- a new sense of ... I wish I could turn that off.

What off? JEREMY

MARSHALL
(indicates the intercom)
That. I don't -- I don't like being watched.

JEREMY
It's 'cause they don't trust me.

MARSHALL
And you don't trust me. Do you? Never mind. I think we need some rules here. I thought just three. No food or drink, no electronics, no -- disrespect. Of any kind. And those rules apply to both of us. What do you think?

JEREMY
You're the teacher.

MARSHALL
I'd like your agreement.

He offers his hand. Jeremy shows his bandaged hand. Marshall offers his other hand. Jeremy shakes it limply.

MARSHALL (cont'd)
If I speak to you, please show me some respect by giving me a response in kind. Can we?

JEREMY
Yeah.

MARSHALL
Now. Please tell me why you're here.

JEREMY
What?

MARSHALL
I want to know why you're here.

JEREMY
Tancredi told me I had to.

MARSHALL
Jeremy, we have a month together. Twenty-two days, taking weekends off. So, for twenty-two days, do you expect the two of us to just stare at one another?

I don't know. JEREMY

I'm not running a prison here. MARSHALL

Yeah, right. JEREMY

Dictionary. MARSHALL

What? JEREMY

Go to the dictionary, please. MARSHALL

Jeremy shuffles to the dictionary.

Look up prison. MARSHALL (cont'd)

Jeremy thumbs through the book.

JEREMY
Hah! "Prison: a structure in which people are legally confined as punishment for their crimes."

MARSHALL
Yes, and this is a school classroom.

JEREMY
I'm being kept here because of my crime.

MARSHALL
It said legally committed. That's punishment issued by a court of law, not a school.

JEREMY
Yeah, but, the law says I can't leave, right? School, I mean. 'Cause I'm only 15. I can't quit school 'til I'm 16. So I'm legally committed.

MARSHALL
You are legally restricted from quitting, as you might be restricted from driving or buying cigarettes ...

JEREMY
Might as well be a prison. I only do what I'm told.

MARSHALL
If that were true, you wouldn't be here. Right?

Jeremy doesn't respond.

MARSHALL (cont'd)
Are you going to deny your -- outburst?

JEREMY
No.

MARSHALL
Then, whenever we discuss it, I expect you to own up to it. Every man must own his own actions, Jeremy. Do you know what that means?

JEREMY
Does it matter?

MARSHALL
More and more. Now, we still haven't established why you're here.

JEREMY
Aren't you supposed to tell me?

MARSHALL
I want to know what you think you will gain from our next month together.

JEREMY
Shit, I don't know.

MARSHALL
Jeremy!

JEREMY
What?

MARSHALL
What are the three rules?

JEREMY
No food, no cell phones and like that, no dissing. I got it. What's your problem?

MARSHALL
Have you ever heard the term "common courtesy"?

JEREMY
Am I supposed to look that up?

MARSHALL
Common courtesy means that when you associate or mix with people you don't know well, or with your elders, you do not disrespect them or their values. Are we clear?

JEREMY
Yes.

(beat)
So are you gonna yell at me?

What? MARSHALL

JEREMY
That's why I'm here, right? For punishment. I figure you can't hit me, that's the law.
But there's nothing says that you can't yell at me all you want.

MARSHALL
I'm not going to yell at you. But I want you -- I want --

What? JEREMY

MARSHALL
(pointing to intercom)
I want to kill that, is what.

I could do it. JEREMY

How? MARSHALL

Easy. JEREMY
Jeremy pulls a soda bottle from his backpack and shakes it.

Do it. MARSHALL

No way. JEREMY

Do it. MARSHALL

I'd get in trouble. JEREMY

You won't. I promise. MARSHALL
Jeremy goes to the intercom. He shakes the bottle, then stops.

Really? JEREMY

Trust me. MARSHALL

Jeremy shakes the bottle again and opens it, spraying soda into the intercom, which flashes, sparks and dies.

JEREMY

That's fu-- That's awesome!

He starts back to his desk.

MARSHALL

Wait.

He hands Jeremy a few tissues.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Wipe it clean.

Jeremy does, then puts the bottle in his backpack.

JEREMY

That's too cool!

MARSHALL

Now. Before you -- attacked me, you were screaming something at me. Do you remember?

JEREMY

I don't know.

MARSHALL

It's okay.

JEREMY

I said -- words are -- shit.

MARSHALL

Do you believe that?

JEREMY

I don't know. I was --

MARSHALL

Angry. Frustrated, I know. Come on, Jeremy. We only have a minute or two. Do you believe that?

JEREMY

Why a minute -- ?

MARSHALL

(overlapping)
Do you believe that?

JEREMY

Yeah. Words suck. They're just words. They don't mean anything.

MARSHALL

If words really are meaningless, I'd have nothing to teach.

JEREMY

That's not my problem.

MARSHALL

If words don't mean anything, what does?

JEREMY

Nothing.

MARSHALL

Come on, Jeremy. Everyone finds value in something. What has meaning? For you? What has value?

JEREMY

Nothing.

MARSHALL

Nothing?

JEREMY

No.

Tancredi bursts into the room, winded.

TANCREDI

You okay?!

MARSHALL

Mr. Tancredi. Are you okay?

TANCREDI

(to Jeremy)

Back to your seat!

(to Marshall)

What happened to the intercom?

MARSHALL

It looks fine to me.

TANCREDI

It went dead.

MARSHALL

Dead?

TANCREDI

So, how'd that happen? That's what I want to know.

MARSHALL

Why would we know?

Not you.

TANCREDI

MARSHALL

I was here the whole time, Mr. Tancredi. Jeremy and I have been reviewing rules of conduct.

TANCREDI

Well, what do we do now?

MARSHALL

Get it fixed, I suppose.

TANCREDI

No, I mean -- I'll get Lois -- no, she can't leave her desk. I'll find you another teacher --

MARSHALL

We're fine.

TANCREDI

Or, we could just move him to detention. That's where he belongs.

MARSHALL

We're fine.

(Tancredi doesn't move.)

Look, thank you for your concern, Mr. Tancredi, but I -- I can handle this.

TANCREDI

(finally, to Jeremy)

If you lift a finger, I swear --. You will only answer to me. Got that?

Jeremy nods.

TANCREDI (cont'd)

All right. Just -- keep this door open.

He props the door open and leaves. Marshall quietly closes it.

JEREMY

You lied to him.

MARSHALL

Did I?

JEREMY

He asked you if I did something.

MARSHALL

No. He never did.

JEREMY

Yes, he did!

MARSHALL

He never asked, "Did Jeremy do something to the intercom?"

JEREMY

That's what he wanted. You know it.

MARSHALL

Yes. But I didn't tell him a lie. All I said was that you and I were talking.

JEREMY

But --

MARSHALL

Did I lie?

JEREMY

You didn't tell the truth.

MARSHALL

You and I were talking.

JEREMY

Yeah, but I screwed up the intercom.

MARSHALL

I didn't tell him all of the truth.

JEREMY

That's lying.

MARSHALL

Jeremy, there's literal truth and there's essential truth. I answered his stated question rather than his implied question. I gave him the literal truth he asked for, not the essential truth he wanted.

JEREMY

Whatever. That's BS.

MARSHALL

I chose my words carefully, it's true. In this case, I did it to protect you. You didn't want me to do that?

JEREMY

No. I mean, yes, but --. Words just -- suck. People tell you stuff they don't mean. Or they use fancy words to say stuff, and all that means is they're trying to cover their -- their butts. Or make themselves feel all -- righteous.

MARSHALL

Everybody uses words to protect themselves. Right? They protect their interests. Their egos. I tell myself I read just fine without glasses. Even when I really can't anymore. Don't you do that?

JEREMY

Do what?

MARSHALL
Tell yourself a lie to -- soften reality.

JEREMY
People should always tell the truth.

MARSHALL
That would be a brutal world.

JEREMY
It already is.

MARSHALL
How?

Jeremy doesn't answer.

MARSHALL (cont'd)
Jeremy?

JEREMY
Why? Every time I answer, you just put me down. You don't let me just say something and leave it at that.

MARSHALL
I --. Okay.

JEREMY
You said no disrespect. And that meant you, too.

MARSHALL
That's fair.

Marshall sizes Jeremy up.

MARSHALL (cont'd)
Jeremy, how do you describe our -- encounter last week?

JEREMY
You mean --?

MARSHALL
Yes.

JEREMY
I don't know.

MARSHALL
(sighs)
All right, then. Here's your chance. To express yourself. To open up without fear. Get out some paper. And a pen. Notebook paper is fine. And I want you to ... describe the incident. In writing. Then read over what you've written. See if there's anything you might describe differently. Then, turn the first page face down and on a new page, describe the incident again. Then read both versions. Compare the two.
(MORE)

MARSHALL (cont'd)

See what's changed. Then, turn those pages face down and on a new page, describe it again. 'Til the end of the period.

JEREMY

What a waste.

MARSHALL

I hope not. Start writing. Please.

Jeremy pulls out his supplies and starts. Marshall goes to the window and tapes a new piece of paper over it.

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 4

Later that day. Marshall is packing.

MARSHALL

I couldn't.

TANCREDI

What do you mean?

MARSHALL

I was all prepared to be the taskmaster. Like you said. I was ready to drill him. I honestly was. But -- there was something -- I don't know. I just felt -- like I needed to do something different.

TANCREDI

I don't need to hear this. This is not what I need to hear.

MARSHALL

I'm sorry. Look, what I did -- has value, I'm sure.

TANCREDI

I need you, Marsh. I need you to do this.

MARSHALL

I know.

TANCREDI

I mean, you can do this, right? He's not stupid, is he?

MARSHALL

He could ace this test if he wanted to. For what it's worth.

TANCREDI

I'm not looking for miracles. 'Cause it's all a matter of numbers now. You know? This many passed the trial test. We need this many more to pass the state test or else we get sanctions. You know how many? Eleven. That's all. Eleven more kids pass the standardized test, we're off the hook. We're golden. You know what I did? Last week? Formed a team. On paper. Drew up a team. We get my team to pass the test, we're clear. No sanctions. So I pick my team: twenty-two kids, 'cause I want to be sure. You know how tough that was? Getting up a team of losers? Skanks and losers, every one of 'em. But I scrape together a team. Eleven kids for my A team and eleven real long shots for the B team. Not a lot of depth there, you know? Now, Jeremy? He's on the A team. Hell, from what you tell me, he might be the star of the A team. Then he up and pounds on you. I figure we gotta chuck him. Then you come up with this plan to tutor him. All right. I'm game. But that means you gotta pull through, Marsh. You gotta make this work. And there's only one way. You gotta drill that stuff into him. You know? I don't need to explain this to you. Just pump his head full of the stuff he's going to need.

MARSHALL

This isn't Math, Ace. There are no formulas to memorize here.

TANCREDI

He's gotta spell, doesn't he? Drill him on spelling. Same with vocabulary. You know the kind of words they're going to ask. Run 'em every day.

MARSHALL

I can't drill him on a book.

TANCREDI

Yes, you can.

MARSHALL

He's got to read it.

TANCREDI

No, he doesn't.

MARSHALL

Yes, he does. They all do.

TANCREDI

No. You've got the perfect setup. See? Perfect. It's just you and him. Nobody else in the room. Nobody else to know. You just feed him the kind of stuff to write in those essays. Give him specific chapters --

MARSHALL

There are no chapters in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

TANCREDI

You know what I'm saying. Just give him what he needs to write, something that at least makes some sense.

MARSHALL

That's great, Ace. I get him through the state test but I have to flunk him in class because I know he hasn't read the material.

TANCREDI

No, you don't. No, you don't.

MARSHALL

You know I do.

TANCREDI

All right, all right. But you know what? Flunk him. I'll sacrifice him for the good of the school.

MARSHALL

I -- don't want to sacrifice him.

TANCREDI

It won't matter to you. You pass him, he's gone. He's somebody else's problem. Or, you flunk him, same thing. Probably gonna drop out anyway.

MARSHALL

He'll probably drop out no matter what I do.

TANCREDI

Really?

MARSHALL

He's not dropping out until he turns sixteen. He already told me.

TANCREDI

Damn! Gone's as good as passing.

MARSHALL

Sorry. We may actually have to teach this one something.

TANCREDI

You know, it's not like I don't want to teach 'em. If I got that mandate from the state, from the school board, I'd do it and be glad. But that's not the mandate I get. My mandate is to make sure this school doesn't show up on the critical list. That's what I'm doing.

MARSHALL

I'm sure it doesn't hurt your standing with the school board.

TANCREDI

Hey, I'm clear on all this. Some team has too many losing seasons? They fire the coach. I like my job and I want to keep it. So I need you to make this work, Marsh. We clear?

MARSHALL

Yeah.

TANCREDI

You'll get him ready for the test?

MARSHALL

He'll be ready.

TANCREDI

That's what I need to hear. Go home. You look beat. Sorry. Bad choice of words.

Tancredi starts out.

MARSHALL

You know what really bothers me, Ace?

TANCREDI

What's that?

MARSHALL

I looked at my notes for *The Old Man and the Sea* yesterday. There's a date up in the corner on the first page. From fifteen years ago. That's the last time I changed anything about how I teach that book. I worked all summer long on new curricula, new approaches to the books, new ways to expand vocabulary. I keep thinking, "I was a teacher then." I knew what I was, what I was doing. Now I look at myself, what I'm doing, and nothing's familiar. I don't know who I am or what I am.

I'm taking him back.

TANCREDI

What are you talking about?

MARSHALL

Jeremy. I'm putting him in detention. Tomorrow.

TANCREDI

No.

MARSHALL

You can't do this. That's what you're telling me. You're telling me you can't do this.

TANCREDI

No. I think I've got to do this. Prove that I can do this.

MARSHALL

Marsh, look: you got a full load already. You can't take this extra kid two hours every day. I'll just put him in detention. Figure something else out.

TANCREDI

He's on your A team.

MARSHALL

The whole thing with the team? It only works when nobody else fails. That means you gotta make sure all your other students pass this test, too. I can't have you sacrifice them just to get Jeremy to pass.

TANCREDI

I'm not going to do that.

MARSHALL

You gotta promise me.

TANCREDI

I promise.

MARSHALL

Three more days. Are we clear?

TANCREDI

I've got to show you some tangible progress in three days' time?

MARSHALL

Yes.

TANCREDI

I believe I can do that.

MARSHALL

It's not enough to believe. There's no room for if in this.

TANCREDI

MARSHALL

Jeremy has no room for if.

TANCREDI

Neither do you, Marsh. Neither do you.

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 5

The next day. Marshall is in his room writing words on the blackboard. A very large cardboard box sits at the back of the room. The top of it hinges open and one side opens like a door, though it is closed now. As Marshall finishes writing, Jeremy strolls in, purposely sitting in a seat in the second row.

MARSHALL

Front row, please.

Jeremy pulls himself up and moves.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Have you considered my question from yesterday?

JEREMY

Which one? You asked a lot.

MARSHALL

Why you are here.

JEREMY

No.

MARSHALL

I will give you a partial answer. You are here to prepare for the state exams in a couple of weeks.

JEREMY

I thought we were doing that in class.

MARSHALL

You're doing it here, too.

JEREMY

Does it go on my grade?

MARSHALL

No.

JEREMY

Then why do I care?

MARSHALL

I said that was part of the reason you're here.

JEREMY

What's the other reason?

MARSHALL

I think we'll take some time to discover that. In the meantime, I read your descriptions of our -- fight. You only wrote four. Three-and-a-half, actually. This one ends abruptly.

JEREMY

It was time to go. You said turn 'em in.

MARSHALL

Yes, I did.

(reading one)

"I got out of my chair. I was trying to talk to him. I was mad. He wouldn't listen to me. I started hitting him. I don't know why. I hit him pretty hard, I guess. I saw his face bleed. I got up and ran out of the room."

JEREMY

Yeah. So?

MARSHALL

There are fifty words on this piece of paper. Ten of them are "I" or "me". Every fifth word is a personal pronoun.

JEREMY

A what?

MARSHALL

"I" or "me".

JEREMY

So?

MARSHALL

Was there anyone else in the fight?

JEREMY

What do you mean?

MARSHALL

Never mind. I've written five words on the board: skiff, benevolent, humility, gaff, gelatinous. I want you to try to define them for me. There is no grade here. I just want to see what you know.

JEREMY

I don't know any of them.

MARSHALL

Try, please. Define skiff.

JEREMY

I don't know.

MARSHALL

What do you think it is?

I never heard that word. JEREMY

Okay. Benevolent. MARSHALL

That's how you spell that? Um. I've heard it. JEREMY

Does it look like any other word? MARSHALL

Benefit. JEREMY

Do you think the two are related? MARSHALL

Maybe. I don't know. JEREMY

That's fair. How about the other three? MARSHALL

Humility. I kinda know what that is. It's like -- I mean, it's how some people act. JEREMY

What kind of people? MARSHALL

I don't know. JEREMY

Gaff? Gelatinous? MARSHALL

No clue. JEREMY

Okay. Do you see that box at the back of the room? MARSHALL

Yeah. JEREMY

For the rest of the period, I want you to sit in the box. MARSHALL

What? JEREMY

Open it up. Sit in the box. MARSHALL

That's retarded. JEREMY

Now, please. MARSHALL

Just 'cause I didn't know those words? JEREMY

This is not punishment. MARSHALL

Is that what the dictionary says? JEREMY

In the box. MARSHALL

Jeremy picks up his backpack.

Leave your backpack. MARSHALL (cont'd)

Uh! JEREMY

He shuffles to the box, opens it and flings himself in, leaving it open. Marshall closes the top and side.

Hey! JEREMY (cont'd)

MARSHALL
(retrieving his book)
 I want you to sit in there quietly, please. While you're in there, I'm going to read to you. The only time you can come out of the box is to ask a question about the book. Do you understand?

No. JEREMY

Really? MARSHALL

I don't understand why you're doing this. JEREMY

We'll find out, won't we? All right. "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the -- MARSHALL

Hey, wait. JEREMY

He pops up.

Yes?
MARSHALL

Skiff.
JEREMY

Yes.
MARSHALL

So, what's it mean?
JEREMY

What do you think?
MARSHALL

How'm I supposed to know?
JEREMY

MARSHALL
"He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff."

A boat?
JEREMY

MARSHALL
Yes. Back in the box, please. "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unluck, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in every day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat. The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun --"

Wait a second.
JEREMY

Yes?
MARSHALL

JEREMY
I thought benevolent was something good. But you said benevolent skin cancer. That's not good. Cancer'll kill you.

MARSHALL
All cancers?

JEREMY
I don't know.

MARSHALL

Maybe you've just learned two things. Box, please. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert. Everything about him was old --"

JEREMY

Like you.

MARSHALL

You have a question?

JEREMY

No.

MARSHALL

"Everything about him was old --"

(He waits but hears nothing.)

-- except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and --"

JEREMY

I have a question.

MARSHALL

Yes?

Jeremy rises out of the box.

JEREMY

Doesn't this guy have a fishing rod?

MARSHALL

No. He's very poor. And he uses the traditional methods he learned a long time ago.

JEREMY

So, that's gotta hurt. His hands, I mean.

MARSHALL

That's why Hemingway describes the deep creases in his hands.

JEREMY

Who's Hemingway?

MARSHALL

Where do you go when you're in class?

Jeremy flashes a big, sheepish grin.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Box, please.

JEREMY
What if I have another question?

MARSHALL
Do you?

JEREMY
No.

MARSHALL
Box.

Jeremy returns to it.

JEREMY
Wait!

MARSHALL
Jeremy, please! This is not a game.

JEREMY
No, I have a question. For reals. Who was that virgin you were talking about in class?

MARSHALL
We're coming to it.

JEREMY
But who was she?

MARSHALL
The Virgin of Cobre, patron saint of Cuba.

JEREMY
So this takes place in Cuba?

MARSHALL
Yes.

JEREMY
How do we know that?

MARSHALL
By reading. Box, please.

JEREMY
No, wait. Um. What's a patron saint?

MARSHALL
People pray to a patron saint. Usually they're seeking protection.

JEREMY
I thought you were supposed to pray to God for protection.

MARSHALL

Some people think they need more protection. Or protection for specific things.

JEREMY

So why is this virgin their patron saint?

MARSHALL

Sometime back in the seventeenth century, two Indians and a slave boy found a statue of the Virgin Mary floating on a board in the tide. On the board was the inscription, "I am the Virgin of Charity." They took the statue back to their village and everyone worshipped it. After the slaves were freed, the Spanish tried to reinstitute slavery, but the Virgin is credited with helping to keep her people free.

JEREMY

That's stupid. Statues don't do that.

MARSHALL

Sometimes people invest a lot of faith in objects.

JEREMY

That's crazy.

MARSHALL

Back in the box.

JEREMY

Are you going to tell anyone about this?

MARSHALL

I'll have to tell Mr. Tancredi. But no one else. You?

JEREMY

No.

MARSHALL

Not even your mom?

JEREMY

No!

Where'd you get it? *(pause)*

MARSHALL

Does it matter?

JEREMY

You get it from the garbage?

MARSHALL

No.

JEREMY

You sure?

MARSHALL
I got it at the appliance store. Does it matter?

JEREMY
(a lie)
No.

MARSHALL
“‘Santiago,’ the boy said to him as they climbed the bank from where the skiff was hauled up. ‘I could go with you again. We’ve made some money.’ The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.

Marshall looks up.

MARSHALL (cont’d)
Box. Please.

Jeremy slides back in.

MARSHALL (cont’d)
‘It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him.’ ‘I know,’ the old man said. ‘It is quite normal.’ ‘He hasn’t much faith.’ ‘No,’ the old man said. ‘But we have. Haven’t we?’”

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 6

Later that day. Tancredi examines the box.

TANCREDI

All you did was put him in the box?

MARSHALL

Yes.

TANCREDI

For two hours?

MARSHALL

No. Just part of the time. And he can come out of the box to ask questions.

TANCREDI

What the hell are you thinking?

MARSHALL

I want him to focus, I want --

TANCREDI

You know what this is? It's -- child abuse, it's false imprisonment, it's --

MARSHALL

It's a way to get his attention.

TANCREDI

I can't allow this, you know I can't.

MARSHALL

He's learning, Ace.

TANCREDI

What do you mean?

MARSHALL

(pointing to the board)

He started out not knowing any of these words. By the time we were done, he could define three.

TANCREDI

Will he know 'em tomorrow? Or the next day?

MARSHALL

Yes. But more than that -- Jeremy has always been a silent, dark blob in the room. He'd get by on tests, but that's it. Now he's talking. He's asking questions.

TANCREDI

Good questions?

MARSHALL

Questions, but --

TANCREDI
Will this help him pass the test?

MARSHALL
(a lie)
I think so, yes.

TANCREDI
Who else knows about this?

MARSHALL
About the box?

TANCREDI
Everybody knows you have the box. It's a big damn box. Who knows why you have it?

MARSHALL
No one.

TANCREDI
Your students? Someone had to ask questions.

MARSHALL
Oddly, not really. A lot of them looked at it, but no one asked about it until the end of fourth period. Amalie Majors. I told her it was for something later in the semester.

TANCREDI
What about Jeremy? Who's he going to tell?

MARSHALL
No one.

TANCREDI
Not even his parents?

MARSHALL
He's embarrassed by it. He thinks it's punishment.

TANCREDI
That's the way we keep it. How long you gonna do this?

MARSHALL
Depends on Jeremy. It depends on when he's ready.

TANCREDI
This week. That's it. Then we get rid of the box.

MARSHALL
Thanks.

TANCREDI
But it's working?

MARSHALL
I think so, yeah.

TANCREDI
When are his parents coming?

MARSHALL
Friday. At five.

TANCREDI
I'll stop by.

MARSHALL
Why?

TANCREDI
Just to say hi. Show 'em we're all on the same team. You know the drill.
(looking at the box)
You know, if I could put 'em all in boxes, I think I would. No more passing notes, no more flirting, no more gang signs. Everybody's space is clear. It's genius. Really. Genius.

MARSHALL
As long as they don't sleep in them.

TANCREDI
Hell, they sleep at their desks. What the hell's the difference?
(pointing to the box)
Nobody finds out. Right? Nobody.

*Tancredi leaves. Marshall packs his satchel.
Angela peeks in the door.*

ANGELA
May I -- come in?

MARSHALL
Of course. Please.

ANGELA
I thought --. Has Jeremy gone home?

MARSHALL
About twenty minutes ago.

ANGELA
Mr. Wright, Jeremy tells me that what you're doing in -- in the afternoons is teaching him to take that state test.

MARSHALL
I'm -- supposed to get all my students --

ANGELA

I don't want you to. Not -- not with my son. You've given him an opportunity, Mr. Wright. You've -- offered a -- a chance for him. I don't want to waste that.

MARSHALL

Why would you think -- ?

ANGELA

Does it go in his grades? This test?

MARSHALL

No, it --

ANGELA

Does it -- does it change anything for him in your class?

MARSHALL

No.

ANGELA

Then don't waste his time. Teach him something important. That test -- it's just multiple choice, isn't it?

MARSHALL

Mostly.

ANGELA

Then all he's doing is filling holes. Isn't it? Taking his pencil and filling in little holes.

She takes a can of apple pie filling out of her purse.

ANGELA (cont'd)

You see this can? Apple pie filling. This is my job. I operate a machine eight hours a day, five days a week. I put the bottom on the can, I fill the can, I put the top on the can and I send it off to cook. From seven in the morning until four in the afternoon, I'm filling holes.

MARSHALL

This test -- helps us know how well the school is doing. How well -- I'm doing.

ANGELA

I'll know how well you're doing. I'll see it. Won't I?

MARSHALL

If I do it right.

ANGELA

Then, please. Do it. You're in charge here. You can make the difference.

(beat)

You know what I always liked? About my teachers? They always seemed -- in control of their day. I wish I could be like that. I don't control one minute of my day. Everything I do -- someone tells me how to do it. Jeremy -- can't -- handle that. He can't live like that. And I don't want him to. I want you to help him -- see more than that. See farther than that.

I'll try.

MARSHALL

ANGELA
Thank you. I'm trusting you, Mr. Wright. I'm putting my trust in you.

She leaves.

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 7

Marshall is reading. Jeremy is in the box. The sound of a heavy rain outside.

MARSHALL

"They sat on the terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the of the old man and he was not angry. Others, of the older fishermen, looked at him and were sad."

JEREMY

You really like this book, don't you?

MARSHALL

I'd forgotten how much.

JEREMY

Why?

MARSHALL

It's -- a simple story. Told very simply. Yet in the end it's very powerful. Hemingway --

JEREMY

How's it end?

MARSHALL

I'm not going to spoil it for you. Hemingway doesn't give you a lot of information about Santiago except through the actions he describes. But by the end, those actions lead you to respect Santiago a great deal. And Hemingway's words become the way we see Santiago.

Marshall hears noises inside the box.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

What are you doing in there?

JEREMY

Making a hole.

MARSHALL

Why?

JEREMY

I wanna see out.

MARSHALL

No. You already know what it looks like out here.

JEREMY

I know what it looks like in here, too.

MARSHALL

Do you?

JEREMY
Come on. I just want, like, a window.

MARSHALL
A window works two ways, Jeremy.

JEREMY
So?

MARSHALL
Just something to consider.

JEREMY
Is that why you don't want a window?

MARSHALL
In the box?

JEREMY
In your class.

MARSHALL
They didn't build this with a window.

JEREMY
But you been teaching out here for how many years?

MARSHALL
Several.

JEREMY
Right. And all the other portables, those teachers are new. After a year or two, they get a classroom in Main. Doesn't matter how good they are. That's gotta mean you wanna be out here. With no windows.

MARSHALL
Back in the box, please.

JEREMY
I'm in the box. We're both in a box. Look at this place. It's just a big box. No one looks out. No one looks in.

MARSHALL
Sit down, please.

JEREMY
In my box? My box in the box?

MARSHALL
Yes.

JEREMY
Do other teachers make fun of you?

What? MARSHALL

JEREMY
Like Santiago. Like you were just reading.

MARSHALL
Why would they?

JEREMY
I mean, you're pretty private, right? You keep your window all covered up.

MARSHALL
That's not why --

JEREMY
You need a big window. Really huge.

He goes to the chalkboard and draws a window the full size of the board.

JEREMY (cont'd)
This big. And then you put some curtains on it.

He does.

JEREMY (cont'd)
Little lacy ones. Not heavy, dark ones. So you could never cover it up.

MARSHALL
And what would I see out this window?

JEREMY
What do you want to see?

MARSHALL
You, back in the box.

JEREMY
Man, you really have a small world, don't you?

MARSHALL
Box.

JEREMY
I'm going, I'm going.

Jeremy slips inside the box again.

MARSHALL
"-- the older fishermen looked at him and were sad. But they did not show it and they spoke politely about the current and the depths they had drifted their lines at and the steady good weather and of what they had seen."

A beat. The rain is letting up.

JEREMY

Why'd you stop?

MARSHALL

What? Oh. Sorry. Um. "-- the steady good weather and of what they had seen." Listen, Jeremy, it sounds like the rain's letting up some. This might be a good time for you to head home.

JEREMY

(out of the box)

It's early.

MARSHALL

I know. But if you don't leave now, you'll really get soaked.

JEREMY

Okay.

He grabs his backpack and leaves. Marshall turns to the board and stares at the window Jeremy drew. He turns and walks over to the door and looks at the paper covering the window in the door. He lifts a corner and looks outside. He lowers the paper again and returns to the board. He starts to draw something in the window, stops and erases the board. Steve, wet, steps in.

STEVE

Hey. Uh, Jeremy here?

MARSHALL

You just missed him. I sent him home a little early. The rain let up a bit. I didn't want him to get soaked.

STEVE

Oh. Well. Angie thought I should --. I mean, I got him something. I thought I'd give it to him on the way home. A comic book. I guess he likes 'em.

MARSHALL

Oh?

STEVE

An old Superman. Not sure this is his thing, but ...

MARSHALL

Maybe.

STEVE

Maybe. Jeremy's tough, you know? I'm never sure where I stand with him. I mean, I've only been with Angie about a year, so, you know. And Jeremy's got a lot of secrets.

MARSHALL

Don't we all?

STEVE

It's been tough enough for Angie and me, but throw in the kids. And Jeremy's been -
-

A torrent of rain starts in.

STEVE (cont'd)

Jeez, now I'm the one that's stuck.

MARSHALL

(referring to the torrent)

It's been doing that all day.

STEVE

(not hearing him well)

What? Oh. Yeah. You know, I bet I could fix that for you. Just needs more insulation.

MARSHALL

Talk to the landlord.

STEVE

Right. Not my craft anyway ...

The rain comes down even harder now.

STEVE (cont'd)

(shouting)

How do you teach when it's like this?

MARSHALL

I have --.

He goes to a drawer, pulls out a file of magazine articles, hands one to Steve, then goes to the board and, demonstrating, writes "READ." Steve nods. The rain pounds outside. Steve starts to read his article. Slowly the rain eases up.

STEVE

Okay. So everybody reads this article --

MARSHALL

Everybody has different articles. I tell them that. Then I ask them to tell the class what was in their article that might have been common to all the others. Yours was on --

STEVE

What people do to stop hiccups.

MARSHALL

So what do you think is in your article that might be found in everyone else's?

STEVE

I don't know. I mean, are they all medical reports or something?

Marshall sifts through the stack.

MARSHALL

"Life as an Avatar: The Story of a Computer Game Actor." "Watch Out Below: Crumbling Skyscrapers Endanger Pedestrians." "The Human Cost of Diamonds."

STEVE

So. Okay -- .

MARSHALL

It creates a short but lively discussion.

STEVE

Yeah. It's kinda sad that you have to do that.

MARSHALL

What?

STEVE

That whole thing. With these articles. You know, 'cause of the rain. I mean, it's gotta be tough teaching in a tin can instead of in the school.

MARSHALL

This is part of the school.

STEVE

I guess, but --. I mean, if I was to look back on my high school days, I'd wanna remember my time in a real building, you know? At least there's some traditions there. History.

MARSHALL

It's quieter out here. Except when it rains.

STEVE

I guess that's true. But there's something about a big brick school. You know? It's permanent. Stable.

MARSHALL

You go to school here?

STEVE

No. Over to Cedar Ridge. Go Wildcats.

MARSHALL

Still go to the games?

STEVE

Never went. High school wasn't my thing. I ducked out, got my GED. Pretty much everything else I know I learned on the job. I mean, I've been on construction since I was 15. I love it. I started laying bricks when I was 19, 20 maybe. Anyways, I figured out construction is just a lot of math and geometry and physics, right?

(MORE)

STEVE (cont'd)

But instead of sitting down and trying to figure it out on paper, or out of a book, its a bunch of guys working it out for real. When you're done? You got a building. Something solid. Give me a good brick building any day. There's a lot of sweat when we build a building. Lot of memories.

MARSHALL

A lot of stories.

STEVE

Exactly. This building? Took 'em, what? A week to throw this together? Some factory somewhere? Making these things'd be easy. No weather to worry about. Just a bunch of guys swarming around with their pneumatic tools. Rivets popping like semi-automatics. Probably half built by robots. Not a lot of memories in something like this. Not a lot of history.

MARSHALL

Nothing to get attached to.

STEVE

And no one's gonna come back on you when it falls apart. I mean, what're ya gonna do, drag it back to the factory? Me, I want my buildings to stand, 'cause I gotta live here, you know? It's not like teaching. You guys get off easy.

MARSHALL

How?

STEVE

Well, I mean, 'til recently. No accountability. Pass a kid, fail a kid, it's no skin off your nose. Now? You got those tests. That's a good thing.

Steve starts to go.

MARSHALL

Are you the only person accountable if a building falls down?

STEVE

'Course not. There's a lot of guys on the job.

MARSHALL

Bricklayers and carpenters and electricians. And everyone depends on everyone else, right?

STEVE

Yeah. So?

MARSHALL

Me, too. Students don't stop learning when they leave. Education isn't just lessons and homework. Kids learn from parents as much as from teachers. So why am I the only one being held accountable?

STEVE

Hey, look, I'm sorry, but it's gotta be somebody's ass. You college guys get so stuck on -- you know, theories, and all that "it takes a village" crap. You don't understand what it's like to work your ass off every day.

MARSHALL

My father was a high school dropout. He fixed people's plumbing, and loved it. Sixty hours was a light week for him. My brother's a printer. Works six days a week making catalogs and directories and guidebooks. I was the first one in my family to go to college. My dad was real proud of me, too. And you know what? I let him down. Nearly flunked out. Now I didn't blame my teachers. I was screwing around, so I knew it was my fault. I got my bachelor's degree in literature but just barely, and I had no idea what to do with it. I bounced around for awhile, working odd jobs, wasting time. Then I ran into an old teacher of mine. I was surprised she was still teaching. I said, "Why haven't you retired?" She told me she couldn't. She looked forward to going into the classroom every day. Getting up and doing her work every day. She sounded like my dad. He never wanted to retire. So then I got the bright idea that I wanted to be a teacher.

STEVE

So you gotta deal with the consequences of that. You know? You're teaching these kids. You gotta be on it.

MARSHALL

Ever have days where the mortar is a little too thin?

STEVE

Or the bricks are heavier than they were yesterday? Oh, yeah.

MARSHALL

Happens in teaching, too. Truth be told? I sent Jeremy home early because I didn't have it today. Teaching is labor. When it's done right. Students are handcrafted. And each one comes out a little different. The difference between our jobs is you know what you're making when you begin.

STEVE

Okay. Today'd be a lousy day for construction, too. Building relationships are like that too, huh? Some days are better than others.

MARSHALL

Some days you're building a wall. Some days it's just a stack of bricks.

STEVE

You know, a lot of people look at a brick wall and that's all they see. A wall of bricks. But I see the bricks. Each one is a little different. A different shade. The surface is a little different. And when you're working a great job, you get to take some time to choose the right brick for each spot. Choose it for its color and texture. You do that and the wall is more than a stack of bricks. It's a work of art. Well. The rain's let up a bit.

(starting out)

Hey. What was the thing? With the articles? What they had in common?

MARSHALL

Words. Language. It's what makes us humans. It's what makes it possible to settle disputes before they become wars. It makes democracy possible. It allows us to express ourselves: our greatest fears, greatest hopes, greatest feelings.

STEVE

Uh-huh. Well. See ya Friday, right?

Wait.

MARSHALL

*He goes to his bookcase and pulls out a book and
tosses it to Steve.*

MARSHALL (cont'd)
This seems to have lasted. Built in 1885. You might like it.

STEVE

Okay. Um. Thanks.

And he's gone.

END OF SCENE

ACT 1 SCENE 8

Jeremy is alone, finishing a drawing on the back of his hand. Under his hand is a wad of paper towels, probably from the boys' room. He takes out a box cutter and begins cutting where he was drawing. He draws blood, wincing with the pain, but he doesn't stop. He slices into his hand three or four times, producing a lot of blood. He tries to work fast, watching the door. Marshall enters the room.

MARSHALL

That took longer than --. What's the matter with your hand?! Oh my god!

He runs to Jeremy, who has thrown his box cutter back into his pack.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

What did you do? Let me see. God! Come here.

He drags Jeremy to the sink and turns the water on.

JEREMY

No!!

MARSHALL

No?! You're bleeding!

JEREMY

I want this!

MARSHALL

Want what?

JEREMY

My design.

MARSHALL

What are you talking about?

JEREMY

This is my design.

Jeremy shows his hand to Marshall.

MARSHALL

All I see is blood. What is it?

JEREMY

(mumbling)

A garbage can.

MARSHALL

What?

A garbage can.

JEREMY

Marshall stares at him.

Wash that off. Now.

MARSHALL

No.

JEREMY

Now!

MARSHALL

Jeremy goes to the sink.

I'll just do it again.

JEREMY

Do what again? What were you doing?

MARSHALL

It's a kind of tattoo.

JEREMY

How?

MARSHALL

Marshall pulls wads of gauze out of his filing cabinet.

JEREMY

You draw a picture. Then you cut yourself where the ink is. The ink gets into your skin ...

MARSHALL

And you want a tattoo of a garbage can.

No answer.

Give me your hand.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

He presses the gauze against the cuts.

Why here?

MARSHALL (cont'd)

I can't do it at home.

JEREMY

MARSHALL

So you thought it would be okay to do here. You had to know I'd see the blood.

JEREMY
I didn't think it would bleed that much.

MARSHALL
Does it hurt?

JEREMY
Yeah.

Marshall looks at his hand.

MARSHALL
I've got to report this.

JEREMY
No! Please.

MARSHALL
I have to.

JEREMY
Please. You said you were going to respect me.

MARSHALL
Let's start with you respecting you.

JEREMY
I do.

MARSHALL
Tattooing a garbage can on your hand? A tattoo is your story. You put a mark on your body that's going to stay with you for life, it's a part of your story. If everyone can see the tattoo, it's a billboard. And you're putting a garbage can on your hand?

JEREMY
Tattoos are cool.

MARSHALL
Tattoos of what are cool?

JEREMY
I don't know ...

MARSHALL
Know what your story is before you advertise it on your body.

JEREMY
You gonna report me?

MARSHALL
You're the one who wants everybody to tell the truth.

JEREMY
I know ...

Marshall quietly bandages Jeremy's hand.

MARSHALL

No report.

JEREMY

Cool.

MARSHALL

And the lesson of that is ... ?

JEREMY

I don't know.

MARSHALL

Let's hope we find one. Now, into the box.

JEREMY

No.

MARSHALL

Yes.

JEREMY

Please?

MARSHALL

What's your problem today?

JEREMY

I just -- don't want to be in the box.

MARSHALL

Every time you go into the box, you come out with better questions.

JEREMY

But just not today.

MARSHALL

Box.

JEREMY

You go in the box.

MARSHALL

I'm not the one who's here to learn.

JEREMY

Come on. Just for a few minutes. You go in the box and I'll read to you. Then you'll see what it's like. Come on. It's only fair.

MARSHALL

All right. No more than a page. From here.

Marshall hands Jeremy the book, climbs in the box and closes it.

JEREMY

"They had coffee from condensed milk cans at an early morning place that served fishermen. 'How did you sleep old man?' The boy asked. He was waking up now although it was still hard for him to leave his sleep. 'Very well --' Um ..."

Jeremy grabs his backpack very quietly and inches toward the door.

MARSHALL

Manolin.

JEREMY

"Manolin,' the old man said. 'I feel confident today.' 'So do I,' the boy said."

*Jeremy drops the book and runs out the door.
Marshall pops up out of the box.*

MARSHALL

Jeremy? Damn it!

He runs to the door.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Jeremy!

But Jeremy is gone.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Shit.

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2 SCENE 1

A moment earlier.

MARSHALL

Shit.

*Marshall closes the door and goes to the intercom.
He pushes the button. Nothing.*

MARSHALL (cont'd)
(under his breath)

Damn it!

*He starts back for the door. Tancredi shoves
Jeremy in.*

TANCREDI

What the hell were you doing, you little -- ? You know what this means? Im
bouncing you. You're out. You can't even --

MARSHALL

What for, Mr. Tancredi?

TANCREDI

He isn't supposed to leave this room, that's why!

MARSHALL

Unless it's part of the lesson.

TANCREDI

What the hell lesson involves letting this little -- turd -- run across the campus like a
thief?

MARSHALL

He was having trouble believing a passage in the book, where Manolin runs to
Santiago's boat -- at a dead sprint -- then returns inside five minutes. Hemingway
described it as a quarter-mile distance. I told Jeremy that was about the distance
from here to the driveway. So we were testing it.

TANCREDI

With his backpack?

MARSHALL

Manolin was carrying -- provisions for Santiago. To stock the boat. That was the
hardest part to believe. We were using his backpack to simulate the weight of the
provisions.

(to Jeremy)

So, now do you think it was possible?

JEREMY

No, I --

MARSHALL

You might be right. Fiction writers sometimes create things that are just a little impossible to believe.

TANCREDI

I thought we agreed on the kind of lessons that would work.

MARSHALL

Aren't I supposed to teach students as I see fit?

TANCREDI

It's the third day, Marsh.

MARSHALL

Jeremy, define skiff.

JEREMY

Um. It's a kind of a boat.

MARSHALL

Define benevolent.

JEREMY

Something that's okay, like it's good.

MARSHALL

Humility.

JEREMY

Um. It's -- like ... not all full of pride and stuff?

MARSHALL

Gaff.

JEREMY

A kind of fishing gear.

MARSHALL

Gelatinous.

JEREMY

Um ... ugly?

MARSHALL

Some students may be bottles waiting to be filled, Ace. Some are sponges.

TANCREDI

All right. But let's keep the lessons in the room.

MARSHALL

We'll try.

Tancredi leaves.

We begin again. MARSHALL (cont'd)
Jeremy moves toward the box.

No. Desk, please. MARSHALL (cont'd)

Why? JEREMY

Desk. MARSHALL
Jeremy slumps into a desk. Marshall writes "Jeremy leaves" on the board.

Tell me, Mr. Taylor, what follows from that? MARSHALL (cont'd)

From what? JEREMY
Marshall circles the words.

That. MARSHALL

I don't know. JEREMY

Exactly. Let's examine the possibilities. You leave and what might happen? MARSHALL

I don't know. JEREMY
(dismissive)

You leave and what might happen?! MARSHALL

Why are you doing this? JEREMY

What am I?! MARSHALL

A teacher. JEREMY

What do I do?!!! MARSHALL
Beat.

I almost made it. JEREMY

Consequence one: you get home. Then what? MARSHALL

You call the police. JEREMY

Me? MARSHALL

Tancredi. JEREMY

How does he know to do that? MARSHALL

You tell him I ran away. JEREMY

Or: You leave ... MARSHALL
(pointing to the words)

What? JEREMY

What else could happen? MARSHALL

I don't make it. JEREMY

Sounds familiar. Then what? MARSHALL

I get in trouble. JEREMY

With? MARSHALL

Tancredi. JEREMY

Did you? MARSHALL

No. JEREMY

Why not? MARSHALL

You lied for me. JEREMY

What are the consequences of that? MARSHALL

I don't know. JEREMY

No one does yet. MARSHALL

Why did you lie? JEREMY

What if I hadn't? MARSHALL

I don't know. JEREMY

Think. MARSHALL

I -- would have been expelled. JEREMY

Yes. MARSHALL

My mom would have been really mad at me. JEREMY

Yes. MARSHALL

Steve, too. JEREMY

And? MARSHALL

I'd never be here again. JEREMY

But you chose to leave because that would be a good thing? MARSHALL

I thought so. JEREMY

Did you? Did you think? MARSHALL

No. JEREMY

Are you stupid? MARSHALL

Yes. JEREMY

No, you're not. MARSHALL

Yes I am. JEREMY

MARSHALL
You just now reasoned through the consequences of your actions. You weren't too stupid to do that.

But I ran anyway. JEREMY

MARSHALL
You didn't stop to think. If you had used your brain, would you have run?

Maybe. JEREMY

MARSHALL
At least it would have been a considered choice. That's different from being stupid. Isn't it?

I guess. JEREMY

MARSHALL
If you don't want to be stupid, what do you have to do?

Think. JEREMY

Box. MARSHALL

Jeremy goes to the box. Marshall locates the book and makes to resume.

Why did you lie for me? JEREMY

Did I have a choice? MARSHALL

JEREMY

Yes.

MARSHALL

But I did it anyway. "The old man says, 'I feel confident today.' 'So do I,' the boy said. 'Now I must get your sardines and mine and your fresh baits. He brings our gear himself. He never wants anyone to carry anything.' 'We're different,' the old man said. 'I let you carry things when you were five years old.'"

JEREMY

Mr. Wright?

MARSHALL

Yes.

JEREMY

So, is this box mine?

MARSHALL

To take home?

JEREMY

No, I mean, does anyone else get to go in here?

MARSHALL

No.

JEREMY

Cool.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 2

Afternoon the next day. Marshall is teaching his regular class but has all the lights off.

MARSHALL

All right, now. Just listen. We've only got a couple of minutes left. I know this is unusual, but I want you to try this. Concentrate now. Just listen. I want you to imagine yourself drifting on the ocean in the middle of the night. Only the stars to light your loneliness. Your boat barely long enough to stretch out in, a small spit of wood and canvas that keeps your fragile form afloat on the vastness of the sea. I want you to think about the forces that surround you: the ocean, water unending, none of which can you drink. The sky: tranquil tonight but it could deliver storms of such fury you couldn't survive them. Yet you have enough skill, enough knowledge, enough experience to not only survive in this environment, you are at ease in this environment. You are nearly as comfortable as the fish you long to catch. You have made this your --.

The bell rings. The sound of chairs scraping, footsteps hurrying, the door opening and finally the door closing.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

-- made this your home.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 3

After school. Jeremy enters.

MARSHALL

(a greeting)

Jeremy.

JEREMY

Hey. Oh, cool class today.

MARSHALL

Really? I thought it bombed.

JEREMY

No. I got it. How lost that dude could be on the ocean? That was pretty cool.

MARSHALL

Thanks. What are you reading?

JEREMY

Comic book.

MARSHALL

Superman?

JEREMY

Superman's lame. Dogboy.

MARSHALL

Never heard of him.

JEREMY

He's kinda new.

MARSHALL

Does he have superpowers?

JEREMY

Speed, mostly. And, like, he doesn't quit. Ever.

MARSHALL

Persistence.

JEREMY

Yeah. And he's like -- really loyal.

MARSHALL

To whom?

JEREMY

He -- like -- works with his dad, who's this policeman. And he always gets the -- like the bad guy.

Don't they all? MARSHALL

I guess. JEREMY

What do you like best about him? MARSHALL

You can never lie to him. He always knows. JEREMY

That's really a big deal for you, isn't it? MARSHALL

What? JEREMY

Truth. MARSHALL

Yeah. JEREMY

Do you know what truth is? MARSHALL

Doesn't everyone? JEREMY

No. That's why people write books. Even comic books. MARSHALL

I don't get it. JEREMY

When you're in court, they make you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. That's the kind of truth you're talking about. The kind of truth Dog Boy seeks. But there are larger truths, truths about life, about humanity. We need those truths, too. That's the kind of truth writers write about. MARSHALL

How? Everything they write -- I mean, they make it all up. JEREMY

You mean like the guy who writes the Dog Boy stories? MARSHALL

Yeah. I mean, they're not real. JEREMY

But maybe the guy who writes Dog Boy wishes it were real. Maybe that's the kind of world he wishes he could live in. MARSHALL

JEREMY

Maybe.

MARSHALL

Does this sound familiar? "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

JEREMY

Um. Yeah. It's like the constitution, or, no -- um ...

MARSHALL

The Declaration --

JEREMY

Declaration of Independence!

MARSHALL

When Thomas Jefferson wrote that, a lot of people thought that was fiction: "all men are created equal."

JEREMY

It is.

MARSHALL

That they're created equal or that they live equal lives?

JEREMY

I don't know. Both, maybe.

MARSHALL

Fiction or not, it's a nice idea, isn't it?

JEREMY

A nice idea's not the truth. Can I go into my box now?

MARSHALL

You want to go in there?

JEREMY

Yeah.

MARSHALL

Okay. You get to leave a little early today.

JEREMY

Why?!

MARSHALL

Is that a problem?

JEREMY

No.

MARSHALL

You'll need to leave Dogboy out here.

JEREMY

But --

MARSHALL

You're supposed to focus on what I'm reading.

*Jeremy surrenders the comic and slips into his box.
Marshall opens the book to start reading.*

MARSHALL (cont'd)

"When they reached the old man's shack, the boy took the rolls of line --"

JEREMY

We read that already. You stopped with him drinking coffee.

MARSHALL

Oh. Right. "The old man drank his coffee slowly. It was all he would have all day and he knew that he should take it. For a long time now eating had bored him and he never carried a lunch."

Noises inside the box.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

What are you doing in there?

JEREMY

Doodling.

MARSHALL

On?

JEREMY

The inside of the box.

MARSHALL

Oh. Okay. Um ... "He had a bottle of water in the bow of the skiff and that was all he needed for the day. The boy was back now with the sardines and the two baits wrapped in newspaper and they went down the trail to the skiff, feeling the pebbled sand under their feet, and lifted the skiff and slid her into the water."

JEREMY

Wait. Slid who into the water?

MARSHALL

The boat.

JEREMY

You said her.

MARSHALL

All boats are called "she" or "her".

Really? Why? JEREMY

I don't know. It's just a tradition. MARSHALL

It's kinda stupid. JEREMY

Why? MARSHALL

I mean, just 'cause everyone's always done it. Why do something if you don't know why you do it? JEREMY

Sometimes it's just easier. That's how societies work sometimes. MARSHALL

It's stupid. JEREMY

We all do things we don't understand. For example, do you know why you hit me? MARSHALL

No answer.

Do you? MARSHALL (cont'd)

Not really. I mean, I was mad. JEREMY

At me? MARSHALL

Yeah. Some. JEREMY

Were you also mad at other people? MARSHALL

I guess. JEREMY

But I was closest. MARSHALL

I guess so. JEREMY

MARSHALL

“Good luck, old man.’ ‘Good luck,’ the old man said. He fitted the rope lashings of the oars onto the thole pins and, leaning forward against the thrust of the blades in the water, he began to row out of the harbour into the dark.”

JEREMY

Mr. Wright?

MARSHALL

Yes?

Jeremy rises slowly out of the box.

JEREMY

I’m sorry. That I hit you.

MARSHALL

Thank you, Jeremy.

A moment.

JEREMY

You -- gonna read some more?

MARSHALL

Yes.

JEREMY

Good.

He slides back down into the box.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 4

Later that day. The room is empty. Jeremy comes in.

JEREMY

Mr. Wright?

He sees no one, enters his box. We hear a pen working on the inside. Marshall opens the door and leads Steve and Angela into the room. The sound of the pen stops.

MARSHALL

Come in, come in. I'm glad you could make it.

ANGELA

This is -- is very difficult for us, Mr. Wright. I lose hours when -- when we have these conferences.

MARSHALL

I know. I know. We'll make this as brief as we can. Take a seat.

ANGELA

First I have a question. Jeremy came home with a bandage on his hand yesterday. He wouldn't tell us why he had it.

MARSHALL

I'm surprised.

STEVE

That ... ?

MARSHALL

That he wouldn't tell you. He seems to insist on full disclosure.

STEVE

Jeremy?

MARSHALL

Yes. He seems to have a fixation on truth.

ANGELA

Can you tell us why he was wearing a Band-Aid®?

MARSHALL

No, I can't.

ANGELA

I asked him if he got into a fight. I -- I asked him if someone else hurt him. I asked him if -- if it was an accident. He didn't answer me.

STEVE

She even asked him if he'd punched you again.

MARSHALL

I'm sorry. I can't say how it happened.

ANGELA

Mr. Wright, I -- I can't always be around to protect my son. But when something happens to him, I have a right to know.

MARSHALL

Yes, I would say you do.

ANGELA

And it just -- it seems like you know more than you're telling.

MARSHALL

Did you call the school?

ANGELA

No. I -- Where I work, they -- don't let me make phone calls.

STEVE

And I couldn't call, yesterday, either.

MARSHALL

I see.

ANGELA

He said he had a meeting, so ...

STEVE

Come on, Angie, it was legit.

ANGELA

I just needed you to take -- like -- five minutes.

STEVE

I told you. We were going to be talking all day long about numbers, about legal stuff. I didn't want the distraction.

ANGELA

I didn't know we were a distraction.

STEVE

Knock it off, Ange! It was an important meeting.

Jeremy pops out of the box.

JEREMY

Liar!

ANGELA

Jeremy!

JEREMY

He's lying, Mom! You know where his "meeting" was? Snuffy's. I heard him talking on the phone.

STEVE

Shut up! You don't know what the hell you're talking about.

JEREMY

That's all you do! Sit down at Snuffy's drinking beer. You and your loser friends.

STEVE

Out to the truck. Now!

JEREMY

That's all he does, Mom --

STEVE

Before I swat you one!!

MARSHALL

All right! Everyone sit down! Right now! Please!

They all sit, but apart.

STEVE

You just wait 'til we get home.

JEREMY

Home? We don't have a home anymore!

ANGELA

Jeremy, please!

JEREMY

Because of you!

STEVE

I'll lay you flat, you little shit!

MARSHALL

All right. Everybody stop talking! Okay? Just stop talking! For a minute. Please. Jeremy, why are you here?

JEREMY

I didn't want to -- to go to the motel. I hate that place!

MARSHALL

I don't --

ANGELA

We -- had to move. About a month ago. We couldn't -- afford our house anymore. After Steve lost his job.

STEVE

I'm not staying for this. I'll be in the truck. You want a ride, you got five minutes.
(to Jeremy)
You're walking.

JEREMY

Fine.

Steve leaves.

ANGELA

I'm sorry, Mr. Wright. These last few months --. I thought we could -- hang on to the house. I'm even working two jobs. But. I couldn't. And construction work is so -- unpredictable anyway. So, when Steve was --

JEREMY

Fired. They fired him.

ANGELA

He was laid off, Jeremy. That's different.

JEREMY

It's just words!

MARSHALL

Jeremy, there is a difference.

JEREMY

It doesn't matter what words you use. He's not working, so now we're living in a motel.

ANGELA

Jeremy, please! So. They laid him off. And, right now, we're living in a room at The Crosswinds.

JEREMY

Two beds and a bathroom for me and mom and my two sisters and him. It sucks!

ANGELA

We're going to -- to get out of there, Jeremy. I will make it happen. I promise you. But -- why were you in that box?

JEREMY

That's my box.

ANGELA

I don't understand ...

JEREMY

Mr. Wright puts me in the box and then he reads to me.

ANGELA

Why does he put you in the box? Have you been bad?

JEREMY

No, I --

ANGELA

I want to understand why you put my son in a box.

MARSHALL

It's a way of --. I really don't want to talk about why I'm teaching your son the way I am in front of him.

ANGELA

Because you don't have a good reason for doing this. I think you're punishing my son.

JEREMY

No, Mom. I don't -- I'm not --

ANGELA

Punishing him by putting him in a box so the rest of the students will ridicule him.

MARSHALL

I never put him in the box during class time. Only after school.

JEREMY

It's okay, Mom.

ANGELA

No, it's not okay, Jeremy. It's wrong. This -- this is wrong.

MARSHALL

Look: it's a way of concentrating his -- attention, getting him to focus ...

ANGELA

(overlapping)

No. No. You can't do this to him. I can't let you do this to my son. I won't let you humiliate my son this way.

JEREMY

No, Mom, it's okay --

ANGELA

It is not okay! I will not let him treat you like that! I will not.

Tancredi enters.

TANCREDI

Knock knock. Mrs. Taylor. Mr. Wright told me --

ANGELA

Mr. Tancredi, were you -- aware that Mr. Wright here was keeping Jeremy in -- in a box?

TANCREDI

What?

ANGELA
He shuts him up in that box.

MARSHALL
Mr. Tancredi and --

TANCREDI
You do what?!

JEREMY
It's no big deal, it's --

TANCREDI
It most certainly is a big deal! Mrs. Taylor, I am very sorry about this. You have my word that I will put a stop to it immediately.

JEREMY
No!

TANCREDI
Jeremy, please step outside.

JEREMY
But --

TANCREDI
There are a few things I need to discuss with your mother and Mr. Wright.

ANGELA
I'll be right out.

MARSHALL
Go ahead, Jeremy.

Jeremy leaves the room.

TANCREDI
Marshall, this is a serious issue. You know that.

MARSHALL
Ace, I thought --

TANCREDI
We cannot have this kind of treatment for our students. Not while I'm the principal.

MARSHALL
I see.

ANGELA
You said that Jeremy hitting you -- that you didn't take that personally. And yet you put him in a cage.

MARSHALL

It's a cardboard box! That's all it is! It's not sealed. He's got air and light. He gets to come out of it if he asks --

ANGELA

Gets to come out?

TANCREDI

All right. This is going to stop. Right now. Jeremy will be reassigned to detention for the rest of the month.

ANGELA

Why?

TANCREDI

He still has the rest of his punishment --

ANGELA

Hasn't he been punished enough? With this humiliation?

TANCREDI

Yes, ma'am, you're right. I'll suspend the rest of his detention. Now, is everybody satisfied?

ANGELA

I think it might be best to move Jeremy out of Mr. Wright's class, too.

TANCREDI

Of course.

ANGELA

(to Marshall)

When I first met you, I thought you might do Jeremy some good. But I can't let you treat my son this way. Not after -- I just can't let you, that's all.

She leaves.

TANCREDI

We'll talk.

MARSHALL

Thanks for standing --

TANCREDI

I said we'll talk!

He flies out. Marshall stands alone. As Jeremy opens the door, Marshall grabs his chair and flings it in a rage.

MARSHALL

Run, Jeremy! Get the hell out of here!

No. JEREMY

Now! MARSHALL

Why did you put me in the box? JEREMY

I don't know. MARSHALL

Yes you do! JEREMY

It was a stupid idea I came up with because I had no other ideas. I never have ideas. All right? Now get out of here. MARSHALL

No! I want you to keep reading to me. JEREMY

Why? To find out what happens? Read it yourself. MARSHALL

That's not -- I just want you -- ! JEREMY

(interrupting)
He catches the fish. A huge marlin, bigger than his boat. It takes him three days. He harpoons it. He lashes it to the side of the boat. He sails home, but the marlin is bleeding. That brings sharks who keep taking chunks out of the marlin. By the time he gets back all that's left is a skeleton and a head. MARSHALL

Jeremy starts out with the box.

Where are you going with that? MARSHALL (cont'd)

I don't know. JEREMY

Bring it to me. MARSHALL

Why? JEREMY

Bring it to me! MARSHALL

What are you going to do to with it? JEREMY

Burn it. In Tancredi's office.

MARSHALL

I don't --

JEREMY

Tancredi knew about the box. He told me it was "genius."

MARSHALL

Then why did he --?

JEREMY

Exactly. Give me the box.

MARSHALL

No! Leave it alone!

JEREMY

Jeremy! Drop it!

MARSHALL

No! It's mine!

JEREMY

Jeremy runs out with the box. Marshall grips the edge of his desk, then flips it over. He turns to the blackboard, writes "Words ARE Shit," then leaves.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 5

Monday. Nothing's changed. Marshall enters. He rights his desk and chair, then looks at the scattered papers. He methodically picks them up and dumps them in his wastebasket. Tancredi enters.

Get me a substitute.

MARSHALL

It's kinda late, isn't it?

TANCREDI

I'm sick and I'm leaving.

MARSHALL

Sick?

TANCREDI

I just threw up in the wastebasket.

MARSHALL

There's nothing but paper in here.

TANCREDI

That's what teachers vomit. So I'm taking sick leave.

MARSHALL

I'll need a doctor's excuse.

TANCREDI

After three days.

MARSHALL

How long will you be out?

TANCREDI

I don't know. It's an unpredictable illness.

MARSHALL

Look, Marsh --

TANCREDI

My name is Marshall. Not Marsh.

MARSHALL

Sorry. I just --

TANCREDI

I know. You just make these assumptions. Stop assuming anything about me.

MARSHALL

TANCREDI
You're not okay.

MARSHALL
Didn't I just say that?

TANCREDI
Stay for the first two periods. Give me time to get somebody.

MARSHALL
No.

TANCREDI
How am I supposed to cover your class?

MARSHALL
Maybe you'll have to teach it.

TANCREDI
I have my own job to do.

MARSHALL
Which seems to be the opposite of teaching.

TANCREDI
I used to teach, Marshall.

MARSHALL
Did you? Or did you just pretend? Did you try to make a difference every day or did you just show up?

TANCREDI
Shut up! You don't know what the hell you're talking about!

MARSHALL
Oh, yes, I do. I know all about just showing up. You taught me all about just showing up, Mr. King of the Drill.

TANCREDI
I did my god damned job and I did it well! That's why I got to be a principal.

MARSHALL
I thought it was because no one else wanted the job.

TANCREDI
Look, I know no one likes me or what I do, but someone has to do it. Someone has to deal with the parents and the politicians. For better or for worse, I'm the face of this school.

MARSHALL
Both of them.

TANCREDI
I told you I couldn't know about that box. Once I knew --

MARSHALL

-- you had to flush me down the drain.

TANCREDI

My job as principal -- !

MARSHALL

Your job, your job. What about my job?

TANCREDI

I'm not here to make it tougher. But you knew it was a risk.

MARSHALL

You taught history, right? Maybe you know the history of education. Used to be that schools were just teachers and students. That's all. For centuries, just teachers and students.

TANCREDI

And no one knew whether the teacher was any good. Now, teachers are accountable.

MARSHALL

Accountable to bean counters.

TANCREDI

Accountable to me!

MARSHALL

And you are ... ?

TANCREDI

I'm an educator, damn it!

MARSHALL

I guess we'll see, won't we? The class is yours. Your lesson for the day?

He erases "Shit" from the board and replaces it with "Masks."

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Good luck.

He exits.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 6

After school the same day. Tancredi sits at Marshall's desk. The board has been erased. Jeremy enters tentatively.

TANCREDI

Have a seat.

Jeremy moves toward the back.

TANCREDI (cont'd)

Up front. Don't be stupid.

JEREMY

Where's Mr. Wright?

TANCREDI

He has a couple days off.

JEREMY

Why?

TANCREDI

Personal. You and me? We've got some work to do.

JEREMY

I thought I didn't have detention anymore.

TANCREDI

State tests start in a couple weeks. You need to pass them.

JEREMY

Why? What difference does it make?

TANCREDI

If our test scores suck, the school --

JEREMY

I know, I know. I mean for me.

TANCREDI

I have the power to make your life miserable. Does that answer your question?

JEREMY

What are we gonna do?

TANCREDI

There won't be any hiding in a box. You're gonna work. I have a copy of an earlier test here. We're gonna start with question one and work our way through. If you get an answer right, we move on. If you get it wrong, I drill you on the right answer until you can't get it wrong. Clear?

Whatever. JEREMY

TANCREDI
We'll start with vocabulary. I read the word and four possible definitions. You choose the answer you think is right. Ready? Innocuous. A. A shot or vaccine. B. Safe or harmless. C. --

B. JEREMY

You sure? TANCREDI

Yes. JEREMY

TANCREDI
(checking the answer sheet)
Okay. You got one. Um. Berserk. A. A manager of financial affairs. B. A Muslim garment C. A kind of pickle. D. --

D. JEREMY

Wait for all the choices, please. TANCREDI

Why? None of the others was right. JEREMY

TANCREDI
I want you to hear the definition. D. Wild or frenzied, which is correct. Okay, number three. Flank. A. Attack from one side. B. Open and honest. C. Long and lean. D. --

D. JEREMY

Wait for me to read it. D. Assign a grade. TANCREDI

Wait. What were those again? JEREMY

TANCREDI
See? You gotta listen. Attack from one side. Open and honest. Long and lean. Assign a grade.

It doesn't mean any of those. JEREMY

It's A. Attack from one side. TANCREDI

I don't get it. JEREMY

If you flank your opponent, you attack -- TANCREDI

Ohhhh! Like --. I get it. JEREMY

You sure? TANCREDI

Yeah. I do. JEREMY

Mr. Wright might have pegged you after all. TANCREDI

What do you mean? JEREMY

He said you were smart enough to pass. What do you think? TANCREDI

I don't know. I think so. I mean, if they ask you stupid stuff like this, sure. I might have to study a little. JEREMY

But you wouldn't do that, would you? TANCREDI

What? JEREMY

Study. TANCREDI

I don't know. JEREMY

There is another way. TANCREDI

Like what? JEREMY

You could leave school. TANCREDI

What? JEREMY

Leave. Play hooky. TANCREDI

JEREMY

No way.

TANCREDI

Mr. Wright says you were talking about dropping out.

JEREMY

I don't want to get arrested.

TANCREDI

The cops only find the people on the list I give them.

JEREMY

You wouldn't give them my name?

TANCREDI

Mistakes happen. We miss a name from time to time.

JEREMY

And I could just -- skip school?

TANCREDI

How would anyone know you weren't here?

JEREMY

Why do people do that?

TANCREDI

What?

JEREMY

Answer questions with questions. It's like you're trying not to answer.

TANCREDI

I'm thinking you already have all the answers you need.

JEREMY

What if I decide I want to pass the test?

TANCREDI

That's kind of a gamble. A gamble you're asking me to take.

JEREMY

I thought you said I was smart enough.

TANCREDI

What if I don't want to take that chance?

JEREMY

What if -- that's the only chance I give you?

TANCREDI

Are you threatening me?

JEREMY

I want to try it.

TANCREDI

Why?

JEREMY

When I was studying with Mr. Wright -- I don't know. It -- worked for me. What he was teaching. How he was teaching. It started to make sense. I think if Mr. Wright were teaching me again, I mean, I bet I could pass that test.

TANCREDI

You want me to put you back with Mr. Wright?

Jeremy nods.

TANCREDI (cont'd)

I can't do that. Your mom didn't want him anywhere near you.

JEREMY

What if my mom said it was okay?

TANCREDI

You think you can get your mother's okay? Come on.

JEREMY

Then ... I don't know.

TANCREDI

Now if your mother didn't know ...

JEREMY

That I was with Mr. Wright? I can't lie to her.

TANCREDI

Then we're back where we started. Your mother asks you what you're doing after school, you tell her, she yanks you out again.

JEREMY

Yeah. But maybe there's another way.

TANCREDI

How?

JEREMY

Well, see, there's two kinds of truth. There's, like, literal truth and there's, um, essential truth.

TANCREDI

I like the "you go missing for two weeks" plan better. It's got a better chance of saving my butt.

JEREMY

I can't do that. There's no way for me not to lie to her about that.

TANCREDI

So that leaves us at a stalemate.

JEREMY

Maybe.

TANCREDI

There's no maybe about it. We're cooked. We're done. We got nothing more to discuss.

JEREMY

See, what I get is that you need me real bad. You need me to pass this test or not be here, and I'm not leaving, so you don't have a choice. The other thing I see is that you don't think I'm smart enough. That makes me mad. That makes me want to prove to you I'm smart. Smarter than you think I am.

TANCREDI

How mad?

JEREMY

What do you mean, how mad?

TANCREDI

When I was coaching, I always liked the player who was out to prove me wrong. You know? He usually delivered the goods. I got some really good games out of those players. You really that mad at me?

JEREMY

I don't like to be called stupid.

TANCREDI

All right. I'll get Mr. Wright back here tomorrow, but you've got to deliver on that test.

JEREMY

I will show you with that test just how smart I am.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 7

Early morning the next day. Tancredi is pressing.

TANCREDI

I don't know why. He just agreed to the sessions.

MARSHALL

But why me?

TANCREDI

I don't know. I tried to take them myself, keep the burden off you, but he asked for you. Pretty much insisted.

MARSHALL

What did his mother say? She wasn't thrilled with me the last time she saw me.

TANCREDI

No, no, no. She wants what's best for Jeremy. You know that. And, well, he told me that he convinced her that you were the teacher that would give him the best chance.

MARSHALL

I'm surprised she'd change her mind like that.

TANCREDI

Me, too. But, you know, Jeremy and his mom are real close. They just, you know, they understand one another, I guess.

MARSHALL

So what do I have to do?

TANCREDI

Just like you were doing before. Just not with the box. And he won't be back in your class. Just after school.

MARSHALL

Ace, I'm sorry for the things I said yesterday.

TANCREDI

It's all right. You were just speaking your mind.

MARSHALL

You're okay?

TANCREDI

You gotta have a pretty thick skin in this job.

MARSHALL

Yours and mine.

TANCREDI

True. Thanks, Marsh. Marshall. For doing this. I know you don't have to.

MARSHALL

I want this to work for him.

TANCREDI

Why him?

MARSHALL

I don't know. Sometimes people come along who -- just shake you up. Make more of a difference in your life. In your teaching. I used to think that teachings not a creative job. That everything's the same, year after year. But it's not. The students change.

TANCREDI

I don't know. Year after year, same problems. This one's after that one's boyfriend. That one gets knocked up by some guy who doesn't care. And they all hate their parents.

MARSHALL

But each of them has a different story. Don't they? A different path that carried them into your classroom?

TANCREDI

Yeah, they got stories, all right. That's all I hear all day long is their stories.

MARSHALL

We all have stories, Ace. All kinds of stories. Our own ... myths ... and legends ... and ...

TANCREDI

What's the matter?

MARSHALL

We believe in our own stories, don't we?

TANCREDI

Don't we have to?

MARSHALL

I guess it depends on the story. And maybe who's telling it.

TANCREDI

You gotta tell your own story.

MARSHALL

Or else you get hit in the face.

TANCREDI

Hey. Snap out of this. You got classes to teach. Right? You ready?

MARSHALL

Yeah. Sure. Ready.

TANCREDI

Go get 'em. Just gotta keep all those stories on the pages and out of your life.
Keep 'em on the pages.

*And he's out. Marshall goes to the board, and
writes: "Words Are _____." He stands back and
stares at the board.*

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 8

Late that night. The box is back. Jeremy is inside it. His backpack sits near. Scratching noises come from inside. Marshall is reading.

MARSHALL

"... he saw the line slanting slowly upward. 'He's coming up,' he said. The line rose slowly and steadily and then the surface of the ocean bulged ahead of the boat and the fish came out. He came out unendingly --"

JEREMY

Whoa!

MARSHALL

"-- and water poured from his sides. He was bright in the sun and his head and back were dark purple and in the sun the stripes on his sides showed wide and a light lavender. His sword was as long as a baseball bat and tapered like a rapier and he rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly, like a diver and the old man saw the great sythe-blade of his tail go under and the line commenced to race out."

JEREMY

(emerging)

That's awesome.

MARSHALL

Hemingway tells a good story.

JEREMY

Wow. It's late.

Marshall looks up.

MARSHALL

Oh my God. I completely lost track of time.

JEREMY

That's okay.

MARSHALL

Look, Jeremy, there's no way we can finish this tonight.

JEREMY

Just a little more.

MARSHALL

We need to call your parents.

JEREMY

Um. Just my mom.

MARSHALL

Oh?

It's okay.

JEREMY

Isn't she at work?

MARSHALL

JEREMY
She lost her night job. Hey, I want to show you something.

MARSHALL
I'm calling. What's the number? Come on. I can look it up, you know.

JEREMY
Here.

He reaches for the phone and punches in the numbers.

JEREMY (cont'd)
Hey, mom. No, I'm all right. I'm still at school.
(looking away from Marshall)
Um. Studying. And reading. I know, Mom. No, I'm fine. No, no. I'll just walk. No! All right. Yeah, I'll be out front. 'Bye.

MARSHALL
She okay?

JEREMY
She's kinda pissed.

MARSHALL
You taking the box back?

JEREMY
Can I leave it? It's a lot to drag around.

MARSHALL
Um. Sure. You should get packed up.

JEREMY
No, wait.

He digs a small bundle of letters out of his backpack.

JEREMY (cont'd)
I wanted to show you this. Remember in class you said you wanted us all to learn how to tell our own stories? So, anyway, this is my story.

MARSHALL
They're letters.

JEREMY
They're from my dad.

MARSHALL

I didn't know you were still in contact with him.

JEREMY

I'm not. I get one every year on my birthday.

(opening one)

"Dear son, Happy birthday. You must be getting to be such a big man now. I wish I was there to see you grow up. I know I would be very proud of you..." And all like that.

MARSHALL

When was the last time you saw him?

JEREMY

I don't know. Like when I was five, I think. Then it was just letters every year. I used to write back, you know? But the only letters from him were once a year on my birthday. And they all say the same thing: you're getting to be such a man, I'll always be proud of you, wish I was there. He always ends 'em the same way, too:

"Maybe I'll make my way over to see you soon. Would you like that? I know I would. Love, Dad." So every year, I figured he's coming to see me and take me to the park or to the city or just out to eat or something. But he never does. And every year, he sends me another letter. And another letter. And another letter. And another letter! And another letter!! And all I have is all these worthless stupid letters!!!

He takes the letters out of their envelopes and shreds them, throwing them in the air like confetti.

JEREMY (cont'd)

That's my dad. Just worthless, stupid words, every year. You know what? I'm glad we live in a motel now. I'm glad we don't have a home anymore. Maybe this year his letter won't get to me. Maybe this year my birthday present will be that I don't get a letter from him. A letter with all his empty promises. His empty -- fucking -- words!

A beat.

JEREMY (cont'd)

Sorry I said fucking.

MARSHALL

I -- think we're past that now.

He goes to the board and points to the words on the board: "Words Are _____."

MARSHALL (cont'd)

What comes next, Jeremy?

JEREMY

In my "poem"?

MARSHALL

Yes. You started this. Does it still end the same way?

Words are ... shit? JEREMY

Do you still think that? MARSHALL

I don't know. Maybe. JEREMY

But maybe not. MARSHALL

Maybe not. JEREMY

MARSHALL
Sometimes words change lives, Jeremy. "Your father and I are getting a divorce."
"You do not meet our requirements at this time." "You have cancer."

JEREMY
"We can't live here anymore."

MARSHALL
Yes. Or, um, "I'm sorry, I can't marry you." "I need your resignation." "She's dead."

JEREMY
Which one of those is yours?

MARSHALL
Which one?

JEREMY
Is yours, yeah. I mean, you didn't just make them up, did you?

MARSHALL
No.
(A deep sigh)
A year before I came here, I taught senior English at another school. One of the students in my class, a young woman, started coming to me after school. She said she wanted to be a writer and wanted help with her writing. So she'd bring me what she'd written and I'd critique it. And I suggested books for her to read by authors who were writing similar material. Our sessions started running late, so I'd drive her home. Rumors started spreading that we were having an affair.

JEREMY
Were you?

MARSHALL
Not really.

JEREMY
Not really?

MARSHALL

Her stories got better and better, more focused, more intense. But they also got more and more explicit. And our discussions ended up being rather -- intimate. Because of the nature of her writing.

JEREMY

So which words does this work for?

MARSHALL

What words?

JEREMY

All that "I can't marry you," "I have cancer" stuff.

MARSHALL

"I need your resignation."

JEREMY

Whoa!

MARSHALL

The rumors reached the principal's office. It didn't take long after that. Her mother was president of the school board.

JEREMY

But she started it. She was the one who wrote the stories.

MARSHALL

I was the adult. The teacher. I was supposed to "draw the line."

JEREMY

But you were helping her. I mean, her writing was getting better.

MARSHALL

I should have suggested that her stories were -- inappropriate.

JEREMY

Is that what the principal said?

MARSHALL

And her parents. And other teachers.

JEREMY

But you were helping her.

MARSHALL

Maybe. But if I was teaching this to her, what was I teaching to the rest of the students? And wasn't I immoral for doing that? And how dare I not tell her mother what she was writing? Besides, they kept throwing around the charge that we had been "intimate."

JEREMY

You said you weren't.

MARSHALL

I said we weren't physical. We were often very intimate in our conversations. I guess we were as close to being lovers as you can be without actually touching.

JEREMY

Did you know you were doing something wrong?

MARSHALL

I still don't know if I did anything wrong. Anyway, she's a writer now. Not a great writer, but she makes a living.

JEREMY

So she learned from you.

MARSHALL

So did all my students. I mean, that year? I was never a better teacher. Never more engaged. She inspired me. Had I forced to defend myself before the school board, both those words would have gotten me in trouble: intimate and inspiration. But its true. Teachers need to be inspired.

JEREMY

What about now?

MARSHALL

What about it?

JEREMY

Are you inspired now?

MARSHALL

We'll see.

Jeremy goes to the board and writes "Problems" after "Words Are."

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Why?

JEREMY

The words that girl wrote. They caused you problems. So did the words "intimate" and "inspired." And I keep having problems with the words in my father's letters.

MARSHALL

Why aren't words "shit" anymore?

JEREMY

I don't know. Maybe 'cause it's not the words' fault. It's how we use them.

MARSHALL

So people are the problem.

JEREMY

I guess.

Then what are words?
MARSHALL

He erases "problems."

JEREMY
Maybe they're like -- like money. You know? 'Cause some people spend money on good things and some don't. Words are like that. And words can get you things like money can.

So, currency.
MARSHALL

Yeah.
JEREMY

He writes in "currency."

JEREMY (cont'd)
Yeah. Like that. I get it now.

Are you sure?
MARSHALL

Why?
JEREMY

MARSHALL
Yes, you can buy things with words. You can con somebody out of something. But that's not the only thing words are for. That's a means, not an end.

JEREMY
I don't understand.

MARSHALL
Santiago is out on that ocean alone for three days. He gets so lonely that he has to talk to himself just to hear the sound of someone's voice. He talks to the bird that lands on his boat. He talks to the fish he's hooked. He talks to the sea.

JEREMY
So?

MARSHALL
When you're in the box, you can never stay inside for long. You always pop out and ask a question, make your voice heard. You have a story in you, Jeremy. Its your story, unique in all the world.

(He indicates the torn letters)

And this isn't it. This is your father's story. Sure, it has an impact on you, but it's not your story. And if you keep your story inside, no one will ever understand you. No one will ever know your journeys, the different path you've traveled. And when you hear other people's stories, you can begin to understand how similar everybody else's stories are to yours and how we can all have different stories and still be so very much alike.

He erases "currency."

MARSHALL (cont'd)

We still don't have our answer, do we?

The door opens and Angela peers in.

ANGELA

Jeremy?

JEREMY

Mom!

ANGELA

What are you doing in here? You're not supposed to be in here.

JEREMY

I know, but --

ANGELA

You told me that Mr. Tancredi was teaching you.

JEREMY

He did. Yesterday.

MARSHALL

From what I understand --

JEREMY

I asked for Mr. Wright to teach me again.

ANGELA

Why? He put you in a box.

JEREMY

The first day, yes. But after that, I wanted to go in the box.

ANGELA

Why would you want that?

JEREMY

It's my space. I can think in there.

ANGELA

No, Jeremy. It's not right. Mr. Wright, I'm going to have to report you to --

JEREMY

NO! Look!

He goes to the box and starts to rip it open, revealing the artwork he has been creating.

ANGELA

Jeremy, let's --

JEREMY

No! You have to see this. Please!

ANGELA

See what? What are you doing? We have to go.

JEREMY

No, you have to see this. Here!

He has the box open and reveals the drawing he has been making.

ANGELA

This is -- really amazing, Jeremy. But -- why?

JEREMY

When Mr. Wright was reading, I'd hear different words and I'd sort of -- draw them in here. And as I was drawing them, they started to -- I don't know -- become the ocean.

ANGELA

Fathoms. Swirls. Hissing. Why hissing?

JEREMY

That was the sound the flying fish made. I liked that.

ANGELA

Current. Stream. Bubble. Mysticism.

JEREMY

I had to have Mr. Wright spell that one.

MARSHALL

I wondered why you asked.

ANGELA

You've just been reading to him?

MARSHALL

The Old Man and the Sea.

ANGELA

I'm sorry, Mr. Wright. I didn't understand. I'm still not sure I understand. But what I'm seeing -- what Jeremy has -- created ... It's beautiful. Isn't it?

MARSHALL

Yes. A sea of words.

JEREMY

I guess.

MARSHALL

A lot of people could get lost in such a sea.

JEREMY

You gotta -- get comfortable there. Or you gotta be with someone who knows what they're doing.

ANGELA

So you got this from listening to a book?

JEREMY

We still haven't finished it.

ANGELA

Then finish it. Please.

MARSHALL

Thank you, Mrs. Taylor.

ANGELA

Come on, Jeremy.

He starts to pack up. Marshall heads to the blackboard.

MARSHALL

Wait a minute. Jeremy: our sentence. How does it end?

Jeremy stares at the board a minute, then writes "Windows" to complete the sentence.

END OF SCENE

ACT 2 SCENE 9

Late afternoon, three weeks later. Marshall is grading papers. Jeremy is reading. The board is clean. Tancredi bursts into the room.

TANCREDI

Where the -- ?

(sees Jeremy)

What did you do, you little shit?

JEREMY

What are you talking about?

TANCREDI

Your test. You screwed up the state test!

MARSHALL

Ace! Calm down!

TANCREDI

Calm down?! This little asshole burned me! Why the hell should I calm down?

MARSHALL

How did you get the test results so fast?

TANCREDI

I don't have all of them. But I pulled a favor and got his test score. He screwed me over!

MARSHALL

How?

TANCREDI

He got a one eleven. Out of eight hundred points, he gets a one eleven. Nobody gets that low a score. Nobody! You promised me!

JEREMY

No I didn't.

TANCREDI

In this room! You promised me!

MARSHALL

Ace! Step outside.

TANCREDI

No!

MARSHALL

I'm not asking.

TANCREDI

What, are you on his side now?

MARSHALL

I'm not on any side. You need to step outside until you calm down. Now!

Tancredi tries to stare him down, but can't. He flings himself out the door.

MARSHALL (cont'd)

Jeremy, what is this all about?

JEREMY

He and I made a deal.

MARSHALL

What was it?

JEREMY

Well, first he wanted me to drop out.

MARSHALL

What?

JEREMY

Yeah. He offered me this deal where I could, like, stay home for two weeks, and he'd leave my name off the truants list, or whatever, and then he could report me as a dropout instead of me taking the test.

MARSHALL

Jeremy, are you sure that's what you heard?

JEREMY

Yes. But I didn't want to do that, so I --

Tancredi bursts back in.

TANCREDI

Now tell me why you didn't pass that test.

JEREMY

That wasn't our deal.

TANCREDI

Yes it was!

MARSHALL

Ace. Watch it.

TANCREDI

It was our deal.

JEREMY

No. I said I would take the test and prove how smart I am.

TANCREDI

What you proved was that you're a smart-ass. Making pretty pictures with all the dots. I saw the sheet.

JEREMY

But I did what I said I would do.

TANCREDI

You did nothing.

JEREMY

Wanna bet?

MARSHALL

What are you talking about, Jeremy?

JEREMY

What happens now, Mr. Tancredi?

MARSHALL

Jeremy, were you trying to get Mr. Tancredi fired?

JEREMY

No matter which deal I took, he was gonna make me lie to my mother.

MARSHALL

Jeremy, I think it's time you went home.

JEREMY

Okay. See ya.

And he's gone.

MARSHALL

So apparently it's your turn.

TANCREDI

What are you talking about?

MARSHALL

Last time he hit me in the face. This time he hit you where you live. Last time it was a wake up call for me to teach. This time it's a wake up call for you to stand up for education.

TANCREDI

It's a royal shafting, that's what it is.

MARSHALL

Whatever it takes.

TANCREDI

I'm not seeing this.

MARSHALL

Teaching is like fishing. Ultimately, it's one man catching one fish.

TANCREDI

But what do I do now?

MARSHALL

You can say the tests are valid and lose your job, or you can stand up and tell people what these tests really are.

TANCREDI

They're accountability.

MARSHALL

See ya.

TANCREDI

What, then?

Marshall tosses him a copy of The Old Man and the Sea.

MARSHALL

Read the book.

Tancredi leaves. Marshall crosses to the door, tears the piece of paper off the window and throws it away.

END OF PLAY