

**A Safe Haven:**  
**The 2005 Williams College Summer Theatre Lab**

Until last June, theater students at Williams College had nowhere to practice their craft when the school year ended. The Adams Memorial Theatre had played host to the Williamstown Theatre Festival for fifty summers and, until the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance opened earlier this year, the AMT was the only suitable space in town. But the boldly-modern, fifty million dollar '62 Center has emphatically solved that problem. It contains three separate, sound-proofed, professional theater spaces: The AMT has morphed into the 250-seat Nikos Stage; the new and elegant Main Stage can hold 550 people; and the adaptable, industrial design of the Center Stage can accommodate up to 200 guests in a variety of flexible formations. The WTF only needed the Nikos and the Main Stage for its 2005 productions, so that meant Center Stage was free to serve as an experimental home for a student/alumni theater company.

“Williams College is very generous in supporting the students,” Robert Baker-White '80, current chair of the theater department, explains. “They give each participating student a room and a stipend, much as they do with the summer science programs on campus. The students have to buy their own meal plans, but essentially they get to live as a theater company for six weeks.”

This, however, was to be a theater company with some experienced and useful friends. Baker-White, along with accomplished actor Kevin O'Rourke '78, had been planning for years to establish a summer theater program at Williams College that would extend the theater department's academic structure into a non-academic environment: They wanted to create a safe haven where alumni who were theater professionals could come back and collaborate with students in a workshop setting to develop and create new, experimental dramatic pieces.

Given the state of the modern entertainment industry, where else would working writers, actors and directors have the opportunity to do that kind of edgy, non-commercial work, they reasoned, and where else could students get the chance to work side-by-side with such talented mentors? Rob and Kevin wanted the Summer Theatre Lab to be a time and a place where a collaborative theater company could concentrate on the expressive foundations of theater rather than worry about the high production values, perfect costumes, and elaborate sets that we often associate with more commercial theater.

“I used to work at the O’Neill Theatre Playwrights Conference and they would take a new script and work it up for two weeks – minimal props, minimal lights, minimal set – and they’d really develop it,” Kevin O’Rourke says, “so I thought that could be a model: We’d bring in scripts written by alumni, then have them rehearsed and performed by student and alumni actors. We put together that proposal, they bought it, and here we are.”

### *The Players*

#### Students

LaVonna Bowen '06  
Edgardo “Eggie” Costas '07  
Katie Edgerton '08  
Zoe Fonseca '08  
Lauren Hester '07  
Ilya Khodosh '08  
Jess Phillips '07  
Becky Phillips '06  
John Selden '06  
Annie Smith '07  
Matt Wilka '06  
Dav Wright '08

### Faculty and Returning Alumni

Robert Baker-White -- Chair, Department of Theatre - '80  
 David Barnes - Composer/musician -- '81  
 Paul Boocock - Actor/writer - '86  
 Bernie Bucky -- Faculty, Department of Theatre  
 Stacy Cochran - Writer/director - '81  
 Margie Duffield - Playwright - '85  
 John Felch - Actor - '80  
 Adam LeFevre - Actor/writer - '72  
 Carolyn McCormick - Actor - '81  
 Alexandra Neil - Actor/director - '77  
 Kevin O'Rourke -- Artistic Director, Actor/writer/producer - '78  
 Mary Pfister - Program Manager  
 Greg Pliska - Composer/musician - '84  
 Cecilia Rubino - Actor/director - '79  
 Julie Seitel - Lighting designer - '94  
 Jay Tarses - Writer - '61  
 Caroline Taylor - Actor - '04  
 Martha Williamson - Writer/producer - '77  
 Michael Winther - Actor - '85  
 Marc Wolf - Actor/writer - '84

### Day 1

“Don’t play it angry,” Jay Tarses tells Lauren Hester, who is about to audition with Kevin O’Rourke for Amanda’s role in Jay’s teleplay-turned-stage play, *Harry Cobb’s America*. Kevin, even though he’s the artistic director for the entire Summer Theatre Lab, is working as an actor, director and writer here as well. Lauren is the fourth Amanda to read this same scene with Kevin. Jay has already heard Annie, Jess and Katie read and, while he still smiles as each new student reads, the furrows in his brow have grown a little deeper with each new interpretation.

“What?” Lauren asks.

“Don’t just play the scene angry all the way through,” he says. “Don’t be angry.”

Jay Tarses, sporting a blue polo shirt, tan khaki shorts, and well-aged laugh lines around his eyes, is class of '61, he claims, "because you're a member of the class you come in with for all time, or so they tell me." Jay admits he flunked out of Williams a couple of times, but went on to become a very successful writer who worked for *The Bob Newhart* and *Carol Burnett* shows, and then created *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, *Buffalo Bill*, *Slap Maxwell* and, for Steven Bochco, *Public Morals*, among many other well-written television comedies.

Jay sits behind a long white table set up in front of a two-story, unpainted brick wall. This wall, with its four door-shaped holes on the first floor and a wide, empty, picture-window opening above, serves as barrier and backdrop for the Center Stage's relentlessly black playing space. The exposed structure of walls, ceiling, risers, floor, lighting grid, pipes, movable gondolas, chairs, doors, girders, railings, and balconies -- everything except the windows, fluorescent lights and the natural brick wall -- are a flat, industrial black, a theatrical *tabula rasa* that will allow this empty playing space to accept whatever imaginative sparks writers, actors, directors, and technicians might try to coax into a dramatic blaze. Jay leans forward onto his elbows now, knits his fingers, and smiles himself into concentration as Lauren begins.

"I'm sorry, Harry, if this screws up your plans for September."

Kevin is playing Harry Cobb, a somewhat flaky, self-impressed television journalist whose hit TV show is loosely based on Charles Kuralt's *On the Road*. Harry travels around America with a television crew, his Cobblers, interviewing eccentric Americans, like Bucky Pratt, the blind baseball umpire and his seeing-eye dog, Bambino, but the comic-romantic subplot of the play actually propels it forward: Harry is trying to convince Amanda, his ex-wife film editor, to marry him again, and wants to capture the whole process on camera. But she's planning to marry someone else, or so Harry has just learned.

“But we love each other. Don’t we?” Kevin/Harry answers, and twists painfully toward Lauren/Amanda in his chair.

AMANDA

I didn’t say it wasn’t complicated.

HARRY

I’m gonna be sick. Who is it?

AMANDA

I’m not going to tell you who it is.

HARRY

Tell me or I’ll put my fist through the wall.

AMANDA

Gary Vukovich.

At this, Kevin/Harry throws his left hand into space and slams into an invisible wall, hollers “Oww!” and jumps up. “Gary Vukovich!? Not Gary Freakin’ Vukovich! Amanda, for God’s sake, you can’t marry that creep!”

“Good, Lauren,” Jay says. “Thanks, Kevin. See how much better it plays when it’s fast?”

Outside the glass doors closest to Center Stage, in the early July, 95-degree swelter, Zoe Fonseca, the next aspiring Amanda, bends at the waist, breathes in, then out, in, then out, stretches as if she’s warming up for a soccer match that could define her whole summer, and now she shakes her hands wildly as she walks in circles, readying herself to read next.

Half an hour later, after Zoe has become the day’s fifth Amanda and after Eggie has inhabited Gary Vukovich, Jay and Kevin assemble the twelve students in the futuristic, centrally-located seminar room to thank them for the auditions. As they sit, listening and waiting, their anxious postures transmit an almost-palpable, tense vibration through the glass-walled room.

“Hey, listen,” Jay starts, “the audition process is one of the most difficult things there is for an actor. You come in, the director wants you to make small talk, then he tells you something to do, and all of a sudden he’s ready to hear you read, and you’ve got to say, ‘Oh, okay,’ and get right into

character. It's a very difficult process, and I want to thank you all for what you did today."

"We're taking the long view on casting decisions," Kevin says, taking over, trying to soothe the group's collective nerves. "We're working on a lot of shows, and we need to do many different jobs, and most everyone is equally capable of doing all these jobs."

And then, with a few anti-climactic instructions about lunch and getting their rooms settled, Kevin and Jay are gone, down the corridor to the Theatre Lab office, debating already who should play whom.

"I want John for Vukovich," Jay says.

"Okay, he was good," Kevin agrees.

"I thought Katie did the best reading for Amanda."

"So did I."

"I want Katie for Amanda."

"Jess could do Amanda, too, and so could Annie," Kevin offers.

"It can't be equal," Jay tells him. "Just like in real life. Like in show business. You have to break some hearts."

### Day 3

Pretend for today that you're Becky Phillips, the only one of the twelve students participating in the Summer Theatre Lab who isn't working as an actor. But you're a rising senior in the theater department, and you signed on not just because you'll have a chance to work with Julie Seitel '94, your first Williams design professor who's now a hotshot New York City lighting designer, but also because you love those moments when you crack the tough technical challenges. That aesthetic rush you feel when something that you've designed suddenly establishes a visual language for a performance and elevates a play to a more profound level – that's what you live for.

And today is one of those tough-challenge days. You're in charge of the entire lighting plot. Kevin O'Rourke really wants to use the corner in front of the brick wall for all the productions, and he wants the lighting simple but elegant. Okay, that's not too bad. But there isn't any stage here. It's all pretty minimal -- a brick wall, a large black floor, and some risers with chairs -- and there aren't sets or costumes to create much of an environment for the actors. The lights have to define the playing space, delineate it from the audience area, and give the actors some real support. No problem. You've got a pile of ellipsoidal reflector spotlights -- nicknamed lekos, after their inventors -- and lekos are great for sharp cuts. A steeper angle, maybe 60 degrees, will light the actors' bodies but also clearly define the playing space without much spill into other areas. And the pattern of the grid mesh is so close to the lights that it won't read down at stage level, so you're all set there.

Your first presentation is Friday night: Adam Lefevre's *Heightened Senses of the Blind*, a short play for two actors who mostly sit on a wooden pallet and talk, so that's easy. But you also have to set up the lights for *Harry Cobb's America*, which gets performed next week, and that has about eight actors in three different locations and they're moving around a lot. It's 10:30 in the morning now, so you have a couple of days to hang all the lights, focus them at the right angles, get the dimmer numbers assigned to the correct channels in the computer, train students on the computers, and rehearse.

That's why you need everybody. Katie, Zoe, Eggie and LaVonna are already here, setting pipes, and the other students will be here soon. None of them have done much tech crew, but at least you've got an Eisenhower grid to work with: About twenty feet up, there's an open-mesh, steel tension grid that flexes, a little like a trampoline with wires instead of fabric, and allows the lighting crew to reach all the pipes without a Genie lift. And if anyone's afraid of heights, all they have to do is not look down. The grid squares are maybe six inches, so they won't fall through, and the big lekos can't either, just in case somebody drops one.

Plus, you gave the crew the basics: empty the pockets, unless they're zippered; hook the wrench attached to the phone cord to a belt loop; make sure the safety chains secure the lights. But suddenly, as Ilya and Matt walk in down below, there's a loud bang, and Mary Pfister, the program manager and resident mom to the company, yells, "Heads up." That's what you yell if anything falls through the grid, and you can see now that somebody dropped an unsecured safety chain and it hit one of the chairs underneath. Good thing there wasn't an audience member sitting down there. "That's why it's heads up," Mary scolds the crew, and lighting day just got a little harder.

### Day 5

Darkness.  
 Two lights.  
 Then two men  
 sitting on a pallet.  
 Eggie blows a duck call.  
 Dav says he's wasting his breath,  
 that all the duckies are still dreaming.  
 Dav plays Cal, who's a man about forty,  
 and Eggie plays his brother, Billy, who's slightly younger.  
 Cal and Billy sit together in a duck blind placed  
 close by a little lake near a small New England town.  
 It's just before dawn on a chilly autumn morning, or that's what  
 Adam LeFevre's play, *Heightened Senses of the Blind*, tells us we should believe.

Suicide.  
 Terminal cancer.  
 Dr. William Beasley,  
 Cal and Billy's father,  
 was buried yesterday, and now  
 these two brothers sit and talk,  
 and wait for the dawn to arrive  
 on the morning after their abusive father's funeral.  
 But Cal has brought along his dead father's shotgun,  
 the one he used to shoot himself, and Billy's upset.  
 He thinks it's inappropriate, and Cal tells him he's not right.  
 What was inappropriate was Billy's glowing eulogy, as if the old bastard  
 wasn't a cold, unfeeling, hypocritical alcoholic who beat his wife and his kids.

Reversal.  
 We expect  
 Cal's the one  
 who assisted dad's suicide.  
 He's the angry, estranged son  
 who moved out to San Diego,  
 the son the father begged for help  
 over the phone, but nope, Cal hung up.  
 It was Billy, the son who had stayed home,  
 who saw his dad's tumor move from spine to neck  
 so, by the end, he could hardly make a fist anymore.  
 Though we don't learn details. What we see, finally, are two brothers  
 reunited, trading sandwiches, deciding not to name the color the dawn offers them.

In the talkback that Kevin O'Rourke moderates after this first play presentation, the small audience and the actors explore, at first, where they feel the play's power resides. But then Bernie Bucky, the former chair of the theater department and still professor of theater at Williams, asks a question about the implied homosexuality in the play and a lively discussion starts up.

"That's what we were reading into it," Eggie says. "The sense that we got, reading it, was that this was probably the biggest confrontation that the brothers were ever going to have, and then, for Billy, it was kind of like, 'If I'm ever going to bring this up, it might as well be now.'"

Then a woman in the front row jumps in. "I wonder though if it doesn't have something to do with why Billy's the favorite son. I mean, that seemed to me to be the only link, and it's a slight link, but it's there. I also was wondering if this might have been the first time that you mentioned it to Cal, and I thought that was pretty interesting in terms of what was going on between you two guys in the scene."

"I think a few of the lines at the end are like that, statements that will test how the relationship stands," Eggie offers now. "If Cal can take this, well, then everything else is going to be fine. I actually saw it as one of the moments when the two characters are closest and most honest with each other."

“You don’t think it was too much, in fifteen minutes, to try and get all that stuff in there?” a man in the back row asks.

At this, Eggie looks down for a second, and then smiles. “I really don’t think so. It is difficult to have so many emotional fluctuations as there are in those fifteen minutes, but I actually think the writer creates a very interesting challenge. And I don’t think it’s impossible or even unrealistic. I’m going to assume that most people have been in a situation where sometimes you just kind of start an avalanche and things start snowballing: You open yourself up to saying one thing and you think the conversation’s going to be about that, and then other words just keep tumbling out.”

### *Day 10*

#### *An Interview with Cosmo Catalano, the Production Manager and Technical Supervisor at the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance*

WP: Tell me what you think about the '62 Center for Theatre and Dance.

CC: For a small, liberal arts college, it’s a little over the top. It’s a project that could hold its own in any university setting in the country. What it does is allow Williamstown to get a closer connection to an important part of the college that they wouldn’t normally get to see, and will allow us to bring in cultural events for the community, so that people don’t have to travel to Albany or New York or Boston to see this kind of work. It’s a little fancy for Williamstown. However, it’s really a pleasure to work in because it’s so nice.

One of the things we wanted to incorporate into this building was a lot of daylight, and we wanted to have the building appear to be open to the community: Hence we have this very large walkway that goes through the building, from one end to the other.

Prior to this, in the old building, we basically had an old brick building with no windows in it, and people never knew what went on in there. They knew that people went in and then they came out late at night and they were really tired and then they did a show. And so the process that we go through to do a show, in fact, is about 90% of the work. The 10% that the audience really sees is just the tip of the iceberg and, as an educational institution, we wanted to celebrate the 90% of the work that goes on before the performance. I think what’s important is that the building can lead a double life: It can be this very elegant concert hall and formal theater that also can support this kind of nitty-

gritty, hands-on, everyday, working-class theater work that goes on at the same time. The public has at least visual access to both of those.

WP: Because architects and theater people live in such different worlds, were there concepts from your world that you had to translate for them?

CC: It should be said that the process of designing this building was very positive. There were bumps in the road, as there usually are with any collaborative effort – people have different views and they butt heads about it, but something comes out of that. Some energy is released there that can be very creative, and I think it was in this process.

But the concept of being messy was a difficult one for the architects. The concept of playfulness. In other words, we like to go in and try some stuff out, kind of make a mess and put some things together and if it doesn't work then you make some modifications and you try it again. That sort of trial and error, the creative mess-making, was a concept they understood intellectually, because they also do it when they're sketching and before they commit to really nice drawings, but it's all on paper. Here, the sketching, if you will, is real-time, full-scale work. And I think that was a difficult concept to really get across.

I think we tried to make the building quirky, and that was a difficult concept to communicate to them. I don't think it was their style. If you look at their other buildings, you see that they're very clean, very crisp – really good-looking buildings – but not a little off, a little weird, and that's something that appeals to us in the theater. Those kinds of statements that are just a little off-center, that make you think, "That's unusual, maybe I should think about this more." I think that's something that they couldn't really get their heads around very well.

WP: How do you think the Summer Theatre Lab is going?

CC: I'm really pleased with the way the Summer Theatre Lab is using the Center Stage. Rather than filling it with a lot of scenery, they're working with it and making the mechanics of that space flexible to work with their projects. They can make that space do a lot of different things without acres of scenery and hours of construction.

That's important because it unmask a lot of the peripheral stuff – the stuff that's not vital to the piece. They're paring the piece down to its minimum, but they're still providing a home for it, and I think that's an important way to learn what the essentials of theater are and then to build from those. That's what that space is for, and I'm glad to see it being used that way.

### Day 18

Saturday afternoon. Another scorcher outside, blindingly bright. The car thermometer reads 96 and it's only 2 p.m. Inside the all-black Center Stage, though, it's air-conditioned to a merciful 68 degrees or so, but Stacy Cochran '81, writer and director of "Prostitutes," wearing a black, long-sleeved peasant blouse, isn't exactly thrilled: It's the fourth day of rehearsals for her new play, and her actors simply aren't getting it.

Truth be told, "Prostitutes" isn't too easy to get. It's a one-act play in eleven scenes, most of them shorter than a page, and three of them just a series of stage directions that read like shot descriptions for a movie. And even in the longest scene, which is less than seven pages long, most of the lines of dialogue are short, too, like most screenplay dialogue. That's to be expected, though, because Stacy is the screenwriter and director of "Boys," the 1996 coming-of-age movie that starred Winona Ryder, Lukas Haas, and John C. Reilly, and she's spent most of her career writing and directing films.

"Prostitutes" is a short, intentionally dreamlike play Stacy wrote about a hooker who robs a dead client, and it's part stage play and part movie, with its only other long scene filmed and projected onto a screen above the action as the play's penultimate scene. Or it's about a john named Tom who kills himself while he's making love to a hooker in a doorway on 31<sup>st</sup> Street in New York City, and then reappears to terrorize her in a coffee shop near Penn Station. Or it's about a 14-year old named Ray, who is either a club kid or the hooker's son, or both, and how he's bought two tickets to Orlando so he can rescue his mother from her seedy life. Or then again perhaps it's not really about any of the above.

Stacy is tough to pin down about it. In a discussion with the students after the first cold reading last Monday, Ilya asked her what the play was about, and what she wanted the audience to get out of it, and she said, "That's the sort of question that someone else should answer . . . No matter

what I say, I'm going to regret it. This was something where three distinct characters were created and, by their very nature as being characters in a play, are fictitious characters. But also within the structure of the play, they're also fictitious to each other on some level, or maybe not, but that is fiction. It isn't that it is reality; it's that it's about reality. So all these characters are not people, but they're about people, and they're creations that came from my imagination. And yet they came from my imagination via real people, somehow, and in the end, is this someone's dream? Is it Tom's dream? If so, is he sort of the creator of this? Is it his creative process in his moment of dying that built this structure? Or not?"

So it isn't much of a surprise that John Feltch '80, who plays Tom, the suicidal john, and Caroline Taylor '04, who portrays Lisa, the hooker, and Eggie Costas, who's a current sophomore at Williams and is her 14-year old son, Ray, are having some trouble locating specific motivations for their characters. And without specific motivation, it's hard for an actor to physicalize a role -- to know how to tell the story with their bodies. With this play, it's hard to even figure out the reality of which story they should be telling.

"It seemed pretty straightforward to me when I first read it," John Feltch confides. "Here's a guy who may have, or who did shoot himself while he was with this prostitute so, clearly, he's got issues. But now he's back, and then it gets confusing: He's either a ghost or, maybe not, but that I can't act. That's for somebody else to light and figure out. I think, for me, there is a spirit of, not so much vengeance, as of Tom wanting to hold Lisa to account for abandoning him. Also, he has that strange stalker mentality, where he believes she possesses some quality that he can't live without. She has something he wants to possess, and he's a spooky guy, clearly unhinged, and I guess I just have to play his need for what he thinks she has."

So here in the rehearsal, on the edges of the makeshift coffee shop near Penn Station, Tom lurks, feeling his need mount. Ray and his mom, Lisa, are

having breakfast before their train leaves for Orlando. Tom buys her a drink and stands next to her, grinning a weird grin, then tells her, “Scoot over, babe,” and pushes onto the bench next to her. John Felch the actor, all 6 feet 4 inches of him, wearing a hat that says TOM in block letters on the front, pushes his long frame menacingly against Lisa and locks his gaze not so much on her but on some middle distance that only he can see, on some crazed location where his idealized notion of her lives, and seems like he’s fully inhabiting this nutcase. Now he grabs Lisa’s hair and yanks her head back.

TOM

Try to remember. What was I wearing?

LISA

I don’t know.

TOM

What was I wearing?

RAY

Let go of my mom!

LISA

An orange sweater.

*It really hurts. Tom lets go and smiles.*

TOM

That’s right. You do remember.

“Okay, okay, that’s good,” Stacy breaks in. “It’s absurd to say, but no matter how tragic the scene is, when you guys make me laugh, I feel like there’s some blood coursing through it.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” John agrees.

“But somehow it’s just not working now. I wasn’t laughing at that. You just seemed angry, John. That one note all the way through, just that anger, and I think before, in the other rehearsals, it wasn’t, to me, so literal.”

And John, at that, nods his head, takes his TOM hat off, rubs his right palm across his forehead, and starts pacing, slowly. “I know,” he repeats, “I know what you mean.”

## Day 21

So if you're the writer and the director, and your actors think your play isn't working, what do you do? If you're Stacy Cochran, you go home and re-write the whole play.

"Listen, in terms of what worked and didn't work, the first one didn't work particularly, so that's the end of story," Stacy says. "If there's an opportunity to do something that tries to work with the minimum number of words, this is a venue to try it in, you know what I mean? It's a workshop, so I thought, *Why write something that's like a calling card to try and get a job and make a movie? Why not do something that probably won't work and see where that takes us?* I mean, why not try something that we hadn't seen before. It's not like I didn't want it to work. But each little nugget of the old version, because it was so minimal, had to be sharp and precise in its smallness, so it had to work perfectly or it wasn't maybe going to work at all. Each scene had to sparkle, and that probably drove the actors crazy, because what I meant was that each scene had to be sharp and shiny and incisive."

### Draft 1 - Scene 1

*The prostitute is earning her pay near the doorway of a Duane Reade on 31<sup>st</sup> St. We can't see her or the client.*

*We can hear him, though, and he sounds very appreciative.*

### Draft 2 - Scene 1

We hear Tom's voice, still in darkness. It's the voice of a man in love, joyful in its discovery of love but with undercurrents of deadliness and spikes of vicious anger. He is an ineffectual man who has taken action and he is both buoyant and destroyed by the irreversible impact he has made. Tom begins speaking in darkness and at some point lights begin coming up on him. Louis Armstrong plays throughout.

TOM

God - Isn't she beautiful? Did you see her go by here?  
The way she walks? She's as indestructible as a whale.  
Layers and layers of that indestructible whale flesh. You know what I mean by whale flesh? I don't mean she's fat, I mean she looms large in my mind and she swims like a planet spins, without even noticing the motion. Whale flesh is very sexy. It's tougher than cow hide, really solid, but still soft. You push on it - it pushes back . . .

*(and this monologue continues for another page)*

“I’m excited. This is also a whole lot easier to talk about now, in retrospect, now that there’s something that everyone’s having an easier time with. But I don’t even know that it was writeable without having gone through the troubles of the first one. It’s a funny sort of combination of team collaboration and solitary effort. It’s crucial that the piece be one voice, but I couldn’t have gotten my own singular decisions to the point where they ended up without the collaboration.”

**Draft 1 - End of the play**

LISA

He’s not my friend. I don’t know this guy. I don’t live around here.

*But she wants to look so she inches up alongside Ray and they both look down into Tom’s gray face – Suddenly Tom’s shoulders wrench up with an explosive burst of life. He sees them both. He devours the sight of Lisa.*

TOM

Help me –

*Lisa and Ray pitch back in horror. Lisa stumbles and falls. She feels ravaged.*

*Tom’s head drops back down. He dies there on the sidewalk.*

**Draft 2 - End of the play**

Tom stands up, miraculously, and takes her in his arms like they’re going to dance and he brings her in close to him and holds her close. She lets herself be held by him and feels strangely calm in his arms.

TOM

You’re a perfect ending.

LISA

Maybe this isn’t the ending.

Go back to BLACK. Lisa steps forward to the front of the stage. Her turn for a monologue.

LISA

I tried to leave. I had to get uptown and then the kid said Wait, come here. Check out this guy. His eyes look weird . . . I shouldn’t have listened to him but I came over to take a look. It scared the shit out of me but I looked and the kid goes, I think he’s trying to see us. He goes to me, Shit, he’s your friend – and I go, he’s not my friend! I don’t know this guy! I don’t live around here!

She looks around in the darkness, behind her and out at the audience. She feels alone.

LISA (CONT'D)

But I wanted to look. So I came up next to this kid and I looked down into his face and suddenly his shoulders lurched up with this explosion of life. He sees me and he looks like he's going to eat me in a single mouthful or something. He goes, HELP ME and me and the kid go flying back. I think I fell. I already had his wallet. I hung onto his wallet. Then his head drops down and I ran.

"I certainly never could have planned it this way, but it was nice to have two drafts of something like this, because it gave everybody a shot at having a new first day. We sort of had a first day that went for a week and we were corkscrewing down with the problems we were encountering - not personal problems, but creative problems. I guess people didn't expect a draft so dramatically different than the first one, and that had the benefit of making us all feel like we were starting over, together. That was kind of a good thing, I think."

### Day 28

"My name is Marc Wolf, I was class of '84 at Williams, and about ten years ago I actually almost stopped acting. I was getting frustrated with what I was being offered, so I thought, *Okay now, if I stopped acting, what would I want to do?* I thought I'd probably get involved in something political, try to create some social change, you know? I was a Poly Sci and Theater major here at Williams, and those are the two things I'm really passionate about.

"Then I asked myself, *Well, how would you feel in six months if you weren't involved in theater?* And I decided I'd miss it, a lot. That's when I first thought about combining my interests and I started doing documentary-based theater. I developed my first play, *Another American*, about the 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy and the whole issue of gays in the military, in the mid-90s. I performed that play as a one-man show up through 2001, and on September 11 of that year I was in Seattle. When the terrorist attacks happened, I decided I would drive across the country to my home in New York City, and the structure of my new play, *The Road Home: Re-membering America*,

is based on interviews I did with random people I met as I drove back home for two months. I edited some of those interviews into a sort of collage, or a re-memberment of my journey.

"I become twenty-two different people in the play and I use their words, their actual interview words, though I shaped them for performance into monologues. And I also re-create each character physically, but minimally, with a gesture or accent or some small identifying mark. All I have on stage with me is a table and a chair, a coffee mug and a box of Kleenex, and my script in a blue, 3-ring binder. So I'll cross my legs and sit straight for one character, or jump up and pace around for another, use a Southern drawl, stand in front of the table, put my right hand on my lower back and bend forward, sneeze and blow my nose a lot, shout, swear, sit still. It depends who I am.

"There's a woman, for instance, near the beginning, who says, *'I feel like I've gone down Alice's rabbit-hole in Alice in Wonderland. That occurred to me probably two weeks ago. Yeah, yeah. The final descent. I think so. It's building up to this, but nothing appears to be what it seems to be. I don't believe anything the newspapers say. Oh, I . . . Oh, I . . . Oh, oh, I, I read the New York Times, and I believe it, but I think the truth is just buried under fluff and propaganda, and you have to know what you're looking for and you have to carefully read it, and that's interesting. It's new. It's exciting. I look for the truth . . . Life's tragic. I mean, that's it. Every time, every time I see a giant pick-up truck now or a great big SUV – some self-indulgent, pompous asshole with an American flag on his car – I think to myself, This war's because of you.'* And I do her with an almost brusque, Brooklyn accent, even though she lived on an island off the coast of Washington State.

"Or I do a store owner from a small Mississippi town, who says, *'I visited New York one time in the 5<sup>th</sup> Grade. The bus driver, he said, "When we go through this tunnel, it's gonna be a different world on the other side," and sure enough, it was, and I said, "This is the nastiest city I've ever seen." My middle name is Israel, and the reason why they call me Israel is because when I was born, they thought I was gonna die, and my grandmother, she's a Pentecostal, and she read in the Bible where it says, "Israel could never fall," so they named me Israel. But the thing about it is this: look what happened to New York. Now people say, "Why did God let this happen?" God didn't let it happen. No, he could have stopped it if he wanted to, but it's the beginning right now of the end, I believe. That's right. The end of the world.'* Now he's different from the African-American traveling salesman I met in that same small town who was really angry, so I just use different postures for each of them.

“I love the documentary form, because the audience becomes me, in a way, and gets to interview the people I met, you know, the people I’m playing, and it’s an intimate experience. The audience really has to listen to what the different people say: All they can see is this white guy on stage, playing different people – men & women, old & young, blacks, whites, Native Americans, Malaysians, a German tourist – so they have to listen carefully to how these people talk, and what they say, and not just label them, and I like that.”

### Day 36

Haloed by a single leko, in a second-story opening in the brick wall that suddenly turns into a balcony, LaVonna finishes the last three lines from a Wordsworth sonnet:

in his hand,  
The thing became a trumpet; whence he blew  
Soul-animating strains – alas, too few!

and David Barnes '81, hidden downstage right, blows a long, soulful riff on his blues harp. The lights come up full on the stage. Then, quickly, Eggie strides in from downstage left, in army fatigues and a dark grey t-shirt, wearing a backpack and carrying a worn portfolio under his left arm, and crosses in front of the audience, saying,

We do not speak like Petrarch

And now Zoe, back on the balcony, hollers down at us,

Or wear a hat like Spenser

Katie, sashaying above us along the walkway, reveals

and it is not fourteen lines  
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field

and then Dav, Lauren, Ilya, Matt, and the other students deliver their lines, their parts of “American Sonnet” by Billy Collins, and *The Sonnet Project*, the final presentation of the Williams College Summer Theatre Lab, is off and running.

*The Sonnet Project* is Alex Neil's brainchild. Alex Neil was Dianne Thompson when she graduated from Williams in 1977, and she has gone on to an illustrious career that has included a generous balance of television and theater work, most recently in the 3-character play, *Match*, with Frank Langella and Ray Liotta, on Broadway last year.

But Alex has always loved poetry, and she felt poetry was something unique she could offer the students in the Summer Theatre Lab. "Nobody had really talked about language, and nobody had talked about speaking in verse, which is a huge thing for an actor when you get out in the real world," Alex explains.

So she showed up for her two-week stint with 50 sonnets she loved, asked for the students' help, and whittled them down to the 22 poems that appear in the play. "The hard part about turning a group of sonnets into a play is that you don't want to be up there reciting poetry. It could be really dead, and boring, so the hard part is getting the actors to live through it and make it very personal. That's where the work is for any actor: To say, 'This isn't a poem; this is a piece of text that I'm going to use as an actor to create a world and to find a life and to use as my words about this moment.'"

Alex believes that Williams is the place that made her into an actor, and was the place where she discovered who she truly was. The theater department, the old Adams Memorial Theatre, and now the '62 Center "has that same feeling, like it's my home. The theater was my home in so many ways when I was here."

Martha Williamson, also '77, head writer and executive producer of "Touched By an Angel" for nine years, and one of the alumni actors in *The Sonnet Project*, echoes Alex's feelings about her time at Williams: "Truly, everything I learned about how to run a show and how to make creative decisions started right here at Williams, because they give you the opportunity to make the mistakes you need to make before you can get it right. Williams is famous for letting you fail successfully."

However, watching the students of the Summer Theatre Lab in the finale of *The Sonnet Project*, it's hard to imagine them failing successfully for very long.

All we need is fourteen lines,

Ilya begins, starting the sonnet by Billy Collins that ends the show, and gestures to Kevin O'Rourke, who has just finished a Robert Frost poem and stares briefly at Ilya before he turns to go. Then Ilya continues,

Well, thirteen now,  
and after this next one just a dozen  
to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,

Zoe waves and walks upstage through an opening in the brick wall, and now Dav stands up and salutes. One by one, as the lines of the last sonnet tick by, LaVonna waves and Matt bows, in keeping with his earlier Shakespearean turn. Eggie nods his head, Jess curtsies and hurries off, while Ilya goes on, cueing them all into their exits,

But hang on here while we make the turn  
Into the final six where all will be resolved,  
where longing and heartache will find an end

all except Katie, lounging in the wall's opening near the stairs, who signals seductively to Ilya as he finishes,

where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,  
take off those crazy medieval tights,  
blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.