

WE NEED A LITTLE CHRISTMAS:  
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF  
THEATRE TCU'S  
PRODUCTION

by

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ABSTRACT

This project focused on assisting the director of Theatre TCU's production *We Need a Little Christmas*, a musical revue compiled by Dr. Harry Parker and Mr. Alan Shorter. Before and throughout the rehearsal process, I took notes for Dr. Parker and contributed my suggestions when appropriate. Specifically, I met with each individual actor to help him or her create the most interesting character and backstory for their respective songs. We collaborated on given circumstances and strong emotional choices that we felt would positively impact the audience.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....1

PROCESS .....1

CONCLUSION.....12

## INTRODUCTION

This past semester, I had the privilege of working alongside Theatre TCU Department Chair Dr. Harry Parker to assist in directing the Christmas musical at Texas Christian University. *We Need A Little Christmas* was a musical revue encompassing a mixture of funny, heartwarming, dramatic, and touching holiday songs. Besides directing my peers in a ten-minute play for Directing class last year, I had never been on the other side of the rehearsal process, especially for a musical. Dr. Parker had told me that I would make a good director. While at first I doubted this suggestion, I now recognize the value in my skills, work ethic, and mind set as they apply to directing. I applied for the position on a whim, figuring that if selected, I would be able to give myself a fair shot at the process and learn crucial lessons while still having a model to look to for guidance. Dr. Parker decided to take a leap of faith on me and graciously took me under his wing. I was excited to work with an accomplished director and knew that I would learn more from this experience than any class could ever teach me. I could not wait to get started.

## PROCESS

Before rehearsals began, I attended my first ever production meeting and saw step by step how much planning and how many details go into planning the production before it even starts. While I always knew this in the back of my mind, sitting in on meetings first hand sheds a whole new light on why we begin the process so early. The costumes, lighting, props, set, sound, and other logistical details all have to mesh together to create a coordinated vision that the director is responsible for orchestrating. I always thought of the director as the acting or performing expert of the team, but the head honcho really must know about all aspects of production in order to even create a concept for himself in

the first place, which is something I struggled with in my Directing class. Not only that, but it also becomes the director's responsibility to lead the other team members to that goal. If the vision is hazy or unspecific, it becomes almost impossible to implement stylistic elements without chaos. In the first production meeting, Dr. Parker started everyone off in the right direction by knowing his exact vision for the musical and choosing specific and illustrative words to get everyone on the same page. While he had done his homework and successfully communicated a dynamic idea, he still allowed the other designers freedom to create their own elements within the overall scheme. This established a sense of respect, as it proved he had done his homework and was prepared and precise. The director's openness to suggestions from other experts in those different areas also established trust within the company from the beginning. Had Dr. Parker been overbearing or vague, the production meetings and team dynamic would have undoubtedly suffered.

In addition to trusting the experts, Dr. Parker entrusted me to work with his actors. He did not feel the need to monitor me or check my ideas before he allowed me to give the cast members direction. This sense of responsibility made me feel special and put a healthy amount of pressure on me to figure out the best ways to succeed. It is always a challenge to demand authority among people in one's own age and peer group, so it was helpful when Dr. Parker authoritatively instructed the actors to meet with me outside of rehearsals, as I did not want them to feel I was overstepping boundaries without his approval. That being said, I feel that I gave much helpful feedback to the actors. I found that those who were more willing to try my suggestions improved their songs leaps and bounds from when we first rehearsed them. While the talented cast did

not need very much of my help, watching them improve with even small adjustments we made filled me with excitement and a sense of reward and fulfillment.

The initial plan was for me to work one on one with the actors for their songs in the first section to make sure their introductions to the audience were strong. In the end, though, I ended up helping them work through their later songs as well. It was interesting to see which actors were eager and proactive when it came to scheduling times to work with me, and which tended to forget or demonstrate apathy. For the most part, they all showed enthusiasm, so luckily, we had no major problems. I approached this work a little bit differently for certain actors and songs. I started by reviewing the lyrics of each song and listing character questions that I felt were essential for the actor to answer in order to more specifically develop the song's arc. I typed out some of my ideas and possible answers to these circumstantial questions in blue so that I would know they came from me, but I expected the actors to come up with answers on their own once we had talked about them. In the individual meetings, I asked the actors the questions and wrote down what they had to say about their characters in green. In some cases, our ideas were the same, which worked great and we could agree and get even more specific. Sometimes, the actors came up with details I never thought of, but that were in some cases even more effective than my initial ideas, so I refrained from muddying their work with my previous thoughts. In other instances, while the cast member's idea was valid and could work, I felt their songs could potentially be made more clear to and emotional for the audience if they tweaked slight details, so I provided them with possible alternatives to consider. It was important to me throughout this process to be confident in the ideas that I had and the guidance I was providing to my peers. One thing I learned from my Directing class



was that while it would be awful to be perceived as overbearing, it is worse by far not to earn their respect. I knew I had to be sure of what I had to bring to the table because as soon as I doubted myself, they would doubt me too. So, this time I made sure to be clear and direct, but respectful of their work and talent. Though not an experienced director, I had been entrusted with this position for a reason and needed to own all of that responsibility and be proud of it. So that's what I did.

When I met with Caroline Iliff to talk about her first song "All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth," I asked her how her character felt about her two front teeth and about everyone looking at her. Caroline was prepared with the answers that she was upset that her teeth were missing and expressed that she absolutely hated being stared at by her peers. After asking a few more questions about her choices, we established that her goal was for her crush to tell her he loves her and hug her. Caroline and I worked to find discovery between beats and new meaning and variation to her repeating phrase about her two front teeth each time she said it. She was seven years old and beyond frustrated that she could no longer show off her tongue twister skills with "Sister Susie sitting on a thistle."

When I met with Shelby Ringdahl about "Merry Christmas, Darling," we discussed the yin and yang aspects of her song where she could pull apart the beats within her lyrics and emphasize the antithesis to add interest. I suggested that Shelby heighten the stakes and continue to top her previous intentions, specifically when she had continued phrasing or lists. Really seeing the logs on the fire and finding a personal emotional connection to each of her images helped Shelby interpret the lyrics in her own way. I challenged her to define why her message was so important and urgent to

communicate to her significant other, and why she repeated the same lyrics at the end. We determined that because she could not be with her love on Christmas, she ultimately lost at the end of her song. I reminded her that she could not know or play the outcome before her final beat.

Alex Vinh's first song "Silver Bells" served as a bit of a challenge that I welcomed with enthusiasm. I felt I had a lot to teach and share with Alex since he is a freshman. I was excited to watch him grow throughout the process. We discussed how he felt about Christmas time, whether or not he was excited about it, or potentially hiding his anticipation. Alex had to decide whom he was singing to and how to best communicate his message. We worked on separating his beats and not seeming like he knew what he was going to say before the fact. I thought images would be a big help to him in this song with so many list items connoting different feelings of Christmas. I could tell, however, that silver bells, specifically, did not really mean much to him. Alex was having a difficult time pretending to love silver bells, so I suggested he might substitute that image for chocolate cake, his professed favorite. This definitely helped him begin to see how he could make this song his own, but he needed reminding that not all of his images could be the same. We spoke about how much it would mean to Alex in his own life to be able to see his mother on Christmas and strategized to find places where that emotion might play well in his song. While I would have liked to do more with Alex, I did not want to overwhelm him or make him feel self-conscious, so I chose a stopping point in our work when I felt I had provided him a few main strategies and ideas to continue working on without me.

Logan Lane, in his classic “Merry Christmas To You,” had the task of determining how each repetitive “Merry Christmas” could affect him slightly differently. Like Alex, Logan also had many images in a list to specify to the audience. I presented to Logan the idea of illustrating opposites between the warmth of the fire and the cold of “Jack Frost nipping at your nose” to highlight to the audience the shared feelings Christmas brings to all of us. I knew that if Logan could really connect with those lyrics, the audience would be right there by the fire with him and feel the frostbite on the tips of their noses just as well. Keeping this number relaxed, yet still energized proved another goal Logan focused on in his work.

The first duet of the number between Jonathan Hardin and Caroline Carden served as a short, sweet story of affection. A note that I had for the pair was to fill their beginning accompaniment with a pre-beat very specific to their relationship as strangers. Jonathan expressed that his goal in communicating this way to Caroline was to get a date. I tried to get him to discover each item of candy on his list more clearly and suddenly so it would not come across as preconceived. He and I talked about using images quite a bit, especially for his initial entrance when he painted, “pine cones” and “holly berries” for us. I also wanted Jonathan an element of surprise at some of the items he was illustrating. When I inquired why the pair would be singing different words and messages simultaneously, they answered that they were sharing Christmas ideas together, flirting, and listening to each other, all while expressing their own thoughts and desires. They both won their objectives in the end and exited happily together.

Jackie Raye was a joy to work with, as she was always prepared, enthusiastic, and open to new suggestions. When I asked her what she had already determined in the

moment before her song “New Year’s Eve,” she had come up with the setting of a formal party where she would finally be able to express her romantic feelings for a friend, after previously not having had an opportunity to reveal her true emotions to him. At first her character tried to break the ice through all of her nerves. I challenged her to really weigh all of her options and portray the differences between them. I prodded her with questions about her fear of rejection, her imaginary other’s response, and her reason for continuing to try, despite his initial reaction. We decided that there was an obvious element of sensuality in this number and that she needed to win her goal by luring and seducing him. I encouraged her to know in her character’s mind what she had to offer her man, but not to let him in on that secret. Jackie and I discussed making the transition clear between “It’ll never work” and “I’m giving it a shot.” Finding the discovery between beats and cultivating those moments within the music between her lyrics proved a challenge worth addressing. I asked Jackie to connect the lyrics to images that would affect her personally, especially in her initial vocal entrance with such phrases as, “bells,” “horns,” and “couples we know are fondly kissing.” This helped distinguish how she felt about each of these descriptions and let the audience in on why her character cared.

In my first meeting with Jack Bristol, we went over lyrics and I presented him with some important questions to consider when continuing to work on “Don’t Let Christmas Pass You By.” I inquired whether Jack’s character liked Christmas, how the holiday made him feel, and what would happen if Christmas did pass him by. I wanted to know what Jack was holding at stake in his portrayal and what the difference was the second time through. I thought it could be fun for Jack to create a secret for his character to hold about Christmas. Not only that, but I also thought that would add a subtext to his

performance that we may not have gotten otherwise. For Jack, it seemed worth it to me to address his physical presence, as well. Keeping his feet about shoulder width apart, but, more importantly, planting them and grounding his body, would help Jack feel and appear more masculine, powerful, confident, and convincing.

When Wyn pulled me aside on a rehearsal break, he was quick to inform me of the circumstances of his song. On his own, Wyn had created the story that he had come to find his long lost brother at a basketball court where all his brother's friends had been playing. His goal was to convince his brother to come home to their parents' house for Christmas. In Wyn's backstory, they did not have the best family life, but out of everyone, he and his brother had maintained the strongest and closest relationship. After hearing Wyn's ideas I urged him to emphasize the joy of the holiday and play up the love he and his imaginary brother shared. Questions about how his home felt, smelled, and impacted him, and his memories there were beneficial for Wyn to think about, too. I advocated making his delivery different and even more convincing on the repeat and really figuring out what the stakes were, or what would happen if he did not accomplish his goal. Finally, I cautioned Wyn to make sure to vary his tactics between beats as to avoid a wash of one general emotion.

This section of the show also included Kylie Arnold's beautiful rendition of "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas." In our meeting, I asked Kylie to determine what had happened in the moment before that drove her to need to sing. Before our meeting, I thought Kylie could perhaps play a motherly figure speaking to a toddler to convince her that Santa exists. I also thought an older sister entertaining a younger sister's thoughts about Christmas could serve the song well. After discussing the

possibilities, Kylie and I ultimately decided that her goal to cheer up her younger sister would be the most effective. We discussed embracing the happy words and finding the joyous moments where her character could serve as an uplifting and inspirational figure for her sister. I reminded Kylie of the importance of pulling apart her beats and making her decisions appear spontaneous throughout the song in order to win her objective.

Section three of *We Need A Little Christmas* opened with “Sparkle Jolly Jingle Jingle,” in which Wyn needed to both encourage and caution his elves in order to impress Santa. As with the others, I noted the need for Wyn to find the discovery between each of his exciting new thoughts, and also to vary his tactics to convince the elves that they absolutely must please Santa. In my mind, Wyn’s stakes were that he would be fired from his dream job if Santa was unhappy. I advised that the refrain needed to build toward the end beat before Wyn’s victory. I thought he should charm, inspire, and prod the elves along the way. I wanted Wyn to continue generating images in his mind, especially on long held notes, so that we could witness his enthusiasm grow. I did not end up getting much scheduled time to share my notes with Wyn, but the number was still successful and convincing.

Similarly, I did not communicate as much with Shelby about her third song “Christmas Clichés.” I wanted to know, though, how each of the locations where her character had spent Christmas differed from the others, and how she felt about those specific places and the memories associated with them. I advised her to clearly shift beats between describing past Christmases and elaborating on the present holiday. The culmination of all her desired clichés should be “the guy in the bright red outfit,” as she expressed how dear he was to her. At the same time, I wanted Shelby to avoid

anticipating the outcome so she could be surprised and excited when he finally decided to stay. Uncovering new ideas, each with distinct images that affected Shelby in unique ways, allowed her performance to resonate with the audience.

When Caroline Carden and I deliberated her song “Three Wishes,” my suggestions included using the introductory music to decide on her three wishes, letting us into that moment, and enjoying the images she was painting for her imaginary other. Taking advantage of operative structure in her lyrics would be a good way to add interest and dynamic to this ballad. I provided possible tactics of charming, flirting, pleasing, and pleading for sharing her message with her significant other and encouraged Caroline to play the happiness at the prospect of gaining her wishes rather than the sadness of not yet having received them. In the final moment of her song, I asked Caroline to show us her anticipation of opening the gift from her love.

I urged Logan to really prod and encourage Caroline in “Just Sing a Christmas Song” and to raise the stakes and energy for himself. I reminded him that he loses after the first verse, or he would not need to sing it again a second time. I asked him to decide on their relationship, whether it was siblings or friends or something else, and to choose an age for his character. A big note I had for Logan was to really allow singing this Christmas song light him up like the magic he was so excited about. It also helped Logan to think about really seeing “reindeer on the roof” because it evoked an honest reaction to those ridiculous circumstances.

I had so much fun working with Alex on “The Davey Dinkle Song.” First, I asked him to whom he was speaking and how he felt about the other person and about what he was communicating to this person. I advised him to really prepare the audience

for what he's about to say, to let it be a warning. I explained a little bit about operative words to Alex to make sure he did not unimportantly stress too many unimportant words. My notes also included finding the joy in imitating the other characters and not holding back when finding the vastly different portrayals for them. I stressed the importance of "yin and yang" to Alex to help illuminate opposites. I suggested some tactics such as belittle, charm, harass, and warn, and reminded the actor how gloriously he needed to portray the moment when Davey Dinkle finally saved Christmas. We discussed that the different perspectives he was sharing with the audience needed to be motivated and have unique purposes in the story as a whole. Alex was great to collaborate with, always ready to work and eager to learn.

Jackie's presentation of "The Truth About Christmas" was always beautiful, so we simply tweaked some things in order to enhance the message. We first decided that she was singing to her younger sister. I guided her not to give away her frustration too soon. I wanted her to be excited about Christmas and the presents right up to the moment she revealed her dislike for the holiday so that we would see a clear shift. We worked to make sure that each repetition of "here's the truth" had new reason and purpose, slight though it may have been. I directed her to visualize the sleet and hail and to find hopeful moments throughout the song so she could play up the opposites, such as when she sang about families fighting but starting off right. Discovering each of her desires and not playing sadness or pitying herself about the pain was an important element for Jackie. I asked her to find places where she could laugh at herself even through all her hesitation. Jackie always tried all of my notes and trusted the validity of my suggestions. Her



positive enthusiasm always served to improve her performances noticeably after we worked, and continued to grow as an actress throughout the process.

For “Toyland,” I expressed that Kylie should find excitement and in sharing her wise advice and work to discover each new idea. Like with Jackie, I thought it would be beneficial for Kylie to find places to laugh at herself, such as in her beginning words, “and are as old as I.” I recommended that Kylie try this number like story time, really painting the images and exciting the children. We knew she needed to feel just slightly different about Toyland each time she mentioned it, so we brainstormed variations for that, as well.

### CONCLUSION

Overall, my experience as the Assistant Director of Theatre TCU’s *We Need A Little Christmas* turned out to be extremely rewarding and educational. Though I do not consider myself a director, I enjoyed playing the opposite role from a committed performer. Even as an actor, I found great value in evaluating other performers from the outside perspective. Moving forward, I now have the confidence to take the lead in similar situations and perhaps even direct a production on my own. The experience and knowledge imparted through this practicum project is an important milestone in continuing to develop my skills as an actor and coach, and on the road to becoming an effective and successful director.