

Spring 5-15-2009

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Mary's Wedding

2009

by

Amelia Gay Hammond

Theatre

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Science
In the Honors Program at
Coastal Carolina University

May 2009

Student Produced Theatre



Photo courtesy of James Wells

As the market for actor training programs becomes more competitive, university theatre departments are attempting to generate the most production opportunities possible to attract the highest quality students. Crucial to this agenda's success is remaining cost effective while finding new conduits of artistic growth and production experience to enrich the students' development. Coastal Carolina University's Department of Theatre forged an answer to this departmental balancing act. With almost all budget and faculty resources pledged to the full mainstage season, smaller, student produced work had begun to supplement the production offerings. These projects can provide a much-needed venue for actively engaging more students and expand the Theatre Department's visibility through the development of a new audience. This audience appreciates the more intimate, intense plays that are sometimes avoided due to the mainstage demands of larger cast size and wider marketability. Coastal Carolina University's Department of Theatre, with 5 mainstage productions and 2 possible second-stage slots per season, bridged the gap between student initiative and mainstage training with an Honors Thesis production of *Mary's Wedding* in March, 2009.

Student produced work invites the danger of a lacking attention to creating a healthy process. In these cases, the experience does not always build upon, or add to, the involved students' training. With faculty course loads increasing, few departments can commit a full set of faculty mentors to supervise student leaders in second stage pursuits. Although students will hopefully learn from both negligent production processes as well as exemplary ones, what are the lasting effects on student artists if their work is primarily in the student lead arena? Will dealing with inexperienced directors and stage managers foster bad habits in inexperienced actors? How much responsibility does the faculty have to be involved and prevent these habits from being reinforced, even if the production is not mainstage? If the students are to fulfill an arc in their development as artists, emphasis must be placed on their connection to the most experienced mentors immediately available in their field – the faculty of their training program. Student leadership independent of any guidance is not a substitute for mentored training. Dramatic Arts major Amelia Hammond sought the latter type of formative experience when she began crafting a performance project to satisfy requirements of her Honors Thesis.

The Department of Theatre at Coastal Carolina University had previously allowed any student to propose a second stage production and selected one to two of these students to direct student designed, and student performed plays with space and (small) budget support. Rather than plug the thesis into the Theatre Department's existing Second Stage, since it requires the proposing student to direct instead of act, Hammond enlisted an available faculty director, Monica Bell. Choosing to involve Hammond's faculty acting mentor as the piece's director, which was not a new undertaking for Bell, was a way to ensure that the student's work in this thesis would be representative of the culmination of her undergrad actor training without straining the department by pulling more than one faculty member from Main-stage endeavors.

Student produced work creates an outlet for departments to produce newer, edgier works without as much risk as putting these productions on their mainstage. It is pivotal to the success of these productions that the piece chosen also reflects the resources available. Hammond and her director chose *Mary's Wedding*, a new play by Canadian playwright Stephen Massicotte. This lyrical dream play demands little of the scenic and costume

elements, and satisfies second stage's proclivity towards small casts by utilizing two actors in a piece with three characters.

The title character and her love, Charlie's WWI cavalry officer are written to be played by the same actress as the play fades through dream and memory. The challenges of inviting an audience into this integral suspension of disbelief without the aid of costume changes, entrances, or exits (as both actors are to remain onstage for the duration of the action), are great – but so, too, is the reward of creating art with that level of power.

Solutions born from struggles with artistically exacting scripts or diminutive budgets become the most riveting. The doubling of Mary and Sergeant Flowerdew (nicknamed "Flowers") is not only moving for the audience, but a transformative opportunity for the actress. Discovering the similarities in character and care for Charlie which link Mary and Flowers across the differences of station and gender was an invaluable experience for student actor Hammond, created from a playwright's initial choice to limit the number of actors. Similarly director Monica Bell limited the set to barn doors, two blocks, a chair, a log, and lots of pine straw which proved to be effective in casting the spell of a dreamscape without the need to build an entire barn and other locations. These careful



Photography by Cari Zourdos

choices illustrate playwright Stephen Massicotte's artistic objective to "find a blend of showing just enough to get people's imaginations going."¹ With regards to *Mary's Wedding* Massicotte expresses a truth that, if embraced, would serve all theatres well: "Because of the scope, the audience has to imagine what's happening. You fill in all the blanks. It really engages an audience. ... The imagination is stronger than the visuals of the movies."¹

¹ Pratt, Rob. [From Canada With Love](http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/10.16.03/marys-0342.html). 16 October. 2003. MetroActive. 13 April. 2009. <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/10.16.03/marys-0342.html>>



Photography by Cari Zourdos

We do not come to the theatre to see a film. Regardless of how well supported a piece may be financially (and, let's face it, these productions are not currently the majority), unlike film, theatre does require more from an audience's imagination to bridge the ravine between life as we experience it visually and the evocative representations that can be created in university second stage, mainstage, or professional theatre. It is this audacious attempt to transcend the limitations that compels artists and audiences alike to return to the theatre. The challenges attached to Coastal Carolina's student proposed and designed production of *Mary's Wedding*, as well as the acting/directing challenges inherent to the script, became the very triumphs that formed an engaging whole.

WHIPPING AUTHORITY:

Gender and Societal Roles in *Mary's Wedding*

Establishing an Identity

[Settlers] were frequently characterized in domestic cultural and political discourses as ungovernable, uncultured: as 'colonials' they were second-class – belated or feral – Englishmen, and often came to be seen as political or economic rivals to the domestic citizens of the 'home' country. These factors produced, in many cases, the feeling of being colonized of being European subjects but no longer European citizens. Settler postcolonial theory commonly describes this phenomenon in the axiom: the settler is both colonized and colonizing. (363)

The settler subject represents, but also mimics, the authentic imperial culture from which he (and more problematically she) is separated. (369)

Johnston and Lawson, "Settler Colonies," *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. (86)

Homi K Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," *The Location of Culture*

Taking note of the insecurities inherent to Mary Chalmers' status as a new settler, divorced from her country and categorized as an illegitimate identity on foreign ground, helps deepen an actor's understanding of her perceptions concerning the farm boy, Charlie, who Mary discovers in a barn during a summer storm. Mary finds herself in a position of authority from the beginning of her relationship with Charlie when she defies gender stereotypes by being less afraid of a thunder storm than he. She already seems to be challenging her previous English world by being out late (Massicotte 4), far from home, and then suddenly alone with a native boy and his horse, both of which are representative of the wild country Mary and her Mother have been transplanted to, perhaps against their preference. In order for Mary to regain some sense of propriety, with regards to her behavior and status, the young Miss Chalmers' initial reaction to Charlie is to demand information of him. She first questions the accuracy of his assertions, and therefore his intelligence, then ignores his request for silence to ask another question:

CHARLIE One-one thousand, two-one thousand, three-one thousand, four-one thousand, five-one thousand...

Thunder rumbles.

MARY Was that just five?

CHARLIE Shhh!

Pause.

MARY Is it coming closer?

CHARLIE What does it sound like?

MARY You're more frightened than your horse is. (4-5)

This assumption of dominancy in a delicate situation, indicative of her own trepidation and awareness of displacement, is undercut by the amusement and surprise in finding the boy more afraid of thunder. This classic emasculation of Charlie in his very first scene differentiates his quality of native from both the threatening archetype of a grudging, oppressed field worker, or the controlled and rigorously civilized culture that Mary is used to. Charlie instead has a fateful commitment to honesty of being. Even though he claims to be unafraid of the storm, his unrestrained instinct to jump belies this immediately. The humor possible to actors in this scene would allow audiences to view the event through Mary's more lightheartedly judgmental point of view rather than Charlie's legitimate lens of fright. That his fright is irrational further connects Charlie to the identity of a colonized native, whose counterpart is the colonizer empowered by ownership of rationality. Mary enhances this conception by calmly suggesting the ways in which she overcomes fear as tactics Charlie might try (7). Traditionally irrationality is attributed to feminine nature while the male is endowed with more rationality. These conventions of rational thought and irrational fear enable Charlie to unconsciously follow the pattern of compromised male gender roles in a colonized country, which actually prompts Mary to begin to abandon some of her learned habits and preconceptions.

In contrast, Mrs. Chalmers exercises her cultural legitimacy by clinging to the social rules of England and taking it upon herself to share them with the colonial society. Mary says that her

mother's Tea has become "quite the event" (17) and describes it later as "carefully orchestrated" (21), indicating that her mother is rigidly trying to transpose her less than desirable residence in a young Canada to an English tribute. The vehemence with which Mrs. Chalmers embraces this cultural quest isn't given expression through any dialogue of her own but is present in the text, when Charlie describes the wild way in which Mrs. Chalmers tries to get Mary's attention at the tea, and is left to the actors to establish through their own reactions. The wild degree of arm waving Mrs. Chalmers resorts to after she sees Mary actually touch Charlie's hair leads Charlie to wonder if there is a fire (22). Mary's public breach of the distance, physical as well as ideological, implied by her family's status as settlers causes an emphatic and immediate reaction in her mother. Mrs. Chalmers' way of coping with her slighted status as a settler subject is to forcefully reinstate the boundaries of her previous existence whereas Mary transitions into a new perception of her place with regards to nature and nation.

Exchange of Stations

The question of the representation of difference is therefore always also a problem of authority. (89)

Homi K Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," The Location of Culture

The "settler" subject exercises authority over the indigene and the land at the same time as translating desire for the indigene and the land into a desire for native authenticity.

This can be read in numerous narratives of psychic encounter and indigenization. (369)

Johnston and Lawson, "Settler Colonies," A Companion to Postcolonial Studies

Mary's journey from "settler" to "native" begins with the first horseback ride she shares with Charlie. She has ceded authority for the moment by both setting aside her standards of appropriate behavior and by letting him be in control of her transportation. More importantly, though, this ride is the first time she experiences nature and Charlie as one. Mary speaks of the speed with which they slice through the air and that her surprise that Charlie, the emasculated native of a colonized country, could be "fearless and flying with me, body to body beside him" (Massicotte 11). The unexpected magnetism of this fleet abandon, the connection to both the land and Charlie's body knocks Mary's psychological walls completely over and she starts to

dream exclusively of him that very night. She is willing, after that experience of relinquishing her imperialist identity, to view him as a possible ruling force in her life (a husband) and is entranced by the visceral, native intimacy with regards to nature. Mary begins after that horseback ride to desire Charlie's authenticity.



Performance of “Mary’s Wedding” at CCU (Photo by Carri Zourdos)

Defying Destruction

At the intersection of European learning and colonial power, Macaulay can conceive of nothing other than “a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” – in other words mimic man raised “through our English School,” as a missionary educationist wrote in 1819, “to form a corps of translators and be employed in different departments of Labour.” (87)

...the question of the *authorization* of colonial representations; a question of the authority that goes beyond the subject's lack of priority (castration) to a historical crisis in the conceptuality of colonial man as an *object* of regulatory power, as the subject of racial, cultural, national representation. (90)

Homi K Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," The Location of Culture

The native other, connected to the land and existing outside of civilization's prevailing definition, is given voice through the character of Charlie. His association with nature is communicated through Mary's first vivid description of him and his horse, who has been "sleeping in the damp grass" (Massicotte 3), when Mary reveals the boy's preference for nature over the comfort of constructed civilization:

MARY That's when it starts to rain, slowly at first, then heavier and heavier. He and his horse don't move and I always wonder why. It's raining very hard and they should find some shelter, a tree, or a barn... somewhere, but they don't. He just stands there, looking up into the rainstorm, getting ready to count the thousands from the flash to the rumble. (4)

The English settler, Mary, is perplexed by Charlie's choice to yield to the rain. For Mary rain is an uncontrollable, and therefore distasteful, force of nature that civilized people would want to shut out. By avoiding the rain, people are able to pretend they have as much influence over their environment as they like. For Charlie the rain is more directly connected to life and to himself. As a farm-boy, he can embrace the rain as an irreplaceable gift that greatly determines his life and that of his family. Mary cannot understand him, and it is that wild and unconventional perception of individuality which Mary begins to covet and convert to something she can recognize. She wants to have a common language, culturally.

Charlie does take steps towards a cultural conversion. He tells Mary he is trying to swear less (5), anglicizes his appearance for the Tea (21), and finally enlists in the British Empire's cavalry. These attempts to conform to the imposed civilization of Mary and her mother only make the limitation of Charlie's citizenship more apparent. Despite each transformational gain he makes the Canadian farm boy is doomed to always inhabit an "almost but not quite" position in society. Mrs. Chalmers realizes this, and temporarily succeeds in cutting Charlie from Mary's world by making him aware of their social definition's inevitability. That Mrs. Chalmers only

allows Charlie into the house after he has enlisted speaks to her investment in the idea of slight social elevation for colonial Others who are seen to serve a purpose condoned by the empire:

MARY: How did you get past Mother?

CHARLIE: She let me in, said you were reading in here.

MARY: She invited you in? She's changed her opinion of farm boys and colonists all of a sudden.

CHARLIE: I think maybe she liked me after all.

MARY: I think she likes you more now that you're going to fight for the British Empire. (51)

This final tactic of Charlie's to assimilate into civilized British culture thrusts him into the grimmest aspects of that same civilization. Rather than just experiencing the culturally destructive colonizing culture, Charlie becomes an active weapon for the more immediately violent world that the British Empire represents. Although he enlists in the cavalry it isn't long before even that symbol of the natural, his bond with horses, is taken away. A possible arresting way to emphasize this transition from the natural to the structured would be through additional costume pieces for Charlie. If he is originally wearing something very loose or worn, then he could gain more fitted, stiff items in a contrasting color palette once he joined the war.



Performance of "Mary's Wedding" at CCU (Photo by Carri Zourdos)

The event that could shred these extra costume pieces, as it does Charlie's ideological bondage to the empire, is the charge at Moreuil Wood. With Charlie's horse restored to him, it is instinct that gets him through the charge, not his training or conformant to his fellow cavalymen. He is instantly reconnected to nature and lets that guide him, noticing the grass and a bird more than the focused officer, Gordon Flowerdew (56). This exhilaration and success might be what triggers Charlie to throw off the destructive civilization he has attempted to become a part of, which he ultimately accomplishes through death. Charlie's heroism during the charge in being the first one to break both German lines and not be hurt proves that a Canadian farm boy can be more successful than his British officer, who "loses a stirrup. His horse twists and tumbles" (56) before that officer even gets to the German's lines. Having Charlie's journey to personal bravery thus completed the audience is left to realize that in the final scene it has to be choice, rather than fear, which keeps Charlie with his horse when the fatal shell lands. Mary even swears that he heard the planes above him (62) and she cannot understand why he doesn't run, or hide, or do follow any of the procedures that he would have been trained to do during shelling. Charlie, however, has finished his reaching for an identity that is not his and does not try to protect himself from the war culture's weapons with the war culture's tactics. This final commitment from Charlie to his horse and the nature around him is a rejection of the conventional role destructive civilization demands of him.

Disillusionment and Definition

Britain's involvement in the First World War subjected the imperial system to an unprecedented number of stresses and trials. This was disguised for the most part by the upsurge in patriotic sentiment which was manifested throughout the Empire. (245)

It was by no means clear from the outset that the war was being fought in the interests of the Empire as a whole, certainly not to the advantage of its various component parts. If, as the British government claimed, it had entered the conflict to defend democracy and the interests of small nations...how was that to be reconciled with Britain's frequently autocratic and dominating attitudes towards much of its Empire...? (246)

Sergeant Gordon Muriel Flowerdew is the playwright's bridge from the rural, intimate scenes with Mary and Charlie to the broader, foreign scenes of World War I. Stephen Massicotte employs the character of the Sergeant purely as a theatrical convention which allows Charlie an opportunity to speak of being consumed with love for Mary with a strength that Charlie cannot share with Mary until his last letter. As a character, however, "Flowers" exhibits a noticeable lack of self interest. From his first appearance Flowers allows his conversation to be exclusively catered towards sounding out and then exploring Charlie's concerns. The first substantial clue to Flowers' personal complexities lies in his answer to Charlie's unease at their sea travel:

FLOWERS: Listen, Charlie, we're horse soldiers, this sailing isn't our kind of war. We'll be on land soon enough, back on our horses, where we belong. Then if we get to France and the Germans before the war is over, they'll be in for it. Eh? (15)

In this snippet of dialogue the idea of displacement, pivotal in settler/native discourses, is applied to the Great War as well. Charlie should ignore the discomfort of the sea because he is not really a part of it. He and Flowers are reserved for something grander, something more manageable, they are cavalymen. This choice of the playwright's to invoke the image of cavalry over foot soldiers facilitates the audience's romanticization of Charlie and Flowers' participation in the war by distancing these two characters from the audience's modern ideas of war. The incongruity established for Charlie and Flowers between their ideas of a "taking the enemy in a charge" (15) and the inherent cowardice of trench warfare constructs a strong dramatic irony for the audience. They are giving the poignant contrast between natural beauty, an idea inspired by Charlie's horse earlier in the play, and the known horror of modern war.

The sense of glory and honor missing in the Great War is then embodied by Charlie, which compels a powerful attraction from Flowers. Charlie's naïveté with regards to the war is evident from the moment he enlists, when he draws on "The Charge of the Light Brigade" as a true representation of war. Charlie is motivated by the possibility of translation from farm-boy native to an important part of the empire, a man, and he shares that promised ideal with Mary before he leaves:

CHARLIE: I want to join the cavalry. I've always wanted to. Like in "The Charge of the Light Brigade."

MARY: Like in "The Charge of the Light Brigade?" Do you listen to yourself when you speak it. "Not tho' the soldier knew some one had blunder'd? Into the jaws of death? Into the mouth of hell?"

CHARLIE: "But when can their glory fade? Honour the charge they made!"

MARY: That's poetry Charlie, not real life. (52)

Charlie continues to uphold an adventuresome interpretation of the war through the majority of his letters to Mary, and in his interaction with Sergeant Flowerdew. Charlie and Flowers are faced with a war that for the first time, due to the technological progression, was fought without men being able to see the others they killed. In this war was no sense of fair play or honesty yet Charlie does encompass these values, thus justifying Flowers' attraction. Although Flowers was only 23 when he was killed, he acts as the voice of maturity and reason throughout his relationship with Charlie and it can be inferred that he is more attuned to the harshness of this war. Flowers interactions with Charlie take on a more conventionally patriarchal tone as the officer responds more to the eternal responsibility of the empire towards a settler colony. He wants to protect Charlie and warns him against active involvement in offensive maneuvers.

FLOWERS: I want to talk to you.

CHARLIE: I was listening.

FLOWERS: I know. Just sit down for a minute. How are you doing? Cold not getting to you? Hey, Charlie, keeping warm?

CHARLIE: I'm fine.

FLOWERS: Listen, I was looking at the records and it looks like you've been out in no-man's land every night this week? And I hear you've volunteered to go out on patrol again tonight?

CHARLIE: Everyone's got to do their share.

FLOWERS: Yes, their share, not everyone else's. You'll tire yourself out. You'll get knocked on some stupid patrol around in the mud – or even worse you'll get me knocked. Is there something you want to tell me?

CHARLIE: No.

FLOWERS: Nothing at all?

CHARLIE: No. Nothing.

FLOWERS: You're not going out tonight. No patrols for you until I say so. (44)

That the sergeant tries to keep Charlie from participating in as many ambushes, and really tries to keep him out of the fighting as much as possible bespeaks an ideological separation for Flowers between Charlie's raw loyalty and the dishonor of the war. Another contrast is apparent in the degree of loyalty Flowers himself adheres to. Instead of constantly rallying the troop's moral to plunge them forward, Flower's refined sense of loyalty allows for an appreciation of the men of the empire over the idea. When Flowerdew does attempt to spur Charlie successfully forward into battle the officer stresses the practical and personally exciting or faux egotistical aspects, rather the nobility of the idea. Flowers does not value the idea of the empire as much as he might feel bound to, and no longer considers it pertinent to Charlie's life. Flowers insistence on the separation foreshadows Charlie's final recognition of distance from the destructive world of "civilized" war societies, resulting in Charlie's inability to save himself from the fatal shell.

ⁱ Carter, Alice T. Playwright Allows Good Heart of "Wedding" to Beat For Itself. 12 March. 2009. Tribune Review. 29 March. 2009. <http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/ae/theater/s_615601.html>