

THE ELECTRIC COMPANY SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT PROCESS:
BRILLIANT! THE BLINDING ENLIGHTENMENT OF NIKOLA TESLA

By

MICHELLE E. KNEALE

Bachelor of Arts, University College of the Fraser Valley, 2005

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Theatre Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)

April 2008

© Michelle E. Kneale, 2008

Abstract

Ensemble creation in Canada is a popular form of script development. It began essentially in the 1970's with *The Farm Show*, and has become the site for much theoretical and critical discussion. The Electric Company Theatre began as an ensemble in 1996 and since then has created fascinating productions with a range of topics in both site specific and touring venues. *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* was a cornerstone piece for this group and existed in a number of incarnations before the script was eventually published in 2004 and the production toured again in 2006. This thesis examines how the Electric Company Theatre developed material for performance as an ensemble. I also discuss how the Electrics were influenced by the various resources they used in order to generate text and imagery for the production. Through these discussions, I argue that the collective creation product has a direct influence on the process. My research has mostly been conducted through interviews with company members, through research of their production history and script.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
List of Figures.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
CHAPTER I: Introduction.....	1
CHAPTER II: The Electric Company Theatre	4
CHAPTER III: Electric Process.....	8
Roundhouse Community Centre.....	15
High Performance Rodeo.....	17
Edinburgh Festival.....	20
Critical Responses.....	21
CHAPTER IV: The Influence of Source Materials.....	26
Biography.....	26
The Light.....	35
CHAPTER V: Elements of the Play	44
Narrator.....	44
Embedded Genres.....	47
The Sphere.....	51
CHAPTER VI: Conclusion- The Collective Model.....	56
Works Cited.....	61
Appendices:	
Appendix A: Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval.....	64

List of Figures

Figure 4.1 Excerpt from Collier, Kim et al. *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* (Victoria, British Columbia: Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2004) 33. 36

Figure 4.2 Excerpt from Collier, Kim et al. *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* (Victoria, British Columbia: Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2004) 34. 37

Acknowledgements

I have a lot of people to thank for helping me complete this project. First, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the members of the Electric Company theatre; their kind and generous support of this project has been truly inspiring. I would also like to thank Professor Jerry Wasserman for his words of encouragement, honest criticisms, and unfaltering wisdom. Thank you to Professors Kirsty Johnston and Tom Scholte for their helpful comments and support. Finally, I would like to thank Jennifer Suratos for being my friend, colleague and master formatter.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

There is a mystifying disconnection, it seems, between private process and public product (and between private intention and public use): the destination of the journey may have cultural significance, but the journey itself is said to be undertaken for personal and aesthetic reasons, untainted by social or political intent. (Richard Paul Knowles and Skip Shand 3)

In the editorial of the “Process Issue” of the Canadian Theatre Review, Ric Knowles and Skip Shand make this claim that the public and private realms of theatre are detached from each other. A production is generally only viewed by the public as a final product rather than as an in-progress creation. However, a production’s creation relies solely on the collective creativity and subjectivity of the people involved. So, in order to better understand a production, one may want to understand the process that comes before it. This puts an audience’s understanding of the play not just within the finality of production, but also in the pre-production process.

The collective creation impulse comes from recognizing that while one person may be primarily interested in designing or performing, they may also have useful things to contribute dramaturgically. It breaks the standard structure of production; each member will embark on various and overlapping duties. These models began to surface in Canada in the 1970’s and as Diane Bessai notes, the early Canadian “collective creators were subversives” (14). Their initiative derived from a long-standing desire to reach audiences not being spoken to by regional theatres. They were motivated, as Mark Fortier asserts, “to escape the alienating structures of capitalist and mainstream theatrical processes” (8). This generally leads to the blurring of the roles of producer, artistic

director, director, playwright, actor, and designer simply out of economic necessity. The economic necessity stems from not having the large funding that regional theatres enjoy. While this re-structuring may come out of need, these models allow for productions to be created in a way such that all elements are created in conjunction, not just one element at a time. Rather than first developing the text, many of these plays are created so that design, performance, and direction are incorporated into the entire process.

Much of the work written about Canadian collective creation companies or scripts is either historically or theoretically situated and anyone interested in this process must wade through hundreds of pages in order to find a few sentences on how the work was created. However, we cannot talk about one without the other, given that elements are developed simultaneously. The ways in which a company chooses to create will illuminate their motivations and vice versa. Through describing the practices of collective creation artists, the unknowns of process in creating collaborative theatre can be extracted to enable like-minded artists to learn from the processes of other companies.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: the first is to describe the Electric Company's creation process for *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* and the second is to argue that there is a symbiotic relationship between the content and the creation style; the process is inextricable from the product. For this research, I have drawn on personal interviews with members of the Electric Company as well as various critiques of their work.

I have chosen Electric Company Theatre for the focus of this thesis because they are one of the six companies in Vancouver theatre that “are at the centre of a new cultural

ecology that has been transforming theatrical performance in Vancouver since the mid-1990's" (Wasserman 1). The Electric Company shares this category along with Boca del Lupo, newworldtheatre, The Only Animal, Theatre Replacement, and Radix. These companies have "made their mark on west coast theatre by virtue of original, self-created work and unique performance protocols, reinvigorating the local, and increasingly, the national scene" (Wasserman 1). Their work puts them at the forefront of the innovative theatre culture on the west coast and will no doubt have an impact on the future of alternative theatre in Canada. The play I focus on, *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla*, was the inaugural Electric Company play. This play provides a rich place to begin this inquiry because in the twelve years since it began, it has had the fortune of continuing its development through a number of productions and remounts. This continuing development has resulted in many variations in the script and is indicative of the company's continuing development process in creating theatre; *Brilliant!'s* development spans a large portion of the company's development.

The second chapter introduces the Electric Company by giving a brief history of their start. The third chapter discusses the Electrics' creation style, their influences in developing this process, and how it has changed as a result of creating *Brilliant!* The fourth chapter analyses the final product and draws connections between the process and the product, followed by the conclusion. As this is a work on process, I only include historical context where necessary.¹

¹ For a comprehensive history of the Electric Company, see Sarah Fairburn's BA honors thesis entitled "An Overview History of the Electric Company Theatre (1996-2007)": UBC, 2007.

Chapter Two:

The Electric Company Theatre

This chapter introduces the Electric Company and, in doing so, provides a context in which to understand their process. The Electric Company members- David Hudgins, Kevin Kerr, Jonathon Young, and Kim Collier- met as students at Studio 58, a professional acting and production training program at Langara College in Vancouver. The school boasts an intensive program format and includes “Scene Study, Improvisation, Modern and Classical Text, Voice, Speech, Choir, Singing, Mask, Movement, Alignment, Period Dance, Tap, Writing, One-Person Shows, and Theatre Fundamentals” (Studio 58). It is known for its intensity and attention to detail in both training and production. The four members met in the mid 1990’s and soon discovered that they shared interests in creating and performing their own work. David Hudgins notes that Studio 58 planted the seed for the collaborative process because “there is a real honouring of creation work” (Hudgins). Their education gave them a shared vocabulary and experience with devised theatre which helped to inspire their future work together.

After leaving Studio 58, the group made plans to create their first play together. Kevin Kerr has a self-proclaimed interest in science and technology and through a few serendipitous events, came across Tesla: Man out of Time by Margaret Cheney. Cheney’s book is a biography of Nikola Tesla, a 19th century inventor and contemporary of Thomas Edison. Upon reading this book, Kerr discovered the inherent theatricality of Tesla and was fascinated to continue studying him (Hudgins). The idea was later pitched to the group and work began on creating the first script which was to be performed at the 1996 Vancouver Fringe Festival. The forty-five minute show was well received and

excitement began to build around this new company. For example, Chris Dafoe from the Globe and Mail called the Electrics “a group to watch” (Dafoe C4). After the Fringe performance, the group’s instinct was to fill in gaps they saw in the current story they were telling. This led to the drastically expanded version performed at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver in 1998. It was created for a large scale room and ran for two and a half hours. This was an expansion in the length, scope, and size of the production. The Electrics were then invited to One Yellow Rabbit’s High Performance Rodeo in Calgary. The High Performance Rodeo is a performance festival which promotes the “progressive and wild” (High Performance Rodeo). The festival required the Electrics to present the show within a certain amount of time and be able to strike the set after each performance. Given these constraints, the Electrics needed to tighten the show once again, so they continued their dramaturgical process and reworked it fit the creation into the confines of the festival.

After creating and performing *Brilliant!* the company began working on *The Wake*, a site-specific piece on Granville Island in Vancouver. The Electric Company then returned to scientific themes with *The Score* in 2000, a play about human genomes. Over the course of their production history, the Electrics demonstrate a fascination with scientific discovery, hubris, success, failure and everything that happens in between. David Hudgins recalls,

We all have an interest in science. Kevin has a background in Physics, I started in chemical engineering, and Kim and Jon have a wonderful curiosity about life and science. So there has been this theme of discovery and invention and wonder that has been a

through line of almost everything we've done together. (Hudgins)

Their common interest was a significant basis for the formation of the group-- in addition to their dedication to collaboration, audience, and the community. Their objectives state that "a key goal is to create a constructive and rewarding environment for artists allowing all members of any given project a voice in the overall shape and evolution of the play" (Electric Company). They also note that "the audience is always at the forefront of our work and we strive to tell stories that speak to our community and our often accelerated culture with unorthodox and surprising techniques" (Electric Company). Finally, they state that "our projects are the result of partnerships with community organizations, arts groups, businesses, government, schools and individuals" (Electric Company). This dedication to audience and the artistic community demonstrates their commitment to the collaborative process of devised theatre. They do not rely on the hierarchical structures that the large theatres employ, rather they focus their energies on fostering a relationship with those who are most influenced by their work.

During the 1990's, as the Electrics were beginning to form a company, they were part of "a new generation of theatre graduates, impatient with the status quo, [who] were starting up their own companies, [and] looking at a return to the collective, collaborative model" (Wasserman 2). Wasserman also notes that a major factor in the conception of these companies was an economic recession which hit the theatre community in Vancouver hard. Economic struggles provide an opportunity for artists to approach theatre in a new way because the standard economic (and therefore artistic) ways no longer work. Therefore, the 1990's saw a resurgence of the collaborative model. However, the model of the 1970's changed to accommodate for technological

innovations and the changing motivation behind devised theatre².

Space is very important to the work of the Electric Company and they continue to be known for their site specific works. *The Wake*, *The One That Got Away*, and *Flop* are all site specific plays. Although *Brilliant!* is not a site specific work, its Roundhouse version shows tendencies towards environmental theatre which are discussed in the next chapter.

Since leaving Studio 58, each member has embarked on their own career paths in addition to continually working with the Electric Company: Kevin Kerr is a Governor General's Award-winning playwright, Kim Collier a noted director, Jonathon Young an actor, and David Hudgins a sound designer and associate director of Studio 58. In spite of (or perhaps because of) their diverse interests, they all maintain an interest in creating, producing, and performing their own work.

² See Wasserman.

Chapter Three:

Electric Process

After having briefly discussed the Electric Company's history, I will now outline the process they used to create the first version of *Brilliant!*. This will lead into a discussion on how subsequent revisions led to an evolution of their process. The research for this chapter draws predominantly on personal interviews with Kevin Kerr, David Hudgins, Jonathon Young, and Kim Collier which were conducted in late 2007 and early 2008, eleven years after the creation of *Brilliant!*. Despite having had to reach far back into their memories, the interviewees have provided some valuable insights into the collective creation model that they employed throughout the development of *Brilliant!*.

The Electric Company Theatre's process in creating *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* contained many stages: research, collective table work to identify useful elements and overall narrative, writing and physical experimentation, dramaturgical reworking and writing, production, and post-production development. They developed this process through practical production creation; it was the first production they created as a group so their process involved creating and learning how to create at the same time (Collier). In 2003 the Electric Company, in association with other creation-based companies in Vancouver, held a conference called Progress Lab with dramaturg Rachel Ditor as the facilitator. The purpose of this conference was to discuss collective creation processes with respect to these Vancouver companies³. Ditor asserts that there are three categories in which the Electric Company finds inspiration for

³ Though it has not yet been published, Rachel Ditor has created a number of drafts to create a book from the transcripts of this conference. The author obtained a second draft from the Electric Company Theatre.

creating a piece: theme/narrative/characters (concerns of the text), style and form (concerns of aesthetic), and location (concerns of venue). For example, in *Flop*, the company wanted to explore failure (theme), and in *Brilliant!* they were initially intrigued by the anecdotes about Edison electrocuting animals to try to discredit Nikola Tesla's alternating current (character).

The second point of inspiration that Ditor notes for their creation process is style and form. When creating *Brilliant!*, the company members had just graduated from Studio 58 where they had attained a number of skills like mask work and movement, which they used in the creation of the show. Also, for *The Fall* (2003) the Electrics wanted to create very physical theatre which became a driving style for that production. The third element that Ditor lays out is location. The Electric Company works site-specifically for many of their productions, but they are also fond of environmental theatre. For example, when they expanded *Brilliant!* for the Roundhouse Community Centre (RCC), Tesla's theatricality and the technological nature of the modern era were already established as important factors for the play. Therefore, they used the Great Hall in the RCC which has large wooden beams, expansive windows, exposed brick, and many visible bolts. All these features amount to a modern and industrial-looking space, large enough to accompany the great theatricality of Nikola Tesla as they staged him. For the initial creation of *Brilliant!*, the Electrics incorporated two means of inspiration: character and style/form. It was not until further developments of *Brilliant!* that venue became a concern with the Roundhouse version.

Character was the initial inspiration for the production because Kerr pitched Nikola Tesla as the subject of their first project, citing his inherent theatricality. Once the

group accepted it, *Brilliant!* became the inaugural ECT project. Kevin Kerr recalls that the beginning of their process was “to divide and conquer [research], and pool our resources. Then we would come back and do a presentation of impulses that would get flagged and catalogued” (Kerr). The company embarked on a collective research mission which entailed uncovering the texture of the time period in which Tesla lived. This included gathering imagery of 19th century New York and period costuming. Jonathon Young notes that “we began by taking areas of research, music, fine arts, and maybe photographs that would give us a sense of architecture and costumes from the period” (Young). In addition to historical research, the company included contemporary auditory textures such as the Chemical Brothers, an electronic group from the United Kingdom. This would ensure that although the play is about a 19th century inventor, it would also be a reflection of contemporary times.

In addition to the contemporary music used in early development, Hudgins explains in “Electric Sound: Collective Creation and Sound Design” that they incorporated pieces by Bartok, Stravinsky, and Britten. He also notes that much of this early sound design still

exists a decade later in the ongoing remounts of the play. We worked many physical sequences set to music in theatricalizing the relationship between [Tesla, Robert and Katherine]. Eventually these scenes fell away as the script evolved, but not until they had served their purpose of informing us as writers/actors/designers of the nature of the narrative we were portraying. (19)

These sound pieces were used “in the earliest writing stages, during scenes that suggested

movement and emotional arc” (19) such as the relationships of Tesla, Robert, and Katherine.

Hudgins also emphasizes that “the shift toward a digital medium has made a huge difference in terms of the speed and dexterity of layering/manipulating music and effects” (20). Such advances in the playback and recording of sound have added another dimension to their work. The technological advances examined in the play have a direct influence on the way they present the piece. The use of alternating current in professional sound equipment provides a connection between their collaborative process and the final product; they are using an invention of Tesla’s which is significant in the world of the play.

The Electric Company’s relationship with sound technology in their creation process led to connections between their subject and what they wanted to say about it. David Hudgins maintains that

[Tesla] in his day was a hero and is now forgotten and then there is a new perspective at the turn of the next century; so there is shift of perspectives. I think, with that in mind, it aids the complexity of style and music. (Hudgins)

The shift in perspectives from the Victorian to the Modern era became a major element in the creation of this work. They were creating the piece at the time when the internet was gaining popularity and being used with increased frequency. This increasing use of the internet creates a secondary importance for the play as the 19th century becomes a mirror for the 21st. As electricity became significant at the turn of the 20th century, the internet became significant for the turn of the 21st century. Jonathon Young explains:

The internet was just coming into being which was new and exciting. So we looked at contemporaries of Tesla and what sort of milieu would have influenced him. (Young)

In addition to the research impacting the thematic intentions in their creation process, the company's training was a significant stimulus on the style and form of its development. David Hudgins recalls, "we took everything we learned in theatre school and tried to apply it to the show. So it has tap dancing, it has musical theatre, physical theatre, [and] movement pieces" (Hudgins). Therefore, *Brilliant!*'s variety format was a result of both the training they had received from Studio 58, and the need to demonstrate the paradigm shifts of the modern era and relate them to contemporary society.

The discovery process then moved into collective table work to give some perspective to the data that was collected:

Then we would move into trying to tell each other the story of Tesla. Who are the key characters and what are the key events? We whittled the extraneous folks down to Katherine and Robert, and the key locations. Then we would get ourselves down to a similar track with a map and began writing by taking turns at certain sections and breaking them down into four pieces and passing them around. (Young)

Young is outlining part of their process as identifying key characters and locations, mapping the story, and dividing scenes among themselves to write individually. Kerr also noted that their process would blend "imagistic experiments as well as traditional writing to bring back to each other and dramaturg" (Kerr). Most often, group members would

write a scene and bring it back to the group for consultation. However, occasionally in this step they would try physical experimentation. Kerr notes that “if [scenes] were text based then we would split them up. But if they were not text based then sometimes we would have the impulse to try it another way. So those did involve physical experiments” (Kerr). The physical experimentation would be focussed on locating practical problems with the staging, not usually in the generation of text.

Here we see two different approaches to the second phase of development, which involves identifying text-based scenes and physically based scenes. The Electrics note that “an early part of our process was that we quickly dispelled an early notion that we would figure out our place from improv; we noticed pretty early on that we were bad improvisers” (Kerr). Their lack of comfort with improvisation led the text-based work to come first in the process; they decided what they were going to say, and then discovered ways to say it. The physical experimenting was only used if they were unsure whether a particular element would work onstage. For example, in the scene where Katherine is reading a letter from Tesla she begins to levitate above the ground in a fit of euphoria and inspiration (27). The experimentation for this moment would incorporate two methods of inquiry: Is it possible to make her levitate? Does it make sense in the context of the story? (Kerr)

On improvisation, David Hudgins comments that “we improvised in those days, which is something we haven’t done since.” When physical experimentation was used for the generation of text, they had a method of retaining the progress they made which was to transcribe the improvised scenes: “I remember sitting and writing down literally everything that came out of the actors’ mouths” (Hudgins). In addition, the generation of

text through improvisation would occur only once they were in agreement about key story points (Young).

The pre-production process for creating *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* incorporated four stages: a) resource research, b) collective table work to identify useful elements, resources, and overall narrative, c) writing and physical experimentation, and d) dramaturgical reworking and writing. After the show was directed and all elements put together for performance, the Electrics moved to their post-production process, which involved expanding, re-writing, and re-conceiving the initial work.

Since the Electric Company has been creating shows for the past twelve years, their process has evolved to take into account their specific strengths as a group. Kim Collier notes that with *Brilliant!* they did not do the same amount of table work they do now; they used more physical experimentation than they would with subsequent creations:

But unlike our other productions, we didn't outline it first. As we evolved in our understanding of creation and playwriting as a collective, our processes ended up having clearer markers. But with *Brilliant!*, I remember us just going at it much more free form --we really did not understand how we would work but we were *discovering* how we'd work. So we did things in that process that are different than we do now in the sense that we would be rehearsing and doing the play before really knowing what the play was. (Collier)

She recalls that much of the process of creating *Brilliant!* was experimenting not only with the content of the production but also with their process.

Roundhouse Community Centre- The First Full Length Production

After *Brilliant!* was presented at the Fringe Festival and received critical acclaim (Armstrong), the Electrics were excited to expand the story beyond its current incarnation. This led to the two and a half hour epic performed at the Roundhouse Community Centre in Vancouver. Jonathon Young outlines the process:

We ended up talking for a good year and we were moving into how we started to work, which was to spend a lot of time together hammering out the story, completing journeys, finessing story elements, and probably overworking elements. We knew that we wanted to take the story to the next level and do it better. We spent about a year and a half trying to figure out where a story was going. (Young)

This post-production process began with a need to “take the story to the next level and do it better,” an impulse that required a new process to re-shape and re-work elements already in the play, as well as add new material. One of the first parts of the story that they felt needed attention was Robert’s journey. A scene was added in which Robert comes to Tesla later in life and tries to make amends for abandoning him (Young). This scene served to complete the story and tie up the loose ends in the characters’ lives.

An element of the play that changed many times was the Narrator. The Narrator

originally started out as Phil, loosely based on a real life person called the “info-geek.”⁴ Phil was transformed into a woman in the Roundhouse version to provide gender balance to the casting. In later productions the Narrator was returned to being a man and the actor playing the Narrator was double-cast as the Edison character (Young). The Narrator initially began as the present day link to Tesla, his legacy searching for information about Tesla’s life. The Narrator’s function is to illustrate the connections between the birth of the modern era that Tesla helped to create and the birth of the technological era that the internet helped to create. Phil used the internet to post information about Tesla which enabled the Electrics to draw this connection between the two time periods. The link with the internet became difficult for the Electrics to work with in subsequent productions because the novelty of it was becoming old as technology moved forward at a rapid pace at the end of the 1990’s (Young). Therefore, while the Narrator still maintains his place as a representation of Tesla’s legacy in the final product, he is less tied to the discovery of the internet.

The space the Electric Company used in the Roundhouse Community Centre is a large expansive room with brick columns, steel beams, a concrete floor and large banks of windows; it is an industrial-looking space which is most commonly used as an art gallery and often hosts events with large groups of people. The Electrics wanted to use this environment to illuminate the larger-than-life legacy of Tesla (Kerr). This desire to use the space so fully is indicative of the early seeds of site-specific theatre being planted in their collective. However, they did not consider this work to be a site-specific creation- rather, it was environmental (Kerr). Kerr notes that the space was “definitely beating into

⁴ Though the info-geek maintained a website about Nikola Tesla for a number of years, unsuccessful internet searches reveal that he is no longer maintaining this website.

the narrative consciously” and was found at the suggestion of Kathryn Shaw, head of the Studio 58 program, after a lengthy process of trying to find a performance space in Vancouver (Kerr).

The critical reception of the Electrics’ first attempt at the full-length version was in line with the Electrics’ own criticism of the piece, that it was too large and had too many ideas. Peter Birnie of the Vancouver Sun says that “*Brilliant!* loses some of its lustre by being trapped in unnecessary padding.” He argues that the piece is “still a clever multi-media exploration of inventor Nikola Tesla, but what must have roared along in its previous incarnation now has a tendency to lose its juice” (Birnie). He points towards a dramaturgical issue: the piece is clever, but is lost in a sea of details.

High Performance Rodeo

After creating the first full-length version of the play, the Electrics were invited to One Yellow Rabbit’s High Performance Rodeo in Calgary. For the festival, the set had to be struck at the end of every performance and the show also had a time restriction which meant that the script had to be cut and tightened from the Roundhouse Community Centre version. Jonathon Young addresses this process:

A lot of the cutting was done by Kevin and I; that was the first time there was a reduced number of us making decisions. It was much easier because suddenly we didn’t have to have four opinions and we came to a bunch of decisions really quickly. We started with things we did not like. (Young)

For this version of the script, the dynamic of the group was changed to accommodate the

busy lives of the collective, so the majority of the changes were made by two members of the group. This made the process slightly more efficient because the decisions involved fewer people. In this version, one of the first things to be reduced was the Narrator, played by Judy Closky, in order to place the focus back on the story of Tesla's legacy rather than the Narrator's interaction with it. Kerr explains the changes to the Narrator:

We began the process of streamlining the Narrator to get out all the excessive story of her working for a CD ROM encyclopaedia. Yet she still had a station outside the play and started sounding closer to what the Narrator is today. (Kerr)

In the Roundhouse version, the Electrics also added a scene where Robert tries to make amends for *Century* magazine's lack of support for Tesla. Robert is the editor of *Century Magazine* which supports Tesla at the height of his career. However, when Tesla's career begins to wane, *Century's* support for him does as well, causing a rift in Tesla's relationship with Robert. They learned through this production that it is "better to leave audiences right after the destruction of the relationship as opposed to having to tie everything up" (Kerr) so the scene was eventually cut. In the process of re-working this play, they were learning dramaturgical lessons about narrative. In this case, they discovered that it was more interesting to structure the play so it does not come to a stable conclusion. Tesla's career, in this play, fails partly because of his broken link with the outside world (Robert and Katherine) and this reinforces the importance of the group as a function of success, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between process and content which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Another major change they made for the High Performance Rodeo version

concerned the intermission. The Roundhouse performance included an intermission which was an essential break considering the length of the production. However, they could not have an intermission for the Rodeo because the time constraints would not allow it. So they created an innovative intermission substitute through a parody commercial for the United States military about Tesla's HAARP project in Alaska. The HAARP project was an Air Force and Navy project that involved sending "so much radio energy at a specific portion of the earth's ionosphere that it bulged into space" (49). However, Tesla's patents used for this project outlined "techniques for experiments in weather manipulation, communication blackouts, and thought control" (49). The video satirizes the military implications of Tesla's work which Margaret Cheney discusses in her biography. For example, Tesla worked with the American military to develop the early technology for remote-controlled naval ships in 1898 (Cheney 161) and later became worried about the uses of his military inventions (203). Shortly after Tesla died, his research materials were confiscated by the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). It is posited that his materials were sequestered because his inventions had military implications that the CIA did not want to be procured by enemy governments. This video, satirizing HAARP, maintained the two-act structure of the play they wanted to preserve while still adhering to the requirements of the Rodeo.

In subsequent versions, the video was dropped in favour of an actual intermission break. A significant implication in cutting this video is that they had to change their script given the demands of the festival, but when these constraints were removed, they changed the script again to allow for the intermission break. The HAARP subject is maintained in the final product as a passage spoken by the Narrator (49). This reinforces

the product's relationship with process as the script is changed and adapted to suit production venues.

Edinburgh Festival

In 2003 they took the show up again and launched a tour that was to start at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland. Subsequently, the script underwent further changes, which the Electrics felt were easy to make because they could more clearly identify what was necessary and what was not. For example, the decision to cut a scene with Robert, Katherine, and Tesla that took place at the top of a precipice was made easily because they decided it was extraneous to the story.

One of the more notable changes was to make the Narrator male again. This decision was made in order to streamline the number of actors in the play, making it easier to tour: the Narrator part was given to David Hudgins, who was also playing the part of Edison. This double-casting has been maintained through all subsequent productions. Motivated by the demands of touring, this change speaks to the way process can affect the final product of a collectively created script. Also, with the same actor playing Tesla's legacy and biggest rival (the Narrator and Edison), a new dynamic is created. The Narrator is the central motivation behind the play. He tells us the story; it is his inspiration and love for Tesla that makes this story worth telling. When the same actor plays Edison (the protagonist's arch rival), his subjectivity as an unreliable narrator becomes clear. Because Tesla and Edison were fierce competitors and the Narrator shows himself as having a deep respect for Tesla's legacy, the portrayal of Edison as 'the bad guy' becomes subjectively motivated to suit the Narrator's vision of Tesla. This

change to the script, while motivated by practicality, makes a drastic supposition about the reliability of this Narrator.

Critical Responses

Throughout the extensive touring, there have been many reviews written about *Brilliant!* This section will highlight some critical responses to the play that relate to the issues the company experienced in development. One element that many critics commented on was the simple beginnings the production reflected. In Kamloops, Mike Younds noted,

From the opening scene to the repeated bows, *Brilliant!* shines with the polish of years of refinement, performance and the tight discipline that fringe theatre can provide.

It is apparent that he points at the importance of this production beginning as a Fringe festival performance. Fringe Festivals are important grounds of experimentation for small companies like the Electric Company because they enable a company to produce a show with little economic risk. Ksenija Horvat called the show “Simple yet complex in its presentation,” a show which “imprints itself on its audience from the very beginning with its explosive music and visual images” (Horvat). This simple presentation is also discussed by Catherine Larson of the Ottawa Citizen:

Brilliant! made its debut 10 years ago at the Vancouver Fringe Festival, and reveals its simple origins in its economical use of props. A large white orb is employed as a screen for filmed images, a transmitter for one of Tesla's inventions and even a

precarious platform for the man to stand on. (Larson)

The example that Larson gives for the simplicity and economical use of props is the large canvas spheres which are used in a number of practical ways in addition to their figurative use as a representation of Tesla's obsessions. *Brilliant!* was originally made to fit a forty-five minute festival format which would involve having to strike the set after each performance. Though *Brilliant!* started as a Fringe show, it has maintained its austerity to fit the demands of touring; these demands include the need to easily pack up and transport the entire production to another city in the most cost-effective way possible.

Many critics also commented on the filmic quality of the production. Sarah Frater reviewed the show at the Edinburgh Festival and noted that the production was similar to the style of "a blossoming Robert Lepage." She also noted that

The play's opening is strangely reminiscent of Hitchcock's *The Birds*, as it projects images of pigeons onto a large globe while their cooing fills the theatre - just the kind of tangential introduction you might expect from a production that conveys alternating current through two people whirling a coiled wire until it forms a horizontal S, and dares to turn some of Tesla's calculations into tap dances. (Frater)

Frater says that their use of projections is evocative of a film, in this case, an Alfred Hitchcock. She also connects the technological subject of Nikola Tesla and the technological presentation of the play. However, she refers to the projections of the pigeons at the beginning as tangential, meaning aside from the main purpose of the play. But, the projection (a technological advance of contemporary theatre) onto a canvas ball

(meant to symbolize Tesla's obsessions) of pigeons (the creature he adores for its complex communication system) is important to draw connections with Tesla's obsessions with the technological advances in society. In this device, the Electrics are giving a metaphoric picture of Tesla's character in using technology to portray his obsessions.

Many of the reviews also comment on the theatricality of the production. Liz Nicholls of the Edmonton Journal noted that

There's a bizarre theatrical originality in every aspect of Tesla's story in the hands of four actors, equipped with an inflatable ball, some ladders, flashlights, a translucent screen, projections, sound effects—and their wits.

While many of the critics focused on the theatricality and innovative staging of the production, few commented on the story itself. However, Nicholls found the story to be particularly moving:

It's consistently playful and fun to watch. And it's moving, too, to see the tragic dimension of genius, how precarious it is, how isolating, how close to madness, as Tesla comes up against the corporate infrastructure of the young country and finds it unexpectedly immovable. There are all kinds of resonances here: the immigrant experience, the telepathic magic of intellectual energy, the indefinable sixth or seventh sense for connections.

(Nicholls)

In contrast, Martin Morrow, in a review of their performance at the Rodeo, asserts:

There are some weak spots. Like most multi-media productions, this one could make better use of its film and video segments, and it would be nice to have a few basic explanations of the scientific principles Tesla was working with. (16)

Although Morrow's review was mostly favourable, he points towards a common theme throughout the critical reception of *Brilliant!* which is the desire for more information, in this case about Tesla's inventions.

The genre of scientific theatre poses difficult challenges because a science play can take a number of different forms in covering either the science itself (including ethical debates) or the scientists. In this case, the *Electrics* cover both, but put the focus mainly on the scientist. Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, author of *Science Onstage*, observes:

[Scientists] are irresistible partly because of their authenticity, and because of the liberating quality of their often unconventional behaviour. Quirky, idiosyncratic behaviour can be deeply appealing and cathartic for ordinary mortals in the theatre to watch. Unlike the rest of us, these characters are geniuses; and their genius at once produces and excuses their unconventional behaviour. (54)

Shepherd-Barr indicates that the behavioural motivation behind presenting a play with a scientific theme is that the scientists are interesting and strange people who make for interesting theatre. She also notes that

the love of science for science's sake can also take darker undertones in science plays. This Faustian aspect can lead to such

atrocities as eugenics and the proliferation of atomic weapons, leading in turn to the constant threat of annihilation, and it is a very prominent theme. (59)

The connection that Shepherd-Barr observes between the Faustian bargain and the interest of science is aligned with the Electric's portrayal of Tesla. However, in this case, Tesla's Faustian bargain concerns his personal life more than the danger in his inventions. The extent to which Tesla's inventions have impacted newly developed and dangerous technology is largely unknown because most of the information about his work is riddled with conspiracy theory. However, Tesla's Faustian need for information and invention led to a dismal personal and professional situation later in his life.

The critical responses to *Brilliant!* were mostly positive as the critics were pleased with its theatricality, use of filmic qualities, and simple complexity. However, as the next chapter will discuss, the critics had concerns with having little information about Tesla's life. This chapter has focussed on the process that Electric Company Theatre used to create the many versions of *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* and has discussed some of the issues that arise from the collective collaborative process; it outlines the beginning of the process, performances, and subsequent development. These processes and the critical review of the work demonstrate the tension between the narrative and the staging, and how process is affected by practical concerns. The next chapter will discuss the published script, and further elucidate issues in the process of creation, notably concerning biography and staging.

Chapter Four:

The Influence of Source Materials

In order to discuss the process of collective creation, as Knowles and Shand note, we must examine not only the process but the final product as well. In this chapter I will consider the published script as the final product to illuminate more about the process that the Electrics engaged in to create this production. Although there were small changes made to the script after it was published, I will use the published script as a final product in order to establish a reference point to when most of the changes ceased. This chapter will include the influence of Margaret Cheney's book Tesla: Man out of Time.

Biography

Though much has been written about the Tesla, Cheney's work includes research from previous biographies as well as primary resource materials from museums including letters, newspaper articles, and journals. Kevin Kerr stumbled upon Cheney's book while trying to answer a question posed to him by a tourist while he was a tour guide.

Cheney's book directly influences much of the dialogue and events in the play. Kerr stated in the companion guide for the production at the National Arts Centre that "*Brilliant!* is based almost entirely in fact" (James 14).

In creating a biographical drama, there is much difficulty in maintaining balance between fact and theatricality, fact and narrative, and fact and an audience's attention span. Certainly, the story of a prolific inventor such as Tesla-- whose life was fraught with publicity, friendships, eccentricities, and the birth of a new era-- is difficult to fit into a forty-five minute show, a seventy-five minute show and even a two and a half hour

show. The Electrics felt this difficulty after the first version and thus embarked on the massive expansion, then subsequent attempts to reduce the play's content while preserving its heart- the legacy of Nikola Tesla. Despite the attempts to include as much information as possible, it still proved unsatisfying to some critics. In 2005, the company took the show to San Jose where Marianne Messina reviewed it:

Uncertain chronology and data-overload conspire with this fragmentation to send anyone who doesn't have a solid background in science history scrambling to the seven pages of program notes on Tesla's life (put together by dramaturg Johnny Miller) looking for coherence. But once you know that Tesla spoke eight languages, had eidetic memory and impressed his elementary school teachers with calculus, you have the luxury of accessing the play's depth. (Messina)

Messina felt that the story was too complex to understand without having prior knowledge of Tesla's life. The tension between narrative and theatricality is a significant dramaturgical concern for the Electrics. They recognize their desire to maintain a "visceral journey" through spectacle while still preserving "pure narrative" (Kerr and Young 91). Despite these concerns, Messina is unsatisfied with the episodic and thematic narrative. However, since it is difficult to create a script that includes decades of material and still be cohesive, the Electrics opted for a less chronological, more episodic structure; the structure is bound by ideas rather than time. This appears to be a direct influence of the structure Cheney used, which may have been the result of her own difficulty in capturing Tesla's life completely.

Cheney divides the book into thirty chapters, each focusing on ideas like Tesla's robotic technology, and his love for pigeons. The Electrics used this kind of structure as well. For example, there are twenty-three individual scenes-- most of which are montages and shorter episodes. The shorter scenes do not follow a specific chronology and they are thematically situated. The longer scenes involve the trio of Robert, Katherine and Tesla. At the heart of these scenes, which represent the present tense of the play, is the development of their friendship. That these are the longest scenes suggests that they are the most significant because they are given a journey that is presented chronologically. The present tense in which these scenes are played enhances the immediacy of them, also contributing to their significance.

When Katherine and Robert meet Tesla for the first time, they become almost instantly intrigued by his inventions. At the end of the scene, Robert is inside Tesla's early x-ray machine and reaches the height of inspiration, saying, "Ah! I invented my own form of sonnet, with its own rhythm and rhyme scheme. My own sonnet! A Johnson. Katherine, I have a Johnson!" (23). This scene establishes the beginning of a friendship based upon Katherine and Robert's fascination for Tesla.

In the next scene that develops their relationship, Katherine is writing a letter to Tesla and is desperate for him to visit them. She begins to levitate and says,

Sometimes I hope you will make me tell you what I know about transference, one would need to feel herself en rapport to speak of such things. I have had such wonderful experiences, I sometimes fear it will all pass away with me and you of all persons ought to know something of it for you could not fail to have a scientific

interest in it. (26-7)

Katherine is making herself vulnerable by expressing to Tesla that she is afraid her excitement will disappear. Cheney discusses the fondness that Katherine had for Tesla and notes that her letters sometimes reached towards desperately loving: “effusive and intimate, they sometimes seem to stop just short of becoming love letters” (142). In the play she returns to her seat as the letter comes to a close and she returns her attention to Robert. This levitation indicates a mental uplifting she receives from Tesla. In addition, this movement where she begins in her seat, rises up, and lowers back down mimics the sine wave of an alternating current. He has electrified her with his invention.

The next scene involving the trio is entitled “Interference.” The three are sitting at the upscale Waldorf Astoria hotel, in a restaurant that Tesla frequented. In this scene Tesla reaches an epiphany that is demonstrated by a series of numbers and movements performed by all three actors.⁵ While Tesla is at dinner with Robert and Katherine, he is unable to focus on their company because he is constantly consumed by his work (32). This theme is carried through to the next meeting among the trio at the Waldorf. Tesla and Katherine are both anxious: Tesla is upset over his lack of progress in the last year and Katherine is upset about the lack of communication she has received from him. Tesla apologizes, saying, “I confess I am totally consumed. Continuous, tortured concentration [...] The possibility of a blood clot or atrophy of the brain is a constant threat to me” (42). Then the canvas sphere appears, “distracting Tesla,” and the three-way communication breaks down. Katherine and Robert are cultivating the whole discussion when Tesla becomes confused and fixated on the sphere-- a physical manifestation of

⁵ This device will be discussed later in this chapter and I will omit discussing its significance here in favour of focussing on the concerns of the trio.

Tesla's "singular vision" (4). The scene's main function is to demonstrate the difficulty Tesla has in preserving friendships as well as to carry forward the story of his career. The conversation then switches towards speaking about the state of Tesla's persona in the media and the competitiveness of invention. Marconi, another inventor, has defeated Tesla in transmitting messages without wires. In this instance, the role Katherine and Robert play in Tesla's career is as his contact to the outside world-- one which he does not participate in by ignoring them. Subsequently, he loses touch with Marconi's progress and, as a result, his career takes a dismal turn.

The final scene with the trio occurs right after Tesla's failed pitch to Morgan for funding. Tesla's indifference to Katherine's attempt at condolences leads her to say, "You don't need anyone, do you? How strange it is that we can't do without you," and an argument ensues over Robert's failure to support Tesla in the media. The trio is broken. In real life, the three remained friends long into the future, but in the context of the play, their friendship is broken. In the Roundhouse version the Electrics wrote a scene where Robert tries to make amends with Tesla after this fight. However, the Electrics discovered that it is more dramatic to leave the problems unresolved (Kerr) and in doing so, reinforce the importance of collaboration in order to maintain happiness and productivity. Tesla's reclusive nature and indifference towards his links to the outside world leads to his failure. He ignores Katherine's attempts to keep him apprised of current events in technology, thinking that the only thing that matters is his inventions. This theme is made more significant because the longest scenes in a play full of short scenes are those in which these two characters discuss this matter. The significance of this theme is reflected in the process of creation for the Electric Company; the collective

requires an equal commitment by each of its members in order to maintain its structure as a collaborative relationship. Tesla's failure becomes a direct result of his passivity towards the collective.

The Electrics also illuminate Tesla's failure in another, more literary, way. Tesla is noted for being able to quote, at length, passages from Goethe's *Faust* (Cheney 44). The Electrics draw on this fact in order to highlight Tesla's hubris, his striving for knowledge at all costs. The passage that Tesla quotes at the beginning of the play suggests that the world is at his feet:

Here, Faustus, is thy world—a world!
Still dost thou ask, why in thy breast
The sick heart flutters ill at rest?
Why a dull sense of suffering
Deadens life's current at the spring? (8)

Tesla, like Faust, has a great deal of potential and yet he still suffers. For both Faustus and Tesla, the suffering comes from inactivity and lack of progress: Faustus craves knowledge of all things, and Tesla fears atrophy in his brain. The passage continues,

It is, it is the planet hour
Of thy own being: light, and power,
And fervour to the soul are given,
As proudly, it ascends its heaven
To ponder here, o'er spells and signs,
Symbolic letters, circles, lines,
Then ye, whom I feel floating near me,

Spirits, answer, ye who hear me! (8)

This passage acts as a conjuring of inspiration as he calls to the heavens, “spirits, answer, ye who hear me!” Shortly after, there is a lightning flash and Tesla “freezes as if he is being clutched... from the inside. Collapsing to his knees he grabs a stick and draws in the sand” the diagram for the magnetic field of the alternating current system (9). This passage contains the same image that the Narrator shows him in his dream which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. The references to light, power, letters, circles, and lines imply that Tesla, like Faust, is to “ponder here, o’er spells and signs, Symbolic letters, circles, [and] lines” of electricity and inventions to harness it. Young comments on the Electric’s fascination with Tesla and the Faustian bargain:

I think the reference to the Faustian bargain was something that rang true. Apparently Tesla could quote Faust by heart so it was just too perfect for us that Tesla would associate with the story of a man who traded his soul for knowledge. I also think that it sets the mood of a gothic inventor from Budapest. It sets a time and mood that has that darkness and sorcerer element; all that electricity is like dark magic and not something that we are comfortable with. We wanted to find a way to remind the audience of what it was to everyone and it was this force that was not well understood and was potentially evil. (Young)

So these passages serve a two-fold purpose: first they include biographical information about Tesla and draw the connections between him and Faust, and second they add a gothic element to the atmosphere of the play. For example, Tesla had a problem with the

inadequacy of language during his time. He would say to the press things like he had “harnessed the rays of the sun” (Cheney 155) which in contemporary language, we would refer to as “solar power”. This caused people to fear him because language could not keep up with the speed of invention and the term “solar power” did not yet exist. Though this reference is not used in the play, it speaks to a culmination of the fear of the unknown which also contributes to the gothic quality of the piece.

In addition to covering major biographical plotlines in Tesla’s life and career, the Electrics also strive to illuminate the man and his eccentricities; these include his love for pigeons, his dismissal of experimentation in favour of the flashes of inspiration, and his rules for personal contact. The pigeons become of particular importance in the play because the death of his favourite pigeon is paralleled with his fall and coincides with his loss of inspiration. In *Brilliant!*’s final version, Tesla describes his love for pigeons as though they are his children: “I am close to each bird in different ways but there is one—she is very special—we spend hours together, laughing and...she is all white with grey tips on her wings, very beautiful, very passionate” (24). The way that Tesla speaks of this pigeon makes him seem more like an artist than a scientist-- speaking of pigeons as though they are worthy of worship. Tesla then says, “These birds have extremely sophisticated methods of communication. *(To Katherine)* We speak of the mind as a receiver, for instance, well, these creatures are equipped with the most sensitive...But I shall keep them waiting” (24). The latter half of this speech contains a tremendous amount of scientific interest in the pigeons’ method of communication. This is important because a large portion of Tesla’s career is focussed on radio and wireless communication, so his fascination with their beauty is explicitly important to his work.

With this element, the Electrics have portrayed his eccentric nature as a function of his scientific mind and use it to enhance the completeness of his obsession.

In this scene, Tesla also notes that “I have been feeding pigeons, thousands of them, for years. But there is one who was unlike all the rest. All white with grey tips on her wings. I would know her anywhere, I had only to call and she would come” (64). In Cheney’s book, the quote appears:

“I have been feeding pigeons, thousands of them, for years,” he said. “Thousands of them, for who can tell--. “But there is one pigeon, a beautiful bird, pure white with light gray tips on its wings; that one was different. It was female. I would know that pigeon anywhere.” (282)

These are a series of quotes from Tesla to two reporters that are written in the past tense, suggesting that Tesla’s special pigeon has already died. There are few changes to this quote from the biography to the play except for that the Electrics put this line in the present tense, as though she is still alive. Changing the quote to the present tense promotes the immediacy of his love for her in the play.

As the script progresses towards Tesla’s fall from grace, one of the most profoundly sad moments in the play occurs when Tesla’s favourite pigeon dies, solidifying Tesla’s deterioration. He says, “I loved her like a man loves a woman, and she loved me” (64). Then the stage directions indicate:

As Tesla touches her, the Pigeon becomes distinctly woman-like. Waltz music. They dance. Tesla’s past glories rush by them until they are dancing in the hills of Budapest. As the music fades, the

Pigeon transforms again and perches beside him, dying. (64)

Then the Narrator quotes Tesla: “I had always known I would finish my life’s work, no matter how difficult. But when that bird died something went out of my life.” Cheney reports that the statement originally appeared as:

When that pigeon died, something went out of my life. Up to that time, I knew with a certainty that I would complete my work, no matter how ambitious my program, but when that something went out of my life I knew my life’s work was finished. (283)

Again, the Electrics have taken a biographical passage from Cheney’s work and given it significance by juxtaposing it to his failing career. This exemplifies the way in which the Electrics take historical information from the biography and create dialogue out of it to make clear the connections between Tesla’s obsessions and his career.

The Light

One of the fascinating things about Tesla as an inventor is his process of invention. He is noted for not ever committing ideas to paper until they were fully fleshed out in his mind. Cheney quotes Tesla: “there is scarcely a subject that cannot be mathematically treated and the effects calculated or the results determined beforehand from the available theoretical and practical data” (32). However, “later in life his methods of research came to resemble more closely the empirical approach of Edison” (33). Cheney notes that Tesla was plagued with inexplicable flashes of light that usually occurred “when he was greatly elated” (Cheney 34). Tesla also said that “these luminous phenomena still manifested themselves from time to time, as when a new idea opening up

new possibilities strikes me” (Cheney 34). This method of working was important for the Electrics to convey in a fascinating scene involving Katherine, Robert and Tesla. A series of numbers and corresponding tableaux are presented by the actors to convey the complex interrogation in Tesla’s mind before he makes a discovery. During this dinner, Tesla, Robert and Katherine first repeat the numbers one, two, and three, simultaneously looping. At different intervals, the same number will be spoken at the same time by two or all three actors. Once the actors have reached the ninetyeth beat, they all begin repeating the number three until the end of the final beat (one hundred and eight), the scene shifts back to the Waldorf Hotel and the dialogue resumes. This passage is shown below:

Figure 4.1 Excerpt from Collier, Kim et al. *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* (Victoria, British Columbia: Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2004) 33.

	* *
Tesla	1 1 1 1 2 3 3 1 1 1 2 3
Robert	1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 2 3 3 1 1 1 2 3
Katherine	1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 2 3 3 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 3

	* *
Tesla	3 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 1 2 2 1 2 2 1 2 2
Robert	3 1 1 1 2 3 3 1 2 2 1 2 2 1 2 2
Katherine	3 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 1 2 2 1 2 2 1 2 2

	* *
Tesla	2 3 3 3 3 3 3 3
Robert	2 3 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 1
Katherine	2 3 3 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 1

	* *
Tesla	3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3
Robert	2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3
Katherine	2 3 1 2 3 1 2 1 2 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

Tesla had an obsession with the number three and numbers that were divisible by three (Cheney 19). This passage contains many numbers divisible by three; first the *trio* counts to three on a loop which shifts to only repeating the number three at the ninetieth beat, which is divisible by three (equalling thirty which is also divisible by three). Then they reach beat number one hundred and eight which is divisible by three- three times. This carefully constructed number of beats is given after Katherine requests, “Let us back into your brain” (33).

After a short section of dialogue, another sequence of numbers begins and is quite a bit more complex than the last.

Figure 4.2 Excerpt from Collier, Kim et al. *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* (Victoria, British Columbia: Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2004) 34.

	* *
Tesla	fif teen thir ty six ty
Robert	
Katherine	
Waiter	4 3 2 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 2 3 4 3 2 1 2 3 4 3 2

	* *
Tesla	1 2 3 4 six ty 1 twen ty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 1
Robert	1 2 3 4 six ty 1 twen ty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 1
Katherine	1 2 3 4 six ty 1 twen ty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 1
Waiter	1 2 3 4 six ty 1 twen ty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 1

	* *
Tesla	six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 2 six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty
Robert	six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 2 six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty
Katherine	six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 2 six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty
Waiter	six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty 2 for ty 3 hun dred 2 six ty 1 twenty 1 eigh ty

	* * * * * * * * *
Tesla	2 for ty 3 hun dred 3
Robert	2 for ty 3 hun dred 3
Katherine	2 for ty 3 hun dred 3
Waiter	2 for ty 3 hun dred 3

This time the number loop begins with four and is counted down to one on a repeated loop. During which, the numbers fifteen, thirty, and sixty are also spoken. This time the numbers are larger, indicating that he is closer to the epiphany than he was with the previous sequence. The numbers twenty, eighty, and one hundred do not create whole numbers when divided by three, but they do create numbers with infinitely repeating decimals. These infinitely repeating decimals are either threes or sixes. This use of more complex numbers is also indicative that he is closer to epiphany. At the end of this second sequence the stage directions indicate that “Tesla experiences a startling visionary insight. Unable to speak, he rushes out, ecstatic”(34). The epiphany that Tesla experiences is one of the blinding visions he was noted for having. This exciting scene attempts to show Tesla’s mind deeply engrossed in a series of numbers, on the verge of invention, by alluding to his ability to create entirely in his head. It also depicts his exceeding expertise in math and his eccentric obsession with numbers that have a relation to three. In creating a demonstration of all three of these elements of Tesla’s character, the Electrics efficiently fit this important biographical information into the script through metaphor in order to augment the summary from the Narrator and existing dialogue.

Tesla described his problem with flashes of imagery in his everyday life as

a peculiar affliction due to the appearance of images, often accompanied by strong flashes of light, which marred the sight of real objects and interfered with my thought and action. [...] When a word was spoken to me the image of the object it designated would present itself vividly to my vision and sometimes I was

quite unable to distinguish whether what I saw was tangible or not.
(quoted in Cheney 31)

Tesla's ability to see inventions in their entirety before working them out on the page presumably led him to attempt an invention where images from the brain could be projected to the outside world, giving abstract or incommunicable ideas a form. He noted that "it should be possible to project on a screen the image of any object one conceives and make it visible" (Cheney 31). Such an invention seems far out of reach even for our current technology, but it led Tesla to invent the early prototypes for the x-ray. The Electrics chose to stage this fantasy invention when Tesla, Robert and Katherine first meet. Tesla has Robert use the machine who is ecstatic after he is removed from it. Robert says:

I had been writing, I think inside your machine, and the poems just materialized complete from start to finish. And I was just merrily transcribing away in there. And as each poem flowed effortlessly onto the page it was as though another was lined up patiently behind it. And the pages, I felt, were just falling out behind me, like a wake behind a boat! (22-23)

Cheney clarifies that Tesla's claim of inventing this technology may have been fabricated and that if it were true, "he would have to have been using equipment far more advanced than anything we now believe existed at that time" (134). In fact, it is now known "radiation can cause 'flashes' in the eye, and with overexposure, cataracts" (135), so the experience that Robert has with Tesla's x-ray machine in the play is scientifically explained as radiation poisoning. This is important for the mythology behind Tesla

because of the wild claims he was known to make. The Electrics describe their fascination with Tesla as an expressly theatrical human being and in a theatricality which comes from the inadequacy of scientific language mentioned earlier. Tesla reaches for this particular invention because of his affliction with flashes of light, something that will capture what is inside his mind, or something to help him improve his inventions created in his head. This becomes important for the Electrics to stage because the fantasy invention makes him exponentially more fascinating to Robert and Katherine, explaining why he might be so intriguing to them. It also alludes to his claim of having invented the machine and encompasses some of the myth surrounding Tesla which allows the audience to see the outrageous theatricality of this man in real life. The Electrics used Cheney's book as source material so they would have been aware of this invention as a fantasy. Therefore, in staging this fantasy invention, they demonstrate the wild claims that Tesla made which contributed to his theatricality.

Tesla had become so used to these blinding flashes of light that he could track and predict their progress from start to finish. He says, "before falling asleep, images of persons or objects flit before my view. When I see them, I know that I am about to lose consciousness" (Cheney 34). The Electrics first use this in their scene entitled "The Lightning Walk."

Lightning flash. Tesla experiences a vision. As he draws it on the ground, the diagram appears.

He freezes as if he is being clutched...from the inside. Collapsing to his knees he grabs a stick and draws it in the sand. The diagram. The answer. It is a rotating magnetic field. It is the heart of the

Polyphase Alternating Current System. A system that will transform the field of electricity, transform all of industry, transform all of society, transform the entire world. And he knows it.

Lightning flashes. Blackout. (9)

The vision occurs directly after Tesla recites Goethe's *Faust* and is reminiscent of a story that Cheney tells about Tesla and his dear friend Szigety walking through a city park.

Then, "the idea came like a flash of lightning, and in an instant, the truth was revealed." Tesla's long, waving arms froze in midair as if he had been seized with a fit. Szigety, alarmed, tried to lead him to a bench, but Tesla would not sit until he found a stick. Then he began to draw a diagram in the dust. (44)

It was the initial plans for the AC motors, an invention that had been eluding engineers for years. The Electrics assign a sense of great discovery to this passage as a demonstration of the theatricality of Tesla's process of invention and the anticipation of a new era. They removed Tesla's friend Szigety from the discovery in an attempt to streamline the characters in the play but maintain Tesla's recitation of Goethe's *Faust*. The Electrics use this image again in the scene entitled "The Meeting" where the Narrator appears to him in a dream.

It was in 1899, I think...Yes...1899. I had a vision...a vision that I was no longer in the city, but in a wide open place in the countryside. A lightning storm was flashing on the horizon...powerful bolts of electricity that seemed to be in some

way...energizing the earth itself. And as I watched this in
fascination, a man appeared to me. (35)

The lightning that seems to electrify the earth is indicative of Tesla's relationship with his blinding flashes. It is also symptomatic of Tesla's relationship with electricity and his life-long quest to harness it. The figure that appears is played by the Narrator and is meant to establish a connection between the modern era and present day. Tesla recalls, "he wanted to thank me for all I had done. 'I am your legacy,' he said. 'I am your greatest invention,' and then he showed me a marvellous thing" (35).

The Electrics in this scene combine the fervour of invention with the legacy that Tesla has left with the contemporary world. This staged vision becomes a form of poetic realism where the Electrics take a real event and place it in a dream where the past and future interact. This appears in the script as a stage direction:

A shot of the Narrator's hands. A black iron rod lies across them.
Suddenly he is on all fours, digging in the sand. As Tesla watches
with fascination, the Narrator drives one end of the rod into the
ground then stands beside it proudly gesticulating. Tesla is
confused. In slow motion the Narrator reaches out and clasps the
end of the rod. He begins to glow. Everything glows. It's as
though electricity is travelling directly from the earth through the
Narrator and into the night sky. (35-6)

Given that Tesla's real-life epiphanies manifested themselves as blinding lights, and that the entirety of his research concerned electricity, this image not only serves as a historical depiction of Tesla's mode of invention, like the previous vision, but also signifies the

legacy because it is the Narrator that appears to him. In recounting this image to Tesla, the Narrator explains the impact that Tesla has had in the modern world. This is another example of how the Electrics use anecdotes from Cheney's work to enhance Tesla's legacy in the contemporary world. This layering of biographical information with larger meanings is also indicative of the episodic structure of the play.

Cheney's biography has influenced the development of *Brilliant!* most notably in the structure of the play, in some of the biographical anecdotes that are modified to fit the story, and in some dialogue. I do not mean to say that this was the only resource that the Electrics used because they also used a series of books, images, movies, and music in their research. However, since this is a seminal book on Tesla and the critical reception of the play has often focussed on the problem of biography, it is useful to see how the Electrics addressed this issue. The next chapter will focus on elements of the play that became important to the development process.

Chapter Five:

The Elements of the Play

This chapter focuses on various elements which underwent many changes and became key theatrical and narrative features in the published script. This includes the Narrator, whose interaction with the play has evolved a great deal since the first production. It also includes a discussion of some of the embedded genres alluded to in the process chapter, and some of the key design features that evolved over the course of the play's development.

The Narrator

In the last chapter, I addressed how the Narrator was connected to the biographical information given in the play. However, the Narrator's function is not just to drive the biographical information-- the way he interacts with the story itself is much more complex. In *Brilliant!*, there are two main time periods: the 19th century and the end of the 20th. The Narrator most often serves as the bridge between these two time periods by commenting on the history of Nikola Tesla and making it relevant to the present day. Theatre theoretician Manfred Pfister's ideas are helpful in understanding the Narrator's position within the play. He outlines three communication systems: the internal, mediating, and external. The internal communication system is the means by which the actor interacts with the character. The external communication system is essentially the playwright- the one who communicates the play to the audience. The mediating communication system is what mediates between the internal and external.

Pfister observes that some narrators can transcend "the merely explanatory and

reflective function of the chorus, [and] appear as the fictional authorial subject presenting the internal dramatic system” (75). In this way, narrators

develop an independent figure-perspective, that is superordinate to and embraces those [perspectives] of all the other figures on the internal dramatic layer. His superordinate perspective is demonstrated by the fact that he possesses far more information than the figures of ‘his’ play. (Pfister 76)

This unique position allows him to “disrupt the level of information in the internal communication system at any time” (76). Essentially, this is how the Narrator started in this piece; the original Narrator (Phil from the info-geek highway) told the story of Tesla’s life from his own outside perspective in the wake of the invention of the internet, making him the fictional author of the internal story and therefore, part of the external communicating system. His omniscience allows him to tell the parts of the story he wants to tell; essentially, he is the playwright. The Narrator holds all the information, and he drives the story by introducing the scenes which cover ideas essential to the play.

The external function that the Narrator serves through most of the play is also linked to the open time structure that it employs. Pfister notes that time-space *deixis* (context) is introduced to provide an explanation to the audience (254). In this case, the Narrator provides the temporal and spatial context for the audience to interpret. This means that the function of the Narrator is to communicate with the audience and comment on the past’s influence on the present. In the Roundhouse version, the Narrator had a larger role in drawing the connection between the modern era and the present. This was because the Electrics wanted to demonstrate a link between the rise of the internet

and the birth of the modern era. With the birth of the internet, society was changed drastically as information could be exchanged faster and more conveniently than ever before. This parallels Tesla's time when electricity and other technologies were changing rapidly and everyday life was becoming drastically different; the Narrator's function was to communicate this relationship between the past and the present.

The Narrator serves this external function for a large portion of the play but in two cases, he begins to interact and he attempts integration-- that is to say, he attempts to become part of the mediating and then the internal systems. In attempting to integrate into the action of the play, the Narrator mediates between the external communication system (the playwright) and the internal communication system (the players) (Pfister 3). He takes his mediating position for the first time in the scene "The Meeting" (35). This scene is a staged vision where the Narrator attempts to speak to Tesla, and explain to him the impact Tesla has had on the future. The Narrator says to Tesla, "I am your legacy," and "I am your greatest invention." Tesla recounts this meeting as an old man. The significance of this scene is that the Narrator, for the first time, attempts to speak to Tesla and explain to him the legacy Tesla has left for the contemporary world. The Narrator's attempt to speak directly to Tesla puts the Narrator in the mediating position between the 19th century world of the play (Tesla) and the audience.

Another position the Narrator takes is entirely within the internal system: the Narrator's direct interaction with Tesla near the end of the play. Tesla's favourite pigeon dies and he asks the Narrator to "bring her back." When the Narrator cannot, he pleads, "then begin again." When the Narrator says that he cannot do that either, Tesla attempts to summon the beginning by repeating the opening lines, "It's 1882 in Budapest, a

young man is walking, his thoughts drift to a favourite passage from Faust and he speaks it aloud...” (65). However, the play does not begin again. The Narrator’s position within the internal communicating system is a significant move towards connecting and integrating the past with the present.

Embedded Genres

Throughout the final version, *Brilliant!* demonstrates the influence of various genres of film and theatre, as well as the resource material used in the development of the script. These influences highlight important aspects of the modern era and the story and include film and musicals. One specific film, Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, is invoked through the Narrator. Jonathon Young recalls that for him, *Citizen Kane*, a “metaphysical detective story,” was an inspiration for the mood of the piece (Young). At the beginning of the play, the Narrator’s words are reminiscent of the reporters in *Citizen Kane*, trying to understand Kane. He says,

He is a strange picture. Clinging to letters he has, until now, left unopened. This is how I see him at the end. Alone with his pigeons clutching a packet of dusty mementos. What does he fear? Perhaps he wonders that himself. He decides to read them—and that is the last time I can see him: as he is remembering her.

In 1943, Nikola Tesla died. The FBI confiscated three hundred thousand documents, most of them unpatented inventions and plans, packed into his tiny New York flat. Where the US government has these documents today is unknown. Last reported

sighting: 1943. (7)

The Narrator shares similarities with the reporters who are trying to distil what Kane's dying word, "Rosebud," meant. In effect they are trying to find the core of a man who was as inaccessible in life as he was in death. This is essentially the same journey that the Narrator embarks on while trying to "reassembl[e] history" (5) and understand Tesla.

Classic film is also invoked with the spinning newspaper which is used to enhance the press' invasiveness on a genius' mind. Stage directions describe this effect as "a low-fi method of evoking a classic film effect. An oversized newspaper front page is mounted on a single apparatus which the actor revolves as he rushes toward the audience" (4). The stage directions further indicate:

The first reporter rushes toward the audience with a spinning front page. The headline reads: WARDENCLYFFE: TOWER OF BABBLE? The second reporter follows, with the headline: ONE MILLION VOLTS BUT NO MILLIONAIRES. The Third Reporter concludes with: TESLA UNCOILED. (56)

Following this direction, the Narrator discusses Tesla's current troubles with the media and his career:

Of all Tesla's inventions, his unwitting contributions to the rise of tabloid media may have been the most enduring.

His failing finances had been lampooned in the press. Not to mention his belief that an advanced civilization on Mars was signalling him in New York.

Investors were withdrawing and his isolationist approach to

business had left him without resources, backers, or partners. And
with the competition closing in, time was running out. (56)

The juxtaposition of the spinning newspaper and Tesla's failing career exposes the media frenzy during this time. It is executed in a "low-fi" manner which points towards the early technologies of film and helps to foreground the drastic advancement of technology during the modern era. In invoking film in their work, the Electrics draw attention to the "constant tension between the immediate nature of theatre and our media culture" (Kerr and Young 84). So they found ways to "use the sensibility and the vocabulary of cinema [and] then translate it into a theatrical experience" (84).

In the scene "Colorado Springs" the Electrics use another element of film-- a silent film newsreel. It begins with "the sound of a projector switching on" which "runs throughout the scene" and is accompanied by the "soundtrack to a silent film" (36).

Further stage directions indicate that

The following scene is played as though it is three short scenes
from a newsreel depicting Tesla's year of work in the desert at
Colorado Springs. Choppy, sped up action takes place around a
large Tesla coil, emulating the style of an early silent film. (36)

The Narrator describes the scene as it is being acted in a silent film manner. The scene includes placards, reminiscent of silent film projections such as, "BY JOVE! THAT TESLA'S A MODERN ZEUS!" (36). Evoking silent film exemplifies technologies of the modern era and the media frenzy over these inventions.

Brilliant! also invokes the theatre musical to demonstrate the competition between Tesla and Edison. Tesla quit Edison's employment because Edison would not discuss

developing Alternating Current and a rivalry ensued. This rivalry fast reached cruel proportions as “families living in the neighbourhood of Edison’s huge laboratory began to notice that their pets were vanishing.” Edison was acquiring animals that he “electrocuted in deliberately crude experiments with alternating current” (Cheney 67) and distributing leaflets containing anti-alternating current propaganda. In the play, Edison and Tesla are competing for the Niagara Falls project and he electrocutes a small kitten (28). Edison then breaks out into the number “Be Direct With Me,” which contains lines such as:

When you’re alternating, vacillating,

How can I cope?

You shoot in all directions

And you scare me.

But when you’re direct with me, darlin’,

You fill me with hope.

Direct and to the point

Is how your snare me. (29)

This song is purely an invention of the Electrics and was one of the first elements to be developed in the creation of the script (Kerr). Edison’s inventions all used direct current which was not compatible with alternating current mechanics. This meant that if Tesla’s AC inventions gained popularity, Edison would lose a great deal of money. The song effectively portrays the competitive nature of this time as Edison appeals to public perception to try and prevent Tesla from winning the Niagara Falls contract. He takes the names “alternating” and “direct” and applies them to personality traits- alternating being

synonymous with erratic and direct with stable. In swaying public perception with a song, Edison ensures himself a favourable place in the media, thereby encouraging funding. This musical theatre composition shows a satirical picture of Edison's staunch criticism of Tesla. Typically in musical theatre, a song is used to highlight a particularly important emotion or event which works to the same effect in this play. Not only is this entertaining, but it also emphasizes Edison's sophistic abilities to convince the public of his technology at the expense of others, something that Tesla loses his ability to do when the media is no longer interested in him. This song demonstrates the importance of public perception in the race for invention because Edison uses it to manipulate the public's idea of what alternating current is by capitalizing on the fear of the unknown.

These embedded genres of the musical, classic and silent film evoke different time periods and have very specific functions for demonstrating aspects of Tesla's life and career. The musical demonstrates sophistry, and the classic and silent film effects demonstrate technology and the media frenzy in his time. All three contribute to the vivaciousness, indeed the electricity, of the play. The cornucopia of genres helps to construct a lively and theatrical work, aligning the presentation of the play with the thematic intention of its creators- Tesla helped to usher in the modern era, a time of discovery.

The Sphere

One of the major elements in *Brilliant!* is the canvas sphere; it is used for a number of practical purposes- a chair, a projection screen, and a set piece. It also has a symbolic use as the embodiment of Tesla's obsessions. During the early process of

developing *Brilliant!* the group wanted to establish an item that would convey Tesla's obsessions and they thought of the Wardencliffe tower-- Tesla's creation that would eventually lead to his downfall. The structure is a large wooden conical tower with a giant ball shape on top. This structure is also the cover illustration of Cheney's biography.

The sphere first appears as the audience enters the theatre. It has a pigeon projected on it and "sounds of their cooing and flapping fill the space" (7). This signifies the pigeon is extremely important to Tesla. The effect of projecting pigeons onto the sphere is to connect his love for pigeons and his obsessions; the immediacy of this image in the play increases its importance, giving the audience a few clues about what is significant to understanding Tesla.

The sphere is also shown after the silent film montage as Tesla conducts experiments for the media. The Narrator says, "finally, he has no choice but to close off the lab from the paparazzi and when he bars the final door the film comes to an end leaving Tesla alone in his increasingly obsessive fixations" (38). The stage directions indicate that "in a shadowy half-light, Tesla stands alone with the sphere and lost in thought. The Narrator appears from behind the sphere, holding, cupped in his hands, a glowing miniature version of the sphere" (38). It becomes apparent that the sphere represents Tesla's obsessions because the Narrator clarifies that Tesla is alone with his "obsessive fixations" and the only two things on the stage are Tesla and the sphere. The Narrator brings a miniature version of the sphere onstage, indicating the Narrator's own fixations on Tesla. In telling Tesla's story and bringing to light Tesla's legacy, he shares, in a small way, Tesla's obsessions.

Tesla's obsessions also accompany him on dinner engagements with Robert and Katherine. As noted earlier, the sphere appears during a discussion about Tesla's role in the media and how public perception has begun to turn against him. This demonstrates that even while conversations are happening about his failing career, he still maintains his singular vision of invention.

It also appears when Tesla is appealing to J.P. Morgan for money to finance his projects. He begins seated on top of the sphere and as the pitch continues, he begins to "deftly manipulate" it (57). This continues until after Tesla loses his composure and throws Serbian curse words at Morgan. Then the "sphere reappears, blocking [Tesla's] path" as if to stop him from leaving and incite him to appeal to Morgan more emotionally. At first, Tesla can manipulate the sphere, but when Morgan will not support Tesla, the sphere blocks him—as though Tesla's obsessions block his desire to quit. When the sphere blocks him, he turns back to Morgan and says,

Wardenclyffe is my flesh and bone, Mr. Morgan. And the construction is unbearably close to completion. If I can begin making convincing demonstrations I could... I am not a dreamer, but a practical man of great intuition, and my experiences are gained in long and bitter trials. (58)

After this, "the sphere bears down on Tesla. He senses it coming, looks over his shoulder and...Blackout" (58). Tesla's obsession presents a double-edged sword for him; it will not let him quit, but in continuing, he is overcome.

The sphere appears again after Tesla begs the Narrator to begin the story again. Tesla attempts to summon the past as the sphere "appears above him, bearing an image of

Wardencllyffe. As it lowers, Tesla is gradually obscured until he cannot be seen at all” (65), implying that his obsessions have consumed him entirely. In the following scene, the sphere “rolls off stage [and] Tesla is revealed as an old man carrying a bundle of newspapers” (66). Tesla’s career is over and he is just a man, no longer consumed by his obsessions. The sphere is significant not only to the literary value of the play, but also to the process. In the development process, it was important for the company to create a symbol for Tesla, an object representing a major character trait. This visually illuminates an aspect of Tesla’s character development, rather than just portraying it through narrative.

Finally, the title, *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla*, establishes the importance of many of the elements in this play. The first word in the title- *Brilliant!*- ended with an exclamation point signifies the fascination the creators have with their subject and also the theatrical energy contained in its performance. The rest of the title—*The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla*—points towards a number of important issues within the story and the elements used to present the play. The term ‘blinding enlightenment’ seems to be a contradictive statement, but in it contains an intricate nature. Biographically, this phrase covers the fascination with light and electricity Tesla had during his life. A ‘blinding enlightenment’ implies that a discovery is made that is hard to ignore. In this case, the enlightenment culminates at the end of the play when Tesla learns how much he needs personal contact in order to maintain productivity. Theatrically, it indicates the multimedia and dynamic presentation of the play. It also establishes that the main subject matter will be a biographical investigation of Nikola Tesla.

The embedded genres and other elements are used to illuminate the important aspects of Tesla's life and his career symbolically rather than textually. Although the process of creating this script was largely text based, these elements ensure that the play remains extremely physical, visual-- theatrical. The embedded genres are indicative of the physicality the Electrics wanted to employ since they were all trained heavily in various forms of movement.

Chapter Six:

Conclusion: The Collective Model

Ric Knowles notes that collective creation turns “the multiplication of ‘one’ into many,” and it forces “the surrender of individual creative control, and the welcoming of collective sweat and other bodily and structural excesses, fissures, fluids, and imperfections.” He also asserts that it “takes place as unstructured event (as phenomenon), [and] is constitutive of individual or collective subjectivity in progress” (Knowles 78). This switch from the individual creative control to the collective subjectivity leads also to drastic differences in the working model. Theodore Shank describes this process:

The most significant difference between the working methods of the new theatre and traditional methods is that the pieces are created through a single process from inception to completion somewhat as in the visual arts. This change demands broader creative responsibility than is required of those in the established theatre, who are more narrowly specialized. Each participant contributes to the development of the conception for a piece and takes part in the search for materials and techniques to express the conception. (29)

Shank argues that the “new theatre,” the collective creation model, changes the structure of a company to differ from the traditional theatre model by putting the creative responsibility into many hands, rather than just one. Also, he notes that throughout the entire process, all elements are being created. Collective creation in Canada became

popular in the 1970's with companies such as Theatre Passe Muraille, Carbone 14, Tamahnous Theatre, and Mulgrave Road Co-op. This model came from disenchantment with the established regional theatres of the time, as Diane Bessai observes:

The "regionals," a collective designation applied scathingly by the young, were conservative and formulaic in their annual subscription programming: one or two classics, a Shakespearean play, and some contemporary successes from Broadway or the West End. As with the Shaw and Stratford festivals, artistic directors were normally sought from elsewhere, as were major performers. (24)

This dissatisfaction with the content that the regional theatres were producing led these groups of "subversives" (Bessai 14) to begin to create collectively in order to change the content of Canadian drama. The face of Canadian theatre was once again changed in the 1990's with a recession and a new group of artists "impatient with the status quo" (Wasserman 2), who returned to "the collective, collaborative model, adding an embrace of the environment" (Wasserman 2). The Electric Company was one of them. As Wasserman asserts, these collectives are different from the earlier models of the 1970's because they create site specific work, putting less of a focus on Canadian nationalism, and emulate "elements of the *Quebécois* theatricality" (Wasserman 2).

Many of the collective creations of the 1970's , including those of Theatre Passe Muraille, have been published⁶ while few of the 1990's Vancouver collectives have thus

⁶ See *1837: The Farmer's Revolt* (1976), *The Farm Show* (1976), *As Far as the Eye Can See* (1977), and *I Love you Baby Blue* (1977). Parentheses indicate date of publication. These are the plays that were produced and published in the 1970's and they have since produced and published many new works.

far⁷ shared the same place “inside the greater conversation of Canadian drama” (Kerr) through publications and repeated performances. The Electric Theatre Company’s *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* was published in 2004 and I asked the Electric Company members what they hoped would happen with *Brilliant!* subsequent to its publication. Each responded with very different answers, citing elements that they would love to see. Kevin Kerr’s response was to ask, “When does it become a different play?” This question invites an examination of choices a company would have if they were to produce a collectively created script: use the publication as a blueprint for the reproduction of the event, or adapt the publication to suit a new version of the production. Either way it runs the risk of losing the initial energy that the creating company puts into it.

In addition, Ric Knowles writes about collective creations that “insofar as the sociological collective is metonymic and episodic in structure, it is by implication—almost by definition—openly unfinished, incomplete, and (in both senses of the word) partial” (90). This open and unfinished categorization is a direct function of collectives’ purpose for creating. Diane Bessai writes that the collectives set out to “[demystify] the gentilities of ‘high art’ by sharing their themes and performance processes openly with the audience” (14). The collective creation is constantly in process and openly unfinished. The Electric Company has had the opportunity to rework and remount some of their works (notably *Brilliant!*). The constant development and production of their work means that process is not entirely pre-production, but rather continually in progress. *Brilliant!* remained a living, breathing creation for the majority of the Electric Company’s existence.

⁷ See *The Adventures of Ali & Ali and the Axxis of Evil* (2005). Parentheses indicate date of publication.

The development process of *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla* has affected the practical concerns of the piece as well as the thematic intention of its creators. These practical concerns such as touring, costume changes, and length offer variations to the piece that are important to understanding the final product. Through these variations we can begin to see how the process is inextricable from the product in terms of the Narrator character, the embedded genres and other elements because they change through development and result in a performance of both literary and theatrical value. There exists a kind of feedback loop of simplicity where the Electrics create elements of the play that are simplistic to fit the demands of their touring which then turns into an identity of minimalism. The show is then easily toured because of its streamlined nature. The resources that the creators use in order to find ways to tell the story also drastically affect the structure and themes of a collective creation.

An episodic structure suits the collectively created plays, particularly for the Electric Company process, because it enables the collective to divide scenes between members to write individually. These scenes work towards a cumulative effect rather than the fluidity and climax that a climactic structure affords. The episodic structure is pluralistic because it allows for a series of mini-plays within the one-- many voices within one structure. In this creation style there is a significant cohesion between the theme and process. Tesla, a scientist who fancies himself a recluse, asserts that it is necessary to remain that way in order to maintain focus on his work. The overall theme is that Tesla's eventual downfall stems from his reclusive nature. That this play was created by a group of collaborators only highlights this. What better way to celebrate collaboration than to create a successful, interesting piece of theatre about a man who

falls as a result of his stubborn individualism?

Manfred Pfister notes that an epic structure puts the “emphasis on the ‘process-oriented’ suspense in epic theatre, which contrasts sharply with the hitherto generally accepted dramatic norm of ‘result-oriented’ suspense” (Pfister 69). It is the cumulative effect of the episodic scenes that engages the audience, rather than the final climax of a plot-oriented play. There is no climax in *Brilliant!* in the traditional sense where a realization and resolution is explicated; rather there is a high level of uncertainty for Tesla. This fits very appropriately with the process by which the Electric Company creates. At the time of creating this piece, they were learning how they wanted to create theatre. That they did not want to place finality on the dramatic arc speaks to the ongoing nature of their creation process because of this play’s many incarnations. In this way, their creation process, purposefully or not, has deeply affected the structure of the final product.

The importance of collaboration is also noted through Tesla’s eccentricities. Although Tesla is obsessed with the number three, he relies on his singular self by never taking a mate and his individual style of invention means that he prefers not to rely on anyone. *Brilliant!* expresses that there is an incongruity between his obsession with the number three and his individualism through the moment when the trio of Robert, Katherine, and Tesla has a fight and the trio is broken. The embedded genres and other elements are indicative of the pluralistic nature of *Brilliant!* because it acknowledges the multiplicity of elements required to communicate successfully, not just a single way of telling a story.

Works Cited

- Armstrong, John and Tim Carlson. "Inventor Tesla provides dramatic fodder." The Vancouver Sun 14 September 1996: C13.
- Birnie, Peter. "Tribute to inventor lacks necessary invention to sustain it over two acts." The Vancouver Sun 14 March 1998: B8.
- Bessai, Diane. Playwrights of Collective Creation. Toronto: Simon & Pierre Company, 1992.
- Cheney, Margaret. Tesla: Man Out of Time. New York: Touchstone, 1981.
- Collier, Kim et al. *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla*. Victoria, British Columbia: Brindle and Glass Publishing, 2004.
- . Personal Interview. 22 January 2008.
- Dafoe, Chris. "Fringe Crapshoot pays off at Vancouver Festival." Globe and Mail 12 September 1996: C4.
- Ditor, Rachel. "Progress Lab 2003." Unpublished. April 2004.
- Ditor, Rachel. "On Site with the Electric Company: What Lures Artists out of the Theatre and into the Woods?" Canadian Theatre Review 126 (2006): 92-97.
- Electric Company Theatre. Electric Company Theatre Website. 20 December 2007.
<www.electriccompanytheatre.com>
- Fairburn, Sarah. "An Overview History of the Electric Company Theatre (1996-2007)" Hon. Thesis. University of British Columbia, 2007.
- Filewod, Alan. Collective Encounters: Documentary Theatre in English Canada. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1987.
- Fortier, Mark. "Thinking Process." Canadian Theatre Review 97 (1998): 8-11.

Frater, Sarah. "History of Current Affairs." Evening Standard 8 August, 2003.

High Performance Rodeo. One Yellow Rabbit. 15 January 2008

<http://www.oyr.org/highperformancerodeo/08_rodeo/index.html >

Horvat, Ksenija. "Edinburgh Guide Review 2003: *Brilliant! The Blinding Enlightenment of Nikola Tesla*." Edinburgh Guide 5 August 2003. <www.EdinburghGuide.com>

Hudgins, David. "Electric Sound: Collective Creation and Sound Design." Canadian Theatre Review 129 (2007): 19-20.

---. Personal Interview. 15 December 2007.

Kerr, Kevin. Personal Interview. 15 December 2007.

Kerr, Kevin and Jonathon Young. Interview with Sarah Fairburn. "An Overview History of the Electric Company Theatre (1996-2007)" Hon. Thesis. University of British Columbia, 2007.

Knowles, Richard Paul. The Theatre of Form and the Production of Meaning: Contemporary Canadian Dramaturgies. Toronto: ECW Press, 1999.

Knowles, Richard Paul and Skip Shand. Editorial "The Process Issue" Canadian Theatre Review. 97. Winter 1998. 3-4.

Larson, Catherine. "Theatre Review" Ottawa Citizen. 24 March 2006: E.8.

Messina, Marianne. "SJ Stage and Electric Company Theatre cut through the static in 'Brilliant,' the high-energy tale of inventor Nikola Tesla" Metroactive. 07 January 2008. <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/06.08.05/brilliant-0523.html>>

Morrow, Martin. "Bio-drama pays homage to eccentric inventor." The Calgary Herald January 9 1999: 16.

Nicholls, Liz. "Story of Forgotten inventor crackles with energy: Vancouver company

- puts on high-voltage show” Edmonton Journal 17 June 2004: C2.
- Pfister, Manfred. The Theory and Analysis of Drama. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Shank, Theodore. “Collective Creation” The Drama Review 16.2 (1972): 3-31.
- Shepherd-Barr, Kirsten. Science Onstage: From *Doctor Faustus* to *Copenhagen*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Studio 58. Studio 58 at Langara College. 10 January 2008 <
www.langara.bc.ca/studio58>
- Wasserman, Jerry. “The View Beyond the Stage: Collective, Collaborative and Site-Specific Performance in Vancouver.” Unpublished. January 2008.
- Younds, Mike. “History Cast in dynamic light” Kamloops Daily News 13 September 2003: A.4.
- Young, Jonathon. Personal Interview. 15 December 2007.



The University of British Columbia
 Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
 Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road,
 Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - MINIMAL RISK

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Jerry Wasserman	INSTITUTION / DEPARTMENT: UBC/Arts/English	UBC BREB NUMBER: H07-02256
INSTITUTION(S) WHERE RESEARCH WILL BE CARRIED OUT:		
Institution	Site	
N/A	N/A	
Other locations where the research will be conducted: Electric Company Theatre Office 1885 Venables Street Vancouver, BC, CANADA V5L 2H6		
CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): N/A		
SPONSORING AGENCIES: N/A		
PROJECT TITLE: Electric Company Theatre: Brilliant! Script Development		

DOCUMENTS INCLUDED IN THIS APPROVAL:	DATE APPROVED: November 30, 2007	
Document Name	Version	Date
<u>Protocol:</u>		
Electric Company Theatre Thesis Abstract	N/A	September 27, 2007
<u>Consent Forms:</u>		
Electric Company Theatre Consent Form	N/A	October 10, 2007
<u>Questionnaire, Questionnaire Cover Letter, Tests:</u>		
Electric Company Theatre Interview Questions	N/A	October 10, 2007
<u>Letter of Initial Contact:</u>		
Electric Company Theatre Initial Contact	N/A	November 15, 2007
<u>Other Documents:</u>		
Electric Company Letter of Support (open with Internet Explorer)	N/A	October 29, 2007

CERTIFICATE EXPIRY DATE: November 30, 2008

The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board

and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair