

# Making Mugnog:

## A discussion and analysis of the MAP process

In the fall of my junior year, I began the application process for a Mentored Advanced Project (MAP) that would serve as an advanced production laboratory in directing. The dean's office explains, "Mentored Advanced Projects provide a chance to work closely with a faculty member on scholarly research or the creation of a work of art. [A MAP] is the culmination of significant preparatory work. It serves to integrate the knowledge and skills gained by the student's course of studies, and aims to produce results that merit presentation to the college community or the wider scholarly world." For me, *Mugnog* would provide the opportunity to work with Professor Pip Gordon and a team of my peers, integrate the skills I had learned participating in and studying theatre at Grinnell, and produce a result that benefits my community.

### **Conceiving the project**

This capstone directing project afforded me a rare chance to choose a script about which I was truly passionate. I did not have to worry about fitting into a season, or appeasing my producers, or pre-casting. In many ways, this academic setting afforded me more freedom than a professional experience might, in that I was limited by minimal requirements. I had only to justify to the faculty why the script I chose would fit the project criteria and serve as an excellent learning opportunity.

### *Choosing a genre*

The Department of Theatre has a list of styles and genres through which it attempts to cycle every four years; the list includes Shakespeare, non-Western plays and minority voices.

Though the project criteria did not specify any relationship to the main stage season, I wished my

In the future, I recommend: Future directors and designers of MAP (or 380 or 317) productions would benefit greatly from a Theatre Department archive of student-produced work. Ideally, this would include copies of designs, production photos, an archival video of a performance, and an informational sheet with such useful facts as the name of the advisor, the project's official designation, the names of the for-credit participants, and the production budget.

production to serve as both a departure from and a continuation of the departmental genre and style rotation. I needed a form that demanded experimentation and creativity while still making use of the techniques and ideals common to Grinnell productions, including “the

invention of imaginary realities” and “contact with ideas, cultures, and historical periods ...

different from our own.” In order to brainstorm new and nontraditional directions, I considered

how I could apply my interests outside of theatre to this project. When I began to ruminate on

my experiences as a summer camp counselor, I imagined how theatre for young audiences could work at Grinnell.

Audiences and theatre-makers at Grinnell consistently complain that college productions, which seek to change minds and provoke thought, simply preach to the choir, as the majority of theatregoers are liberally minded students and professors. With no dissenting opinions in the room, dialogue is less productive. One solution to this perception is to attract a different audience. There is no theatre dedicated to young audiences in the Grinnell area. College theatre productions usually contain adult subject matter and complex subjects that make them unappealing to grade-schoolers. Some community theatre is family oriented, but productions

targeted specifically at young audiences are rare. Producing a play for young audiences would not only fill a gap in the local theatre scene, but also introduce different audiences to theatre at Grinnell.

### *Selecting the play*

When I knew I wanted a script targeted toward children, I read about the history and current state of theatre for young audiences. My personal experiences have made me familiar with the problems young people face and the problems that adults face in dealing with young people. I

have been a camp counselor for many years, and I come from a long line of educators. From earliest childhood I remember dinner table

In the future, I recommend: When choosing a MAP or 380 project, directors should strongly consider selecting a script that falls outside the established categories of departmental rotation.

conversations about such subjects as lack of parent involvement in school, positive reinforcement as opposed to punishment, and integrating special needs children into the classroom. In the course of initial research, I found that with the onset of child-oriented entertainment and “better” toys, children have in many ways become less creative. With so many commercially available imaginary worlds, why bother to create your own? Kids would rather be entertained, that is, watch others having fun, then to entertain themselves.

When I set aside research and began reading scripts, I hoped I would find stories that dealt with issues of diversity and acceptance, or that encouraged self-esteem, or characters who modeled 20<sup>th</sup> century instead of 19<sup>th</sup> century values. I had no luck. Several issues prevented me from finding such scripts. First, the genre of theatre for young audiences is a relatively young genre. Second, many professionals view children’s theatre as a “poor relation” of “legitimate” theatre and therefore never consider working in the genre. Third, from the infancy of the genre to

the present day, many scripts are based on traditional fairy tales for children, most of which reinforce outdated conceptions of appropriate children's behavior: children should be seen and not heard, boys are braver and stronger than girls, and virtue comes from submission to God and to adults. Fourth, though a more effective, valuable theatre for children is evolving, the scripts of these plays are not yet available for non-professional production.

During my research, I came across a book entitled *Political Plays for Children*, whose author/translator, Jack Zipes, had recognized the same problems within the genre of theatre for young audiences as I had noticed in my search. His introduction asserts "...children have been given a steady diet of banal, cute plays diluted of reality in order to distract them from their real oppressive surroundings and to keep them unaware of how they might use their wits and initiative to develop their full potentialities and possibly change society."

An answer to the problems Zipes articulates was exactly what I had been searching for. One of my goals for my production was to avoid preaching to the choir by attracting a different audience. A different audience, however, requires a different message. Children perceive stories differently than adults do; as a theatre-maker, I needed different tools to send a message to a young audience. *Political Plays for Children* provided those tools: a fast-moving plot, likeable characters, larger-than-life villains, music, and best of all, a message of empowerment children could use. A children's play could truly be worth doing if I could use it as a vehicle to encourage young people to use their wits, initiative, and potential to change their society.

Yasha Frank, the director of the National Theatre for Youth under the auspices of the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s, noted "Children love to learn but hate to be taught—so all we have to do is frame our plays in such a way that we never tell them anything but just evolve, with as much participation as we can get from them, the behavior patterns we want them to

follow.” Of the three plays in the book, I choose *Mugnog* because it frames its “lesson” in a fun, interactive way that has the potential to stick with a young audience. *Mugnog* also has a small, flexible cast, which provided the opportunity for color- and gender-blind casting, its minimal technical requirements that left great opportunities for conceptual flexibility, its potential for audience interaction and improvisation, and its messages of the power of imagination and the joy of critical problem solving.

*Mugnog* begins with a group of children deciding to put on a play. From an ordinary cardboard box, they pull forth the costumes and props necessary to create their world. The children enact the story of Tom and Pam, two children who are visiting their Aunt and Uncle on holiday. They name their cardboard box “Mugnog” and treat him as a friend and mentor. Meanwhile, the adults are bungling about trying to find out who or what Mugnog is and if he is dangerous. The search for Mugnog brings in the police, the army, and eventually the president’s assistant! Through it all the kids use their wits and imagination to keep one step ahead of the grown-ups. When the bumbling adults finally do get their hands on the cardboard box, Pam and Tom declare that Mugnog has now become a drain spout they have found outside; Mugnog remains too powerful an idea for grown-ups to stop.

### *Seeds of a concept*

Through my initial impressions of the play and my preliminary research, including the details of the first production of *Mugnog* (then *Mugnog-Kinder*, The Mugnog Kids) by Grips, the radical Berlin theatre company, I had developed some ideas about what I wanted my production to do. My first goal was to engage the audience: use direct address, create an intimate theatre space (arena or thrust configuration) with untraditional seating (pillows, mats, etc.), repeat

musical elements, perform an interactive preshow, and follow up with the show an activity book or post-show discussions. My next goal was to ensure the show's broad appeal to children and adults by means of visual spectacle and movement, fast-paced, continuous action, covering scene shifts with action and/or music, and not "cheating", that is, talking down to younger audience members or joking over their head. My third goal was to encourage "critical thinking and new solutions to real problems," as stated in the Grips mission, by making problems and circumstances real and applicable, by valuing audience involvement, going further than token participation, and by showing the characters' process of problem solving

These goals laid the foundation for work on this production, but they were only the seeds of a production concept. The production team and the actors would help nurture these seeds and add their own unique ideas and perspectives to the concept. Research and rehearsal would help shape and cultivate my own ideas about the message of the play and the means of conveying that message. Together the cast, production team, and I would refer to these goals whenever we lost sight of the roots of our project.

## **Pre-rehearsal**

Before rehearsal could begin, I needed to choose official academic designation of the project within the Department of Theatre, assemble a production team to help envisage the physical world of the play, conduct dramaturgical research, develop a meeting schedule and logistic plan for the production, and hold auditions. Addressing these logistical concerns laid the foundation for a smooth collaborative process.

*Blazing a trail: a new kind of process*

The directing curriculum of the Grinnell Theatre Department is limited in practical application. I had directed only one production, a short one-act play, for academic credit. My

In the future I recommend:

Production team members who are receiving full credit meet at least one hour a week beyond the production meeting to carry out the work that goes beyond the traditional duties of their stations. This includes dramaturgical research beyond individual areas, event planning (trips, colloquia, etc.), script analysis, and writing a weekly production summary (this is what we accomplished this week, this is what we plan to accomplish next week). All members of the production team should attend a weekly (or bi-weekly early in the semester) production meeting with the MAP mentor at which the MAP team members can share the fruits of their meeting and discuss the usual production business. All production team members should attend these meetings starting early in the semester so that non-MAP team members are not left out of the loop.

other directing experience, directing another one-act play and assistant directing two mainstage plays, was strictly extracurricular. Furthermore, my production experience had only given me limited opportunity to collaborate with a production team. Because the department discourages extensive production demands for student productions, my extracurricular directing experience had lacked all but the most basic

technical support. My duties as assistant director for the department were in rehearsal, not in collaborative design discussions. Therefore, although I had leadership experience, I had never been responsible for guiding a production team through a fully produced production.

To complicate matters, my official designation for this project was new. Never before had the department produced an advanced directing project as a MAP, with designers as equal academic partners to the director. Our team was going into uncharted collaborative territory towards a dimly imagined production process. Before the semester of the project we had done our best to address logistical concerns such as schedules, deadlines and meeting times, to consider exactly how and when faculty would be involved and to determine how department

would allocate material and human resources for our project. However, as in any new process, our plans would need to be flexible as new challenges surfaced during the production process.

### *Assembling a production team*

In the fall of 2004, I began approaching students to invite them to join the production team. Elisabeth Kruger, a junior Russian major, would serve as lighting designer and be a part of the official MAP team, receiving full academic credit for her work. The scenic designer, Nick Santiago, a senior Theatre major, was the other full-credit member of our MAP team. Other team members participated for no academic credit. Tarry Anne Weston, a senior History major with an Education concentration, was our costume designer. Sarah Smith, a sophomore Theatre major, designed the sound. Katie Kleese, a senior Biology major, stage managed. Lauren Ditzler, a junior English major, was our music director. Team members joined the process at different times, which challenged me as the group leader to keep everyone updated about logistical planning and concept development.

In the future I recommend:  
A group meeting of all the members of a production team before the semester of the project would help everyone understand the nature and time commitment of the project. This would also give each person a chance to decide what type of academic credit (if any) s/he would like to take for the project.

Frequent production meetings helped keep everyone up to date. I also arranged separate meetings with designers to discuss ideas between production meetings. Early in the process, our stage manager realized that she would be unable to fully commit to the process; we would only have our stage manager for “tech week” (the week before the performances) and some “run-through” rehearsals (during which we perform the entire show) in the month before performances. In order to fill the organizational gap, I recruited Dale Mackey, a sophomore pursuing an Independent major, as my assistant director.

## Research

Dramaturging *Mugnog* required a massive amount of research because of the unusual genre, the historical and linguistic situation of the play, and the stylistic challenges inherent in the production concept. An appointment with a research librarian helped set me on the right track to English-language resources concerning Grips theatre and the original production of *Mugnog*. As

In the future I recommend:  
In the MAP application, all members of the production team who are receiving credit for the MAP should specify how they will contribute to research for the production. For MAP students, such research should go beyond what is traditionally necessary for their production role to include the broader information necessary and useful for everyone working on the production, as well as for the audience.

my concept developed further, three distinct areas of research came into focus.

The first area concerned the text: its background, historical situation, the circumstances of its translation, and its relation to other plays for young audiences. Research in this

area included the articles “Grips: Towards an Emancipatory Theatre for Children”; “From Escapist Fantasy to Social Imagination,” which detailed the problems with traditional types of children’s plays; “The Youth Plays of Grips”; “Emancipatory Drama for Children and Youth in West Germany”; “Children’s Theatre as People’s Theatre,” which details the response to Grips plays by both critics and young audiences; “The Lehrstück Experience on a Contemporary Stage,” which explains the influence of Brecht on the Grips theatre; and “The Child Grow up—Towards a History of the Grips Theater,” which describes the evolution of Grips’ methods. Much of the theory and history of children’s theatre belonged in this category of research, as it helped me situate our production in the world of children’s theatre. The actions and philosophies of Grips helped me develop my production concept, as they convincingly articulated their ideas for solutions to problems with traditional children’s theatre.

The next area of research focused on our target audience. Current developments in children's theatre and other entertainment belonged here, as did children's relationships with the issues of the play such as politics, conformity, and television. This section included such articles as "Growing Up in Twentieth Century America"; "The Development of Political Attitudes in Children," which offered statistics about children's views of the government and its agents; "Once Upon a Time Beyond Disney," which describes the telling of fairy tales in film and television; "Lessons in How the Planet Should Work," an interview with prominent contemporary director Peter Brosius of the Minneapolis Children's Theatre Company; and "Political Children's Theatre in the Age of Globalization." These articles gave us examples of the toys, television, movies, and theatre productions that are marketed to today's children, and suggested how such amusements influence the development of children's imagination.

The last, and possibly most unusual area of research concerned child psychology and children's play behavior. The production concept envisioned the characters of the play as children putting on their own play about personalities drawn from their imaginations and life experiences. Therefore, the entire play is an elaborate make-believe game acted by a group of children. In order to make this concept credible and authentic, our actors and design team needed to know how and why children play. The following articles informed our production: "Pretend Play as Improvisation"; "Play with Social Materials," which describes how pretend play is used to develop social awareness; "Getting to Know City Kids," which details the imaginary worlds city children build for themselves; "The House of Make Believe," which discusses what happens to an individual's pretend-play impulses when make-believe ceases to be a socially acceptable pastime; and "Child's Play", which explains possible motivations for what roles children choose to play.

I compiled the most important and useful selections from the research into a dramaturgical packet for distribution to production team members and the actors. This knowledge of the text's history, the modern world of children, and the world of make-believe play would prove invaluable in rehearsals and production meetings.

### *Preliminary design meetings*

Before auditions, we held preliminary design meetings to formulate a collective concept for the world of the play. Nick had the idea of making the performance area a children's

In the future I recommend:  
To help keep members of the production team on the same wavelength as ideas change and expand, it would be helpful to have a central location (perhaps in the design studio) to store research, drawings, and so on. It might even be worthwhile to work up some kind of visualization of the concepts of the show (for instance, a chart or web) to remind everyone of the common goals.

playroom, filled with real toys. Elisabeth thought of enhancing the difference between the "real" world and the world of the children's imagination using light to make the imaginary settings more tangible for the audience. Sarah suggested using cast members to produce live sound rather than implementing stereotypical recorded sound effects.

Tarry put forward her idea of supplementing foundational

costume elements with dress-up clothes that would signify and assist the children's transformation between imaginary characters. In short, once the idea of a child's playtime world of make-believe was established, we all drew on our own childhood experiences to lend excitement and authenticity to the concept.

Nick, Elisabeth, Tarry, and I ventured to the children's section of the local library and picked out several books that expressed each of our ideas for the color palette and imagery of our original impressions. We looked for images of locales such as gardens, offices, and playrooms, as well as images of stock characters, such as doctors, policemen, and teachers. Through our

findings, we began to understand how books present such people and places to their young readers.

To refresh our memories of childhood play and to get a visual feel for the worlds children inhabit, we visited the Iowa Children's Museum. We voraciously stole ideas. At the museum, contrasting borders on wide expanses of solid colors drew together disparate architectural elements. Green strips of fabric hanging from the ceiling created a jungle. Piles of pillows gave children secret corners in which to nest. A ramp and platform structure, surfaced with soft play mats and with a solid railing along one edge, provided a flexible space to climb, crawl, fly to the moon, conquer a castle, or chase a pirate ship. Everything was sturdy, soft-edged, low to the ground, and subtly patterned.

Perhaps most interesting of all was the theatre area of the museum, where children were invited to put on their own make-believe plays. In looking at the costumes, Tarry recalled from her education classes that children preferred ambiguous dress-up clothes to those specifically constructed for certain roles. For example, an old suede suit-coat has more possibilities and is therefore more attractive than a witch's hat. This information proved to be an important element of our concept: sets and props (like the characters) should be flexible, have more than one possible use, and seldom (if ever) serve their intended purpose.

### *Casting*

Auditions, held three weeks into the school year, were not the typical theatrical read-a-monologue-take-some-direction affair. Auditioners came in a group; I led warm-ups and improvisation games to show me each person's energy, imagination, and ability to work with a partner. I wanted each auditioner to have fun at the audition. No matter who I called back or cast,

I wanted everyone to have a positive experience and feel that they would enjoy working with me on this show. After thirty minutes of games, Lauren, the music director, taught the group

In the future I recommend: MAP production auditions should be held as soon as possible after mainstage auditions in order to avoid being superceded by other student productions. If possible, mainstage callback and cast lists should mention MAP production audition times.

selections from two songs. We gave them a short break to practice and collect themselves. We then had the auditioners sing in groups (to check for blend and tone) and individually (to check for quality and confidence). The music is strange and dissonant, so it was not easy to learn quickly. However, the fun and energetic

atmosphere we had created helped put people at ease in the audition process.

Callbacks involved all eight people who had initially auditioned. We began with warm-ups and creative improvisation games. One particularly useful game, called “Hot Spot,” asks the group to work together to keep a sing-a-long going. They stand in a circle, with one person in the center singing a song. Another player must jump in with a different song before the person in the center forgets the words or can’t go on. This exercise is harder than it sounds. Hot Spot demonstrates which players are willing to take risks to rescue their teammates from trouble, which is an invaluable characteristic for the ensemble of an improvisational, interactive show.

After several games, I asked pairs to read short scenes from the scripts and to take direction. I asked the auditioners to perform a scene once making whatever choices they wished. The second time I would explain to each auditioner a simple goal for the scene, such as “get your partner to leave” or “get the audience to answer you.” This exercise showed me how auditioners interpreted my direction and the extent to which they were able to adjust their performance as per my request.

Casting itself necessitated a choice about which was more valuable for this production: the opportunity to build ensemble from the beginning of the process, or the assurance of individual, proven talent. I had limited options, compounded by the fact that several of the auditioners who had done well had schedules that would prevent them from attending several rehearsals a week. Since all members of the cast would be onstage for the entire performance, I would want to work with the entire cast in most rehearsals. The absence of one cast member from any given rehearsal session would seriously impede our progress. Furthermore, the consistent absence of one or more cast members would damage the strength and unity of our ensemble; difficult dynamics can result. No matter how tempting the possibilities presented by a talented individual, a hectic schedule presents all of the aforementioned problems. As such, I made creating ensemble my primary concern.

## Rehearsal

Once I had assembled a cast, the heart of my work as a director had begun. I had to impart to the actors the vision of the world the production team and I had developed and help the actors create characters to inhabit that world. The meta-theatrics of *Mugnog* can be confusing: the actors are adults playing children playing adults. However, the structure of our rehearsal process ensured that the actors would never forget that their characters were children, and one spontaneous discovery guaranteed that the actors would never forget why their children felt the need to play adult characters.

One night during rehearsal, half the cast acted the pre-show (an elaborate improvisation in which the actors, as their child characters, engage the audience in childish games), while the other half played audience members in order to help their castmates get used to interacting with

the audience. For her audience character, one actress took on the guise of a certain professor notorious for his disapproving countenance while watching rehearsals. The actors, protected from their timidity by the double shield of their own characters and the character of the professor, interacted brilliantly, approaching the “professor” to ask him to participate, admonishing him for not having fun, and so on. The next night, however, the *real* professor came to watch a rehearsal, and the actors did not interact with him at all, confessing to being intimidated by his characteristic glowering. This discovery showed the actors why the children masquerade as adults.

The actors had naturally done the same thing as the child characters of the play: used make-believe to combat their fears in a way that they find difficult in real life. The child characters of the play would never talk to adults as they do in the course of their game. Likewise, my actors, even hiding behind a character, could not address the professor the way they imagined. Perhaps there was not so far to go in transforming this cast from college students to children playing at make-believe.

### *Becoming like little children*

One key to the type of acting for which the Grips Theatre strives is the honest presentation of adult actors playing child characters. The audience knows that the actors are not really children, and artificial, stereotypical representations of children such as high voices, lisps, and clumsiness only enhance the unreality of the situation. Realizing this, I wanted my actors to approach their young characters in much the same way they would an adult character; find out what he wants and try to get it. In the course of developing the characters of the play, we discovered common

traits in our young characters that seemed to set them apart from adults: energy, single-mindedness, creativity, energy, spontaneity, honesty, and energy.

Every rehearsal began with warm-up games. These ranged from traditional theatre warm-ups such as tongue twisters and stretching to throwbacks to childhood. We played Mother May I, Red Light Green Light, Kitty Wants a Corner, Television Tag, and many others. As children do, we improvised variations on old games, or made up entirely new ones. This high-energy silliness set the tone for the day's work, since, for the play's young characters, the entire performance was an elaborate game.

An uninformed observer could not be blamed for mistaking rehearsal for day care. From the first week of our process, we worked with some of the toys that would later constitute our set and props. It was essential for the cast to be familiar with the toys that populated their world and be able to use the toys to express their ideas as easily as adults use language. Sitting in a circle around a pile of toys, we played speed rounds of "name that object," in which each player must pick up a toy and immediately name a novel use for it. Players decided that a plastic shovel could be a clock's pendulum, a wagon could be a skate for a giant, and a plastic airplane could be a telephone. We constructed imaginary objects from the toys, such as secret weapons. One secret weapon was a folding plastic tunnel that exploded army men. Another was an innocent-looking doll who held a briefcase full of deadly (plastic) snakes. We built toy-castles, peopled by wooden blocks or plastic ninjas or folded fabric scraps and defended by intricate systems involving dump trucks or plastic get-away boats or projectile-launching puppets. Soon, choosing a toy to use in a scene was as natural to the actors choosing a tone of voice.

We did approach character study somewhat differently than we would have approached adult characters. For starters, young characters have less history than adults; they simply haven't lived

as long. Children also identify themselves in ways different from adults. Kids are more likely to describe their identity in terms of their surroundings rather than their individuality. While a college student might say “I’m a bio major,” a child might say “I’m Kendra’s best friend.” Knowing this, much of our character work comprised discussions and experiments with the interrelationships of the child characters: their relative ages, the pecking order, familial relationships. I also asked each actor to draw her character’s ideal play space. This was more revealing than asking them to write a description of their character’s personality, since the play space included the child’s ideal location (indoors, outdoors, or a combination), toys, and even other people.

The actors had to create their “base” characters of the children from minimal textual evidence. Only the first few pages of the script reveal the base characters. Through the rest of the script, the children speak through the guise of their assumed personas. The actors needed to find evidence for their child’s gender, relative age, relationship with other characters and personality traits largely from the way they play. This is easier than, say, attempting to discern Julia Roberts’ personality just by watching her movies. The characters’ play in *Mugnog* is not only highly personal, but improvised by the characters as they go; each child helps control the flow of the story and has some control over what other characters they assume.

### *Incorporating research*

Several sessions of dramaturgical discussion served as the impetus for implementing research. We held one session for each of the three major categories of research. The first category, the history of Grips and *Mugnog*, helped us understand why this play was important and worth doing. The second section, about the state of childhood in America today,

piggybacked on our first ideas about why we should do this play and helped us understand many of the influences that differentiate the kids who would make up our audience from the kids who made up the audience for the original production: the attitudes of children towards certain people, such as policemen and president's assistants; their experiences with television and theatre-going; the toys with which they play. The third category, describing the ways and means of children's imaginary play, was the most helpful to us in structuring the action and discovering how the child characters built their elaborate imaginary world. We discussed the types of play and imaginary worlds referred to and implemented by the children in the studies, and tried to integrate some of their strategies into our own play-making. For instance, we used "replica play," the practice of talking through objects symbolic of an assumed character in the garden scene; Tom and Pam, in their only instance of talking "out of character" as imagined adults, hold a discussion through puppets.

One particularly useful article, from the book *Pretend Play as Improvisation* by R. Keith Sawyer, discussed metacommunication in the context of playing pretend. Since the children in our play are improvising the story as they go, they must have ways to communicate to each other how they want to proceed. Sawyer describes how children alternate between implicit direction, which occurs inside the world of the play, with explicit, or meta- direction, which occurs outside of the world of the play. Our script has several instances of meta-direction in which the children step out of their pretend character to explain something to their fellow players. This article helped the actors find strategies for their characters to influence the dramatic action of the play. When they began to see how their characters could negotiate and direct pretend play, the action became more dynamic: minor struggles cropped up between characters with opposing ideas of the direction of the play, and the actors did not take course of action for granted. For instance,

the “children” would hold hushed conferences during the scene shift to determine who would play a role in the next scene, or the President’s Assistant might invent a reason within a scene for his friend, in the character of the Policeman, to come onstage.

One article of our dramaturgy packet gave me an idea to demonstrate how *Mugnog’s* message was relevant to adults as well as children. There was a legendary Caliph of Persia, Haroun-al-Raschid, who would go about his kingdom dressed as a beggar in order to do and hear what he could not do and hear as himself. Haroun-al-Raschid was doing exactly what the *Mugnog kinder* do: disguising himself to escape from his station in life.

One evening at rehearsal, tucked away inside the sheet-fort (lit by a lamp and some flashlights) that constituted the scene in Tom and Pam’s bedroom I read out loud one of the stories of Haroun-al-Raschid, The Story of Ali Cogia. The story tells of how Haroun-al-Raschid had to rule in a difficult criminal case, and so went out walking one night in his beggar’s guise hoping to find some information to help him make his ruling. He happened by a courtyard where some children were playing a make-believe game of the very trial on which Haroun-al-Raschid had to rule! Listening in, Haroun-al-Raschid heard the children present a solution of which he had not thought, and so invited the children to his palace the next day to help him make his ruling. This story illuminated not only how the device of incognito indulgence, that is, shedding one’s station by assuming a make-believe role, can apply to adults, but also how the make-believe worlds of children hold potential adults should not ignore.

### *World-building*

Another challenge was merging the imaginary worlds the actors were creating with the physical world the designers envisioned. To assist this collaboration, I scheduled several blocks

of time labeled simply “world building.” Initially, I asked the actors to play “etudes.” Like its musical equivalent, the acting etude is a short invention that explores a certain theme or technique. I would assign each group of actors a theme or location and ask them to create a world (using our large collection of toys and anything else in the rehearsal space) and play a little scene inspired by the prompt. I might give each group a different location or profession, or ask them to choose and enact a common proverb. The etudes were both entertaining and productive.

There were cowboys riding horses (bouncing up and down on the theatre seats) firing arrows (wooden blocks) at the Indians (toy soldiers) on the open plain (the stage). Traveling scientists trekked through the South American jungle (fabric hanging from clothesline) studying monkeys, and later decided to live in a cave (under a slide) with said monkeys. There was a full-service carwash. Waves traveled the ocean and met for afternoon tea. Musicians wandered in the desert looking for the Burning Bush Restaurant. All of these etudes helped the ensemble think of ways to use the toys and the space around them to build an imaginary world, and of ways to make that world real by believing in it absolutely.

The next step was to focus their newly developed worldbuilding skills on the world of the play. I invited the designers to a rehearsal to describe the physical components of their plan and how they related to the world the characters would inhabit. Nick described the physical features

In the future, I recommend: Designers, especially those receiving MAP credit, should share their process with the actors as much as possible. Especially in a situation with actor/designer collaboration, it is important to the actors to feel like a part of the process and the team. It would be especially useful for designers to attend scene rehearsals as well as run-throughs.

of the playroom; Elisabeth suggested what lighting effects the characters could call upon in their imaginary world; Tarry offered ideas for using costumes to switch between characters; Sarah explained how they could use sound to give their worlds atmosphere.

Armed with this information, and only a little

bewildered, the ensemble gamely set out to build the world of the play. We went through each setting of the play, first working in teams to build two different versions of the scene, then working all together to build the scene on the stage. In order to help the actors become accustomed to spontaneous action, I gave them time limits (two minutes, then 90 seconds, then one minute) to build each scene. By this point in the process, they were quite familiar with the materials available to them, and had experimented in how these materials could be combined to suggest settings. Each reconstruction of a setting was different. When a particularly good feature occurred, we labeled it a “keeper” and asked the actors to keep using it. The ideas flowed freely and almost urgently as the actors, in character as their kids, scurried to finish their masterpiece while I counted down the remaining seconds.

### *Music*

Our original MAP plan had called for a mentor from the Music Department faculty to assist our music staff and offer advice. Such a mentor never materialized, however, so music director Lauren Ditzler and our guitarist Richard West conducted music rehearsals with the cast. Actors worked separately with Lauren and Richard until certain pieces were ready to add to run-throughs of the show. The actors were mostly inexperienced at singing, and I had never directed a musical before, so the addition of musical elements was a challenge for us all. We spent a handful of rehearsals working each song in the

In the future, I recommend:  
When directing a musical play, special effort should be made to clearly define the role of musicians. Perhaps they should sign a contract similar to the actor contract. Without a doubt, the director should make every effort to use their time judiciously. Out of necessity, we experimented with recorded accompaniment, and I believe that with the proper attention, recorded accompaniment can be substituted for the presence of a musician in the early stages of rehearsal. This is especially important if the musicians will otherwise do a good deal of sitting around while the actors are working.

context of the show, discussing its purpose, its staging, how to effectively begin and end, and what to do in the event of applause. I had never choreographed, but Professor Gordon shared with me advice from a workshop for directors of musicals in educational settings: choose a movement for certain active words or beats. This method would not be successful for *Forty-Second Street* or *Chorus Line*, but for *Mugnog* it was effective. I added choreography to some songs, but others worked well without it. Richard added musical interludes during scene changes and at other opportune times. With his ability to improvise, he got into the same habit the actors had developed: working off the other performers and the audience. Our sound designer, Sarah, procured simple instruments, drums, tambourines, a slide whistle, for actors to use as accompaniment when they were not singing.

Some songs were more challenging because of the sheer dissonance of their tunes and strangeness of their lyrics. In listening to the original German versions of the songs, we heard how different, and in some cases, difficult the English words sounded; we realized that translating songs is more challenging than simply translating spoken lines, as song lyrics must take into account such concerns as meter and rhyme.

Throughout the process, some songs remained problematic to the actors and therefore to me. I found that the most effective way to make actors comfortable with their songs was to give them a strong direction for the piece, just as in a scene: they needed a goal to concentrate on and action to accomplish. For instance, I asked one actress to never stop moving while she sang “The Television Song,” and to try to address each member of the audience individually. As a result, she became more comfortable with the frenzied energy of the song and her character of The TV Man. The most successful songs were those in which the performer remained confident of their relationship to the audience and had a task to accomplish during the song.

## Performances

No theatrical production is complete without the presence of an audience. This is especially true for *Mugnog* because of the interactive nature of the show.

### *Educational packets*

As part of its efforts to make the messages of its plays go beyond the stage, the Grips theatre developed educational packets to send home with parents and educators who brought their youngsters to Grips performances. I hoped to achieve a similar result by distributing not the traditional collection of research articles and scholarly commentary, but an interactive book of games and activities that audience members could take home and play with.

The packets included a short description of the different jobs of the people who worked on the play, a note about the history of the play with a map of East and West Berlin, cutout postcards, and many activities designed to stimulate the imagination and encourage “thinking outside the box.” We placed crayons along the path to the seating area for the audience to pick up so they could enjoy their activity books right away.

In the future, I recommend: Any show can benefit from an advance audience. Since Grinnell actors are unused to performing for children, it would have been extremely useful to have test audiences help prepare us for the different reactions of young audience members. If an unusual demographic is expected to attend a MAP production, directors should stop at nothing (almost) to find themselves test audiences.

### *Audience participation*

*Mugnog* was designed to encourage audience participation. We asked the audience to make sounds, to provide information, and to help change the sets. The pre-show sets up an expectation of interaction between performers and audience. No sooner does the audience

member sit down than the “children” playing their games onstage ask him to join in. The more active the audience, the more fun the pre-show is to watch.

Sunday’s performance was a special “family” show, where adults were admitted only if accompanied by a child. Fortunately, the children were all excited to participate; during the pre-show, the stage looked like a playroom in a daycare center. Having been thus prepared to interact with the characters, the children were not shy about answering the characters’ questions and helping them to make sounds or change the scenery when necessary. At other parts of the show, they were gravely silent, looking on with open mouths as they saw something, perhaps, that looked very familiar.

## Post-Production

My journey with *Mugnog* did not end after the final curtain call. I had much to learn from the responses of the audience and the participants, and from my own continuing analysis of the experience.

### *Feedback*

Both participants in the process and adult audience members expressed their satisfaction with the performances of *Mugnog*. The week after the performance, the department held a post-show discussion to evaluate the process and product of this performance.

Members of the production team, cast, and crew attended to

give their comments. The designers each remarked that working with a director and with other

designers was a new and useful experience. Nick mentioned that he felt safe enough to take risks

In the future, I recommend: If possible, faculty should attend MAP post-show discussions. It would also be extremely useful for MAP participants to have a panel discussion of their work with the faculty.

in the learning environment we created. Several others backed up our stage manager Katie when she mentioned that the extent to which we had the department's practical support was ambiguous; we occasionally did not know which materials and resources were available to us, or whether we were entitled to department labor. The actors all agreed that the rehearsal process was long, but ultimately worth all the work. Several actors liked the sense of collaboration with the designers and their chances to give input into creating the world of the play. Everyone involved agreed that the work we'd done to incorporate the children into the world of the play paid off when the young members of our audience felt comfortable at the performances and participated freely.

What interested me most, however, was the reaction of the children who saw the play. I heard that some second grade boys sang one of the songs from *Mugnog* to their teacher the day after the performance. I heard that one eight-year-old was so excited to tell her parents about the show she'd seen that she demanded to stay up and wait for them. Two months after the performance, I talked to a boy who had seen *Mugnog*, and he was able to quote me some of his favorite lines.

### *What I learned*

The process of *Mugnog* lasted a long time. I began thinking about my senior directing project during my first year of college. Even as I write this, I am planning the presentation of my *Mugnog* portfolio. I began this project with the expectation that I would learn a great deal, and I have not been disappointed. I learned something new every day of the process, and I continue to learn as I analyze and reflect on my experience.

Foremost, I learned about directing in the genres of musical and children's theatre. Having never worked in either genre, I was unprepared for some of the challenges each presented. Now, however, I have a better understanding of how to integrate music effectively into a performance. I also gained experience in fashioning a performance that children will enjoy by keeping the action moving, getting the audience involved, and coaching the actors to display limitless energy.

Working with a design team was a new experience for me. I learned how to communicate with designers in a way useful for both parties. I learned how to lead a production team through the process of taking the world of the play from page to stage and help fuse all the design elements together into a unified whole.

For this production, I also had to learn how to manage audience interaction and actor improvisation. This involved figuring out where and when the actors could improvise, and how to teach them to do so effectively. I also had to prepare my actors to deal with an unpredictable audience and give them the tools to respond to any situation.

*Mugnog* was the result of over a year's work and the collaborative effort of about two-dozen dedicated students, not to mention our mentors. For me, *Mugnog* provided the opportunity to lead a production team through a lengthy and complicated production process, collaborate with designers and actors to produce a unified artistic product, improve my skills as a director, and produce a result that benefited my community.

