

A DAY IN HOLLYWOOD, A TIME IN MY LIFE: A REFLECTION ON THE  
PROCESS AND PRODUCTION OF TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY'S

*A DAY IN HOLLYWOOD, A NIGHT IN THE UKRAINE*

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for Departmental Honors in

the Department of Theatre

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas

May 2, 2016

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## ABSTRACT

This paper details my experiences choreographing the musical *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* for Theatre TCU. I will document how my interest as a choreographer first piqued and the steps I took to in order to apply for the position of choreographer, as well as the journey of casting, rehearsing, and going through the tech and performance weeks. I will then conclude with a post-show analysis and review how the entire process gave me a new perspective on choreography and how my future endeavors have been shaped by this process. *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* shed new light on how to be a more well-rounded choreographer, performer, and theatre artist in general. The show taught me how to compromise when I could, stand up for what mattered, that theatre productions are a collaborative effort and it takes an entire team to put on an upstanding production, and, most importantly, that when dancing is needed in a show, it must be used for storytelling, not just for spectacle. These arguments and bits of knowledge are supported within my work as a choreographer and will continue to be prevalent in my works to come.

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## INTRODUCTION: ME

As a child, I had often felt slighted and pushed to the side, as if the stars had not aligned properly for me. I am the middle child of my family, I am the only girl in my house besides my mother, I enjoyed football more than playing house, which other girls found weird, and I was told early on that I did not have the body of a dancer even though dancing was all I wanted to do with my life. I guess I had a chip on my shoulder starting at a young age, but I sojourned onward in order to prove the world wrong.

This drive consequently formed other unique personal traits in me as well; whenever I got attention, I liked to hold onto it for as long as I could by telling random, somewhat related, stories about my life. I also began to listen to less music on the radio and more of what my parents enjoyed, thus developing an eclectic taste in music. This also led to me hearing my first song from a musical, “Rich Man” from *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was like nothing I had ever heard, full of excitement, comedy, and a tinge of spitefulness. Of course, as an elementary school child, I could not verbalize what I have just written, but I am certain I felt it. I wanted to see what other songs existed in this world of theatre, and so my mother enrolled me in acting classes at the same studio where I took dance lessons.

After my first acting class, I knew that I had to be a part of the theatre for the rest of my life. It started out as only wanting to perform, but while watching my dance teacher when we were in rehearsals for shows, I found myself being pulled towards the dancing part of shows more often than not. I always volunteered first to do whatever she wanted, whether it was a number in a show or a competition dance piece. Dancing made me feel comfortable, like I had found something that I wanted to do every single day, even with the setbacks of my body

structure. Still, I did not realize what a wonderful journey on which theatre and dance would take me and how it would change my view on art, myself, and the opportunities that life brings.

### **STEPPING STONES TO BECOMING THE CHOREOGRAPHER**

Starting at a very early age, I became interested in choreographing dances. In elementary school, my friends and I would put an iPod on shuffle and make up short, thirty-second dances to whatever played. I choreographed entire dance shows by myself to the soundtracks of *Wicked* and *Rent* and then would force my parents to watch me perform them in our basement. I am quite sure that these pieces dazzled my support system, but my first real piece of choreography did not come to fruition until high school. My Freshman year, I was lucky enough to choreograph a musical theatre piece on eight of my fellow dancers at my studio in Oklahoma. This was my first taste of having to create movement that worked on bodies other than my own. I still look back on that piece with pride, despite it being a competitive dance routine, but, I would not experience what it meant to create a collaborative piece of art until college.

#### ***Guys and Dolls***

Spring of my Junior year at Texas Christian University, I was cast in the musical *Guys and Dolls*. On top of that, my crew assignment for the semester, which in the past had been anything from building sets to running the fly rail, was something far more exciting in my eyes: Assistant Choreographer. Finally, I had been given a chance to expand my passion and learn more about what really goes into choreographing an entire show. In previous shows, I had been appointed Dance Captain, but that is a role merely for cleaning dances and remembering every detail the choreographer teaches. Assistant Choreographer, on the other hand, meant I would have some creative license on what was being created in the *Guys and Dolls* world.

For about two months, I would meet with my professor and choreographer, Penny Ayn Maas, for a few hours during the week to come up with the show's dances. *Guys and Dolls* choreography ranged anywhere from the manly "Crapshooters' Ballet" to salsa dancing in Havana to a light strip tease in "Take Back Your Mink." While these vast stylistic changes stretched my vocabulary of choreography, the most important concept that Penny taught me was storytelling.

Early on, Penny made it very clear that while the dances needed to be well executed and show off the actors' abilities, the storytelling aspect of each piece was the most vital part. She imparted this information to me: "When an actor can no longer express their feelings with mere words, they sing, and when singing no longer does that emotion justice, they dance." For me, that solidified that only dance consistently expresses the most extreme of emotions, whether that is tremendous fear or unfettered love. This realization led me to another discovery. Once the purpose of a dance in a song gets overshadowed in order to show off leaps, turns, and other unnecessary tricks, the piece no longer supports the show and its message for the audience. With these bits of knowledge, I was ready to assist Penny in choreographing the show.

By the end of the rehearsal, tech, and run of *Guys and Dolls*, I had a better grasp of the overall responsibilities of a theatre choreographer. They must communicate with the director, stage management, and design team about the dance choices that might affect other areas of the show. Also, showcasing talent, while important, is not everything; an actor's pride and ego can be hurt easily, so sometimes fairness trumps the choreographer's first choice. With assisting a show under my belt, I felt that the next step in my journey was to fully choreograph a production, and thus began the process of applying and hopefully preparing to choreograph during my Senior Year at Texas Christian University.

## **Applying, Acceptance, and Reality**

Rewind to late February of my Junior year. At this point, one could begin applying for design and production assignments for the following year. Having talked to other faculty members in the past, I knew that the possibility of choreographing an entire show by myself was a longshot. No student at TCU, to my knowledge, had choreographed an entire Main Stage Production on their own. I had been told that a former student, Kelsey Milbourn, had choreographed a Kaleidoscope Production many years earlier, but those shows are not fully realized in design or production in the way that Main Stage shows are. Still, my mind was set, and the worst that could happen would be that the faculty would deny my application and I would just have to wait a little longer to explore that interest in my life.

The two musicals that were happening in the 2015-2016 school year were *A Day in Hollywood*, *A Night in the Ukraine* and *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. I had heard of *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*, having had friends and teachers who had performed in previous productions, but *A Day in Hollywood*, *A Night in the Ukraine* was completely new to me. After talking to Jennifer Engler, the slated director of *Hollywood, Ukraine*, about the show and what, if any, choreography it might need, I learned that the musical was essentially two completely different shows. The first act, *A Day in Hollywood*, was a musical revue about the transition from Vaudeville to early film, and all of the famous actors, composers, lyricists, and stories that made it possible. *A Night in the Ukraine*, on the other hand, was a musical written in the style of a Marx Brothers film, and would have the actors portraying Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and other staple actors from their iconic films. The second act required little dancing, as the point of the act was to recreate the Marx Brothers' characters and antics, but in a live show. The first act, however, was almost entirely singing and dancing. Jennifer knew that this show, if directed and



choreographed by a single person, would be near impossible; for me, the idea of a one-act marathon of singing and dancing was enthralling and a perfect challenge. At that point, I decided that applying for *HollyKraime* (as we would lovingly end up naming it) would be the show best suited for me.

The month or so of waiting to hear about assignments was grueling. *HollyKraime* was the first show of the fall semester, and I had heard in the past that those first slot shows generally had meetings before school let out for summer. There was not much to do besides continue to rehearse for *Guys and Dolls* and hope for the best. Then, finally, the email appeared in my inbox. Harry Parker - 2015/2016 Design and Production Assignments. I was nervous to open it, despite my fate having been decided already. Once I mustered the gumption, I opened the email, and a smile spread across my face. Co-Choreographer with Jennifer Engler for *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine*. I did not know what Co-Choreographer meant, but to finally be able to work with Jennifer and put my own work onstage made me ecstatic.

Shortly after the email went out, I met with Jennifer to hash out some details. Essentially, she told me that I would do most of the choreography and that she would assist me when necessary and do a few of the numbers as well. Jennifer had a lot on her plate, dealing with two sets, two casts, and one massive transition, even though none of us knew it at the time (but more on that later). By this point, the semester was winding down and summer was nearly upon us. That was when I found out the truth. We had not received the script or the score yet from the publishing company, and therefore could not have beneficial production meetings until then. We met once before school was let out, but it was more of a meet and greet as well as Jennifer giving us a rough idea of the show. We knew that we would be in contact over the summer and

hopefully have production meetings, but nothing could be set in stone until we had the physical script and score. And thus, summer and my weeks of planning began.

### **SUMMER DAYS DRIFTING AWAY**

Summer break went by faster than expected. I was juggling summer school, work, family life, and being in a show, all while having *HollyKraime* hanging in the back of my mind. There were many areas of the show for which I could research and prepare, and yet, at the same time, no physical groundwork could be laid until I had the script and score which was much later.

#### **Researching the End of an Era and the Beginning of Another**

One of the most rewarding parts of the entire *HollyKraime* process was, surprisingly, the research. For assignments such as papers, presentations, or speeches, research is an integral part of the final product, but it does not necessarily mean that it will always be pleasant or exciting. I was thrilled to find out that researching this show meant I got to watch old Hollywood films and search pictures of famous Vaudvillians. I mean, what could be better than that?

Midway through the summer, the design team finally received the script, although Jennifer informed all of us that we should not become married to the order of the show or songs themselves. Our team had been told by the publishing company that some of the songs in the script were slightly different than some in the score, and even more different than the ones on the Broadway cast recording. Because of this, most of my job over the summer was not choreographing. Instead, it was working on gaining a vocabulary of movement that I could eventually put in the show.

I found most of my inspiration for the more intricate dance steps in films starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, specifically *Follow the Fleet* and *Swing Time*. Fred and Ginger often looked as if they were floating when they danced, but it was especially true in numbers like

“Pick Yourself Up” from *Swing Time* and “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” in *Follow the Fleet*. I wanted to emulate that in the more intimate partner dances of *A Day in Hollywood*. In contrast, the first act was also full of bright, uptempo tap pieces. I have loved to tap since I began dancing at the age of four, but I grew up learning a style that was much more grounded and “hooper-esque” than what was necessary for this show. To learn this different tapping style, I watched videos of Eleanor Powell and Ruby Keeler on *YouTube*. Earlier tapping styles were much more effortless in appearance and often looked as though the tapper was simply walking along while making dozens of different sounds. This effortless quality was a key component for fusing together the first act. In a long review where there are hardly any breaks from song to song, nothing can look labored or else the audience will become concerned with the actors’ abilities to get through numbers instead of enjoying the show. Having begun by researching the two styles that came easier to me, it was time to start figuring out and practicing the trickier style: Vaudeville simplicity.

Although I had grown up watching some old Hollywood films with my mother, none of the movies I had seen went back in time far enough to show off the variety acts that were popular during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Luckily, it was not complicated finding videos and pictures of these acts, but that was where the easiness of Vaudeville disappeared for me. Back in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the performers who toured the Vaudeville circuit had no more than ten minutes to sell their act to the audience. For singers, the voice was key; therefore, they avoided large, unnecessary gestures or dance steps to hinder the production of sound from their bodies. These numbers might have been enthralling to audiences back in the 1920’s, but this “simplicity” can come off as boring and repetitive to audiences of the present day, as it did to me at first. With this being my first show to choreograph, I was afraid that movements that were extremely simple

in certain sections might lull the audience into a bored state. Fortunately, Jennifer would allay my fear of that, but not until after the rehearsal process began.

With my script handy at any moment I had free over the summer, I created a *Pinterest* board and a *YouTube* playlist and essentially dumped any and all information and inspiration for the show into these two places. Every song in the first act, all references of people, movies, or phrases that was new to me, I would find a few photos or videos that best showcased who or what those things meant to the people of that time period. I did this as inspiration and a visual frame of reference for the actors who would eventually be singing about these movie stars and novelties, since they most likely knew nothing about this time period, much like myself only weeks earlier.

Through all of the summer research, I felt as though I had found the heart of the *A Day in Hollywood* in the choreography aspect. The most important aspects were the melding of two different time periods in showbusiness: Vaudeville and early film. *A Day in Hollywood* was a nod to both of those eras in aspects of song and the characters themselves. The actors play ushers who are telling the audience all about their love of the movies and how those movies and famous composers, lyricists, and stars came to be. The first act is as much of a history lesson as it is a celebration of performers and music, and that is why it was important for me to have my future actors understand what exactly they were singing. If they did not understand, there was no way an audience full of apathetic college students would. Despite this seemingly significant problem, I felt confident that the design team would work this problem out, and so I set that issue to the back of my mind to be resolved at a later date. What did need to be solved was the lack of a score, and my, what a big issue it was!

## **The Delay and Thank God for *YouTube***

Not having a score was an immense problem. All that Alan Shorter, the Music Director for *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine*, Jennifer, and I had to go off of was the Broadway cast recording, which was not as reliable as we had hoped. With most Broadway cast recordings, certain songs have been sped up in order for every song to fit on one disc. Dance breaks and inner dialogue are often cut as well, as they are seen as superfluous since hardly anyone wants to listen to two minutes of no singing on a musical theatre album. Because of this, Jennifer advised me to refrain from choreographing the show with one exception: “Doin’ the Production Code.”

“Doin’ the Production Code” is easily the most recognizable number from the entire show. It was the number the original cast performed at the 1980 Tony Award show, and it is a well known for being an acapella tap piece where the cast rhythmically chants the 1930 Hollywood Production Code on censorship in movies. Jennifer told me that I had creative license over the entire first act except for that number. “That number is as close to perfect as any dance piece is in musical theatre,” Jennifer explained, “and since it is on *YouTube*, I want you to learn it for the show.” And so I began that task about midway through July.

I had learned choreography off of videos before. That previous Winter Break, I had performed in a dance show back in Oklahoma. Since most of the rehearsals happened while I was still in Texas, I had to learn over half of the dances off of videos and *Skype* sessions. The difference between learning those dances and trying to learn “The Code” was the video quality. Due to the fact that *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* is a little over thirty years old, the video quality at the Tonys was subpar, making the quality of the video on *YouTube* that much worse. Still, I sojourned onward.

Another difference that learning “The Code” brought about was how many tracks I had to learn. When I had to learn dances via video in the past, I just had to watch one person dance my part and that was the part that I learned. For “The Code,” however, there were six different patterns of tapping that I had to learn. Luckily, there were many moments of repetition, which made my job a little easier, but the grainy quality of video still hindered my ability to catch exactly what a certain step was from just viewing it once.

It took me about two weeks to learn the entire four-minute routine, but the relief and elation that I felt when I had committed it to memory was not small. Learning a routine as rhythmically challenging as “Doin’ the Production Code,” and having six variations of it in my head, reinforced in my mind that I have the ability to be a swing and know multiple tracks for a certain musical. It also made me come to the realization that there would have almost been no way for me to imagine anything even comparable to the original choreography of “The Code.” Without that sole copy of that Tony performance on *YouTube*, I would have most likely been doomed to creating a nice, but mediocre dance for the typical highlight of the first act. In fact, while I am on the subject of *YouTube*, most of the choreography I ended up choosing would have taken much longer to make up had it not been for the snippets of dances and Vaudeville acts I was able to watch and compile into my *YouTube* playlist. It is times like that when I am thankful to live in the time period with such accessible technology.

As summer break wound down, I finished up the summer stock show that I was in, returned to campus for Fall RA training, and finally had another production meeting for the show. Most of the meeting was just reconvening and talking about what headway we had made over the summer, but afterwards, Jennifer pulled me aside so we could talk about what was just days around the corner: Fall Auditions.

## THE DRAFT

I had been a part of each TCU audition every semester in the past, but this time was unique because I was now on the opposite side of it all. I was one of the people who could call the shots, who could make the cuts, and whose decision mattered. To be perfectly honest, it was enthralling and terrifying all at once.

### **Auditions**

Auditions, for the musical at least, were different than they had been in the past. Normally, there is only one dance call, and it is for those that are called back on Sunday, but because dancing was so integral to the first act of *HollyKraime*, a pre-dance audition was required that Saturday.

Jennifer and I planned out the audition on Friday so that I could run the dance call on my own. We made sure that we had two sections to the audition: with and without music. The first part of the audition was a simple combination to music to see if the auditionees could tap in time for the most part. The second section of tapping was where Jennifer and I knew many people would have trouble. It was only an eight-count or two of a paradiddle variation, but without music it would be much easier to hear who was faking the steps, who was making hesitant sounds, and who could maintain the rhythm and felt confident in the steps that they were doing. At the last minute, Jennifer suggested that I add in a non-tap across the floor dance section, something flowing like a waltz or triplet step. This did not seem vitally important at the time, but once we had people learning the combinations in the room, it was very telling.

On the actual day of auditions, I was allowed to sit in the auditions with the professors and other students who were also trying to cast their shows. I could not stay the whole day because I also had RA training, but being able to sit in the audition room even for a little was

immensely helpful. I could tell within about ten seconds if an actor was right for *A Day in Hollywood* or not. It was not always dependent on their talents either. Sometimes it had to do with a person's look or style. For me, while the singing and acting auditions were helpful, the afternoon dance auditions were what made up my mind on many people.

The dance call was split between two groups, upperclassmen and lowerclassmen. For both dance calls I did all three sections of dancing: tapping with music, tapping acapella, and simple movement across the floor. The first section was the most predictable, in my opinion. With the short combination, it was fairly simple to tell who had a background in tap dancing and who had bought their first pair of tap shoes that summer. From there, the acapella tapping further solidified who was and was not confident in tapping. I was actually quite surprised at how many convincing fake tappers we have in our department. People who looked great during the previous combination were missing sounds right and left when they did not have music or other people's sounds to back them up. Despite this, there was still a decent sized group of people, mainly girls, upon whom I could depend if they were cast. But, there was still one section of dancing left, and, surprisingly, it was easy movement combination was the most helpful for me. I was astonished that some people who were quite efficient tappers could not move fluidly at all. Many who were strong at tapping became awkward and stiff when they had to waltz across the floor. On the opposite end, there were some who moved quite gracefully and with ease, yet they could not produce many tap sounds at all.

Jennifer and I watched and notated each person for dancing over the course of two hours. Afterwards, Jennifer, Alan, and I convened and discussed which people we wanted to call back for Sunday. The callbacks would be split between dancing, for the first act, singing, and acting,



which was solely for act two. Once our list had been created, we all went our separate ways until Sunday evening.

### **Callbacks**

My end of callbacks were fairly similar to the previous day. I skipped the tapping with music and added onto the acapella tap routine. Each person did the routine twice, once slow and another time faster. It was imperative that I tested the abilities of each person's inner timekeeping and if they could stay in tempo for an extended period of time. After each person had performed the routine, Jennifer and I asked if anyone felt comfortable rollerblading or inline skating and if anyone could whistle or play the piano proficiently. This may have seemed strange to the auditionees, but there were specific moments in the show that required these special skills or someone who could fake them well.

The singing callback was up next. There were songs from *A Day in Hollywood* as well as some from *A Night in the Ukraine*. Each act had a different singing style, so Alan tested many people's ranges as well as singing styles. For the solo singers, Jennifer and I were interested in seeing who would make bold choices in their acting. The singing, more so for act one than act two, was important, but the heightened acting style of old Hollywood and Vaudeville was much harder to emulate if not practiced. It was fairly obvious to Jennifer, Alan, and me who had practiced and researched old Hollywood and the Marx Brothers over the summer and who had not. The same went for those who had clearly not listened to the soundtrack over the summer, which was pretty much every guy that was called back that day. Words cannot describe the comedy that was the men's singing audition.

After the lengthy singing callback, it was time to start the acting callbacks and read sides from *A Night in the Ukraine*. This specific callback did not seem to pertain to me at first, but

once casting started, it was actually very important for me to know who Jennifer and Alan were considering for the second act more than the first.

### **Casting**

After the evening of singing, acting, and dancing was complete, the three of us reconvened once again to discuss our, hopeful, final cast list. I learned from Alan and Jennifer that one must go in with backups and backups to those backups in case we were unable to choose the person that we wanted. While that was normally the case for casting, we could not do that in the slightest for *HollyKrairie*. Each act had its own cast, and there was almost no wiggle room to recast anyone. Only three specific people could play the Marx Brothers in *A Night in the Ukraine*, same went for the majority of the second act cast. For the first act, we had eight people picked out, and while we still did not have the entire score or who would exactly be in which numbers, those eight people were the only ones that Alan, Jennifer, and I felt could sing, dance, act, and entertain an audience for an entire hour without a break. Coming to this realization made all of us nervous for when we would have to meet with the other directors and fight for the cast we desired.

After the first day of classes of Fall 2015 had ended, all of the theatre faculty as well as the student directors and myself met in the Graphic Design Lab to finalize the three Main Stage shows' casts. One by one, each director wrote the name of the characters in their show on the board and their first choice of who they wanted to play each role next to it. If someone's name was on the board more than once, a star would be put by their name that many number of times. Some names were on the board quite a few times, and I knew it could potentially be an issue. From there, each director stated their case as to why they wanted a specific actor for their show if that actor was on multiple lists. In an insane turn of events, we somehow were able to keep every

single person we wanted for the show. Jennifer and Alan both told me that had never happened before and we were extremely lucky that the other directors were willing to bend to our strict needs for *HollyKraine*.

### **THE MORE WE WORK TOGETHER, THE HAPPIER WE'LL BE**

With the show being cast and the school year underway, it was time to begin the official production meetings for *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine*. Usually production meetings for the first show of the semester start before the Spring semester has commenced and continue to some extent over the summer. This did not happen with *HollyKraine* for the most part. While we did have some early concept presentations, without the script and score, it was hard for the designers to get a true feel for the show and work their designing magic. We were off to a late start and only had about four weeks to mount the show; time was not on our side. Still, somehow we managed to put it all together during those short, hour-long meetings.

#### **Production Meetings**

*A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* was a very unique Main Stage show at TCU, mainly because the entire design team consisted of students. Normally on a Main Stage production there will be one, maybe two, student designers and then the professors who are designing the show will have student assistants. To have student lighting, set, costume, and prop designers, as well as a student choreographer was previously of, and, looking back on it, will most likely never happen again. While it was a strange case, the students were not working alone; everyone had their own advisor in their specific field. Jennifer was mine, as she was also co-choreographer on top of directing the entire show.

Most production meetings went as followed: updates from the designers over what they had accomplished that week, whether it was showing us finalized design plans or how far along

the build process was. After that, the rest of the time was primarily used for addressing concerns and troubleshooting. At first, I did not feel particularly necessary at the production meetings. I was not running the ship like the director was, and I did not have deadlines that had to be met at certain production meetings like the designers. My work could not be showcased in a meeting for the most part, and so early on I mostly sat and listened to conversations. While I felt at first that I had been sidelined, the experience opened my eyes to seeing the production as a whole. It made me finally stop focusing so much on making my steps the best and showcasing my “superb choreography skills,” and, instead, finding a way to make the dances better support the concept Jennifer had behind the show. When I came to this realization, it made production meetings much more engaging for me. I was able to come with more questions for the designers so that I could better manufacture my choreography to their design constraints. Designing anything, from costumes to set, puts up certain barriers and limitations that can range from where the actual show is taking place to what time period and types of fabric were available to how far a light can reach and at what intensity. Dancing does not necessarily have those restraints. Sure, you have to work with the abilities of the actors in that specific show, but it is easier to change a dance step than it is to cut down and rebuild a set piece or a garment of clothing. Coming to this conclusion made me want to be as malleable with my steps and staging as possible. I made sure to ask how stretchy or loose a specific costume was or the width between wings for entrances and exits. It was also helpful that this was not Jennifer’s first directing experience by any means, so she was able to back me up and further my cause when I would have trouble explaining myself or had questions that needed answering.

Even with my understanding of working with the other designers and directors, the process did not come without some hiccups. One of the biggest ones was time constraints

overall. *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* is essentially two separate shows. I might have been the only person to make it through the process unscathed, but that is mostly due to the reason that I was only involved with the first act. Each designer had to double the amount of work they would normally do for a single show and were still expected to have their material be at the same caliber of a single show. Because of this, stress and tension were at maximum levels for almost everyone. This caused some miscommunication and hurt feelings and pride occasionally, but the goal still had to be accomplished. There was still a show to be designed and performed, and no one was going to give up and create a half-baked production. By the end of the process, everyone was happy with the final product for the most part, though many agreed that another show like *HollyKraime* would need more time and planning in order to be less stressful.

All of the peaks and valleys of the production meetings made me appreciate what Theatre TCU has taught me over the years. I have learned not to be self-indulgent in my own work, and that change is okay and should be welcomed if it is for the betterment of the show as a whole. While there can be standouts in certain areas, one aspect of a show should not outshine everything else, and understanding that mutual respect for those working just as hard or even harder around you makes for a better setting to create something beautiful. These production meetings took place from day one of school all the way up until tech week began. During that same amount of time, Jennifer, Alan, and I were making headway with the actors as well as the physical show itself. It was rehearsal time.

### **THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF HOLLYKRAINE: FROM ME TO WE**

Something unique about *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* is that it is not a widely produced show. It is a very fun musical with lots of interesting acting, singing, and

dancing opportunities, but certain technical features and requirements for the actors as well as continuity discrepancies at points in the physical show make it a daunting piece to put together. Jennifer was aware of this when the show was picked, and she informed the entire design team that there would be quite a bit of cutting and pasting of the first act in order to best showcase the talent onstage. Unfortunately, most of this pseudo-rewriting work was not done until right before our first rehearsal due to the delays of getting the score as well as waiting for the finalized cast list. Once we had both of those, though, Jennifer, Alan, and I went into overdrive to finalize the script and score for the next day.

### **Changes to the Physical Show**

When we had our first production meeting, Jennifer told the entire production team to essentially throw out all of the stage directions that were in the script. *HollyKraime* had very specific directions of what was to happen and when. Due to the complicated nature of the set and the physical, vocal, and instrumental demands of the actors, Jennifer wanted us to reconceptualize the show and make it work for our actors and audience, and the script was the bulk of where those changes occurred.

The first major cuts we did of the show were cutting two entire songs. The first was a song titled “Louise” that took place in the medley of songs composed by Richard Whiting. We cut the song for one obvious reason, it was entirely whistled. While I am sure it was a charming number with the original cast, no one who we had cast in our production could whistle well enough to carry an entire ninety-second tune. The entire medley was roughly twelve minutes long, so losing “Louise” would not make or break the show. The next number we cut was a five-minute dance piece titled “Easy to Love.” It originally took place after the song “Thanks for the Memory” and was supposed to look like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in one of their intimate

waltzing routines. While this sounds like a choreographers dream, the routine came with one caveat; it took place entirely behind a screen so all the audience could see was the dancers from the knees down. The way the routine is described in the script makes it sound like a beautifully impassioned routine full of regret and lingering feelings. To be frank, Jennifer and I found it hilarious that anyone would even try to put that much emotion into a dance routine only seen from the knees down, and for five minutes, no less. So without too much remorse, “Easy to Love” was cut as well.

While “Louise” and “Easy to Love” were the only songs we cut entirely, there were still songs that needed to go under the knife for some drastic cuts. The song before “Easy to Love,” which I mentioned earlier, titled “Thanks for the Memory” was one of those songs. The song served one important factor in that it had one lyric that lead into the dialogue of “Doin’ the Production Code.” To get to that one important lyric, though, almost the entire song had to be sung. “Thanks for the Memory” was a sweet song about nostalgia and resparking a romance, but the song was originally made to be in a movie where a film crew could do multiple shots of close-ups and perfectly placed poses; live theatre does not cater to that, therefore the number became boring and flat quickly. To remedy this, Alan kept the beginning of the song, about the first minute, and then cut to the very end when the actors had a short break for dialogue. That way, the mood of the song was set and the important lyric was kept in for the transition. The only other internal cut of a song we made was during one of the big song and dance pieces called “Famous Feet.” Not much of the song was cut, just portions of two different dance breaks. While that might not seem like much, it made a world of difference to the actors since they had to entertain the audience while still having excellent breath support while singing and dancing.

Those might have been the only cuts that shortened the actual length of the show, but we also made other cuts that changed what the actors had to physically do in the show. In the original Broadway production, almost every single actor played an instrument in the show and was in both acts. The second act required actors that could play the piano, harp, and ukulele, as that is what two of the three main Marx Brothers were famous for playing, but the characters in the first act were just nondescript ushers, so the original cast could utilize their instrumental talents in both acts. The producers capitalized on this so they would not have to hire a conductor or instrumentalists and save money. For a college production, though, some of our production budget was allocated to hiring a band, and therefore an actor being able to play instruments was less important. To cement our decision of cutting the actors playing instruments, we asked everyone at auditions if they could play any musical instruments with average to above average proficiency. Very few could, and those that said they could did not fit into the other requirements of the show. Jennifer, Alan, and I made an executive decision at that point to cut any blocking where the actors had to play piano, clarinet, saxophone, melodicas, or any other instruments that were called for, but without cutting the songs in which those instruments were used.

After reading the script, one thing that Jennifer and I agreed needed some revising was the order of the show, specifically where the two solo girls' songs fell. Most of *A Day in Hollywood's* songs were either group numbers or short solos in the medley, but there were two relatively long solos given to two of the females in the cast, "Nelson" and "The Best in the World." In the published version of the show, both songs happen right in succession and are relatively early in the show. Despite the songs being very different in style, Jennifer felt that separating the two songs would be more aesthetically pleasing for the overall effect of the show,



and I agreed. We ended up keeping “Nelson” towards the beginning of the show and put “The Best in the World” as the second to last song in the show.

Another revision that Jennifer was adamant about fixing was putting back in the song “I Love a Film Cliché.” This song was on the Broadway cast recording, but it was not in the published script that we had for the show. Due to it not being in the published script, we did not get the sheet music either when the score came in. To be honest, when I listened to the recording of the song, I was somewhat glad that it was not in the version of the show that we had. After listening to it dozens of times, I could not figure out what blocking would work well with it or how it would be performed without becoming too ridiculous and out of place from the rest of the show. Jennifer assured me that it would work well and offered to block the entire number if we found the sheet music since I was lost on what exactly to do. I am quite happy to say that my hesitation for putting “I Love a Film Cliché” back in the show was misplaced. We found the music, put towards the beginning of the show, right before “Nelson,” and it ended up being one of the standout pieces in the show. One reason why it stood out was that it quickly set up the style of acting that the audience was going to see throughout *HollyKraine*, especially when it was pure dialogue and not singing. In “I Love a Film Cliché,” the song makes many references to famous lines from early Hollywood films and acts them out to some extent. The quotes pulled from these movies ranged from war films to romances in exotic jungles, so the acting styles had to be far more stylized than today’s standard of realism. With this convention of acting set into place during a song, it helped the audience transition into the world and style of *HollyKraine* in ways that the previous two songs could not, as they were more focused on the dancing aspects of the show.

Another song we added into the show was at the beginning of the second act. The first act ends with a very Russian number titled “A Night in the Ukraine;” its purpose was to set up the atmosphere of the second act before intermission so that when the set change occurred and the second act curtain rose, the audience would not be confused as to why they were in a completely new location. In our version of the show, however, we decided not to do our set change during intermission. We wanted the audience to see the set change from the vibrant colors of the Grauman’s Chinese Theatre to the gray scale set of the second act. To make this change work, we added the small entr’acte back into the second act, which was in the score and not the published script. Adding the entr’acte in helped weave together the two acts a little better since they were so vastly different.

Besides the physical act of choreographing and writing down my choreography, the part of the show that took the most planning was divvying out the lines to the actors in the first act. The version of the show on Broadway, and the version that was published, called for six actors in the first act to sing and dance various songs. In our production, we decided to cast eight. This meant that once our cast had been chosen, Alan, Jennifer, and I had to go through the entire first act and redistribute lines and songs so that everyone in the first act cast had relatively equal parts throughout the show. Some people had more singing or dancing than others, and that was balanced out by giving the other cast members more of the dialogue in between the songs. It was a tedious process, but all three of us agreed that it would be near impossible to have kept the show at just six cast members with how demanding the singing and dancing was going to be. The final physical change we made to the show was the most beneficial addition in terms of keeping the audience engaged and understanding the show. Luke Atkison, *HollyKraime’s* lighting designer, doubled as the projections designer for the show as well, specifically in the

first act. *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine* makes references to dozens of old movies, stars, concepts, and pop culture items throughout the entirety of the show. Although many of our audience members at TCU are older and might know these references, we also had to be mindful, as all collegiate level theatre must, that we would be performing for quite a few college students who would not be as well versed in early film and Vaudeville like some of our older patrons. In order to avoid audience members becoming uninterested with the show, Jennifer wanted to come up with a gimmick that would educate the audience as well as keep them engaged and enjoying the performance. We did this through projections. Luke and Jennifer found high quality photos of the actors, movie posters, and other iconic photos that would help the audience become more engrossed with the show. Luke also designed clips of curtains raising, lowering, and parting, as well as music notes dancing about the projection screen for transition purposes. All of the additions, cuts, and changes we made to the show were all to benefit the story, but the projections were what brought the entire show together and helped make it a unique and professional production.

### **Choreographic Choices**

With the show structure and order finalized, I was free to begin choreographing. Some numbers came easier than others. The dances that needed my synchronized and uniform movements came much easier to me, as that was the style of dance that I grew up learning. The other ones were much more challenging, as they required much more storytelling, research, and thought than I had put into numbers in the past, but those ones were the most rewarding.

The opening number of *A Day in Hollywood* is titled “Just Go to the Movies.” The song informs the audience of the show’s setting and what they will be seeing and hearing. It was important to me that the choreography set up the entire show in terms of usher mannerisms as

well as style choices. As with any character in a show, it is imperative that an actor has a physical neutral to give their character a unique life. With the ushers, that physical neutral would be a bit different. Being an usher is a job, and the ushers' jobs in the show were to delight and educate the audience members. Despite the exuberance the ushers have, it was important to me that they looked professional as well. In that sense, the ushers all had the same physical neutral when they were merely playing ushers: legs together, parallel, and straight, arms behind the back with the thumbs and pointer fingers making a diamond shape and the elbows pointing out, and chest and head held high. This shape varied from time to time, they would hold the lapels of their jackets occasionally, but when the actors had to stand still or were not given specific arms, that was how they were supposed to stand, at attention and ready to serve. I also asked that the ushers be given flashlights. In old movie houses, just like the theatre today, ushers used to walk patrons to their seats if the lights in the house were dim. I wanted to use the flashlights in the dance to pay homage to that as well as make the actors look even more believable as ushers. As for the rest of the dancing in the song, I wanted to make sure that the dancing was period appropriate for the most part and illustrated some of the lyrics. One of the lines in the song is "Girls in sarongs, monsters in capes, see Scarlett make a dress out of the drapes." All three of these phrases depict vivid images from iconic movies and I wanted to make sure the audience would understand that, even with the slides of the actual images behind them on the set's fake movie screen.

The second number of the show is all about paying respects to the stars that placed their feet in cement and immortalized their fame on Sid Grauman's Hollywood Walk of Fame. Its title: "Famous Feet." The number is two of the ushers singing about how enamored they are with the Walk of Fame and how badly they want their footprints there as well. The gimmick in the number is that a part of movie screen border raises and we are able to see the feet of certain

famous people as their cement footprints go across the movie screen. This number was extremely fun and challenging for me because I had to figure out how to have the actors portray iconic Hollywood stars just by looking at their feet. Some of them, Judy Garland as Dorothy, Dracula, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, and Charlie Chaplin, were immediately recognizable to anyone watching the show. Others, though, like Marlene Dietrich, Ruby Keeler, and Tom Mix, were less recognizable without seeing their name on the projection screen. That forced me to do lots of research and show the actors photos and videos of the stars that they would be portraying. Jennifer and I were very nitpicky on the movements that the actors did behind the screen, as they sometimes had to be seductive, frightened, or excited and could only show that from the knees down. As for the two actors out front, another challenge was, since they were the only ones with their faces showing throughout the entire number, I did not want to tire them by dancing so hard that they could not sing or emote well. Jennifer taught me a valuable lesson that sometimes less looks better as it gives the audiences' eyes and minds a break, but it also lets the actors onstage cover too. With this in mind, I had to rework the dance breaks a few times in "Famous Feet," but we eventually found a happy medium between engaging dancing without killing the actors and small movements that did not bore the audience.

The hardest number, or should I say numbers, of the show for me took place during the Richard Whiting Medley. The entire medley consisted of eight songs composed by Whiting that were all different in terms of style and content, which, again, made me research quite a bit. I wanted each number to be different in terms of dance style as well as number of people in each segment. The first song introduces the theme of the medley: "It All Comes Out of the Piano." This number was pure acting and no dancing; it was all about enjoying the music that was being heard. The next section, "Ain't We Got Fun," was a very straightforward top hat and cane

number. Four of the actors were in it, and I used many standard Vaudeville moves like long walking, heel pops, and hat catches. Some might even say it had some Fosse flavoring in it. The third song was titled “Too Marvelous for Words” and, compared to the previous song, was starkly different in terms of style and content. “Too Marvelous” is a slow love song about being unable to find the words to tell someone how wonderful they are. I put three people in this number, though the one singer did not dance. I choreographed this section in the style of a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers waltz, full of passion and grace. I think that this number was my most successful in the show in terms of storytelling. Both actors were able to emulate the words of the song through their entire bodies, not just their faces, which I think raised the piece up to another level. Keeping in the same, somewhat quiet vein as “Too Marvelous,” the next song was “Japanese Sandman.” This number I struggled with. Jennifer wanted it very simple and smooth, as the harmonies of the song were tight and hard. I did not understand her completely at first, for I redid the routine at least three times before Jennifer choreographed it herself. That was a learning experience for me. I agreed with her that it was over choreographed, but I could not figure out how to fix it. When I saw the routine after Jennifer had fixed it, it clicked in my head that simplicity did not equate to boring because other aspects of the song and stage helped keep it interesting. The next song was one of the easier parts of the medley to choreograph. It was Shirley Temple’s “Good Ship Lollipop.” Since there were videos of Shirley Temple doing this song, I wanted to pay tribute to her dancing and the innocence and youthfulness in the number. I had five people, including the soloist singer, do simple and happy tap steps throughout the short routine. Just like the drastic change from “Ain’t We Got Fun” into “Too Marvelous,” the number after “Good Ship Lollipop” was quite different in its lyric content. “Double Trouble” is a song about being in love with two men and trying to figure out how to work around the strangeness of

it. The music is very jazzy and flirty, so I wanted to three dancers, two boys and one girl, to emulate that. There was still tapping in it, but also simple ballroom and partnering moves to show the closeness between the female singer and her two male partners. The last dance number of the medley was “Sleepy Time Gal” which is about a man trying to get his party-crazed honey to stay in with him for the night. This was another routine that Jennifer wanted me to scale back and focus more on blocking and acting instead of choreography. Although it took some time, I was finally able to find a balance between the two aspects which again reinforced how important storytelling is, even in a short song. The final song of the medley was a stand and sing number titled “Beyond the Blue Horizon.” Alan called it an “All-American sound” in terms of singing, so I did not want movement besides simple walking and head movement to detract from the harmonies and meaning behind the song. Before I began choreographing the Whiting Medley, it seemed so daunting and unconquerable, but Jennifer and I took it step by step and we were able to complete it and, most importantly, be proud of the work we had created.

I have previously talked about learning “Doin’ the Production Code,” but teaching it to the six cast members in the number was another challenge. It was by far the hardest number in the show in terms of stamina in dancing and singing. With the entire number being acapella, no one could get off with his or her tap sounds or else it would be very obvious. Also, once the dance was learned and the actors no longer had to think about it, the focus moved to the lyrics. It was a wordy, chanting song and diction was imperative, especially over six pairs of tap shoes, or else the audience would not understand what was being said. We ran “Doin’ the Production Code” almost every single day of rehearsal so it would be second nature in the actors’ brains, feet, and mouths, that way they could focus on making pleasant faces onstage.

The final number of the first act was a large departure from the style of the rest of the act. As I said before, the final song ushered in the style of the second act, Russian opulence. That meant that the dancing could not be similar to the light and easy style of Vaudeville or else it would feel out of place. I watched videos of Russian folk dances called the kalinka for inspiration of what to put in the routine. Russian dancing is strong and masculine for the most part, though I did not want to lose some of the aspects of the happy ushers, and the characters were still ushers merely putting on a show and preparing the audition for the feature film. With that in mind, I fused the folk kalinka style with the precise stances of the ushers for the final song. The actors enjoyed performing this number, as their faces were quite involved with the switching of styles of dancing. At one moment they were friendly ushers, the next, stoic Russians. We carried this convention over to the beginning of the second act as well so the audience was fully prepared for what *A Night at the Ukraine* was going to be.

The variety of styles in this show stretched my choreography skills greatly, but it was the merging of acting to create storytelling that was the most valuable knowledge that I gained during the rehearsal process. Without that, the show would have been hollow and disconnected from each aspect. With the connection of singing, dancing, acting, set, lights, costumes, sound, and props, that is when it moves into art and a special theatre experience and not just “another show.”

### **Collaboration: The Cast and the Designers**

I have spoken briefly on collaboration earlier, but there were specific instances throughout the process of the show that engrained in me how important it is to be on good terms with your creative team and how giving up some of your singular power in order to work with the team is in the best interest of the show, always. I was able to work with many talented



individuals during *HollyKraime* that helped me come to these realizations, and I am indebted to each of them for aiding me in becoming a more professional and easy to work with theatre artist.

The success of the show would not have been as great and my involvement in it would not have been as noticeable had it not been for the help of Jennifer Engler and Alan Shorter. Jennifer directed both acts of the musical and Alan served as music director the entire show. Both professors are seasoned veterans in the theatre world, both in terms of performing and directing, and their guidance helped me transition from a mere dance choreographer into a storyteller and artist. Jennifer let me explore movement that was less dancey but still just as interesting. She helped me look at things from an audience's perspective and that they do not necessarily care about the hardest and most miraculous steps. Audiences get a kick out of repetition, partnering, and classic dance steps, so Jennifer tried to help me incorporate these into the show. Alan helped me in terms of style for the acting. He helped convey to the actors that this show was not in the vain of realism and that they should not be as concerned about motivation as with other shows. As the music director, Alan would also let me know when he thought certain phrases of choreography might be too difficult to get through while the actors were singing. In a musical with few dialogue breaks, the actors had to pace themselves or else the entire show would suffer. Without the assistance of both of them, I am not sure my choreography would have fit into the entire show the way it did in the final product. Alan and Jennifer gave me creative freedom while still giving me their honest opinions, which I greatly appreciated because it further instilled in me that collaboration was necessary. If I would have disregarded the advice they gave me, I might have burned some bridges by being a self-indulgent choreographer, and that could have ruined opportunities in my future. Fortunately, all of the guidance they gave me for the show made dozens of lightbulbs go off in my head in terms of

choreography and theatre in general, so it made more first experience as a theatre choreographer easy and enjoyable.

My experiences with Jennifer and Alan during *HollyKraime* were so positive, in my opinion, because it was not their first time working with students in this manner. They are professors, and while their job is to make beautiful shows, it is also about teaching those around them. The rest of the design team for *HollyKraime*, though, was predominately students. Some experiences between the other student designers and myself were more helpful than others, but one instance that stands out in particular was my partnership with costume designer and fellow senior, Brittany Mahan. Costumes and choreography naturally go together as they are two things that are put on an actor's bodies besides the voice. This means that a costume should not be too restricting as to hinder an actor's ability to do choreography, but, on the other hand, an actor should not be doing grand dance moves that would ruin the costume in which they are performing. Figuring out how the two parts of the show come together means constant communication, and Brittany and I had quite a bit of it. The number that took the most planning was "Famous Feet." As I said earlier, two of the actors stayed onstage in front of the fake movie screen the entire song; Brittany and I agreed that they should stay in their usher uniforms for this song. The other actors behind the screen, however, had much more to do. Each actor had anywhere from two to four changes over the course of the four minute song, remembering that they would only be seen from the knees down. To plan how these changes would go seamlessly, Brittany and I talked about what each outfit would need in order for the costumes to be distinct and unique. Then, we had to figure out through the choreography from which side they would be entering and exiting. I tried to keep exits and entrances into the next character on the same side unless they had a larger span of time to move sides. Once the costumes and the entrances and

exits were solidified, we then had to figure out if each actor would need help getting dressed, which they all did, and how many assistances were needed. This is just one of the many examples of how Brittney and I collaborated with costumes and choreography to raise the level of professionalism on the show.

The final standout moment of collaboration I had during *A Day in Hollywood* took place over the longest period of time and involved the most people. My goal for this show was to make everyone feel comfortable, happy, and proud of the work that they were putting on the stage, and I wanted my choreography to assist that. In doing this, my collaboration with the actors was the most important aspect of putting the show on its feet. This could have become a big tap fest and dance marathon if I wanted it to be that, but, besides the facts that Jennifer would have never let that happen, it would have been a disservice to the actors. Ultimately, the eight of them are the ones performing the show and its success largely rides on each of their performances. Therefore, I made sure to always ask if the choreography was too much at any given point. Not meaning if it was too difficult, I wanted them to be challenged, but, in the grand scheme of the show, if they were not able to make it through a song or the finale without keeling over onstage, it was not worth forcing them to do a daring trick or partnering moment. Cooperating and having this mutual trust with the actors made that final spark go off in my brain, and I realized that this show was no longer just about my choreography and me, and it never had been. This was a true team effort to make the best show possible, and each and every person, prop, shoe, and note made a difference.

### **BECOMING WE: THE FINAL STRETCH**

Through all of the peaks, valleys, and changes that were in the first act of *A Day in Hollywood*, *A Night in the Ukraine*, we somehow managed to get the entire show together in the

rehearsal space. But, as any theatregoer knows, a theatre experience is not complete until there is a space in which to perform and an audience to view the spectacle. That was the next large step: tech, dress, and performances. I have been through many techs in my life as a performer, but they have all been as either the performer onstage or a crew member being told what to do. This was my first time being somewhat of the final product for a show, and it was exhilarating. But more than that, it solidified for me how vital the combining of each aspect of a show was in order to create the final product the audience sees. I was taking one of my final collegiate steps to becoming a theatre artist.

### **Tech and Dress Rehearsals**

One of the longest and most tedious weeks of any show process is tech week. As an actor in a show, you do not necessarily get the brunt of what all goes on behind the scenes since most of it does not concern you. As one of the directors or designers, though, everything concerns you. When the full set, costumes, lights, props, music, staging, and choreography come together, it can create utter chaos as well as sheer beauty.

Jennifer had been kind enough to let the act one cast practice on the stage a few times during the rehearsal process so they could become accommodated to the space. This helped when tech started because we were able to spend less time on fixing formations and more time on transitions and light cues. Act one, being a review, naturally has less continuity than a full show like act two. Because of this, there was more possibility for dramatic lighting differences. Each dance, scene, and song had a life of its own, and the lights helped further influence those distinctions. Jennifer and I both dealt with the difficulties of the lights being too dim and dramatic at times. The lighting designer, Luke Atkison, was more used to lighting plays, and therefore lit the musical in more of the convention of a play. Faces were barely lit and there were

lots of interesting shadows everywhere. While it looked nice, it was wrong for what *A Day in Hollywood* needed. Eventually, compromises had to be made and we amped up the lights some more. While Jennifer was met with some resistance, ultimately it is up to the director what the show needs. That was another lesson in collaboration that I learned: your creative input is important, but the ultimate vision is inside of the director's head, and it is up to the designers to fulfill that vision to the best of their abilities.

The set, while it did not concern the first act per se, was a substantial issue. Kristina Vanderhout, the set designer, created two gorgeous sets. The first act was designed to look like the Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood. It is referenced in the very first song of *A Day in Hollywood*, so Kristina wanted to put the audience inside the theatre before the second act "movie" began. It was full of rich red and yellow colors with grand, oriental designs. In contrast, *A Night in the Ukraine* was created completely in grey scale. There was not a drop of color on that set. While both concepts were beautiful and feasible on their own, this was not two one-act shows, it was one show separated by an intermission. And, to make matters worse, the set change from act one to act two did not happen until after the first song of act two. That meant that the set change had to be done in full view of the audience and had to be impeccably timed in order to run successfully. For this section of tech, there was not much I could do besides sit in the audience and watch with apprehensive eyes. It took many tries, but the set run crew was eventually able to perform the set change without a hitch.

I had already had instilled in me that tech was never about the actor, but the same ran somewhat true as a choreographer. Since my part of the process directly affected the actors onstage patterns, I mainly sat in the house of the theatre to make sure everything looked nice. Occasionally I would have to fix entrances and exits or formations, but I had faith that my actors

knew what to do. I did not want to give more notes until dress rehearsals began, as they would most likely not have a full run of the act until then.

When dress rehearsals began, it brought on a whole new set of issues to tackle. The first big chunks during dress rehearsal that we had to work for the first act were the quick changes that happened during “Famous Feet.” As stated before, everyone was involved in the number in some way or another. Brittny and I had already planned every costume change, so we hoped it would run smoothly now that it was actually happening. Some people had more time than others. Jordan, although he went onstage twice, only had one costume to wear. Cassidy had two costumes and ample amounts of time to change. The other four actors had three or four changes apiece that were incredibly quick. Ashlee had to change from a Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* to Minnie Mouse and then back to Dorothy. That meant taking off the lower half of her usherette costume, putting on a gingham skirt, bobby socks, and ruby red slippers, then taking that off and putting on black tights, a red polkadot skirt, and large yellow shoes with taps built in, and then finally taking that off and putting on the Dorothy outfit again. On top of that, three other actors are doing that fast and difficult of changes at the exact same time. Those changes required a tremendous amount of planning, practicing, reevaluating, and practicing again in order to get the performance perfect, which I am happy to say we were able to do.

Costume changes in the Richard Whiting medley were also in need of practice, but not as much as in “Famous Feet.” More so in the medley, props being on the correct side were vital. With all of the hats, canes, and umbrellas used in that twelve-minute song, if something was on the wrong side, there was not much time in between one song and the other to run around the stage and retrieve the misplaced prop. Luckily, we did not have to worry about that ever, to my memory.

Dress rehearsals were, in a way, a return to normalcy for the actors and me. The actors were finally able to do full runs of the show again, and Jennifer and I were able to see everyone's combined efforts merge into the, almost, final form. Although there were rough patches during some of the dress rehearsal runs, we were able to push through them and continue to build the show up to excellence.

### **Opening Night and the Run**

Opening night was exhilarating and terrifying all at the same time. I had not had my work on display like this ever before, and, regardless of how it went, I had to breathe and let it go. Jennifer and I were invited to speak to at the theatre donors' dinner party before the show. We both talked about the challenges and triumphs of the show as well as what it was like to work with an all student design team. During my portion of the speech, I talked about the research I had done and how I hoped that college students would be educated and enjoy the show as well as taking the older audience members on a trip down memory lane.

After the dinner, I made my way over to the Buschman Theatre and sat in my chair. I was early, but I wanted to watch and listen to those around me as they entered, hear what their initial thoughts on the set and lights. Then, the lights dimmed and it was time to begin. For the first time during this mammoth of a process, I was able to relax and enjoy what I saw, just like the rest of the audience. Even if there were small snafus, I did not let it bother me, it is live theatre. I could see that the actors felt settled in as well; there were no looks of concentration or trouble on their faces, they were just happy to share with the audience the joys of an old-fashioned film. At intermission, Jennifer and I met to talk. She asked me how I thought the show was going, and I just smiled. I had no words for how happy I was to see this show come together. Through the

mess of fixing, rewriting, fixing, choreographing, fixing, scheduling, and fixing some more, the show came out of it all unscathed and shining, as all TCU productions always do.

### **CONCLUSION: AN OPEN MIND AND ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES**

I have had a few months to reflect on the production since it has closed, and I am surprised at how little I have forgotten. From getting the show and being utterly overwhelmed to sitting in the audience on opening night and all of the emotions in between, it is a process and feeling I never want to forget. Now that I have worked on a show in a position other than an actor, it has opened my eyes to all of the work that goes behind the scenes. There have been pictures taken of icebergs where you see what is above the surface of the water and what is below, and there is always a significant difference of how much of the iceberg is below the water than what is on top. That is how I feel about *A Day in Hollywood, A Night in the Ukraine*. Only a dozen or so people will ever know about all of the work that went into this particular show, while everyone else gets to see the small sliver of the finished product, though it is seen as the most important. And that is how it is with every show that has ever been produced, regardless of how grand or simple in scale.

The journey I took from just making dances to collaborating and creating something more was an interesting one. It was not always easy, I became frustrated many times when my creative juices were not flowing, but that was when joining forces with Jennifer, Alan, the designers, and the cast members to find the best solution worked the most and ended up producing something brilliant that was bigger than just one person. In order to do a fully realized production of a show, those involved have to walk the line between creative license in their specific area and letting go of control in order to benefit the production.



Possibly the most important thing that I took from this whole process is the importance of storytelling. Storytelling is what makes a musical a musical. It is not just some random songs put together because a singer likes singing them. Each song was crafted, chosen, and put in a certain show for a reason, same with the dialogue and characters. When an artistic team takes on the show, they have to honor and advance the storytelling that is on the page and make it come to life. Each person furthers this process through their own expertise, but one person does not make a show alone, all of the parts must merge to create a whole. From reading researching for the show and learning “Doin’ the Production Code” by myself to collaborating with Jennifer, Alan, Brittny, the actors, and everyone else, my transformation into a storyteller is well underway, but it is not complete. The head of our department, Harry Parker, always says that all you need to create theatre is a group of actors, a place to perform, and an audience. Finally the stars had aligned for me; I was no longer making up dances in my basement by myself, I had actors on which I could create something special, I was given a stage for them to perform and an audience that was ready for a good time. Now the question is no longer if I will ever get to choreograph a musical, it has become when will the next show be?