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Boom and Bust: The Evolution of Process

by

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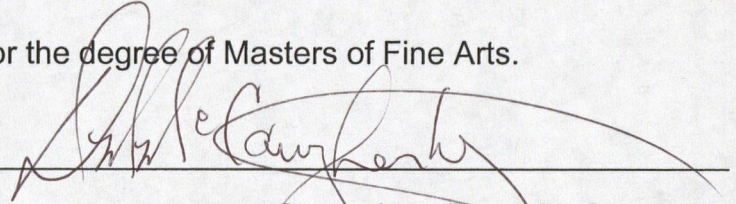
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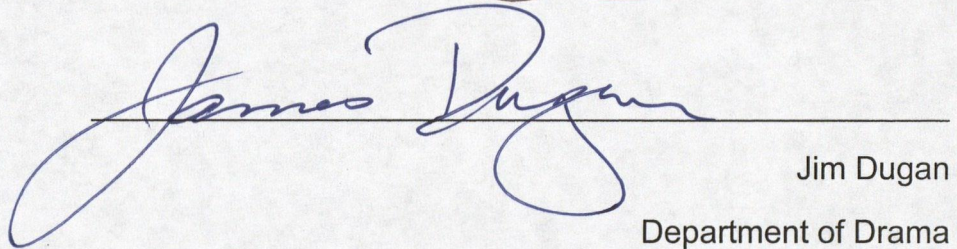
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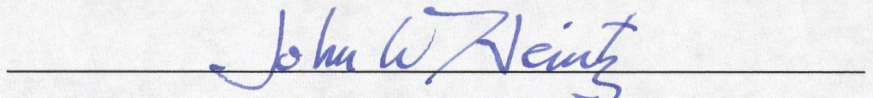
The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Boom and Bust: The Evolution of Process" submitted by Lawrence Leong in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts.



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Abstract

This thesis outlines the process of creating and producing *Boom*, an original play created by a collective group of artists formed by local theatre company Mob Hit Productions. This play was inspired by the economic boom in the Calgary area in 2006. Chapter One of this thesis outlines the finished script in order to create a context for the creative process. Chapter Two outlines the creative process used in the play. Importance is stressed on the process of incorporating scene transitions into each scene of the play, as well as incorporating a pitch and review process to the development of the story. Chapter three describes in detail the evolution of one of the main storylines in *Boom* through the creative process. Chapter four is a reflection and evaluation of the outcomes of the process and the final production.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the University of Calgary, the Bridgeland Community Association and the McKenzie Towne Homeowners Association for providing venues for our project; they allowed us to truly make this a project that uniquely served Calgarians.

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For Jim Andrews

My teacher, colleague and friend

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Introduction

Boom is a 90 minute full length play that was created and developed by local Calgary theatre company, Mob Hit Productions, during its 2007-2008 theatre season. This play was created using a new collaborative process for the company in order to pursue its artistic interests within a rigid production timeline. The creative process for Boom combined the use of improvisation and brainstorming with a presentation and review cycle. The project developed from concept to final presentation in a span of 7 months.

In the following chapters I will outline the creative process that I led my actors, designers, story artists and technicians through in order to create Boom. In the first chapter; The Play, I will discuss the final play script that was developed. This will provide a context for the developmental process described in following chapters. I will also discuss dramatic style, plot structure, characters and images.

The second chapter; The Process, will provide an overview of each stage in the creation process. This section will describe the envisioned outcome of each creative stage, as well as the actions we took to achieve them.

Chapter three examines one specific story line in this play and its evolution through the creative process. This chapter will provide details and discuss specific events in the creative process from the early research stages to the final drafts of the script.

In the fourth and final chapter I will evaluate and comment on the creative process as well as the actual production. During this section I will describe how the creative process satisfied my requirements, and I will give an evaluation of artistic and technical elements in the production.

Chapter One: THE PLAY

Dramatic Style

Boom employs realistic acting, contemporary dialogue, and situations so that the viewer can become immersed in the play's world. In addition, the scene structure and rhythm are designed for a modern audience. The 29 scenes are short and change physical location from one scene to the next scene. These brief, dynamic scenes are structured in a similar manner to the way in which television or film is structured.

Plot Structure

Most scenes involve two or three characters; there is only one scene where the whole cast appears on stage. Each scene also contains at least one turning point, as described in Robert McKee's "Story"; in which the life value charge of the scene switches from positive to negative or negative to positive. This turning point will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Although the physical location can change from scene to scene, it remains constant within each scene. Time progresses in a linear fashion.

The plot has three distinct storylines centered around the main characters. From scene to scene, the play shifts from one story line to another, as we learn how the characters relate to one another. The main story lines are as follows:

Bruce and Diane

This story line basically centers around two senior executives in a large, multinational oil company. It highlights Calgary's corporate experience in general,

and the petroleum industry in particular. Its themes include greed, ambition, industrial expansion, corporate politics, and personal fulfilment versus career achievements.

Dave and Chantal

This story line focuses on two lonely strangers: Dave, an oilfield laborer from Newfoundland, and Chantal, a university student who works part time as an escort. Through their relationship, we see the personal sacrifices that people make for material wealth and possessions. Other topics include those workers who migrated from the east coast to Alberta to take advantage of the boom.

Zach, Liza. and Maggie

Zach, Liza and Maggie's story centres on the opposing issues of social consciousness and the pursuit of wealth and success. Other themes include homelessness and the disparity between rich and poor. At the beginning of this story arc, Zach, a bartender, falls in love with a young, up-and-coming business woman, Liza. Their relationship is a turbulent one as they argue over social issues such as excessive wealth, the stigma and guilt associated with success and the homeless. They have an opportunity to test their values and preconceptions when Zach "adopts" Maggie, a homeless woman, in an attempt to prove to Liza that he is genuinely concerned with social issues. He tries to convince Liza that Maggie should live at her house temporarily until they can determine how to help her. Liza and Zach's relationship is tested throughout this unusual story but by the end they have achieved a new level of understanding and intimacy.

Characterizations

The following sections describe the major characters in *Boom*. These descriptions include the key conflicts and choices with which each character needs to deal. It was important for the actors to understand their characters' choices, conflicts, and turning points.

Bruce

Bruce Gervais is a senior executive at a major Calgary oil company. He quickly reveals himself as a high status character, a fact which is made apparent in the early parts of the play where he openly brags about getting a position that has been recently vacated. One of the challenges that this character faces early in the play occurs when he finds himself sitting across from his new superior, Diane, a woman who has been appointed to the position that he was expecting. As a result of this unexpected reversal, Bruce makes several key decisions that compromise the future of the company. A crucial element in this character's development occurs when Bruce has to think beyond himself and consider the welfare of others. He experiences a crisis of conscience, which is sparked by an argument with Liza, a junior executive working under Diane's direction. This argument starts after Liza and Bruce have a brief romantic encounter. This crisis is reinforced through a meeting with Chantal, an escort whom Bruce calls after Liza criticizes him. Despite the anonymous sexual encounter that Bruce was expecting when calling the escort service, his actions create a completely unexpected circumstance. After his escort has arrived, they immediately recognize each other, as Chantal is also his daughter's best friend. These conflicts and shocking experiences show Bruce

his selfish and deceptive nature as he realizes that his choices and his actions have an impact on the welfare of others. In the end, Bruce makes an unselfish decision which supports Diane, his professional rival, and the company as a whole.

Veronica

Veronica Gervais is Bruce's wife; her story book-ends the play, as she appears in the opening scene and then in several scenes near the end. Although she is married to Bruce, they never have a scene together at any point in the play. This separation visually and dramatically reinforces the disconnection in their relationship. At the beginning, Veronica appears to be a wealthy housewife. She reveals how proud she is of her home, her possessions and her family over the course of an interview with Better Homes and Gardens magazine. As the play progresses, however, she discovers a video that Bruce has made of Liza during and after the company Stampede party and she realizes that Bruce is having an extramarital affair. After this crisis, she exacts revenge in a humorous scene, when she returns to her living room with the bent golf club she has just used to destroy Bruce's prize collection of Porsches. Despite this crisis or perhaps because of it, the final scene of the play closes with Veronica's giving a speech to a room full of business executives as she accepts an award for entrepreneur of the year. A year has passed since her previous revenge episode, and through Veronica's presentation we see how she has reacted to this major event in her life by building a new career for herself. During this speech Veronica describes the discovery of her husband's infidelity in a humorous way. At this point, however, we

see a change in Veronica's attitude as she recognizes the past crisis as a catalyst for change, a change that had given her the opportunity to gain her independence and financial success.

Diane

Diane Marshall Gray is a new senior executive working at the same oil firm as Bruce Gervais. Her major challenge is working in a male-dominated environment. We learn about this challenge from her comments and the comments of several employees and business partners. She also confronts the expectations from shareholders and board members in order to increase earnings growth and shareholder value even if her methods put her career at risk. At the same time, Diane is ambitious and this ambition dictates her first major decision, a risky business venture in unproven territory for the company. Her ambition also clouds her judgment when Bruce proves to be an uncooperative member of her team and she chooses to initiate the deal without his help and influence over key business partners. In a business, such as the oil industry, which depends on personal contacts and reputations, Diane's decision to continue without Bruce's influence proves detrimental. We learn the extent of the damage during her final scene when we see her packing up her personal effects after her resignation. Her position and standing within the company, however, are restored by Bruce's last-minute unselfish efforts. At the end of the play we see these two colleagues reconcile their differences and, while they may not be friends, we definitely have a sense of mutual respect and support. Both characters have learned about their own shortcomings through their past rivalry.

Dave

Dave is an oil-field laborer who has come from Newfoundland to work in Alberta. His story reflects the experience of many Maritimers who have migrated from the east coast to Alberta's oil fields and construction sites. Dave faces the challenge of supporting his wife and child in Newfoundland. In addition to this financial responsibility, he also has to maintain a long-distance relationship with his family and learn to live in a strange city with few friends. Because of an altercation that he has with his friend Chantal at a Christmas party, his wife believes that he has been unfaithful to her. As a result, he has to choose between his lucrative Alberta career and his marriage.

Chantal

Chantal is a young university student who struggles to keep up with her wealthy friends. As her story develops, we learn what she is prepared to sacrifice in her pursuit of material prestige. In order to meet these social pressures, she decides to become a part-time escort/prostitute. Although this job quickly proves lucrative, we also see that her choice has consequences. Her friend Dave learns about her work when he accidentally runs into her while she is on a "date" with Dave's boss at the company Christmas party. Dave and Chantal argue about her choices in the middle of a crowded room at the party, which publicly embarrasses Chantal. During this argument, we learn that Chantal became an escort for two reasons. First, it was a way to buy the "competitive" jewelry, clothing, and cars she wanted. Second, it gave her more time to study. Despite these justifiable reasons, we also see that Chantal is not immune to her friend's criticism. In an act of revenge after

their argument, Chantal grabs Dave's cell phone while he is talking to his wife and gives her the impression that she and Dave are having an affair. Her career choice comes under further scrutiny when one of her "clients" turns out to be Bruce Gervais, the father of her best friend. In their scene together, both Bruce and Chantal confront the effects of their self-centered choices. During their awkward discussion, Bruce asks Chantal to consider the idea that her personal self-esteem, sense of worth and health are worth more than the material possessions and money that she is seeking through prostitution. In Dave and Chantal's final scene this idea is further reinforced. Chantal meets up with Dave to apologize for the family troubles she may have caused. After a few bitter words from Dave, we find out that he has chosen to return to his family in Newfoundland, in order to be closer to his family. Dave also corrects an opinion that Chantal had about the beginnings of their friendship. Chantal tells Dave that this friendship must have started out due to a sexual attraction that Dave had for her, as many of her male relationships begin. Dave however corrects this misconception by admitting that the reason he became friends with her was because he missed his family and she reminded Dave of his sister.

Zach

Zach is a Calgary bartender and his bar serves as a common setting for his and other characters' storylines. Through Zach's conversations, we learn more about the other characters' stories and situations. Sometimes he even offers sympathy and advice, as in the case of Diane while she is going through her crisis at work. In addition to introducing the other characters to the audience, Zach has his own

story. He meets and begins to date Liza in what proves to be a tempestuous relationship.. At the beginning of the play, Zach seems more liberal than Liza. When she brings him to her expensively furnished condo, he immediately criticizes her desire for material objects. Despite this self-righteous outburst, we soon realize that Zach is all talk and no action. Liza points out his hypocrisy when she refers to his entertainment system and big-screen TV. She even points out that he doesn't recycle. Their argument is not only a major turning point in Zach's story, it is also the catalyst for Zach, Liza, and Maggie's relationship. Motivated by his growing affection for Liza, Zach decides to prove that he can, in fact, do something "to make a difference".

Liza

Liza is a young, up-and-coming executive who works closely with Diane. She faces a number of personal challenges, primarily with Zach whose different opinions and values cause a great deal of conflict. Due to the argumentative nature of their relationship, Liza breaks up with Zach and soon finds herself in a romantic situation with Bruce at the company Stampede party and afterwards at the Palliser Hotel. Despite a brief encounter in the Presidential Suite of Calgary's Palliser Hotel, their relationship doesn't progress much further. When Bruce admits that he has been responsible for Diane's professional problems, she challenges him to recognize that these actions are not only negatively affecting Diane, but the company as a whole. This event with Bruce also serves as a turning point for Liza, for she sees that Zach is a better person than she first realized.

Maggie, the homeless woman, is also another significant character in Liza's story. When Zach introduces her to Maggie, Liza's immediate reactions are fear and aversion. Their first meeting in Liza's kitchen is a humorous scene as they begin attacking each other with kitchen utensils. Liza then faces a significant challenge to her ideals as Zach convinces her to let Maggie live in her backyard. Through a series of short scenes we see the women's relationship grow warmer until they are both looking forward to their weekly television sessions watching Lost. Liza's attachment to Maggie is apparent when she has to choose between placating Zach's insecurities and turning Maggie out onto the street. When Maggie suddenly decides to leave, Liza seeks Zach's assistance in finding her. It is through their search that Liza and Zach become reunited. In addition, they both gain a deeper understanding of Maggie as a person, instead of just a nameless homeless person.

Imagery

As previously noted, the situations, language and characters in Boom are basically realistic. As a result, most of its imagery and its design relate to Calgary's and the characters' physical surroundings. Physical locations include large, upper-class suburban homes, corporate offices in downtown skyscrapers, stylish condos and the company's Stampede party.

On a more personal level, Zach and Liza spend a great deal of time discussing her apartment, including its luxurious sofas, stylish vases, and expensive duvets. At the same time, they also discuss the issues associated with the city's rapidly

growing population, the lack of affordable housing and the increasing numbers of homeless people were living in Calgary's downtown core. The images associated with homelessness and affordable housing form a marked contrast to the city's affluence and materialism.

The play's physical objects and locations formed the basis of its design. Key images related to the city's and the province's rapid growth and industrialization. Because I wanted to give the impression that the characters lived in an environment of construction and industrialization, these images included cranes, framing steel, chain-link fences and cement.

Another image related to the city's suburban sprawl and we used aerial photos to evoke Calgary's urban footprint. Finally, because this rapid urban/suburban expansions and the city's notoriously inadequate public transportation have resulted in traffic problems, we used the image of the ever-increasing congestion during set changes to highlight the play's scene transitions.

The style, plot structure, characters and images described above would be created and refined in a multi-stage process that will be described in the following chapters.

Chapter Two: THE PROCESS

Early Development

Boom originated from conversations in September 2006 when Mob Hit Productions' Research and Development Director and I were looking for a show to fill our second slot for our 2007-2008 season. In the early phase of development, we established several requirements for the show. First, this project would be an original piece created by Mob Hit Productions. And second, we would work in a highly collaborative manner. It should be noted that although Mob Hit Productions' long-term strategy is to increase its number of original projects, in this case the idea to work collaboratively was not due primarily to artistic considerations. Instead, it evolved primarily out of production and logistical needs. At this time, our Writer-in-Residence was engaged in another project and we felt that working collaboratively would allow us to develop a script that would not require a single author. In addition to writer availability, we also faced time constraints. We had less than a year from commitment to production.

We also wanted to incorporate several artistic theories and methodologies into our story creation process. At a conference at the Banff New Media Centre called "Perfecting the Mix of Story, Character, & Interactivity", we had been inspired by the creative process at Pixar. In a presentation named "Trust the Process: A Conversation with Pixar Animation Studios' Story Artist Ronnie Del Carmen," the story supervisor discussed in detail the methods and processes of telling stories at Pixar using the film Finding Nemo as an example.

This process begins with a stakeholder or "story owner" who presents the central core or idea of the story to his/her story team. In Finding Nemo, writer/director Andrew Stanton's basic idea is a father taking his child to school for the first time and the difficulty of letting that child go. Brainstorming meetings then took place to map out the overall story arc. Once this was determined, specific sequences and scenes were assigned to story artists. These artists then mapped out the narrative using a technique called "storyboarding." Storyboards resemble comic books in that they use illustrated cells to tell the narrative of a scene. At this point, the artists "pitch" or present their storyboards to the entire team who critique their work, suggesting changes and revisions. The story artists then revise their storyboards and re-pitch them to the team. This process continues until the team and, especially, the owner of the story are satisfied with the results.

Another strong artistic influence came from several principles Robert McKee describes in his screenwriting book Story. I was particularly interested in his definition of a scene and its different elements. McKee describes a scene as an "action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space that turns the value-charged condition of a character's life on at least one value with a degree of perceptible significance." (35) He describes these values:

universal qualities of human existence that may shift from positive to negative, or negative to positive, from one moment to the next.

For example: alive/dead (positive/negative) is a story value as are love/hate, freedom /slavery. truth/lie, courage/cowardice, loyalty/betrayal, wisdom/stupidity, strength/weakness, excitement/boredom and so on. All such binary qualities of experience that can reverse their charge at any moment are Story Values. They may be moral, good/evil; ethical, right/wrong; or simply charged with value. Hope/despair is neither moral nor ethical, but we certainly know when we are at one end of the experience or the other. (34)

I wanted each of the scenes in Boom to have a clearly defined story value at the beginning of the scene which would change or turn to its opposite at the end of the scene.

These challenges and artistic methodologies inspired us to develop a collaborative process of our own. My goal was to establish an approach that would allow Mob Hit to create a play structured to include conflict driven "scene turns." Inspired by the Pixar collaboration process, we would also develop these scenes using a continuous pitch-and-review process until each segment was complete.

Boom was developed in the following six distinct stages:

1. Casting
2. Research

3. Workshop
4. Story Development
5. Script Development
6. Pre-Production

In using this staged approach, it was my goal cumulatively to create a "stage-ready" production. It was important to me, however, that despite this method, I did not highlight the process itself in any way. Rather, I saw this collaborative approach as a tool for developing a compelling story in a systematic way. I wanted to emphasize the story of the play itself. That story focused on characters who had been affected by Calgary's recent economic shifts and changes, and would be told through a seamless and engaging narrative.

To this end, I involved the actors only in certain stages. Otherwise, they were excluded from the proceedings. In Stages 1 through 3, the actors were instrumental in investigating the potential story lines and characters of the piece. In Stage 4, however, the material that had been created and fleshed out by the acting team was passed on to Mob Hit Productions' story team. They, in turn, began giving it shape and structure. We considered the exclusion of the actors an integral part of the overall process as it allowed for a more objective development. By the time the actors reached Stage 3, I felt that they would become too attached to the characters and situations that they were working on and, as a result, be unable to see the story as a whole very clearly.

Because of this lack of objectivity, I wanted a separate team whose sole focus was to create a clear narrative. Their task involved establishing specific scene turns and ensuring that the play's message was communicated in an entertaining and compelling manner.

During Stage 5 of the process, the story group and the acting group were closest in their collaboration. As the actors worked on the developed scenarios, there was a great deal of interaction about the revisions and changes that were in progress/process.

Stage 6, the final Stage, was the closest to conventional rehearsals; however, even this Stage with its traditional rehearsal techniques still presented many unique challenges.

Casting

When I am casting a show, I always look for several key elements. For me, one of the most important qualities is an actor's ability to take directions by listening carefully and responding quickly. Another quality that I look for is an actor's rapport with me and the other actors. I want individuals to whom I can comfortably give "hard" directions. This comfort is essentially the "chemistry" that I have with the actor and the "chemistry" that he/she has with fellow actors. I also want to see actors working well together by encouraging each other and consistently offering support and ideas.

In addition to looking for these two major qualities, I spend much of an audition taking notes on what I perceive to be the actors' strengths or weaknesses. I later

evaluate and compare these strengths and weaknesses in order to cast the different roles.

With Boom, the unique challenge was that the actors would not know their roles immediately. So, while the criteria of being able to take direction and work well with other actors still applied, I also had to evaluate these auditioners slightly differently than I would for a conventional play. For this particular project, I wanted actors who possessed strong improvisational skills. I also wanted individuals who felt comfortable being given a set of instructions from which they would create work on their own in a short time. These abilities to improvise well and work independently were essential for this production's workshop and rehearsal processes.

In addition to the basic ability to capture an audience's attention, I wanted my actors to be good storytellers. While storytelling skills are necessary for most productions, they were particularly important for Boom because of the episodic nature of the play and its multiple story lines. This format meant that the actors had to possess precise communication skills.

Finally, I also needed people comfortable expressing themselves physically, who were able to display a wide range of movement. This experience was necessary because each actor would be playing more than one character and would need to shift from one part to another very quickly.

In terms of numbers, I wanted a five-person cast. I prefer working with odd-numbered groups, because even numbers can make blocking awkward and too

symmetrical. Similarly, because the creative process would be focused and fast-paced, I did not want to work with a large cast that would be more difficult to manage.

In late September 2007, we held auditions in the Calgary Opera's rehearsal space. This traditional black-box rehearsal studio, with its dance floor, was ideal for our needs. Because of the project's special requirements, I didn't want the actors to deliver prepared monologues or read from scripts. Instead, I asked them to perform several improvisational exercises. Although I try to make auditions a pleasant experience, I also include challenging exercises. In fact, some of these exercises may be even more challenging than rehearsals. I believe that it is important to push auditioners in this manner for two reasons. First, it indicates what an actor will be like to work with in rehearsals. Second, a certain degree of stress or pressure, applied properly, can distract the actors from their nervousness and help them to forget their need to impress the director. As a result, they tend to perform in a more focused and genuine manner, providing a clearer indication of what they will be like to work with in rehearsal, as well as their individual mannerisms, habits, strengths and weaknesses. In order to challenge the actors, I avoided repeating instructions and gave them a minimum amount of time to develop a scene, usually 5 minutes. I also chose exercises that would be competitive, fun, and challenging for the actors.

The first audition exercise was called "Speaker's Corner," which requires an elevated platform or table in the middle of the room. The exercise begins by asking all the auditioners to walk around the table in a circle at the same time.

When an actor feels motivated, he/she stands on top of the table and tells a story to the rest of the auditioners who are circling the table. There are no rules or parameters to the story that the actor tells, they can say or do whatever they want. The objective of the game is to get fellow auditioners to stop and listen as long as possible. The other actors are instructed to stop and listen to the story only for as long as it interests them; once the story becomes uninteresting, they resume walking around the platform. The actor on the platform continues talking until none of his peers are listening to him, once all the other actors resume circling the platform, the actor on the platform gets off and resumes circling, and the process repeats itself.

This exercise reveals several things. Initially, it can indicate which actors are more interesting. This is indicated by the length of time that an actor can stay on top of the platform by captivating his fellow auditioners' interest. The exercise also reveals the different tactics actors will use to get their peers to stop and listen to what they have to say. Because the key to this exercise is for an actor to maintain the attention and interest of the other actors, it also shows the performers' willingness to take risks, as well as how quickly they think on their feet. The actors feel pressure because they are singled out. An additional advantage is that they quickly receive feedback from the other auditioners.

Our second exercise was the "Cocktail Party." In this game, I ask one actor to play the host of the party; the remaining participants enter the scene one at a time, arriving at the party by knocking on the host's door. The objective is for the actors to talk with each other as if they were at a real cocktail party. There are,

however, two rules they have to follow. First, as a group they need to exclude one person from conversation, and, second, they have to try not to be excluded themselves. The scene ends when the director chooses to end the scene and there are no formal rules to how a group can be formed. Groups form and separate to form new groups organically and the experience is similar to the groupings at cocktail parties or receptions; the minimum number in a group is two people and there are no upper restrictions to group size. The only objective is to be included in conversation with at least one other actor and the group objective is to exclude at least one person. The parameters of the improvisation are very open: there are no formal rules to what can be said in the conversation, how a conversation can begin or how or when actors exclude their fellow actors. When observed by the director, this open situation framed by several specific instructions can give the impression of organized chaos. As there is no predefined organization or coordination amongst actors, multiple people are often excluded at a time and group dynamics and numbers shift constantly. This is an extremely competitive game that quickly reveals a great deal about the individual actors. In this exercise, the participants feel pressure from something that most people are naturally uncomfortable with: social exclusion. The exercise allows the director to see how the individual actors relate to one another, their tactics, their energy levels and their willingness to play a challenging game. This willingness, in turn, reveals an actor's ability to take direction, a quality that would be essential in rehearsing for *Boom*.

"Turn Scenes" was the third exercise our actors performed. As the previous chapter indicated, turn scenes involve the actors' going through a change in story value, from positive to negative, or negative to positive. I gave the actors specific characters, locations, situations, and scene turns, and then asked them to improvise the scene. These scenarios were very open and generic but could potentially be used in *Boom*. Below is an example of a scenario:

Characters: Male oilfield worker from Newfoundland and his wife

Locations: Hotel room (Alberta), Hospital room (Newfoundland)

Situation: the maritime worker returns from work to their hotel room, he is expecting good news soon as his wife back home is expecting a child. While he gets settled in his hotel room after a day from work he receives a phone call, it is his wife. The worker has a phone conversation with her, during which she tells him that she has had a miscarriage.

Scene Turn: Hope/Despair

Unlike the previous two exercises, auditioners were paired up and allowed five minutes to prepare their scene before presenting it to the group. Once again, this exercise demonstrated the individual's ability to take direction and his or her creative process. The task was also identical to the improvisational activities they would create during the workshop phase of rehearsals. I was especially interested in seeing how the actors interpreted my instructions and what kind of creative choices they made to tell their stories. In order to get an impression of

their creative process, I observed them during their five preparatory minutes. Given this minimal preparation time, I felt this stage was even more important than the end performance itself.

After the audition, I selected the five actors I felt would be the strongest for our group. Having chosen the actors, I now had all the components in place to begin gathering information about the world of the story I wanted to tell.

Research

The acting company and I began the research phase of our creative process with a brainstorming session. At this session, I gave the actors large pieces of paper and felt markers and asked them to write down as many words, phrases, or ideas as came to mind when they thought of Alberta's boom. We then took the different responses, discussed each idea briefly and finally grouped similar themes and ideas into the following five research areas:

1. Politics
2. Lifestyle & Attitude
3. Economy
4. Oil & Gas
5. Social Issues

In order to divide the research, I assigned these areas to the company members and myself. I would contribute information to all five areas and the five actors were each assigned an area to focus their research efforts on. We

gathered information from a number of sources, including newspapers, magazines, online articles and television. So that we could post the material that we had found, I set up an online forum. This online component was important to our overall process by addressing the issue of time management. Using this system each member could post, comment and review research material on their own schedule, whenever it was most convenient for them. This system would make it easier to work through the two months it would take to get through the Research and Workshop stages. All of the actors had other commitments, such as full-time jobs. Mob Hit Productions conventional rehearsal schedule involves six rehearsals a week for four weeks which can be demanding, especially when an actor or director is competing with other time commitments. While I knew that I would eventually require a portion of the rehearsals to follow this schedule, I was also aware that I had to create a process that would not put the artists at risk of burning out. With the online discussion forum, the actors could participate in a manner that did not put an unnecessary strain on their personal time.

The only constraint at this point was a weekly meeting between the actors and me. These meetings generally lasted two hours as we discussed specific research material we felt could contribute to the story's development. By combining times when actors could create on their own terms and formal meetings, we could share and discuss information that we would eventually use to develop the initial character and scene sketches for the story.

In terms of directing, this period was similar to the "table work" stage I use in more conventional rehearsals. During table work, I want the actors to think about

and discuss issues related to the play in particular, its historical and social context, as well as any style and technical concerns. This work gives the actors concrete information for imagining their characters and the worlds they inhabit. This process for *Boom* differed because we could not yet discuss specific characters or script elements. Even so, the actors did develop a deeper awareness of the events in this period of Alberta's economic history.

The research stage took one month to complete, ending November 2008, after which I shifted focus from gathering and discussing information to processing it. My strategy during this period was to elicit as many story and character ideas as possible, so I made a conscious effort not to criticize or limit discussions. I began the process by asking the group to use their research results to create characters and scenes that they could visualize having a part in our story. These initial sketches became the raw material we used to begin the next phase of our rehearsals – the workshop process.

Workshop

During the workshop process, the actors and I made the transition from working in an essentially cerebral way to a more physical and emotional approach. Instead of discussing issues and ideas online or at weekly meetings, the actors began using performance techniques to discover and experiment with their character and plot choices. During the research phase, the directions I gave the actors were for the most part indirect. I would use questions as opposed to specific comments or instructions to generate discussion and ideas on a research topic. In the workshop phase, the directions I now gave were more

direct. While I still used the indirect method of questioning, I also gave the actors more specific comments and instructions closely related to the actors' creative and performance choices. The primary goal of these exercises was to develop the ideas to the point where we could determine if they were suitable for the final story.

The first set of exercises was extremely simple, involving no verbal communication at all. I asked the actors individually to perform scenarios about very basic character tasks, including,

1. Your characters coming home from work;
2. Your characters enjoying themselves at home or in a place where they feel comfortable;
3. Your characters in a space where they feel uncomfortable;
4. Your characters reading an e-mail or a letter and receiving good news or bad news.

The purpose of these exercises was for the actors to explore and make physical choices about their characters without the pressure of trying to figure out what to say. After each exercise, we would discuss how the actors felt about their choices, as well as those elements that worked and those that we felt did not work or needed revision. The actors would then perform the scenes again incorporating the modifications based on our discussions. We would repeat this process until we were satisfied with the scene, or, alternatively, had determined

that the idea was not worth pursuing. We spent the first three days of the workshop phase experimenting and improvising with these exercises.

We then moved on to exercises that involved vocalization and would often involve interaction with other characters. These more complex scenes included:

1. Your character is talking on the phone with an imagined scene partner and is receiving good or bad news.
2. Your character needs something from another character. In this variation, I kept the requirement simple and conventional, such as a phone number, the time or directions.
3. A modified version of the cocktail party exercise which did not exclude a member from the group. This exercise focused primarily on interacting and maintaining a character over a prolonged period of time. This exercise ran from 30 to 45 minutes and would allow the actors enough time to get a better sense of their characters' physical and vocal traits. It would also give the actors a greater awareness of the characters wants and needs as well as their goals and desires, what actors and directors often refer to as motivations or intentions.

These exercises generally ran longer than the previous improvisations. I wanted the actors to have enough time to experiment with and experience their choices, to develop a sense, both physically and mentally, about whether or not those choices were working. As a result, I would only stop the exercise if I felt the actors had exhausted its potential or if they had "dried up" and fallen out of

character. As with the earlier improvisations we repeated the process of discussion, revision and repetition of scenes until I felt the scene was fully developed. We spent the three remaining days of the first week of the workshop process working on these exercises.

Through this process, we were becoming more aware of how the project was going to take shape. In addition, I continually made the actors' instructions more complicated. Instead of the solitary, non-verbal exercises and the improvisations that involved interacting with and relating to other characters, I now requested scenarios that had clear beginnings, middles and ends, as well as specific story turns. I also provided more specific directions about acting choices and plot outcomes. While there was no specific time restriction on the length of the improvisations, these scenes generally ran anywhere from 15 to 20 minutes. We worked on these scenarios for two weeks.

After completing the same revision cycle, we spent the last week of the workshop phase short-listing those characters and scenes that we felt were the strongest candidates for further development. At this point, we also created monologues for each short-listed character. These monologues and scenes would next be performed for the story development team. This presentation and discussion was an important point in the process as one creative group, the actors, were transferring the material they had created to another creative group, our five member story development team. The purpose of this performance was for the story group to familiarize themselves with the material that the actors had been creating. After the presentation, actors and the story team members

discussed the material presented. I videotaped the presentation and discussion sessions, allowing myself and the story team members the ability to review this key event during the story development meetings

Story Development

The role of the story group was to develop the outline for the narrative arc of the play. This outline would provide structure and direction for the improvised scenes the actors would work on in the next stage. Story development began with the team members reviewing the recorded footage of the actors' final monologues and scenes. After reviewing these tapes, the story group and I discussed which characters were the strongest and which were not. We worked through a process of selecting, combining, and eliminating the actors' characters. The group also decided that we would base the play's structure on the individual storylines of the core characters and that these storylines would intersect at various points throughout the piece. By structuring the world of the play in this manner, we emphasized the sense of an interconnected community of Calgarians whose actions, both large and small, affected one another in many different ways.

The story team and I divided into three groups of two; each of these groups was assigned a character and asked to develop his/her storyline. During the two week development process, the entire team met three times to pitch, review and critique each other's storylines. After a critique, the smaller two person groups worked on their own to revise their storylines and we would repeat the

pitch/critique/revise cycle until we were satisfied with the development of each scene.

While it was the goal of the story team to develop a clear outline of the story arc, we decided that this process would not include writing a formal script for the play. The actors' lines would be determined through improvisations of the scene descriptions during Stage 5, Script Development. The story team's task, therefore, was to produce an outline of each scene. Individual scenes outlines were descriptions structured in the following manner:

1. Characters in the scene;
2. Events in the scene (beginning, middle, and end); and
3. Desired scene turns.

Through the progression of these scenes, the story arc of *Boom* gradually unfolded. When we had completed this two week process, I presented the series of descriptions to the actors on the first day of the script development process.

Script Development

Once the actors had received the list of scene descriptions, we began to develop the script for each scene through improvisation. This process began with a five-to-ten minute review of the scene's key elements between the actors in the scene and myself. The actors then prepared an improvisation of the scene; this work was done without me so they would not be pressured from feeling observed or judged. I gave them a set amount of time to work on the

scene depending on the length of scene, this ranged from 10 to 30 minutes. After this collaboration time they presented to me when they felt they had taken the scene as far as they could and needed feedback. At that point, I offered suggestions about the narrative elements, as well as the acting choices. In what had become a familiar pattern, the actors would then resume working on their own, revising the script and then re-pitching it.

This process continued until we were satisfied that the scene was complete. The time it would take for a scene to reach this stage would vary, but for the most part this process went very quickly. This is largely due to the fact that at this point in the process the actors were very familiar with the characters. In some cases the scene outlines the story group had created were very close to what the actors had improvised. The entire script development process took 12 days to complete. Most scenes took 15 to 30 minutes to develop and many have gone through the review cycle 3-4 times, however more complicated scenes took one to three days to complete. Once I decided that a scene was complete, I had the actors repeat the scene and during this run I recorded the audio. This audio recording was used as a tool to assist the actors in transcribing their individual lines; it also allowed them the chance to review and edit their lines. Actors in a scene would then combine their lines to form the entire scene text. These first draft scenes would be submitted to the Head of our story group who collected the scenes and worked with me on editing the first draft script. The Head of Story then gave the completed first draft to the actors and me for feedback. These notes were sent to the Head of Story who would make revisions accordingly, the

script went through three drafts in this cycle. Changes included re-ordering scenes, cutting scenes, changing dialogue or story events. While every suggestion was considered, ultimately it was my responsibility to decide whether a suggestion would be implemented.

Now that we had the script in its final draft, we moved into the sixth and final phase, Pre-Production. This phase would be composed of two distinct sub-stages: Design and Rehearsal. The material generated from these stages would establish the play in a defined physical space

Pre-Production

Design

The Designer and I developed the concept for *Boom* over the course of three meetings. Because I planned to do my own video and sound design, the Designer would be responsible for sets and lights. During our first meeting we discussed the "literary elements" that we felt were important to visualizing the play, including themes, symbols, images and characters. These elements are discussed in further detail in the Analysis section. I also used this meeting to share my opinions on the mood and style of the piece, as well as ideas on how scenes could be staged and what the set could look like. Finally, we considered the technical challenges involved in working in non-traditional theatre spaces, as well as presenting the play in multiple venues.

During this second meeting, we decided that the metal scaffolding and black plastic sheeting often seen in Calgary construction sites would be a key design

element. These items would serve several purposes. From an artistic standpoint, they evoked Calgary's skyline which was littered with the cranes and scaffolding of construction sites. From a technical point of view these materials served as both a background set and projection screen. They also provided a backstage area. Finally, the scaffolding could be quickly assembled, disassembled, and transported.

The Designer also presented several ideas about the physical challenges of working in extremely narrow spaces and defining those spaces for a number of scene changes. In order to define physical spaces we decided that we could use video to provide a sense of physical location. Because of the space difficulties, realistic set pieces for every scene weren't practical. As a result, we would use simple, non-descript objects, allowing the audience to use their imagination as to what these set pieces should look like based on how the actors used them. These set pieces would be one basic color and would have a simple box shape. They would represent key set pieces such as tables, couches and beds. For these set pieces we chose black, plastic resin racks. These racks would not only contribute to the play's industrial imagery but they were also very light and could be assembled in multiple ways. That they would also suggestively involve the audience's imagination was their third advantage.

At our third and final design meeting, we discussed revisions from the previous meeting. We also established a number of video and sound elements that would be repeated in order to give the audience an awareness of locations in the play. I planned to use video to reinforce the physical locations of each scene

and to establish mood during the set changes. Sound would also help create a sense of each physical location, and provide a transition during set changes. We also considered the technical requirements for lighting, video and sound.

Because of the wiring in the two community centers, the designer, technician and I also realized we could not use conventional stage lighting equipment. Instead, we went back to our construction image and decided to use industrial halogen shop lights controlled by a portable dimmer pack. At this point, we could integrate the design elements into the second part of the pre-production stage, rehearsals.

Rehearsals

For the next two weeks, we rehearsed six nights a week. As previously indicated, the Workshop and Story Development processes essentially replaced the table work and character development of more conventional productions. During *Boom's* rehearsal period, we concentrated upon blocking the play and set changes, as well as running the scenes in their final sequence. Because we were going to perform in three separate venues, two of which were not traditional theatre spaces, we needed to spend more time than usual on actors' movements and set changes.

In order to prepare for the non-conventional spaces, I decided not to rehearse *Boom* in a traditional studio. Instead I chose a variety of more confined and unusual spaces so that the actors could develop focus and flexibility. In general, we held the rehearsals in my apartment; we also worked on scenes in the building's stairwells, hallways, public common room and parking garage.

Because I didn't immediately know our venues and design elements, I postponed formal blocking. Instead, during the Workshop and Script Development Stages, I tried to vary movements as much as possible so that the actors would not come to rely on set pieces or props that might not be in the final production. Final blocking, therefore, became a process of filling in the blanks in the existing stage movements. This process was determined by the confined spaces of our community venues.

Another blocking challenge arose from the brief, multi-location scenes of the play itself. Because the audience's area of vision would be concentrated on a small, long, narrow space, I often felt that I was creating a diorama.

I allocated the first days of final rehearsal to blocking each scene, trying to use as little space as possible. I then identified the scenes that could accommodate area staging. This format meant that I could simultaneously block more than one scene on stage. Like a split screen, one scene would be active, while the actions in the other would remain "frozen." Once the first scene finished, the second area became active and the actors from the first scene would exit and strike any set pieces. This was an important technical strategy because our many set changes had to move quickly and smoothly.

To correspond to our overall design concept, sets and props were minimal. Plastic blocks made from resin racks represented such pieces as chairs, desks, and couches. I also kept hand props to an absolute minimum. This design and the physical constraints meant that we had to use mime for several key objects,

such as windows and doors. In addressing this challenge, I wanted the mimed movements to appear as natural as possible so that they would not distract the audience's attention from our actor's performances or the play itself. To minimize rehearsal time and to keep the presentation simple, the actors did not mime small, hand props, such as books, glasses, pens and paper.

The entire rehearsal process took place over twelve days. Establishing the blocking and stage moments was completed in three days. We would spend the remaining nine rehearsal days running increasingly longer sections of the play, building up to the point where we were running the play in its entirety. I wanted the actors to become thoroughly familiar with the rhythms of the show. Like a coach preparing an athlete for a sporting event, I concentrated on the actors' mental and physical conditioning. To this end, after we completed blocking, I increased the complexity of the actors' tasks and the length of rehearsal sessions from three hours a night to four. I began this progression by establishing the basic blocking; I then moved to linking scenes and finally incorporated the actions required to perform the set and costume changes that take place during the play

During the final three days of our rehearsal process, with our first performance less than a week away, I ran the play as many times as possible to fix any movement or acting choices that needed adjustment. I wanted the show to feel instinctive or automatic, like a reflex or muscle memory. These instinctual responses were necessary because we would be performing *Boom* only on

Friday and Saturday evenings. In addition, there was a two-week gap between the second and third performance dates.

Chapter Three: PROCESS EXAMPLE

To provide a more detailed view of the creative process I used in *Boom*, this chapter discusses the Bruce and Diane storyline previously described in Chapter Two. This storyline was one of the longest and involved all the actors in at least one point in the script. As such it will serve as a good example to illustrate the process we used. By focusing primarily on the research, workshop and story development stages, I will summarize how research and inspiration evolved into production elements.

Research

Because Alberta's current economic prosperity strongly influences the play's social and economic background, I knew that oil and gas would be a major part of this story. In addition to the economic benefits, our research also included such negative issues as the oil sands impact on both the human population and wildlife in the Fort Chipewyan area of northern Alberta (Austen). We also discussed the social impact of the oil industry. In recent years, Alberta has experienced the highest inter-provincial migration rates in Canadian history (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada), in particular, large numbers of Newfoundland residents who moved to Fort McMurray and other Alberta areas (CBC News). Their stories explored the effects on families of long-separation and the difficulties of maintaining relationships by telephone and e-mail (CBC - The National).

Other news sources dealt with the positive and negative that the economic boom had on affordable housing and real estate (Steele). During 2006, many homeowners in the Calgary area experienced a 40 percent increase in the value of their homes (Steele).

At the same time, the rental vacancy rates dropped nearly to zero (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation), and there were increasing numbers of homeless people living on Calgary's streets.

Finally, from a financial point of view, we learned about the billions of dollars currently invested in the massive oil sands projects (Cattaneo). Research was also found that discussed the record-breaking profits that the oil companies were making (Campoy).

In contrast to the immediacy of current news stories, our historical research gave us a long term-perspective on Alberta's boom. From the early gas discoveries in the Turner Valley, Calgary grew into a major base for international oil companies (The Applied History Research Group at The University of Calgary).

The small prairie city soon evolved into a "white-collar town." This research into Calgary's past also revealed that the phenomena of increased migration, soaring real estate prices, and tight labor supply had actually happened several times in Alberta's history (Scoffield), as periods of inflated economic increase were followed by sudden and drastic corrections.

At this stage, we realized that while our news articles provided clear, accurate information about Alberta's oil and gas industry, they also had certain

problems with biased reporting, especially when dealing with environmental issues. In fact, nearly all stories dealing with the oil industry's handling of environmental issues presented a negative point of view. These research problems had the potential of interfering with the actors' objectivity. I did not want them to approach their stories with any moral preconceptions. Instead, I wanted them to have complete freedom to discover and explore their characters' intentions, conflicts, and personalities. As a result, I constantly challenged them during discussion sessions to look at the other side of the stories. It should be noted that I did not approach the stories in this way to achieve a balanced perspective; instead, I wanted the actors to develop a more human, more personal feeling for the news.

This phase of the discussions was very open. We did not talk about specific dramatic elements or choices. Instead, our goal was to learn about the oil industry as a whole, both its positive and negative aspects. Once we had achieved the desired familiarity, we focused on more general ideas and impressions, leaving the details of the research behind. These details were being left behind because I wanted this play to be a completely fictional story. This transition from the factual to the fictional was very important to our desire to tell an original and personal story that emphasized the characters' lives and situations.

Workshop

To begin the workshop process, I asked the actors to suggest potential characters who would be involved in the oil and gas industry. The most relevant

discussion dealt with a figure whom we named "Corner Office Character." We imagined this individual as a male high-powered, extremely wealthy, oil-company executive, motivated by the twin desires for money and success. Socially and economically, this character was "the one who had everything." In person and through our online forum, we discussed the challenges and opportunities Corner Office Character might face. Because he had no material or social needs, I suggested that his conflict and challenges would be personal. Although I initially suggested an affair, I also believed that this situation could seem clichéd. To avoid the familiarity, we decided that the character would have a short-term affair with a prostitute, rather than the more "traditional" long term relationship. Not only would this variation avoid personal attachments while satisfying his immediate needs efficiently, his colder, more objective approach would also be more in character. We also discussed his wife's discovery of his infidelity, as well as the husband's failings as a father. With these details established, I next led the actors through the first stages of the improvisation exercises.

As previously noted, I started these exercises slowly with nonverbal improvisations of mundane pedantic activities. Corner Office Character's exercises included his coming into his office at the start of the working day, arriving home from work and flirting at the bar. These scenarios evolved into spoken improvisations, which included phone conversations in which he lied to his wife about his whereabouts after work, completed the negotiation of a large business deal, and gave someone bad news over the phone. I had the actor work alone as I didn't want to distract him with another person in the scenes. I

then moved to interactions, at first by altering the phone scenarios to accommodate another character. During this point in the process, we felt the strongest scene we had created for this character was a scene called “Phone Call to Buddy”. In this scene, Corner Office Character is talking to a friend about a new promotion, his most recent sexual exploits, and the expensive gift he needs to buy his teenage daughter. He frequently interrupts this conversation to yell criticisms and orders to an assistant offstage. As a result, we come to know a high-status, wealth man who seems to have little respect or sympathy for others. This monologue, along with a discussion between the story group and the actor served as the starting point for the story development process, work that eventually led to the Bruce and Diane storyline.

Story Development

As noted previously, during this phase, our two basic influences were the Pixar presentation by Ronnie Del Carmen at the Banff New Media Center, and the principles of story structure in Robert McKee's screenwriting book Story. The Pixar cycle of creating, pitching and revising appealed to me because it allowed the artists time to create and imagine without the usual pressures of criticism and editing. During the Workshop and Story Development phases, I encouraged both actors and the story artists to generate as many ideas as possible without censoring or editing themselves. This non-critical approach generated approximately ten developed characters and over thirty scenes within a period of two months. These periods of creative freedom were followed by critical review, during which we refined and clarified both the characters and the narrative.

The story team included people experienced in acting, playwriting, and directing for both film and stage. Like the Pixar artists, we discussed the play's important themes and ideas. With Boom, each storyline had to present its characters with some form of opportunity. In this way, the play reflected the experience that the province itself was going through as a whole, as Albertans had to respond to the rapid increase in global oil demand and the attendant rise in oil prices. Like Albertans in general, I wanted the main characters in this play to face choices of opportunity. I was especially interested in how a character's reactions to these opportunities could produce negative or positive results.

As indicated in the previous chapter, we then discussed the acting team's final presentations to the Story Group. We then divided into three, two-person groups, each of which was assigned one storyline to work on. For three meetings, I worked with another story artist on the storyline for the Corner Office Character. In a very open format, we mapped out his storyline, refining ideas we liked and eliminating those that didn't work. Once we had produced an outline made up of bullet points, we presented it to the entire story group for review. At this pitch session, we established the foundation of Bruce and Diane's story.

I did not name the characters at this point, because I wanted the actors to choose their names as a way of personalizing them. During this period, however, we developed Diane Marshall Gray, the character who would serve as the antagonist to the Corner Office Character, eventually named Bruce Gervais. Because Bruce would need a strong, competitive nature, an aggressive,

authoritative woman would provide a more interesting conflict. In addition to his professional relationship with Diane, Bruce would also be briefly involved with Liza, the young, up-and-coming office worker. Finally he would have another relationship with the escort, Chantal. His scenes with these two young women would give him an opportunity to act unselfishly.

At the end of the play, we realize that Bruce has been affected by his experiences with the three women and has taken the opportunity provided by these experiences to help those around him. For the most part, we developed these ideas during our pitch sessions, where two person groups would pitch their storylines to the larger groups, and these scenes would be discussed, critiqued and revised. During those sessions when we didn't agree, discussions would become heated as individuals defended certain characters, their choices and decisions. Rather than a negative experience, these passionate debates were important to the collaborative process. They allowed people to fight for their preferences while other, less important, ideas faded quietly away. An example of this debate occurred when I pitched the possibility of having Liza fired at the end of the play. The scenario I proposed was that Liza reports her discovery about Bruce's sabotage to Diane. Thinking that Diane will be grateful for the information, Liza is surprised to learn instead that her superior is furious with her indiscretion and, feeling betrayed, she angrily fires Liza. The story artists who were working on the Liza, Zach and Maggie relationship were strongly opposed to this idea, as they felt it would interfere with their storyline. After a lengthy, often noisy, discussion, we finally agreed that Liza's dismissal was not a critical

piece in the story arc and we cut it completely. I should note that during these pitch sessions, I played several roles - moderator, director, editor and, at times, referee. It was an exciting process that helped us refine and clarify many of the scenes.

At this point, we also used the concept of story events or turns, as described in the previous chapter. To organize our ideas, we followed what McKee describes as the step outline form. We moved from using scene outlines noted in point form on writing paper, to documenting our scenes in one or two sentences on three-by-five note cards. This method allowed us to clarify a scene's different stages, including the inciting incident, the climax and the resolution. This method also allowed us to re-order, revise and cut scenes easily. During pitch sessions, we would arrange the cards in the order we wanted the scenes to occur. As we collaborated, our one-to-two line sentences evolved into a form of shorthand, so that each card included a title, which would be a brief description of the scene, a description of the turn that occurred during the scene and a point form description of the key events in the scene. For example,

CM meets CW; CM thinks she is his new secretary (CM Turn:
Superior to Inferior)

- CM talks to her about the big promotion he expects due to a vacancy
- CM asks her for a report

- CW embarrasses him when she tells him she's been hired to be his new boss
- CW asks CM for the same report CM wanted

On this flashcard, CM stands for Corporate Man (Bruce Gervais), and CW represents Corporate Woman (Diane Marshal Grey). Once we had determined the final scene cards and their order, we gave them to the actors, whose subsequent improvisations provided the dialogue for the final script.

Through this process each of the storylines for Boom were developed and refined. This method of creation allowed us to research, generate characters and create a completed script in three months time. In the next chapter, I will provide a review of the outcomes of this process and its final creative product, the staged performance of the play.

Chapter Four: THE OUTCOME

From casting to final rehearsals, the development process for Boom took approximately 7 months. It was interesting to watch the play's progression in that brief, intense creative period.

I felt that for the most part our creative process had served its purpose of creating a story inspired by Calgary's recent economic boom. The project was also developed successfully into a stage-ready project within our production timelines. This process also fulfilled my requirement for using the creation methodologies of Pixar and McKee. Improvements could be made by increasing the amount of time allotted to the story development process. While the story development team was able to accomplish its task in the time needed, it was the one part of the process where I could have used more time. This constraint required us to spend more time fleshing out details in the script development stages but did not have a serious impact on the overall project.

The show itself developed into six public performances at three different venues. Due to scheduling constraints at all of the venues we had very little time to prepare and rehearse. We were allowed four to six hours to prepare the space by constructing the set, setting up technical elements and adjusting the actors' stage blocking for each venue. During its run, I discovered that the performance spaces significantly affected the productions. Consequently, to critique the different performances, I will examine them within the context of the three different venues.

The Reeve Primary Theatre, The University of Calgary

We held our first performance of Boom in the Reeve Primary Theatre. Of our three venues, only this space was an actual theatre and, overall, it had the greatest effect both positively and negatively on the outcome of the performances. On the plus side, certain traditional features facilitated the show. These included backstage spaces, clearly delineated exits and entrances, readily available power sources and established audience areas. Despite these advantages, however, there was a negative feature to this venue – its size. Because the actors had rehearsed in small, narrow spaces, they were unaccustomed to the Reeve's wider, deeper dimensions. Because of the increased size, stage crosses, set changes and general blocking took much longer than in rehearsal. The increased time significantly affected the pace of the show by slowing its rhythms down considerably. The actors were also somewhat distracted because of these spatial differences.

The Reeve also presented several technical problems. At times, sound cues were missed and, in general, they were too quiet for this larger space. We had chosen our sound equipment to suit the smaller community venues. Lighting presented a similar problem. Once again, we had based the number of halogen light instruments on the community space. In the Reeve, because it was more difficult to light the actors, the show had a darker more somber look, an effect that was not in keeping with our basic design concept.

The combination of actors who were familiarizing themselves with their performance environment and a technician who was still working out problems running the show, made this performance of Boom feel more like a technical dress rehearsal than opening night. In retrospect, I should not have chosen this particular performance space in this venue. During initial discussions in January 2008, the University of Calgary's Artistic Director as well as their Technical Director discussed both the Reeve Primary and Secondary Theatres as performance venue options. Because it was deeper, I decided that the Reeve Primary would be a more suitable space for Boom. I felt that its depth would give us the throw distance we needed for the video projectors. Unfortunately, however, I did not take into account how this decision would also affect the show's lighting, sound and blocking. I now realize that I should have chosen the Reeve Secondary which is more similar to the community centre spaces. This venue would, therefore, have addressed the lighting, sound and pacing problems. Although I may not have been able to use video in this theatre, I now believe that this would have been an acceptable loss since video played only a secondary role in the play's overall design concept; sound and lighting were more important elements.

Bridgeland Community Centre

Boom performances in the Bridgeland Community Center were significantly different from those at the Reeve Theatre. I attribute these differences primarily to the fact that this venue was much closer to what we had prepared for in rehearsals and design. Another advantage in this Centre was a series of metal pipes that ran along the rafters. We used these pipes to hang additional lights. Not only did

these lights enable the audience to see the actors' expressions more clearly, but they also brightened the play's mood. As a result, the performances at the Bridgeland Community Centre did not have the dark, somber feeling that predominated at the Reeve Theatre. The actors were also more comfortable working in a narrower, more confined space. As a result, their movements were faster and more fluid.

At the first night of *Boom* in the Bridgeland Community Center, I felt that I was finally watching a performance that achieved the vision for which designer, actors, story team and I had all been striving for. The actors' performances were focused, comfortable and clear. Similarly, technical elements, such as sound, were more effective in this smaller space. The improved sound, however, did come at a price. The Bridgeland space is mainly composed of concrete, glass and steel with very few soft surfaces to dampen the sound. As a result, at times I felt that the sound was too loud and had a slight echo. Scenes where music was played in the background made it harder for the audience to hear actors' dialogue. Despite this minor difficulty, however, by this third staging the technicians had become accustomed to the rhythm and the timing of the cues. Last but definitely not least, at Bridgeland, audience members reacted throughout, an indication of their involvement with the show.

At Bridgeland, I felt that the actors and technicians working on the show developed a sense of confidence in their performances. This sense of confidence would be important for them, because our performance at the McKenzie town community

center would not be for another two weeks. As this was going to be the longest time that the artists would be disconnected from their work, I was very happy that they had a positive experience at this venue.

McKenzie Towne Community Centre

At this stage in the production I felt that the actors and the technician had developed a significant level of comfort and confidence with the show. During the first performance in McKenzie Towne, one of the actors lost a line, and as a result almost half of the scene needed to be improvised. The improvisation was done in such a smooth and comfortable manner that it would be very difficult for the audience to know that something had gone wrong. This venue was the most ideal for our production. This Community Center was slightly wider than Bridgeland. The increased width allowed for more comfortable entrances and exits from behind the scaffolding. Other advantages that this space offered came from the enhancements created by the white tiles on the ceilings and the floor. These surfaces served as reflectors for our halogen work lights; these conditions created the best lighting conditions of the entire run. Sound elements were also enhanced by the carpeting and the ceiling tiles, which dampened the sound and removed the echo heard at Bridgeland. These features gave us slightly more volume control. The volume of recorded background sounds and music was appropriately balanced with the actors' dialogue. During these final performances the technician was confident enough to make adjustments to the sound levels using her own judgment. The designer also made additional adjustments to light plot. This final set of lighting adjustments not only allowed us to see the actors, but also made it

easier to see the projections as well. While these adjustments made the lighting of the Mackenzie Towne performances slightly darker than in Bridgeland, I felt that the compromise was justified because it enhanced the visibility of the background video.

In summary, I would describe the process of creating *Boom* to be one that was evolutionary in nature. Each element we established in a developmental stage was reworked and further developed in the next. Over the course of these performances, I felt that the show followed the same progression – gradually evolving and developing into a work of art that achieved the envisioned concept. Our core goals for this project were to create a story that reflected the economic boom that Calgary was experiencing, to create a methodology for new story development and to present a play in various communities in Calgary that told a clear and accessible story. Despite errors in venue selection and other technical issues, I consider this project a success. The sincere feedback that a director receives from his audience is one of the strongest measures of the outcome of any play. Audience members along with being entertained also commented on how familiar situations, issues or characters seemed to them. This to me is an indication that the story we created resonated with our community and our patrons.

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