

**THE RECORD OF THE LONELY HOUSE: SHARING THE EMBODIED SONG**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Expanding upon initial explorations in the interdisciplinary medium of choral theatre as practiced by Halifax's Camerata Xara Young Women's Choir, this dissertation details the process and production of my thesis performance, *The Record of the Lonely House*. The paper examines the current practice of choral theatre and the potential for choral music to further hybridize with theatrical performance, particularly via devised theatre practice. Specifically, the work is situated within the history of feminist collective performance created for and among communities of women, as well as within the practicing history of devised performance in Canada. Throughout, there is an emphasis on ways of knowing via individual and collective embodied experience, and the archival abilities of the body and voice to act as wells of material to draw from in the process of performance creation. The influence of place on art-making is central to the research, in particular concerning my own childhood in Lower Economy, Nova Scotia, and examines how the impression of landscape can evoke narrative. Inspired by the conflict between recorded history and lived memory, the source materials for the performance including pieces of choral music, found text, archival records, object work, and physical action, are analyzed in depth. The discussion includes a detailed account of the rehearsal process and the experience of site-specific performance both in an historic Halifax house and at the Mackie Lake House in Coldstream, British Columbia. Drawing on feedback from colleagues as well as personal testimonials from the performers, I examine the methodology of a devised choral theatre practice, as well as the potential of choral theatre for identity-shaping and community building. In conclusion, the paper reflects on the process both personally and within the scope of the art form, and offers further provocations for deepening and expanding the practice of choral theatre in terms of content and methodology.

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## **Prologue - Snapshots**

*My sister and I sit in our bathing suits on a blanket in the apple orchard. The low surrounding branches build a canopy to hide us from the sunlight. Ants crawl over our feet and head toward the sweets and strawberries piled in between us for our carefully planned picnic. Blades of grass tickle our legs and we giggle to each other as my mother watches from the kitchen window.*

*Small hands reach into the mucky red clay, pull out a slippery chunk of wet earth, and roll it into a long pencil. Murals are drawn all over pale skin covered in sunblock, swirling curves spreading from ankle to knee. My blue eyes watch the brown mud dry and crack in the summer's sun. My small hands dip into the cold mountain stream, pouring rivulets of icy water down my legs to wash the mud away. Then start again on this newly cleansed canvas.*

*It is early evening, and we're walking to the cove. My fingers reach toward a long, fluffy purple bloom reaching out of the tall grass toward the sunlight. There are dozens of tiny, individual flowers on this long stem. They are nearly in my grasp when all of a sudden my mother's voice rings out- "Don't! Don't touch those. Lupins are poisonous!" My hand drops. I look at the flowers, waving in the gentle breeze. There are hundreds of them in our ditches, lining the red dirt road. I keep my eye on them, and keep walking.*

*My eyes are bleary with the morning. I walk through the long grass, winding my way down the familiar path to the beach. All of a sudden I notice a change in the seamless pattern of green and yellow. An oval, flattened into the field. And another, and another, close together. "That's where the deer sleep overnight," says my mother. I imagine the delicate necks of the deer, nestling into their bodies as they curl up overnight in the tall hay, finding refuge from the dark.*

*Black and white photos lay tucked away in an aged cedar box. My mother's voice sighs murmured names but doesn't elaborate. A sense of stillness falls over the room when she and my grandmother mention him. The air is thick and full. They exhale, and the conversation shifts.*

I share these memories with you because, as moments from my childhood, they are the starting points of my research. They are the memories that wind their way through my work, and the cornerstones that ground my practice. Fragments of these memories are embedded in my body, a well of lived history that I consciously and unconsciously draw from. My MFA thesis project, *The Record of the Lonely House*, was my first venture at intentionally using these memories as a starting place in my performance work.

## **Practicing Choral Theatre**

I decided to study for a Master of Fine Arts to look more deeply at the work I had started in Halifax with my ensemble, Camerata Xara Young Women's Choir. Xara is a semi-professional women's choir for singers ages eighteen to thirty. Designed to break new ground in choral performance by incorporating strong narrative, movement, lighting, and scenography, the best way to describe Xara to someone new is as "choral theatre." The central concept behind our practice is to combine choral music, movement, and text to tell a story that is enriched by the polyvocality of the chorus, and grounded in our identity as a community of young women. An emerging art form, choral theatre is practiced by only a few other ensembles throughout the world, notably Slovenia's Carmina Slovenica and Finland's Philomela. Both of these women's ensembles are led by female conductors, Karmina Šilec and Marjukka Riihimäki, respectively, and have been practicing innovative choral performance for upwards of twenty years. Their performances often include dynamic choreography and elaborate set and costume design, and both ensembles have earned widespread praise for their experimental performance styles. By comparison, Xara, founded in 2008 by artistic director Christina Murray, is just starting explorations in this medium. However, in four short years the ensemble has earned considerable critical and popular acclaim, and has taken large steps forward in developing a performance practice that is grounded in a collective, feminist methodology that aims to empower singers, staff, and volunteers.

My work as the movement and scenography designer with Xara involves large-scale productions with between 20-25 singers. The power of large group performance has always been one of Xara's greatest assets, but it can occasionally limit the narrative potential of our performances as we tell stories that are community-based rather than featuring a central protagonist. I was intrigued by the possibility of exploring the choral theatre medium with a small group of performers. I wondered if three or four singers could still convey the beauty and

complexity of choral music that is so prominent in Xara's performances. At the same time, I longed to explore characters in a more detailed way than the chorus structure of Xara allowed. I was also keen to delve deeper into the practice of devising, a model that I had explored as part of other theatre projects in the past. Devising is an umbrella term for a set of strategies toward performance-making that grew out of work started by a variety of performance artists and theatre companies in the late 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. While its content and final form varies widely, the commonality between all devised performance is the focus on the creation period: "At the core of all devising or collaborative creation is a *process* of generating performance" (Heddon and Milling 3). In particular, there is a notable history of women's performance collectives utilizing devised methods to create new work. Theatre scholar Charlotte Canning denotes a desire for change as a motivating factor in the creation of feminist performance collectives in the 1970s. Beginning with the It's All Right to Be Woman Theater founded in New York City in 1969, Canning traces a movement that sought to explore and present women's real life experiences in her book *Feminist Theaters in the USA: Staging Women's Experience*. The emergence of feminist performance collectives was influenced by the New Women's History movement in academia which examined previously unexamined elements of women's history by "providing information about women and their experiences that had been erased, and by allowing women to re-examine themselves and their work in a new and liberating context" (Canning 14-5). This work drew further attention to the lack of women's voices in recorded history, noticed by feminist historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg: "By returning to traditional male historical sources... I had begun to see women, not as they had experienced themselves, but as men had depicted them" (25). At the center of this debate is the ongoing issue of whether women and men are essentially different; many feminist scholars have argued that perceived differences are culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. However, whether differences are biological or cultural, as a result of the continuous forms of oppression that women have



experienced under patriarchal domination in the West, there is an argument to be made that women's experience has been unique to their gender. Feminist scholar Alice Jardine describes a concept of a definitively separate experience based on gender: "feminism, while infinite in its variations, is finally rooted in the belief that women's truth-in-experience-and-reality is and has always been different from men's" (147). This concrete sense of separateness demanded an independent representation that came directly from the source of the experience. Empowered to make their voices heard, women theatre practitioners began to incorporate feminist politics into their work. The processes employed by these practitioners tended to take the forms of collectives, emphasizing the need for women's voices to be heard as a community in order to activate change: "A community needs to see its bonds represented and the representation reinforces them" (Canning 58). Previously silenced communities were making their voices heard on a much larger scale than ever before via advocacy, theatre productions, and performance art. Xara has continued in this tradition by emphasizing community-based organizational and artistic structures. The ensemble was created in 2007 as the brainchild of conductor Christina Murray and four young women, including myself, between the ages of eighteen and twenty. A year long process of collective development launched the ensemble in 2008. Since then, the ensemble has been managed by an artistic and administrative leadership team, developed a dedicated core of volunteers, and offered a show-building structure involving singer-comprised creative groups to generate new music, movement, and visual elements. Much of this work has been implemented in an effort to subvert the dominant hierarchical model of power in place for most choral ensembles that subordinates the singers to the conductor. Feminist theatre collectives attempted to do the same thing by abandoning a top-down relationship between director and actors and instead searching for structures that could create a more horizontal model of leadership.

The use of theatre as a medium to explore these issues and declare a need for change is significant. The presence of empowered female bodies onstage sent a clear message about

women taking control of how their lives and stories were represented to others. Julie Stone Peters notes that theatre has a distinct place in recreating histories because it offers an aestheticized form of cultural self-perception: “performances of the voice and body that serve as cultural inscriptions without the need of writing” (200). While this makes theatre a viable tool of expression for those whose voices have been marginalized, it also means that theatre and performance can be a tool of suppression used by those in power to silence those who are powerless, or as a method of imprinting desired cultural norms. In my work with Xara, it is clear that the act of performing can inspire confidence and a stronger sense of individual and communal identity among singers. However, much like the theatre collectives that began this movement toward a performance model based in feminist principles, it is possible to unconsciously reinforce gender stereotypes, or put forth one representation of womanhood that is meant to represent the entire group instead of acknowledging diverse perspectives and experiences. This is an inherent danger in the collective processual model, prompting continual reevaluation of the content, context, and working method of each show. Dialogue between all singers and feedback after each production is thus essential for healthy development of our performance practice. Xara has explored a variety of models for prompting effective channels of feedback between leadership team and performers, including circle discussions, evaluation forms, surveys, large group creative tasks, brainstorming sessions, and one-on-one “check ins” with singers. Our emphasis on dialogue between performers and staff grows from an effort to maintain and enrich the community of women that make up our ensemble, ultimately aiming to provide a space for both community-building and individual identity-shaping. Applied theatre scholar Helen Nicholson discusses the feeling of belonging to a community as deriving from “shared interpretations of experience...constructed when people recognise their own experience in others, and share an understanding of each other’s values or stories” (94); community is built in Xara via the embodied acts of singing and moving together, the shared experience of

performing and learning as an individual within an ensemble, and the continuous care and support encouraged between all members.

Recognizing the need to provide a voice for women with wide-ranging backgrounds and interests, one of the common practices in early feminist theatre groups was an emphasis on polyvocality in each production, creating pieces collaboratively instead of conforming to the story crafted by a playwright. This process closely followed the political underpinnings of the women's theatre movement: "collective organization within the theatre groups tried closely to imitate the egalitarian community ideals of the feminist movement" (Canning 64). Approaches to text were usually grounded in the collective process, rather than formulated by a singular playwright. For example, Canning details the processual work of feminist theatre company Spiderwoman Theater who implement a process called storyweaving: "performance pieces are created from personal stories and experiences, cultural icons and texts, and political issues and concerns" (94). This layering of story, experience, sound, movement, and history is comparable to the polyphonous structure of Xara's show-building strategies. This type of process has become known in academic and professional circles as devising.

My personal exposure to working in this method began in 2008 when I acted as an apprentice dramaturge with Zuppa Theatre Company on their production of *Poor Boy*. Zuppa is an ensemble theatre company based in Halifax that develops devised work incorporating new text, found text, dance and physical action, improvisation, music, objects, and collaborations with interdisciplinary artists. Their creation process is considerable and often begins with central concepts, texts, or pieces of music and choreography, and relies on actor-driven improvisation to shape the story. Like many practitioners working in the world of devising, their practice is part of a long lineage of artists who have been evolving the art form since its emergence in the mid-twentieth century. Primarily, the heritage of Zuppa's work can be traced back to the practice of Eugenio Barba, founder of the Odin Teatret and the International School of Theatre

Anthropology. Influenced by the work of Polish experimental theatre director Jerzy Grotowski as well as by Eastern performance forms such as Indian Kathakali, Barba trained students in a particularly rigorous actor-driven physical theatre style and explored methods of “barter” that allowed for cultural exchange between actors and communities. One of Barba’s students, Richard Fowler, returned to Canada to form Primus Theatre in 1988. Drawing from Barba’s concept of “pre-expressivity,” Fowler emphasized performance that often included “a multi-layered, non-linear mosaic of meanings” (Brask 213). Central to Fowler’s work was the role of the audience as interpreter:

This full performance is not only composed of the actors’ actions. There are many other elements - the sounds they make, the songs they sing, the music they make, the way the lights are used, the scenic architecture constructed for the event, the use of props - and combinations and interactions of all these elements. The meanings, associations, and denotations perceived by the audience are arrived at by the dramaturgical relationship of these elements, of which the text is only one . . . The spectator ‘reads’ the performance on the basis of all the signs that make up the performance score. (Fowler, qtd in Brask 214)

Following Primus’ disbandment in 1997, Fowler’s collaborator Ker Wells went on to found Number Eleven Theatre a year later. Considered part of the “North American Barba diaspora” (Magnat *Number Eleven* 88), Number Eleven created several shows that were extensively process-driven, incorporating material and ideas from multiple sources as well as actor-created improvisations to develop new narratives. One of Number Eleven’s collaborators on their productions of *Icaria* and *The Prague Visitor*, Alex McLean, now leads Zuppa Theatre along with Susan Leblanc-Crawford and one of Zuppa’s original founders, Ben Stone. Although each company developed work in its own unique style, their practices are linked by their foundational focus on the creative process: “Members of the Grotowski and Barba diasporas choose to make a long term commitment to ‘the work,’ as they often put it, that is to say, a commitment to a specific approach to training, rehearsal, and performance” (Magnat *Number Eleven* 89). Since working on *Poor Boy* with Zuppa, I have attended intensive training sessions with the company,

and had the opportunity to work with Ker Wells during a two-week residency in February 2011 at UBC Okanagan. These experiences have shaped my personal frame of reference for devising and have caused me to value the experience of director and performers working collaboratively to build a script or story from scratch, incorporating existing and newly written text, music, and developing a physical score of action created by the ensemble. Xara's process touches on some of these elements, but is still highly structured by the artistic leadership team. During the Xara process, inspiration is drawn from the music that will communicate the aural elements of the show. From there, blocking, choreography, and additional text and sound are generated from both the artistic leadership team as well as from exercises and improvisations created by the singers. This material is then distilled and refined in rehearsal until the contributions of each singer are woven into the larger tapestry of the show. Typically for the ensemble, feedback sessions surround rehearsal methodology and logistical issues, but could be adapted to incorporate more focused discussions surrounding the development of each production's narrative.

Based on my experiences with both Zuppa and at UBCO, I was eager to see how the choral theatre art form could further meld with devising. In my experience working on *Poor Boy*, the devising process seemed to flourish in the relationship between a small cast of five actors and the director and dramaturgical team. Director Alex McLean was able to give each actor a specific task, whether to create a short piece of physical action, to rewrite a scene of text, or to pair pieces of music, action, and text together. Giving the actors space to work on their own forces them to become independent and allows each person to contribute their own ideas and suggestions. Echoes of this occurred in our work at UBCO with Ker Wells, where he was able to facilitate devised work with a large cast of students, some of who were brand new to the process, much like many of the singers in Xara. For example, at an early rehearsal on our class performance *Dream Migrations*, Ker gave the students a text about childhood memory, and then

asked each of them to create a short “action” that was reflective of a childhood memory or story. These “actions” comprised full-bodied physical movement and sound. From there, Ker watched many of the pieces individually, and then worked with the performer to refine the action and intention of their piece. These developed solo works were combined with another piece or inserted later to function as part of the larger storytelling of the piece. I thought this was an effective way of dealing with a large group of performers, as it gave each person the opportunity to create something individually, and then to receive guidance and feedback from the facilitator. I saw this as a methodology I could use both with the larger Xara group and with a smaller chamber choral theatre ensemble. Ker seemed to be able to pull out the most interesting moments, however, when he worked with smaller groups of students, for example when he worked on a section of text involving one female actor crawling on the floor toward a large group of other actors while delivering an excerpt of Margaret Atwood’s poem “Variations on the Word ‘Sleep’”. Ker added a second female actor to the scene who crouched beside the speaker as she crawled. He asked the first actor to pause after each line of text, and then asked the second actor, a student from China, to translate each line into Chinese. All of this text was directed toward the large group, and in that moment the room became electric with possibility. It seemed as if Atwood’s text was given a second layer of meaning, and had caused the entire world of the scene to be questioned: what was the dominant language in this world? Who held the power in the scene, those who spoke English or Chinese? Were these two women on the same side, and what was their relationship to the larger group? This scene eventually became a pivotal point in establishing relationships between characters later on in the narrative. Ker used provocation during these rehearsals; for example, he often gave actors secret tasks to perform during a scene that might uncover new aspects of their character or situation. Working with one student actor, Ker quietly asked her to perform her existing action as if she was blind. The rest of the students watching were left to discover what condition she was experiencing, and by adding this extra

layer, the piece brought forth new possibilities for breath work, rhythm, and narrative. This type of rehearsal methodology, mixed with Ker's focus on incorporating multiple languages, brought forth some intriguing possibilities for how to apply these techniques to choral theatre. In particular, the exploration of language seemed a fertile ground considering Xara's history of performing in many languages within a single program. The way both Alex and Ker used actor-driven improvisation and suggestion during rehearsal made me think that the potential for using this performance practice with a small ensemble might be the most effective.

Deeply involved in the creative and everyday leadership of the ensemble, I knew that to break away from Xara would be challenging. It would be painful to move across the country and leave behind the group that I had co-founded to go on without me. I would also be leaving behind my artistic partner and Xara's conductor, Christina Murray. Our intense creative relationship had been driving the concept of Xara's performance practice since the ensemble's first season, and I wondered if I would be able to create new work in this medium without her. At the same time, I felt a sense of freedom at the opportunity to dive in to a new experience, and to delve deeper into Xara's methodology from a fresh perspective.

## **Resonance of Place**

*“The environments we live in exert deep and subtle influences on the music we make. The sounds around us - the rhythms of the seasons, the songs of the birds, the cries of animals and the resonances of the elements - all echo in the music of a place” - John Adams*

I missed Nova Scotia. This was no surprise, as I had lived in British Columbia and Alberta before, and had felt the same longing for the East. I had loved the mountains ever since I had spent a summer living in the Rockies, but I still felt dry. Literally, living in the arid Okanagan made my skin and hair dry and cracked. I was buying moisturizer like never before and drinking water constantly. It seemed that the East Coast had made an impact on my body, my spirit, in ways I had not realized until I was away from it. This sense of familiarity was now absent in my life, and I could feel this void deepen as my body adapted to a new place far away from my home.

Among my peers in class, place became a recurring theme. One friend brought back memories of growing up on a farm in the Prairies, another craved the rhythm of the city she had spent the past several years in, and other friends who came from Europe and South America shared stories of their far-away homes. After a class specifically devoted to the role of place in art-making, I was struck by the work of Lucy Lippard. Her definition of place resonated deeply with me: “most often place applies to our own ‘local’ - entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke” (7). Understanding my “own local” in Lippard’s terms is complex; a sense of history is deeply entrenched in the culture and daily lives of many Nova Scotians. The cities and towns are filled with heritage buildings and landmarks, the streets built for horses and carts are narrow by today’s standards, and the coast is sprinkled with small cemeteries with only a few family names on the gravestones. I only recently discovered that I am eleventh generation Canadian; my Acadian ancestors arrived in Nova Scotia in the 1600s. But then underneath this visible history is a lesser-known history of



the aboriginal peoples who were living here long before European settlers arrived in North America. These two facets of history layer on top of one another, separate but connected.

Surrounded by these thoughts, my journal writing became a free-flow of the intimate details of Nova Scotia that I longed for:

November 22, 2010:

I almost imagine the landscape of the local reflected in the bodies and minds of the people who live there, unconsciously mirroring patterns of behaviour and ebbs and flows in their way of life. For me, the east coast means narrow streets, tall brick buildings, rolling hills, lush green, slow tides, country houses in the middle of pastures, beer outside on a summer afternoon, snow crunching, crackling orange leaves, the smell of salt, homemade pie crust, red mudflats, marshes, the little holes clams make in the mud, lupins in the ditches, dirt roads, bank swallows darting in and out, gnarled apple trees, crashing waves, driftwood, strawberries, aging graveyards with only a few names on the stones, wooden churches, abandoned barns, the stillness of the city past midnight on a Tuesday, the graffiti by the granary and the railway tracks, streaks of amethyst in weathered rocks, park benches and pigeons, the water that laps over your feet and then stretches forever.

Many of these images were drawn from my childhood summers spent at our family cottage in Lower Economy, NS, a tiny community tucked in the lee of a mountain on the northern shore of the Minas Basin. Part of the Bay of Fundy, the beaches there are home to the highest tides in the world, and were once the spot of a bustling shipbuilding industry. Now the area is quiet, populated mostly by summer cottagers with a few year-round residents. The landscape is dotted with abandoned barns, overgrown fields, and slowly eroding, rust-coloured cliffs. Lippard's description of the complexities of place resonated deeply with me: "a layered location . . . it is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there" (7). I wondered about my connection with Nova Scotia, in particular the images of my summer home that kept recurring in my writing. While I was not born in my summer home, I had first been brought to the shores of the Bay of Fundy as a three-month-old child, and had spent every following summer there. I feel a deeper connection to this place than to the house in the city where I spent the winter seasons of my childhood, a house that has been since sold and

which I think of rarely. Perhaps I was dreaming and yearning to return to a place where creativity had flown freely, and where I felt inspired to tell stories. I felt the echoes of my connection with the East Coast from across the country. The Fundy shore was a place for visiting with my beloved maternal grandparents, and for playing on the beach with my cousins whose cottage was just down the hill, experiences that shaped my sense of selfhood through childhood and adolescence. I felt these echoes physically, a pain deep in my abdomen. A part of me felt a sense of loss and nostalgia for my childhood, but also felt that by being so far away from this place, I was not truly “myself.” I felt changed by being away from my home, and was only now realizing the impact it had had on my sense of self.

## Knowing in the Body

In my work exploring the relationship between body and voice, I have continued to be impressed by the archival abilities of both. The voice and body, in their interconnectivity, act as a depository for memory, trauma, history, and experience. This type of embodied knowing or understanding is central to a performance practice that is initiated first from the relationship between voice and body. Dwight Conquergood, referencing Michel de Certeau, highlights a polarity between two types of knowledge: “the map” that is “official, objective, and abstract” and “the story” that is “practical, embodied, and popular” (145). He notes that the former epistemology has remained dominant in academic discourse and has thus “disqualified and repressed other ways of knowing that are rooted in embodied experience, orality, and local contingencies” (146). Conquergood maintains that performance studies struggles to navigate between these two types of knowledge, pointing out that the prevailing ways of knowing “are not attuned to meanings that are masked, camouflaged, indirect, embedded, or hidden in context” (146). It is these *embedded* meanings that I am most intrigued by, and believe exist most concretely in our bodies, voices, and memory. In particular, I am interested in the way that women’s bodies have absorbed and passed on knowledges that are not written or visible, but rather learned or embedded. Deirdre Heddon notes that feminist theatre companies in the 1970s used autobiographical performance to bring politics into their work, resulting in their own self-representation as women with the possibility to reveal previously hidden or silenced experiences, with groups ultimately working toward engendering community (134-5). Information, narratives, and ways of doing can be transmitted in a multitude of ways, whether through song and music, oral stories, domestic practices, or personal objects. Thus, the relationship between body and voice is essential for transmitting these embedded or invisible meanings, particularly in light of women’s history.

I am interested in the ways that choral theatre can function in uncovering these embedded meanings, particularly in that its performers draw deeply from the relationship between voice and body. Xara has experimented with using performance to reveal hidden or silenced experiences, notably in our 2010 production *Tree of Life* that featured a new collaborative work called “From Here” developed with spoken word artist Shauntay Grant. This twenty-minute piece involved familiar children’s songs and clapping games that transformed into a more violent body percussion pattern that expressed the angst of physical and emotional development from female childhood through adolescence. Later in the piece, as its characters found strength in new identity and experience, each performer sang their own short melody that layered in and around twenty other counter-melodies. Over this tapestry of sound, the singers spoke a short phrase that they had written in response to their own childhood, for example “I struggle,” “I freeze,” “I embrace,” “I believe.” This was a small exploration in using performer-generated content to create a piece that required engagement with issues of identity. In terms of my own project, I wondered if there were ways that I could use methodology from devising, for example by asking performers to create a physical score of action, to uncover moments that were rooted in the embedded information, narratives, and ways of doing that are archived in our bodies. Perhaps by giving a performer a task to use physical action and vocal work to recreate the way her grandmother made the bed, or a lullaby her mother sang before sleep, we could not only create an intriguing theatrical and performative moment, but we could also utilize this method to help the performer uncover something deeper about herself. As I was eager to explore the parts of my history that had become embedded as a result of my experience in Lower Economy, I posited that there could be ways to tap into my performers’ backgrounds via devised theatre and choral music. This could help support the collaborative structure of the kind of piece I wanted to create while still remaining rooted in the work I had begun with Xara. Ultimately, this self-discovery is

part of Xara's aim to explore community-based performance practices that play a role in identity-shaping.

The voice has the special power of being naturally individualized but yet inclined toward group singing. Laryngologist Yolanda Heman-Ackah explains that as sound resonates through each person's head, throat, mouth, and nose "it gains energy in those areas that are amplified by the particular shape of the vocal tract and loses energy in those areas that are dampened by the shape of the vocal tract" (31). This resonance gives each voice its own unique recognizable sound and its 'ring', the ability to be heard over a crowd (31). Speech and language therapist Stephanie Martin refers to this as the vocal "fingerprint" determined by the unique anatomical features of the vocal tract, and asserts that this cannot be entirely disguised or repressed (35), even as a result of vigorous classical training that can sometimes aim to mold the voice into a certain type of sound. The challenge in finding singers for Xara is to create a delicate balance of singers who represent a diversity of voice types, but can also use their voice to create intricate harmonies and spotless unison, qualities that enhance the vibratory power of choral music. Ideally, singers will be able to move between showcasing their individual voices in solo work and finding resonant blend within group work. We utilize exercises designed to free the voice from tension accumulated from daily use, to find a unified sound, to extend our vocal ranges, and to improve our intonation, always with the goal of singing healthfully.

This holistic process connects to vocal expression on an important anatomical level. As air moves through the vocal folds, the frequency of the vibration and the resonance of the vocal tract causes sound. The intrinsic nature of vocal sound as vibratory means that its power extends through the entire body, not just the vocal tract. Voice coach Rebecca Cuthbertson-Lane calls this "an ideal working system" because "all parts of the body are in continual vibrational contact with all other parts of the body and can adjust to the slightest imbalance immediately in order to safeguard the whole" (79). The interconnectedness of the mind-body means that vibration

initiating in the vocal tract will have a visceral effect on the rest of the body. In his discussion of the transformative power of theatre in his seminal work *The Theatre and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud used the image of the snake to express the vibratory power of sound: “snakes are long and coil their length upon the earth, because their bodies touch the earth at almost every point; and because the musical vibrations which are communicated to the earth affect them like a very subtle, very long massage” (81). While we are subject to comparable vibrational effects, our awareness of the powerful connection between sound, vibration, and the body is limited, and not taught in a typical musical classroom or choral setting. For singers, it is thus often a process of relearning how to *notice* the effects of tension on the body and voice before any work can be done to release some of that tension.

Drawing awareness to and then correction of destructive, habitual voice patterns is the primary goal of many who work with actors and singers in body-voice work. I myself have struggled with difficulties in breathing when suspending long lines of song, and with finding a clear and resonant tone when I am under stress. Voice teacher Joanna Weir Ouston notes the process of socialization, accent and language, muscular tension created by emotional experiences, and the need for rapport with family and peer group as four main factors that contribute to the development of vocal tension (89-90). As children become socialized, they learn which types of vocal behaviour are deemed appropriate for certain social situations, including vocal qualities that are based on their evolving conception of their own gender. Even at this early stage, children may be developing certain vocal patterns or tensions. Ouston notes that young people may be subject to vocal tension due to pressure to conform within social groups: “the speech and vocal qualities of the alpha members of the group (and their vocal tensions) may become the dominating influence” (90), particularly during the important adolescent years of development. Thus, the student must be treated holistically: “in order to access the full spectrum of a person’s physical/vocal/emotional potential, one must *address* the full spectrum of the

person's physical/vocal/emotional challenges" (Cuthbertson-Lane 86). In Xara rehearsal, we value this holistic approach to art-making, trying to reflect on each element of the performance with physical, vocal, and emotional considerations in mind. Even an acknowledgement of the important role of emotion in vocal practice is uncommon in classical choral settings, perhaps because emotional reactions can alter pitch and tone while singing, or because for some conductors the emotional message of the piece is less important than recreating the composer's wishes exactly in terms of tempo, rhythm, balance, and dynamics. Discussion surrounding the text of a piece is not always facilitated with the choir, leaving the conductor feeling certain about the piece's purpose while the singers are in the dark. In contrast, in Xara we have found that exploring the connections between text, music, and emotion in a safe and nurturing environment only enriches each performance. The artistic team has consciously worked to find language to help communicate a piece's narrative purpose to singers, and feel that dialogue between us and the singers surrounding these issues only strengthens our storytelling abilities.

## Starting Points

I made the decision to develop my thesis project in Halifax halfway through my first year of study. I was enjoying my experience in British Columbia, but the pull of the East Coast and the available resources I would have there ended up being the deciding factors. I knew I would find performers who were familiar with the art form I was developing with Xara and who would be eager to take a different methodological approach. Once I decided where I would work, I started to look for source materials for my performance. Typically in the Xara show process, we start with a central idea and then Christina looks for pieces of music that are connected to the theme. The narrative begins to take shape as we move back and forth between the music and the story, and both areas begin to develop in tandem. Similar practices are common in devising, where the creators of the show gather materials from many sources and then the narrative is generated, compiled, scripted, or improvised based on this wealth of material. I was keen to utilize this strategy in the creation of my thesis project.

## Source Materials

*“Home changes. Illusions change. People change. Time moves on. A place can be peopled by ghosts more real than living inhabitants” - Lucy Lippard*

Often source materials can be information or stories connected to a theme, but can also be pieces of music, art, literature, or physical items that are compelling on their own. Reflecting on the creation process for his devised show *The Prague Visitor*, Ker Wells notes, “When I am creating something, it’s always specific images or ideas or incidents or even phrases that make me begin to imagine what the piece might feel like” (Magnat *Number Eleven* 89). Similarly, I began to imagine what my piece would look like after hearing a work of choral music by contemporary American composer David Lang called “I lie”. I had stumbled across the piece about a year earlier and found its meditative ostinato patterns and rich, dissonant chords to be



haunting and evocative. The images of isolation and yearning in the translation of the Yiddish text only added to my connection with the piece:

I lie down in bed alone  
and snuff out my candle  
Today he will come to me  
who is my treasure

The trains run twice a day  
One comes at night  
I hear them clanging  
Yes, now he is near

The night is full of hours  
each one sadder than the next  
Only one is happy  
When my beloved comes

I hear someone coming, someone raps on the door  
Someone calls me by name  
I run out barefoot  
Yes! He is come!

The image that kept following me was a woman, mostly in darkness, with part of her body extending into a small beam of light. I felt the pull of someone emerging from shadow, and the eerily quiet stillness of a night “full of hours/each one sadder than the next.” I was intrigued by the piece and something in its emotive melody had caused it to stay with me since the first time I had heard it. Many of Xara’s performances feature pieces of choral music from around the world structured together to create a narrative, and over the years the ensemble has sung in more than thirty languages. The text of each piece is considered for its meaning, and the music for its emotive power and aural qualities. Although I knew my piece would not involve Yiddish characters, “I lie” still felt like it belonged in the world I was imagining for my performance. Drama scholar Elinor Fuchs advocates for questioning and observing the world of the play to find a deeper understanding of the play’s narrative. She suggests listening to the music of the world of the play: “every dramatic world will have, or suggest, characteristic sounds – of mourning, celebration, children’s patter, incantation. It will alternate sounds of human and

landscape, or sound and silence. Listen for the pattern of the sound” (7). I knew that while I was considering how the local, in this case Nova Scotia, had made its impression on my work, I would mostly be incorporating English music and texts; however, I felt this particular song could live within the piece to begin or end the performance, evoking a haunting, dream-like atmosphere that would shape the world of the play.

As part of our Interdisciplinary Studio class, we were challenged to create a solo piece for the end of term. I started listening more intently to “I lie”, and began to think about texts that might pair well with it. One of the first to come to mind was Anton Chekhov’s iconic play *Three Sisters*, a story I had loved since seeing a student production several years earlier. Somehow the sense of isolation and desperation that resonated through “I lie” also seemed to live in the characters of Olga, Masha, and Irina. The repetitive, barely-changing rhythmic patterns in the piece felt connected to the stagnant waiting for change that Chekhov’s characters experience. The opening of the piece features progressions of between two and five ascending notes, with a beat of rest at the end of each bar. I felt Fuchs’ concept of the patterns of sound that inhabit the world of the play line up between these two source materials, as the breath at the end of each bar seemed to represent a hold or stop, followed by a return to the same starting pitch, similar in a way to how Chekhov’s characters constantly long for and imagine change but remain stuck at home. Perhaps I could think of this patterning as the motif or stasis of my characters, who breathe in short, repetitive patterns that are on some level holding them back from further discovery or exploration. Joanna Weir Ouston notes that habitual breathing patterns, physical alignment, and vocal usage tie intimately to the fundamental elements of identity: “even minor adjustments in body and breath patterns can have a surprisingly powerful influence on mind-set, self-image and communication” (93). Maybe my characters were trapped in this constant repetition with their metered breathing measuring time passing in the house.

More elements of Fuchs' analysis came to light when considering how the themes of these two pieces might intertwine as part of a larger work, for example, the role of power in each piece: "Who has power on this planet? How is it achieved? Over whom is it exercised? To what ends is it exercised?" (Fuchs 7). In both pieces, the women in the story are placed in a position of powerlessness by the men they love, and are dependent on their lover's actions in order to change their own station in life. Drawing from the research I had been engaged with surrounding the work of feminist theatre collectives and the desire to explore women's real-life experiences on stage, I was eager to explore how power dynamics might function in a narrative with only female characters. As my work with Xara had led me toward exploring the experiences of communities of women, I wanted to continue in this fashion to see how narrative conflict between groups of women could also be explored, territory we had rarely ventured into with Xara. It may be possible to use choral music as the medium to indicate conflict between characters, but ultimately in my piece, conflict lived through the dialogue and spoken text, while the choral music functioned as an expression of characters' feelings and emotions. This is an inherent challenge in the choral theatre methodology that relies on careful sequencing of different pieces of music, rather than performances in opera or musical theatre which both utilize an existing score written by a single composer and librettist. As the opera composer and librettist work together to develop a stand-alone score, the narrative of the work becomes fixed. Xara's process of compiling many pieces and composers allows for a more open, interpretive narrative, with concrete details often determined by spoken text. As I mainly drew from an existing repertoire of choral pieces, my process functioned similarly in terms of finding pieces of music that contained not only the aural qualities I was looking for, but also text that fit the narrative structure of the piece, and pieces that were written with the correct number of voice parts and were within the capacity of my performers.

Interested in the fundamental power dynamics and familial relations in Chekhov's work, I read several translations of the play until I settled on Irish playwright Brian Friel's 1981 translation. Friel's translation communicated the forlorn nature of Chekhov's story while grounding the text in a straightforward, unadorned fashion. The rhythm and cadence of Friel's writing in some way seemed to echo the down to earth flow of speech that is so common in rural Nova Scotia. I went through Friel's translation and isolated texts that seemed interesting, provocative, or resonant with the story in "I lie." I began to distill the text and pair it with a recording of "I lie," creating a physical score to accompany the text and music that was generated from free improvisations that eventually began to take on a structure. The three elements melded together into a short performance piece that I shared with my classmates and instructor Denise Kenney. I began to feel that this piece would become the major starting point for my thesis project. When I discussed the work with Denise, I posed the question of the extent of my involvement with my thesis performance. Up until that point, I had always done double duty with Xara, designing the movement and scenography as well as performing in the show. While I love to perform, I was already feeling the burden of being pulled in two directions at once during show week. Through our discussions, I determined that in order to best guide and shape the project, I should remain outside of it, working as creator and director and facilitating the actors' process.

At this point, I hoped that the creation process for my project would be similar to other devised projects that I had worked on in the past, as I was particularly inspired by the devised process Zuppa Theatre had worked with on their production of *Poor Boy*. For that process, the ensemble started with a complete musical score and then drew from a variety of text sources to shape the dialogue. For example, director Alex McLean might instruct any one of the actors or dramaturges to take the central concept of a scene and then combine it with an existing text, changing words and lines of text in the original to fit in with the ideas and characters of the new

scene. After a first draft of the scene was written, it would be brought back to the rest of the company to try out in rehearsal. From there, further revisions were made and the scene would transform and evolve, leaving only a remnant of the original source text and enriched with new text, physical action, sound, and melody, resulting in a scene created via “constant negotiation between spoken and embodied poetic expression” (Barton “Dancing” 20). I felt that the embroidered nature of choral theatre and the predominance of choral singing as the carrier of narrative might fit well within this style of creation, as Barton notes in reference to Zuppa’s 2006 production of *The Zuppa Circus Open Kitchen: It All Looks Different in the Dark*, “Thus, lacking a physical advocate – that is, a playwright – the script has regularly been decentralized as a source of narrative and formal authority” (23). Perhaps in this way the choral pieces could live as the main source of story and the other textual and physical pieces could be folded into them. With “I lie” and *Three Sisters* as my starting points, I set a plan to search for more texts, poems, songs, and stories that felt as if they belonged to the world of this play. I felt as if I needed to take the lead on gathering material that would shape the world of the play because it would eventually be *my* thesis project rather than a work with Xara. This choice lived in contrast to other devised processes I had observed where all members of the ensemble arrive at the first rehearsal with no preconceived notions of narrative, or the Xara process in which Christina and I work together to hatch the initial idea for a show and then select most of the music before meeting with the singers. In some ways the writing process for my MFA project became more akin to the work of theatre practitioners like Wajdi Mouawad, who utilize collective collaboration as a playwright’s laboratory: “an amalgamation of collective creation as a *product-oriented* process and as a *playwriting workshop*, Mouawad’s theatre excludes the uncertainty of dramaturgical authorship” (Meerzon 30). For various projects Mouawad has relied on actor-driven improvisation in rehearsal to gather materials, which he then compiles as the sole author. While not ideally in line with the work of earlier feminist collectives or the work of companies

like Zuppa, Mouawad's methods seemed to live somewhere near the work Christina and I practice in our creation periods for Xara productions.

When I returned to Halifax in mid-April, I asked director/actor Ann-Marie Kerr, a friend and someone whose work I respect enormously, if she would sit down over coffee to talk about my project. I offered up what I had been working on, and asked for any illumination she might be able to share in regards to working as a writer or director in a devised process. The piece of her advice that stuck with me throughout my process was to write down all of my obsessions, bring them to my actors, say "here are my obsessions," and then start from there. I took her advice to heart, and wrote down images and ideas that connected to the two source materials that I had decided to use. Words that kept coming up included mothers, sisters, lies, bricks, wood, water, ghosts, night, family, loyalty, trains, traveling, and ancestry. Around this time, I also came across a poem by one of my favourite poets, Octavio Paz, called "Poet's epitaph":

He tried to sing, singing  
not to remember  
his true life of lies  
and to remember  
his lying life of truths. (15)

Something in Paz's words resonated for me: the divide between truth and fiction, and the conscious effort to remember. I wondered what a "true life of lies" could be in contrast with a "lying life of truths." Govan, Nicholson, and Normington note that themes of this nature are common in this world of practice: "contemporary devisers construct theatrical narratives that are explicitly intended to challenge neat distinctions between the fictional and the real, between secrets and lies, and between imagination and authenticity" (56). As Helen Nicholson argues, truth and fiction are continually linked and remain essential to one another, and thus the presence of both in a work of performance is actually a reflection of our experience: "fiction and reality, self and otherness, are not in opposition or isolated from each other, but, as narrative constructions, they are interrelated and mutually embedded" (66). I envisioned a narrative where

the lines of truth and fiction were blurred, which eventually in my project took the form of the dream world versus the waking world. Certain scenes took place in dreams, but reflected the waking experience, blended together via the transportative and sometimes mystical power of choral singing. In addition, I wanted to develop a narrative where characters questioned their understanding of truth and fiction in relation to their own lives, perhaps by questioning events that had taken place in the past, uncovering information or secrets that would have an impact on their present condition.

A recurring image in some of the materials I was assembling was the image of the train. The Yiddish text in “I lie” includes the image of trains running by each day, marking the days of loneliness for the female speaker: “The trains run twice a day / One comes at night / I hear them clanging / Yes, now he is near.” Similarly, in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* the image of traveling by train recurs frequently, a necessary mode of transportation in sprawling countries like Russia and Canada. The image kept floating back to me as I circled around these few starting points. I wondered why I felt this affinity with the image. I had taken the train only a few times in my life, always to visit my grandparents as a young child. They lived within an hour’s driving distance, but my mother had taken my sister and I by train sometimes, perhaps just for the experience. I kept circling until one day I made another connection: my grandfather had laid railway tracks his entire life as an employee for Canadian National Railway, leaving school in grade eight to work. I found it odd that this central image I had been turning around in my mind had a tangible connection to my heritage, and that even though I had a very close relationship with my maternal grandparents, I had not seen how their lives could have imprinted on my work artistically until now. It seemed that this might be another example of “knowing in the body”; the connection with trains might have been passed on to me from my grandfather and stored inside, waiting to be brought to life in some way. I wondered if through an exploration of memory and lived experience, more connections with my early childhood and my home might come to the surface:

“memory is embodied and sensual, that is, conjured through the senses; it links the deeply private with social, even official practices” (Taylor 82). Perhaps via the act of performance, the physical reimagining of a life story, pieces of memory could be uncovered and retold, newly woven into the stories of the performers, and the audience, as well as my own story. In this way my project could function as performance-as-research that explored not only my own identity as a young Nova Scotian woman, but also could reveal links to generations of women that had come before me. This type of exploration is fundamental to Xara’s performance practices, as we constantly search for new ways to bring to light our own individuality as young women via our experience in a community art form. By continuing to push for an organizational structure that is horizontal in nature, we aim to create an environment that is ultimately empowering and supportive during an important time of personal growth. A devised choral theatre methodology that extensively draws on the memories and lived experience of its singers will only enhance the work that we have started in Xara, and will open the doors for new forms of narrative construction and layering of the contributions of individual singers with larger rituals and statements of communal female identity.

My research shifted to the local. I returned to my journal entries detailing how a sense of place had imprinted itself on me. I became more determined that the story would be set in Lower Economy, Nova Scotia, the place I associated with my childhood. I felt as if the characters should live within the time frame of Chekhov’s sisters, and started to look into the small village’s history. Little literature exists on the history of the village, and I found it slow going at first. I started searching the Nova Scotia Public Archives’ online database for any information about the town. I knew that the village road that my cottage is built on, Soley Cove Road, was named after an old family from the community. My parents always referred to one of the largest houses on the road as the Soley House, and I knew that until recently there had been a descendant of the family living there. I started searching genealogy records from the archives



database and uncovered birth, death, and marriage records starting in the mid 1800s and extending in some cases until the 1970s. I began pouring over these records and started making connections between family members, connecting the dots of mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, husbands and wives. Several of the Soley men had “shipbuilder” listed as their occupation on their death certificates. I started making the connection between the old photographs of ships that had lined my cottage walls since I was a child, and the Soley family that I was learning about from the public records. While the names of the men seemed to be the most recurring, I tried to focus on the women whose names surfaced in my records search. There were fewer female names, and their records contained less information. I had very little to go on in my search to explore and learn from these women, but I felt that I needed to see if I could connect to their stories, even if the story eventually became a work of total fiction. I wanted to create a new performative space for these stories to be told, using a medium that could tap into the deep history of the area via my own history there and my experience with choral singing: “A focus on women’s experiences illustrates a different historical trajectory, and, in performative contexts, allows the presentation of an embodied subjectivity and the demarcation of a place/space from which women can speak” (Gilbert 126). Nicholson notes that performance has the capacity for creating this space to present narratives that are reflective of a multitude of experiences: “performance always unfixes, and because narratives in drama are embodied and made in collaboration with others, their meanings are always multi-layered” (80). This seemed particularly evocative in light of my research about feminist theatre collectives and devising, which are both often hinged on the idea of presenting multiple expressions of experience via a collaborative process. In my own project, “I lie” would be connected to each person or tradition that had had a hand in shaping and developing it: the traditional Yiddish melody, fitted with Yiddish text by Joseph Rolnick, then transformed via Kristina Boerger’s English translation, and then adapted by composer David Lang. From there, this already multi-layered piece would be

interpreted by me as the director of the production, expressed and emoted vocally by the performers, and then would exist again in a new context in light of the narrative of our story. Finally, the audience would interpret the song each in their own, distinct way. Our final interpretation of the piece would be shaped by many hands and voices, as would each piece of music and text that we chose to incorporate into our narrative. Perhaps by incorporating source materials that surrounded or linked to the stories of these women, I could create a multi-layered expression of their experience, and delve into how it connected to my own. I wondered what the lives of these women on Soley Cove Road had been like, and if they ever felt the pull of somewhere different drawing them from their home.

It was about this time that I decided to start looking for source materials written by Nova Scotian writers. I felt connected to the themes in Chekhov's text but wanted to find something rooted more concretely to the place I would be exploring. I had been captivated by the work of Ann-Marie MacDonald for years, in particular her dark and painfully beautiful novel *Fall on Your Knees*, set on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island. MacDonald's haunting family story was filled with ghosts and secrets, and captures the reader from the first, stunted line of text: "They're all dead now" (1). I felt that the ethereal blend of choral voices could somehow communicate the same sense of longing, mystery, and darkness that MacDonald captured in prose. At the same time, the geography and culture of Cape Breton are very different from the part of Nova Scotia that I was looking to dig into, so instead of using anything directly from *Fall on Your Knees*, I let her story just live inside of me as I went further in my process.

I came across the poetry of Charles Bruce, a Nova Scotian writer who had grown to considerable notice in the 1950s, but whose work had nearly disappeared from the public eye by the 1970s. His work had been revived by one of my former professors at Dalhousie University, Andy Wainwright, and Nova Scotian author Lesley Choyce. Though Charles Bruce wrote in Guysborough County, on the Atlantic coast of Nova Scotia, his words seemed to encapsulate the

intense loneliness and separation that was becoming a theme in my material. In particular, his poem “Back Road Farm” vibrated with the images and sensations that were already swimming in my mind:

This house is built within a sheltering  
Sweep of the hills. You will not find the sea  
From attic windows; and the seasons bring  
No lift and change of tide, here in the lee  
Of the land’s high windbreak, where the buffeting  
Onshore wind is tripped on the mountain’s knee.  
No mist of blowing salt is flung to sting  
The trusting flesh. You will not find the sea.

This property is private. Drifting rain  
Beats on its shingles and its native stone;  
The wind of August on its leaning grain  
Is dark with shadow, and the leaves are blown  
To a soft thunder. But the hills remain;  
Their strength is certain and their purpose known.  
Only at night, in the stillness, low and plain  
You can hear the far deep rumor of sea on stone. (33)

Bruce’s description of a house tucked in the “sheltering sweep of the hills” echoed the geography of our little village in Lower Economy, where around two dozen houses and cottages lay tucked in the lee at the base of Economy Mountain. The repeated text “you will not find the sea” struck me as ironic and sad while imagining it in the context of Soley Cove Road, where the Minas Basin is visible from nearly every window. I wondered, could you live by the sea but not really “see” it? To not appreciate it, or feel its pull? The last two lines of the poem seemed particularly poignant considering Economy, a place where the darkness of night is nearly impenetrable, and the silence is so keen it feels like the eardrums are actually relaxed. The Minas Basin’s legendary tides flow in and out for miles each day, and the image of their waves dragging on the endless mudflats out to a stony bottom felt like it fit perfectly with Bruce’s description.

As the summer months passed, my beloved and I were engaging in our usual pastime of driving through the Nova Scotian countryside, stopping to look at abandoned houses and barns.

As artists, both of us find them intriguing, sad, and beautiful. This summer though, they took on a different meaning in light of my research regarding lived history in the province. Two houses in particular stuck out for me. One, somewhere along the secondary highway deep in the Annapolis Valley, was a house about fifty years old, just off the highway. We spotted it thanks to its front door hanging slightly open, and its boarded up windows. The lawn was overgrown, save for the driveway that seemed not entirely unused. The uppermost window was still open, curtain blowing out in the breeze. I felt the presence of ghosts too strongly here, but my beloved in his fearless curiosity decided to go inside. He yelled to me that all the entrances off the main room of the house were boarded up, and that the central room was filled with children's toys. "It looks like people have been squatting here recently," his voice called out. I shuddered a little; the image seemed haunting. I looked around to distract my imagination and my eye caught on the low hanging apple trees by the driveway. Not far off, the tall grass was flattened into ovals. My eye recognized the familiar pattern of a deer's sleeping place, common too in our yard in Lower Economy. The second house to catch my eye was in Central Economy, just ten minutes on the highway from my cottage. Set on a long lane off the main road, this house had clearly been abandoned for much longer. The front deck was in mid-collapse and the white paint faded to a pale grey. The front window still had curtains in the windows, while the side of the house had clearly at one time had an extension that had been ripped away and hastily boarded up. The screen door was emblazoned with the letter "R". These two houses were each their own individual mystery to me. Who used to live there? What were they like? Why had they left the house? Why was the house allowed to fall to ruins rather than sold? Did anyone know the answer to these questions or was it only ghosts who knew what had once gone on in these homes? Bachelard speaks of the way houses imprint themselves of us, carried forever in our dreams and memories: "there exists for each of us an oneiric house, a house of dream-memory, that is lost in the shadow of a beyond of the real past" (15). I had experienced this in the past,

particularly with my maternal grandparents house in Truro, Nova Scotia. This home had remained nearly unchanged in the sixty years my grandparents lived there, and since it has been sold following my grandparents' passing, it has lived for me in sense memory: smells of my grandfather's closet, the taste of my grandmother's strawberry shortcake, the cool relief of the shuttered house on a hot summer's day. Now that it has passed into someone else's ownership, it can live only in memory for my sister, my mother, and myself. For someone unknown to me, these abandoned buildings were their own dream-memory houses, filled with histories and stories that I was not privy to. I wanted to recall this feeling in my thesis project by using a venue that would in some way cause audience members to reflect on the houses that had imprinted upon them, and to make them feel at home in some way.

Devised theatre has a history of intersecting with site-specific performance, as the multi-layered nature of devised theatre can be further explored by performing in a space that has its own layers of meaning and association: "if one accepts the proposition that the meanings of utterances, actions and events are affected by their 'local position', by the *situation* of which they are a part, then a work of art, too, will be defined in relation to its place and position" (Kaye 1). Typically, performances are crafted with a particular building, location, or space in mind. This site plays an explicit role in shaping the narrative, themes, staging, and the audience-performer relationship. In my own research, site-specificity and place-based performance was enticing because I believed it could heighten or enhance the ability to recall memory, as highlighted by Jen Harvie: "site-specific performance can be especially powerful as a vehicle for remembering and forming a community...its location can work as a potent mnemonic trigger, helping to evoke specific past times related to the place and time of performance and facilitating a negotiation between the meaning of those times" (42). I thought that this would pair powerfully with song, as music is equally known to trigger memory and emotion. Ultimately, however, as it was important to me to stage the production for both Halifax and British Columbia audiences, I

did not dive into the work with site-specificity as a major goal: “to move the site-specific work is to *re-place* it, to make it *something else*” (Kaye 2). I needed to be able to tell a story that was distinctly Maritime both in Halifax and in the Okanagan Valley, and would have only my performers and limited staging to communicate this. Therefore, I went forward to find a space that would evoke the sense of history that I was exploring, and allow the sense of place to live in the words, music, and objects that would create my piece. In a way, I felt like Nova Scotia’s abandoned houses were the starting place for my performance piece, and my work would be to uncover and re-imagine the story of those who had once lived in these houses.

## **The Rehearsal Process**

Once I had a good sense of the source materials I would draw from, I needed to start thinking about the characters and the performers I would work with. I knew that I wanted to write a story about a family of sisters and their conflict between wanting to leave home and their loyalty to stay with their loved ones. The pragmatic blended with the artistic as I had ordered the sheet music for “I lie” and had confirmed my suspicions that the piece was written for four voices. I began shaping my story around three sisters and their mother. I looked back through the public archives and looked for names that were connected to the Soley family. I decided on Sarah, Mary, and Alice as the names for the three sisters, although there was no one family that had three sisters with those names.

Choosing performers was equally as important as the story we would tell, a lesson that I had learned from my work with Xara. The singers in Xara come from a variety of performance backgrounds; some are classically trained and have sung in choirs all their lives, while others love to sing but have little formal background. Some singers also have lots of experience in theatre or dance, while others have none. As Xara works in an interdisciplinary performance medium, the variety of skill levels in the group contributes to a dynamic rehearsal process that is based on continuous skill-building and deepening of practice. There can be moments of both frustration and discovery as singers and artistic staff are challenged to push the boundaries of their understanding of choral performance.

For my thesis project, I knew there had to be at least some performers who had a very solid background in choral music to help ground that element of the performance. The first person I decided to approach was my younger sister, Zoe, who is trained in both classical music and jazz, and works as a voice teacher and performer. She is also an emerging composer in both genres. She has performed with Xara on and off over the years, but has little theatre or dance training. For many, working so intimately with one’s sibling might prove problematic, but I

knew that the extraordinary closeness that Zoe and I share would only strengthen the piece rather than harm the process. Although I did not explicitly state this when I asked her to take part in the project, in reflection, Zoe seemed to share similar feelings:

Claire and I are lucky that we both have tremendous appreciation and respect for each other's artistic work but because she and I have very different focuses and artistic goals, there was no sense of competition or conflict of ideas . . . She also could speak to me freely about what she needed from me as an actor and musician because she knows exactly how much experience and knowledge I have in both areas and could direct me in a way that was tactful and played to my strengths. (personal communication)

As I knew from my friendship and creative partnership with Xara's artistic director, Christina Murray, there is always the potential for conflict when you work closely in an artistic capacity with someone you also love and respect as a friend. Ultimately, I believe working with Zoe was the right choice, as I had complete trust in her ability to learn her parts and commit to the project. However, this trust also at times made our rehearsals less productive than they could have been; knowing Zoe's work process, if she arrived at rehearsal with parts not yet learned, I knew she would have them ready in time for performance. However, if I was working with another performer who demonstrated the same behaviour, I might have acted more firmly as a director to make sure we had as much rehearsal time off-book as possible. Similarly, I decided to ask Tenille Goodspeed, a dear friend and collaborator in Xara, to be part of the project. Tenille has a tremendous amount of choral singing experience and a great capacity for movement, but like Zoe, had not been part of a theatre production since high school. From a friendship point of view, I felt even more so that I was taking a risk working with Tenille because she was the only cast member who had no experience working as a professional performer, and thus I worried that the pressure might prove to be a strain on her and on our friendship. However, my experience working with her in Xara had taught me that she memorized material faster than anyone I knew, was willing to try anything, and was an expressive and committed performer. I felt that Zoe's



and Tenille's excellent capacity in choral music would ground that aspect of the performance, as well as give them an opportunity to expand their performance experience.

I knew I also needed to find performers who were trained in traditional theatre and who were comfortable working with dialogue. I decided to approach Kristin Slaney, a friend who I had gone through Neptune Theatre School's Pre-Professional Training Program with several years earlier. Dividing her time between finishing her theatre degree at Dalhousie, teaching at Neptune, and working as a professional actress, I knew Kristin had both the acting skills and a beautiful, if untrained, voice. I also approached Allison Basha, a colleague who had studied acting at Dalhousie and was now working as an actress on the East Coast. I felt that Kristin and Allison would bring a diverse skill set to the project, and hoped that the four could learn from each other's strengths during the performance.

We started the rehearsal process with a "show and tell" of everything I had been working on and compiling. Speaking out loud all of the pieces that had lived in my head and on paper created new connections for me. We listened to pieces of music that I was considering, and read through text. They all responded strongly to Bruce's poem "Back Road Farm," and so I asked Zoe if she would be interested in setting it for four voices. She was eager to take on the task and so I gave her a timeline of two months to work on the piece. We then began rehearsing once a week whenever we could make it work with five people's very busy schedules. We started exploring pieces of text from Chekhov, and sang through "I lie." We also began to work with improvisations that married Chekhov's text with movement. Heddon and Milling note that structured improvisations can allow performers to approach an idea armed with both the freedom to interpret the provocation using various modes of expression, as well as with guidelines that will help to shape the direction of the work:

This idea of repetition and revision is one that holds good in theatrical, improvisational performances. A structured set of givens, rules or games can limit and contain the “spontaneous” input of the performer . . . In the studio or workshop during the making of a performance, different devising practices will use improvisation that might involve the repetition and revision of breathing exercises, or physical, dance-based contact between performers, or everyday tasks, or verbal interrogation, or character-based interaction. (9)

I gave each actor a short excerpt of text from *Three Sisters* and asked them to create a brief physical action inspired by the text. To Kristin, I gave text that Masha speaks in Act 4: “Listen to that music. They’re going away forever. They’ll never be back. And we must begin to put our lives together again because we have got to go on living. That’s what we must do” (113). This text spoke to me of the themes of isolation and the fear of family being torn apart that permeated many of my source materials. Kristin created a physical score that started with sitting on the ground, hearing something, and then slowly turning into a standing position, arm raised, waving goodbye as she delivered the text. It was a sad and forlorn action, and it made me feel that Kristin’s character, Mary, would be the one left behind as the world changed around her. To Zoe, I gave text that Irina speaks in Act 4 as she feels the pattern of her life shifting: “Life had acquired a fresh pattern; a new shape was emerging. I really think I was almost happy again . . . I have a sense that something eerie is going to happen, something sinister” (94). Zoe’s action involved walking forward slowly and quietly, stumbling to the side, and then moving backward. This action would later become the basis of the scene “Spying,” where Alice goes to the attic to find out more information about her family. We shared what we had created with one another, and then taught each other our actions. As expected, exploring these different areas of interdisciplinary performance presented their own challenges for each person. Zoe and Tenille took the lead in guiding the choral music, while Kristin and Allison showed leadership in working with text and improvisation.

I started writing scenes about the three sisters and their mother. At first they were just fragments, ideas that I wanted to try out with the actors and see what worked. I decided that the

story should take place in the early 1920s, at a time when big changes were happening throughout Canada and possibilities for women were evolving in new ways. I saw Sarah, the eldest sister played by Tenille, as the most reserved of the daughters, while Mary and Alice, played by Kristin and Zoe, were the younger sisters with a very close bond who longed to leave the house. The mother, played by Allison, symbolized how life used to be for this family in rural Nova Scotia. The title surfaced early in the work, as I reflected on the abandoned houses I had born witness to over the summer: *The Record of the Lonely House*. I wanted to suggest that the story or lived record that was being performed in the piece could be the re-imagined story of a house that now lies empty, in contrast with the written documents that are deemed the “official” record of history.

As we started scene work, I made a couple of large steps forward in my source materials. The first was deciding to use a piece by Canadian composer Stephen Hatfield called “When I Was in My Prime.” Based on an old British melody, the piece’s text spoke of lost love in a way that was connected to nature: “When I was in my prime, I flourished like a vine / There came along a false young man, / Come stole the heart of mine, come stole the heart of mine.” I liked the simple melodic line and Celtic-influenced harmonies that Hatfield had woven into the piece, and the addition of his work prompted me to add two more traditional Celtic songs to the performance: “Hurree Hurroo” and “’Tis the Last Rose of Summer.” These pieces were simple folk songs that were sung in unison, and they recurred several times throughout the piece. These lyric melodies provided contrast to the measured patterns of “I lie” that opened the performance, interrupting the established pattern of sound in moments of joy or tenderness. I began to feel the Celtic roots at the heart of the performance, surely a result of my Scottish and Irish heritage and the strong Celtic culture that is still present in Nova Scotia. I wanted to try and present that element of the performance without falling into the stereotypes that I feel are often present in plays about Nova Scotians. There is more to Maritime culture than kitchen parties, fishermen,

and coal miners, but these seem to be the prevailing images that we ourselves reinforce in our theatre, music, and performance. There is a darkness to Celtic culture that is less frequently explored, and I think it was these shadows that drew me to the work of Ann-Marie MacDonald. I wanted to go deeper underneath that “friendly Maritime hospitality” that the east coast of Canada is so famous for, and get at some of the moments that were under the surface, mentioned only in whispers or left to be discovered in letters. Surely these were also the moments that drew us together as a culture, and caused us to have such a deeply entrenched sense of family and loyalty.

While reading the text of Hatfield’s piece, I wondered who the “false young man” in our story might be. Feeling that it would be appropriate for the piece to refer to a young man who had scorned one of the three sisters in the story, I also felt that the relationship between the sisters was more complex than I had initially thought. Fuchs suggests considering the formation of characters within the world of the play: “In what kinds of patterns do the figures on this planet arrange themselves? Do you see groups in action, isolated individuals, or both?” (7). It seemed to me that my characters often ended up opposing one another, with Mary and Alice forming a close bond in opposition to Sarah and the Mother. It seemed like the gap between the two groups was generational; even though Sarah was only a few years older than the two younger sisters, she had some kind of life experience that the other two did not. I decided that Sarah would be sister-in-law to Mary and Alice, married to their brother who had passed before the story began. I felt that there was interesting room to play here with familial relationships, and that different and conflicting types of memory could surface from a husband/wife relationship versus a brother/sister. It also seemed fitting that the younger sisters would be the ones who were hoping to leave the family home, while Sarah felt an obligation to stay in the home her late husband had been raised in to look after her mother-in-law. Mary and Alice were pulling to leave their small hometown for work, romance, or adventure in a larger place, while Sarah and the Mother fell

into the more traditional role of homemaker. In some senses Mary and Alice were itching to enter the public sphere, while Sarah and the Mother remained confined to the private sphere domesticity of home. This binary between the young leaving home and the old staying behind is a traditional one, but one that I felt still resonated, especially in Nova Scotia, where so many young people head west to find work and leave their families behind.

Choosing to construct a narrative set in 1920 using information gathered from archival records and drawing from Chekhov's work meant facing traditional hierarchical power relationships between men and women. By choosing to portray only female characters and their experience, I was attempting to shed light on some of their histories that had been covered over by time in the official record books. Nevertheless, by including unseen male characters that lived only in memory, there were still active power dynamics between men and women present in the story. I felt that these were still relevant relationships to explore despite their traditional nature, as I had struggled as a young woman to define my own identity and goals in life while balancing relationships with men. I had also seen my mother struggle through similar issues in her own personal relationships, and had observed how her present experience had been infiltrated with memories of her own deceased brothers and father. My grandmother, who would have been nine years old in 1920, faced both constriction and loss in her two marriages and with her three sons. In this way, I felt that Sarah and the Mother embodied some of the issues I had seen the women in my life wrestle with, and wanted to explore this using a performative medium in an effort to connect more viscerally with their experience. In addition, I was curious to explore possible new endings to these situations: would it be possible for my characters to define themselves independently of their relationships with men? Would they be able to resist sinking down into the memories of the men they loved who were no longer living? Should they? If so, how? All of these questions plagued my mind as I began crafting the narrative.

At the same time, I found an invaluable resource in a manuscript document that my mother had come across in her own personal research of Economy. Compiled by a man named Garfield Perry in 1974, the document was an account of the *Ladysmith*, a barquentine ship built in the Soley Shipyard in 1902 and majority share-owned by R.P. Soley. Perry interviewed people with connections to the shipyards along the Fundy coast and gathered documents and photographs from the era. Although much of it was a technical account of the ship and how it was built, there were also passages about what life was like along the coast. Of particular interest for me were two hand drawn maps that Perry had recreated, detailing the early settlers in Lower Economy from 1850-1900, as well as a plot plan of the Soley shipyards (see Illustrations 1 and 2). A map of the same road my cottage is built on, the plot plan showed several large structures that were integral to the shipyards, including a grist mill, a steam mill, two dams, a blacksmith shop, a cookhouse, a steam box, the millyard, the shipyards themselves, and a 400-foot wharf. The part that fascinated me was that there is no evidence of any of these structures still left in the cove, a place that is now sprinkled with cottages and covered in trees and long grass. It was as if nature had taken back the land over time, leaving no trace except perhaps under the surface.

As I was writing, much of the information I learned from Perry's manuscript was built into the mother character in her recollections of what the land used to be like: "It was different here. This land was once moving. There was a rhythm, a steady pulse. The boots heading to the shipyard beat a path into the dirt. You could hear the ringing of hammers on steel drifting up to the house from the shore." Around this time I also visited the Economy Cemetery, looking for familiar names on the gravestones. I found several Soleys in the graveyard, as well as a row of three small graves, each a daughter lost within a yearlong period in the 1860s. It was a sad reminder of the fragility of life in those times, and the tragedy that can strike any family. I was also intrigued by the headstone as the only remaining public vestige of a person after they and their family are gone. Lippard notes that it is the simplicity of graveyards that causes them to

**Economy Mountain Highway #2**

**To Five Islands**

**To Economy**

**Settlers:**

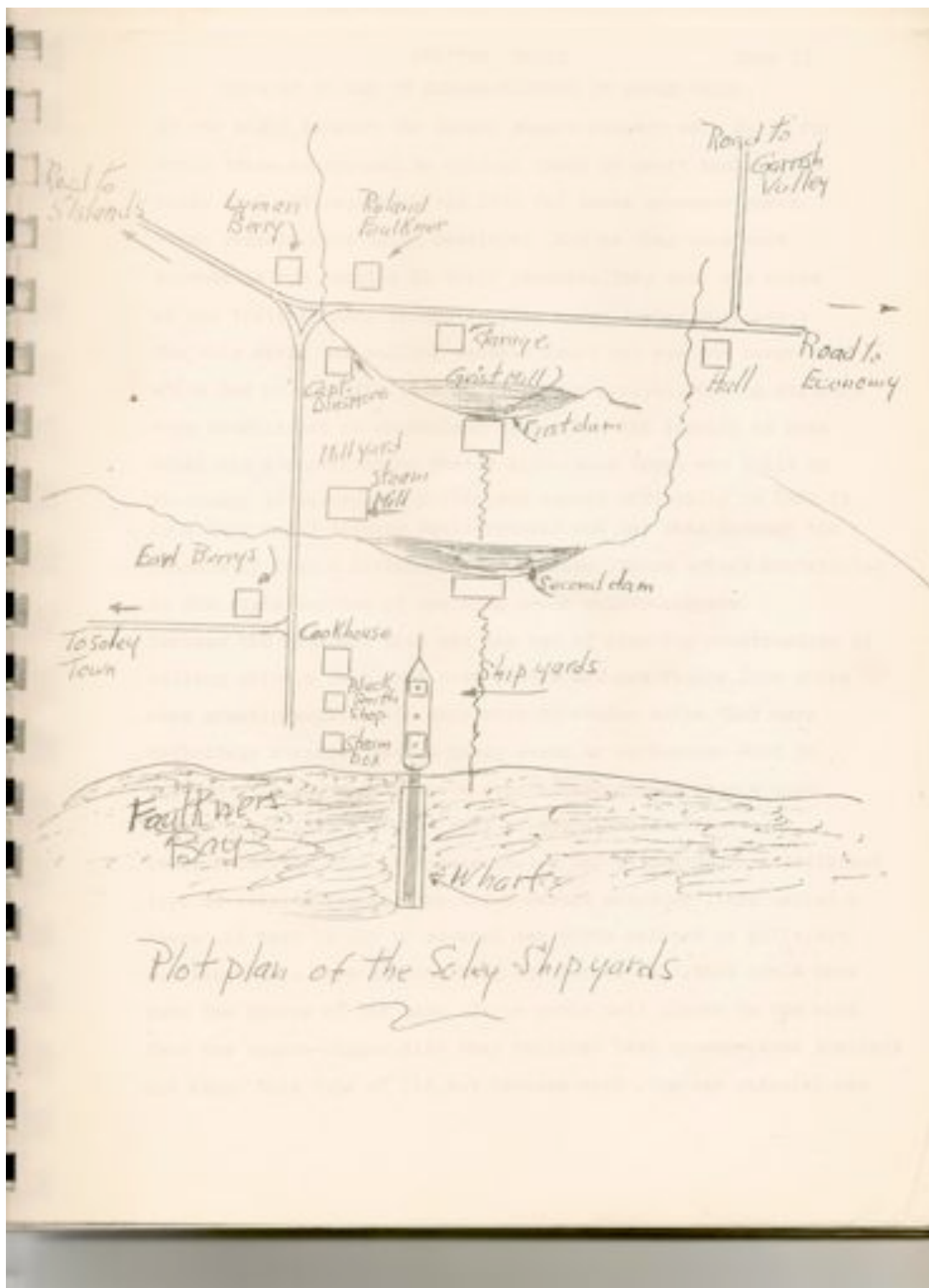
- Tom Berry
- Josiah Soley
- Charles William Soley
- David Page Soley
- Berton Berry
- J Foulkner
- Mrs Beattie
- R McLaughlin
- T Graham
- C Foulkner
- Baptist Church
- R McElhally
- A Hill
- W March
- EL Parker
- M V Young
- J M Carlin
- J M Cobe

**Other Features:**

- Wharf
- Shipyard
- Foulkner's Bay
- John Squire
- Allen Squire
- George Squire

**Map of early settlers in Economy, Ky. approximately 1850-1900**

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**Illustration 2 - Plot Plan of the Soley Shipyard.** Drawn by Garfield Perry. Noted in this map are several structures that have since disappeared from the area's landscape: the grist mill, two dams, steam mill, mill yard, cookhouse, blacksmith shop, steam box, shipyards, and the wharf.



these people by seeing their headstones, although the majority of the information presented on the headstone I already knew from my archival searches. Somehow, seeing the gravestone made the person more real, more alive even in death.

Pieces of the story were falling into place through rehearsals. The opening scene, starting with “I lie”, felt like a dream or a memory as the women moved through the space in candlelight while singing. I built upon the image of the train that had surfaced early on in the process and had Mary recount her dream of a train in the first scene: “I dreamt that we were walking by the shore at night, and we could see a train, sort of off in the distance. You know, we could see its lights flashing up ahead. And we could hear the sound, you know. The sound of the wheels on the tracks. And so we started running, faster, to try and catch it, but before we really got anywhere, it was gone.” Sarah quickly interrupts Mary’s imaginativeness with a down to earth admonishment: “What train are you talking about? You know there isn’t a train anywhere near here,” instantly determining the dynamic between the older and younger sisters. This scene was later augmented with a poem by American poet Louise Bogan called “Train Tune” that used the repeated textual motif of “back through” with a variety of images from nature and landscape, as if watching the world pass by on a long train journey. I felt this would heighten the lyricism of the first scene and give it sharp contrast to the domestic scene that immediately followed. This contrast became a recurring theme as we switched back and forth from dreamlike scenes, including a scene where Sarah is caught sleepwalking by Mary, to scenes surrounding the trivial moments of the family’s daily life. The playful relationship between Mary and Alice started to run through the piece, beginning with a memory of their brother David, Sarah’s husband and a soldier in World War I, and continuing on as Mary teased Alice about her feelings for a local boy named Lloyd McIvor. Sarah’s sensitivity to any mention of David cast a shadow over the tenderness with which the younger sisters evoked him. To soften Sarah’s position and show the depth of her relationship with David, I included text by poet Eileen Cameron Henry, who wrote

in Antigonish, Nova Scotia in the 1960s. I had stumbled across Henry's book of poetry in an antique store in Great Village, two towns over from Economy, and found her poem "Total Recall" to be a beautiful and detailed recollection:

How do I remember you?  
You liked brown bread,  
And milk, and autumn leaves,  
And white shirts, and a wide bed;  
And any hill that soared,  
And ships, and the grey sea,  
And dogs, and old songs -  
And you loved me.

How do I remember you?  
You liked the spring,  
And dawn, and daffodils,  
And ebb tide, and a gull's wing;  
And any kind of sweet,  
And snow, and the blue sea,  
And rain, and old books -  
And you loved me. (n.p.)

I found Henry's text to be almost prosaic in its structure, but thought the sparse use of rhyme helped it to feel expressive and lyric. This helped to make a bridge in structure between the use of text and dialogue and the songs in the piece, which was proving to be one of the biggest challenges in the process. With only a few voices, how do you transition from spoken text into singing without creating the "cheesy" musical theatre effect of breaking into song? Some pieces were used in the narrative in a purposeful manner, such as when Mary and Alice sang and danced together to "Hurree Hurroo." I felt this light and silly moment was needed to offset some of the darker themes in the piece, and served to show the close bond between the two young sisters. Other pieces of music functioned similarly, as when Sarah sang "Tis the Last Rose of Summer" to Mary near the end of the play to comfort her, as a lullaby. These pieces lived within the reality of the narrative, as opposed to the other pieces "I lie," "When I Was in My Prime," and "He's Gone Away" that were not a concrete part of the narrative but rather an emotive moment for the characters. Like with musical theatre, we were functioning under the same

principle that music can carry emotion more deeply and profoundly than spoken text. In addition, the mystical qualities of the songs and poems stood as reminders of the overarching themes I was trying to explore involving the blurriness of memory and the imagined histories we were trying to recreate. Perhaps the issue lay in the sharp contrast: by including both pieces that served a narrative function as well as pieces that were solely emotive, the audience might have felt unsure as to the purpose of the choral music. I was hoping for a blend of both naturalistic and expressive moments to mirror the blurriness of truth that I was eager to explore. Ultimately, I left the process feeling, as Helen Nicholson argues, that various conceptions of truth can be best explored in a more abstract form: “the idea that there are multiple interpretations of truth in autobiographical memory suggests that a dramatic style that relies heavily on naturalistic forms of representation is politically, as well as artistically, constricting” (90). These transitional moments navigating the divide between the realistic dialogue, which I was attempting to use as a means of attaining narrative specificity, and the more lyrical pieces, were a major struggle for me to work through. I think in future I would lean more heavily toward a lyrical narrative rather than trying to find an equal balance of poetic and naturalistic. I think especially as the choral theatre art form is an emerging one, audiences are still learning what to expect and perhaps making a stronger choice toward an abstract lyrical style throughout the entirety of the piece might have grounded the mystical quality of choral singing more firmly for the spectator. As Christina and I are continually working to deepen and explore our artistic practice in choral theatre, we uncover new challenges with each project we undertake. In the past five years, Xara shows have moved from exclusively choral music to blending in passages of spoken text, and, largely as a result, our shows have been grounded in much more concrete narratives. I believe my explorations with *The Record of the Lonely House* were key for furthering the development of this art form to experiment with what could happen if more realistic acting and choral music could blend to tell a story. By experimenting with letting the pendulum swing very far toward

realism and observing its challenges and successes, I think we are now better equipped to find a middle ground that finds a more natural marriage between choral music and theatre.

Although many good things were happening in rehearsal, I was struggling in my writing. It was challenging to develop a story from scratch without ongoing training or feedback regarding my playwriting. I had been hoping to work with a process similar to those I had experienced and read about other devised companies working in Canada, for example, Number Eleven Theatre's experience of developing *The Prague Visitor*:

While the company had prepared for the initial work on the production through a series of vocal workshops focused on Yiddish folksongs, and had established a variety of thematic source materials (in particular, several actual historical figures and a group of four short stories by Franz Kafka), fundamental issues of narrative and mis-en-scène [sic] were to be 'imagined physically,' so to speak, through the collective work of the company." (Barton "Navigating" 111)

In light of the limited experience my cast had with devising new text, I had taken the lead role as playwright, developing the script on my own and bringing it to the cast. Once in rehearsal, the text might change as we worked through each scene, but not to the extensive level that I had experienced when working with other practitioners. I was writing from my heart, but this was unlike any project I had worked on before: much more loosely structured than any Xara performance, but more focused on the music than any devised show I had worked on. The devised process was challenging for Zoe and Tenille, who were willing to follow wherever I would lead, but did not have the experience or impulse to take leadership in developing new material for the show:

When working with Xara there is often a relatively concrete narrative already in place by the time I am involved artistically. From there, the interpretation of the music, or the ways in which we move may fluctuate but always stay within the parameters of the idea set up at the beginning of the process. With the Lonely House the story developed as we rehearsed, which for me was a terrifying thing. The final result was, without a doubt, all worth it but the process was at times very stressful and I, on occasion, felt left in the dark." - Tenille Goodspeed (personal communication)

As the devised process often flourishes in the back and forth between actors and director, the piece was not progressing as organically in rehearsal as I had initially hoped. My unplanned responsibility as playwright meant that I was developing the narrative more independently than I had intended, and with relatively little training in this area I could sense weakness in parts of the script. As someone who regularly functions as an artistic leader in Xara and in other aspects of my life, I struggled with my leadership capabilities in ways that I had never encountered before. Leading rehearsals felt arduous, perhaps because I was not totally confident in the material I was presenting to my actors, or perhaps because we were working among friends and it was easy to get side-tracked. Heddon and Milling note the challenges that many devised theatre companies have faced while determining organizational structures; for example, they note Richard Seyd's discussion of developing working structures during his time with Britain's political collective Red Ladder Theatre: "[it] has been perhaps the most problematical part of the work, relating, as it does, to the creation of an organisational structure that is at the same time democratic, productive, and non-oppressive to the individuals working within the collective" (105). Many devised theatre companies have restructured, added new members, or disbanded due to the pressure of maintaining a productive work environment that also honours its commitment to collective creation. Heddon and Milling describe the shifts in leadership for the legendary San Francisco Mime Troupe, noting struggles between the emphasis placed on politics versus aesthetics, and the continuous effort to balance process and product. In addition, the diversity of the working members produced conflict: "tension was also tangible between performers who were professionals and those who were amateurs, when both had an equal voice in meetings" (108). I felt the weight of this history on my shoulders, and was feeling pulled in several directions between projects with Xara, my three other part-time jobs, and my thesis. The financial load of the project in addition to the massive pressure I was putting on myself that the

performance had to be “perfect” left me little space to think and consider the story I was developing. I felt lost and without guidance for weeks at a time.

Near the end of November, Zoe came to rehearsal with her arrangement of “Back Road Farm” for four voices. The piece was haunting and beautiful, blending in with the aural aesthetic we had been developing in rehearsal with the other pieces of music. In addition, Zoe was able to combine the text and music in a way that deeply fed into the sense of loneliness and nostalgia that the characters were embodying:

There are several points in the text that I felt were necessary to highlight within the context of the story. First, the idea of how the girls are very much united but still feel the want and need to be their own persons. This was highlighted by the constant shift in both unison singing vs. harmony singing as well as moving lines vs. stagnant lines. This love/hate relationship of their home also is displayed in shifts between dissonant, ominous harmony and more chordal, diatonic harmony. Finally, I used strong images in the text such as "you will not find the sea" and "no life and change of tide" that I stressed using repetition as well as dynamic and tempo alterations to showcase the idea of disparity that the girls feel. (personal communication)

I felt that Zoe’s setting encapsulated all that I was hoping for, both aurally and textually. It felt as if the house we had been creating was also somehow living in her composition. For her, the experience of writing a piece within the context of a specific narrative had implications on her own creative process:

Personally, the images that a written work evokes are where I draw my inspiration for melody contour as well as harmony. These images were only strengthened as we delved deeper into the story of the Lonely House. To me, this particular text spoke of the girls' desperation to leave their home and environment which seems to have suffocated them in a way, however they feel the pull of their surroundings making them stay. (personal communication)

I was excited by this processual development. Xara has the opportunity to commission new work very infrequently, but the few times when we have been able, it has proven to elevate the narrative as a whole. The dialogical relationship between the show’s creators and the composer is always detailed and rich, but this experience of working with a composer who was actually

playing a character in the show was new altogether. I felt that Zoe understood the struggle of the characters viscerally, and was therefore able to infuse this experience into her writing.

After taking a break over the Christmas holidays, we had a huge logistical change at the beginning of January. Due to conflict with Allison's schedule, she had to withdraw from the project. I was then faced a big decision: did I try and replace Allison, only six weeks before the performance? Did I play the role myself and do triple duty as writer/director/actor? Or did I rework the show for three characters? After talking it through with the other three performers, it seemed that the last option was the best way forward. Part of me felt relieved, as I had always imagined the show for three women, and had added the mother character mostly out of necessity to fill the voice parts needed. Zoe agreed to reset "Back Road Farm" for three voices and we proceeded to redevelop the show. Much of the mother's dialogue became blended into the eldest sister, Sarah, who became the figurehead for tradition in the household.

The plot was unfolding rapidly in rehearsals, as the secrets living in the house became the focus of the narrative. Sarah's relationship with David was complicated as Alice uncovered evidence that Sarah had performed assisted suicide on her husband in light of his injuries from fighting in the war. The two younger sisters felt this act as a betrayal of the truth they had known and accepted about their brother's death. The resulting conflict between Sarah and Alice caused the latter to leave the house with her beau, Lloyd. This turn of events tore apart the family structure that the characters had understood as their way of life. This conflict beat at the centre of some of the key elements of memory versus truth that I had been keen to explore: "the human memory acts as a filter and, as a consequence, what is remembered may not be the truth but an embroidered version of the real" (Govan 63). How could Mary and Alice have not known that this was how their brother had died? Because the evidence was not in front of them? Or perhaps because they *chose* to remember his death in a certain way?

I began seeing “echos and omens” in the piece, a term dramaturge Bruce Barton had introduced me to when I had worked with him on Zuppa Theatre’s *Poor Boy*. Barton works extensively with the company as dramaturge, and my experience of working as apprentice dramaturge on their 2009 production of *Poor Boy* shaped some of the ways I approached my own work. Their process for that show included sourcing many texts that spoke to the actors in some way, and then revisiting and reinterpreting them in the context of their own story. This experience influenced my decision to incorporate texts from Chekhov and other sources. For *Poor Boy*, a free retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth taglined “a pop music fantasia about tragic love,” the company started with an entire score of pieces written by resident composers Jason MacIsaac and David Christensen, in some ways similar to my starting point using “I lie” as the beginning piece of music for my further explorations. I knew from my work with them that the frustration I was experiencing was normal amongst devisers, as Sue Leblanc articulates: “At the beginning it is exciting and easy - lots of energy, ideas, contributions. As the work goes on, it gets hazy, I grow tired. At a certain point, I despair - I get impatient and cry a lot. Then somehow, the black cloud lifts and and I see the light, and I understand why I am saying certain texts, and then we open” (Stone, Leblanc, and McLean 13). These echoes and omens inhabit the worlds of Zuppa’s performances, often through musical motifs, repeated fragments of text, or specific physical actions. The echos and omens that we explored in our show were usually object centered; for example, the white sheets that Mary and Alice folded during their discussion of Sarah’s sleepwalking recurred as we developed “When I Was in My Prime.” To suggest an omen of the secret revealed later in the story, the sisters folded the sheet into a bed in the middle of the space. First it was used to symbolize Sarah and David’s marriage bed, then it was folded in half to represent a hospital bed. As the song came to its funereal end, Sarah pulled the sheet corner over the face of the imaginary man laying in the bed (see Illustrations 3 and 4).





**Illustration 3 - Mary and Alice fold sheets - photograph from Halifax workshop production.** They discuss the discovery of Sarah sleepwalking.



**Illustration 4 - “When I Was in My Prime” - photograph from Halifax workshop production.** The sheet is transformed as Mary, Sarah, and Alice sit by their brother’s bedside in a memory sequence.

We had also incorporated the use of a handbell as a drone in the piece, and I liked the symbolism of a bell ringing as the movement and sonority of the scene suggested someone’s final moments.

The story ended as it began, as the sisters sang the familiar ostinato of “I lie”, this time with the addition of a soaring solo line sung by Alice as she crossed the floor, looking back at

her family just as the room fell to black. This echo of the beginning of the piece reinforced the divide between lyric memory and realism, in the hopes of allowing the audience to consider the piece in the framework of re-imagination and the blurriness of memory.

## **In Performance**

A major part of moving the show into performance was securing a venue in British Columbia. I felt very strongly that the performance space should be able to emulate a house, and include either wooden floors or exposed brick walls, architectural elements that are prominent in traditional Atlantic Canadian design. After spreading the word among my friends and colleagues in Kelowna, I was able to secure the Mackie Lake House in Coldstream, BC. The Mackie Lake House was built in 1910 and has been preserved in its original Arts and Crafts style. Interestingly, it is also noted to feature a distinct Eastern Canadian influence, an element that was important to me considering I would be performing a story with a central Maritime identity in the Okanagan Valley. It was challenging to decide on the space without actually being there and seeing if it would serve our needs, but I was assured by my contacts and by photographs that it would be the right fit.

With the show finally written and blocked, we planned a workshop performance in Halifax to try out what we had been working on. Luckily we were able to secure space at a beautiful heritage house in downtown Halifax that has now been converted into apartments. The living room space was comparable to the floor space at the Mackie House, and the house had the high ceilings, fireplaces, and wide floorboards that were essential to bring the character of the house to life. As our rehearsal process moved into this space, we commented on how much better it felt to work here, in an actual house. Bachelard argues that the main benefit of the house is its ability to provide space for dreaming: “the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6). For performers, perhaps entering an actual home heightened the capability to communicate in the dream world created for each character. Although our performance venue was not home for any of us, the act of performing an intimate story within its walls began to build a relationship with the space. In this way, our own memories and understandings of home were conflated with the lived history in these two houses, perhaps using the dream world as a bridge: “the house is not experienced from day to day only,

on the thread of a narrative, or in the telling of our own story. Through dreams, the various dwelling-places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days” (Bachelard 5). While the memories that were evoked in *The Record of the Lonely House* were mostly connected to my own experience in light of my role as playwright, each actor brought her own lived experience to her role. For example, the sleepwalking scene between Sarah and Mary became even more loaded for the ensemble when Tenille revealed that she had sleepwalked extensively as a child. As she shared this memory with us, the choice to have Sarah sleepwalk seemed to weave together with Tenille’s own experience, enriching and fleshing out her character. Zoe and I had shared our childhood on the shores of Lower Economy, so for her, the narrative we were creating was infused with her own rich sensory memory of the landscape and its people. Several of Alice’s lines were written with our shared experience in mind, for example a short passage that contained images of the property surrounding our summer home: “I mean, some things are the same. The lupins still bloom each spring. We still hay every summer. The orchard is still full of deer every fall when the apples drop.” As these images connected deeply to our own experience as children, Zoe was able to absorb the sense memory into her construction of the character of Alice. Through this process, we were creating a new space for communication where our own experience and the imagined experiences of our story could live simultaneously, if not permanently. In the future, this is an area where I would work more extensively with a dramaturge to facilitate incorporating these images into the script. For example, the dramaturge and I could work together to create a list of questions to ask the actors or collaborators, creating a shared lens to look through when compiling and analyzing the final script. In future, input from a dramaturge would help to create a system of ongoing feedback for my writing, as well as to provide different suggestions for how to involve the actions, ideas, and information gathered from the actors. I think this would be a valuable strategy moving forward in any further choral theatre performance that attempted, like *The Record of the Lonely House*, to incorporate realism or conventional theatrical narrative structures.

At this point I began collaborating with our lighting designer for the show, Matthew Downey. With a shoe-string budget and limited resources, Matt worked to create a dynamic for the show that would suit both the realistic, domestic scenes, as well as the lyrical dreamlike sequences. He created a general wash using four conventional table lamps, and then used smaller lights that shone down from either end of the playing space. This was used for effect during the train sequences, to highlight Mary as she spoke, and to evoke the sense of staring into the oncoming headlights of a train (see Illustration 5). The other source of lighting in the play came



**Illustration 5 - Mary and the train - photograph from Halifax workshop production.** Recalling a dream, Mary looks into the oncoming light of a train.

from floor lights that we started to call the “dream lights.” These lights were used only in the lyrical scenes that took place at night, for example the opening train sequence featuring the Louise Bogan poem, the funereal action during “When I Was in My Prime,” and the sleepwalking scene between Sarah and Mary. The scenes that took place in a more naturalistic

setting were lit with table lamps and conventional theatrical lighting to give a more everyday feel to the room. The dream lights were placed in a line on either side between the audience and the performers, creating a more defined playing space and a separation between audience and actors. These lights were bare bulbs, and by using them during the dream sequences they attracted the audience's attention to the articulated space in the center, as well as to the fragility of the bulbs. Much like a dream or someone sleepwalking, the audience placed behind the lights had to be careful or they would disrupt the light source, or, to use a metaphor, to disturb the dream. I had been keen to use an "alley" design for the performance, placing the audience on either side of the playing space, facing inward. I had worked with this concept before both as assistant director for DMV Theatre's Halifax production of Meiko Ouchi's *The Blue Light*, and as a collaborator on *Dream Migrations*, a performance created by UBCO Performance students and directed by Virginie Magnat and Ker Wells. I loved the intimacy that this configuration created, and hoped that the vibratory power of choral singing would be enhanced by placing the audience within arm's length of the performers. Alley seating also heightens the theatricality of the performance by allowing the audience to see *each other* across the playing space. Instead of allowing the audience to look through the "fourth wall" that is traditional in performance that takes place in proscenium-style seating, I hoped that alley seating would remind the audience of the re-imagined nature of the piece, and the recurring theme of the slippage between truth and memory. The piece's roots in explorations of female identity via a feminist collaborative process aligned with Canning's position that the "artificiality of fourth wall voyeurism was seen as a male device that would divide women from one another" (33) by early feminist theatre practitioners. I felt in some way I was continuing on in their lineage by creating a spatial environment that encouraged communication between all performers and audience members, although direct address played a minimal role in the performance. In retrospect, I think I could have made bolder choices to engage with the audience and to maximize the relationship between audience and

performer in this intimate setting. For example, characters could have addressed the audience members directly when recounting a memory, or used physical action to draw the attention from one side of the audience to the other, causing a heightened sense of the theatricality of the piece that would have fit nicely with the more lyrical sections.

Visually, I was keen to take on the challenge of designing blocking and movement for this space, as I had seen beautiful work done in this configuration by other directors. For example, during my work with DMV Theatre and director Alan Dilworth, our show *The Blue Light* was blocked in a tight alley configuration with two rows of chairs on risers on each side facing the center. As the show dealt with controversial topics, namely filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl's work for the Nazis in World War II, much of the dialogue functioned like a tennis match from one end of the playing space to the other, causing the audience to look back and forth, heightening the tension in the room. As issues of war and responsibility played out onstage, the audience was able to see each other's reactions to the material. After each show that I attended, spectators sat around afterward and debated whether Leni was right in the course of action that she took. I think the alley seating facilitated this because it created a sense of a community watching the story playing out, and created an invitation for discussion. Also, as the show was structured in short scenes set in many time periods, the actors were forced to perfect extremely fast transitions that happened from one end of the playing space to the other, and the alley design helped to make that efficient and easy: by the time one scene was clearing off on one end, the next had already started at the opposite end. I hoped that my work in alley seating, although I had minimal experience with it, would be able to evoke the same kind of interest and questioning. As we moved forward in the visual design, our lighting designer Matt's contributions were invaluable at this stage of development, as he offered feedback both in terms of narrative and visuals. He also suggested that we should work at bringing more props into the space to make it feel more like a home, and, inspired by our use of sheets in the show, suggested



placing white fabric on the audience's chairs, to make it feel more like an unused attic. As attics are typically places where belongings, and with them, memories, are stored, this was a rich image to work from in terms of visual design. In the script, Mary and Alice both discover new information and recapture memory by visiting the attic and going through what is stored there. When Alice is seeking answers, she travels to the attic in search of clarity: "in the attic, the day's experiences can always efface the fears of night" (Bachelard 19). Bachelard, referencing Jung, posits that the attic can be seen as a place of clarity, a concept that seemed to resonate with some of the situations we had been exploring: "we always *go up* the attic stairs, which are steeper and more primitive. For they bear the mark of ascension to a more tranquil solitude" (Bachelard 26). While ultimately the attic provided information for Alice that was unsettling and upsetting, the image of a room covered in white sheets still resonated as being full of secrets, memories, and dreams lost or forgotten. I was eager to create a more detailed environment for the audience that might help them recall their own memories of long-ago houses, and by placing them *on* the white sheets, I was directly involving them in this world. I think this element is linked to further choices I could have made regarding bringing the audience directly into the story by more overtly acknowledging their place in the house with the characters.

We began incorporating some of the props and costumes that I had been collecting over the months: candles, photographs from the Soley shipyard, trunks and suitcases, white blouses, nightdresses. It was a great process of discovery for the actors to inhabit their characters in a new way via their dress and the objects they interacted with. In particular, my mother lent me a photograph of my great grandmother's brother in his World War I soldier's uniform. This was another part of my own personal history that became woven into the performance. Although this man's story was not present in our narrative, he and my relatives who had kept his photo in their homes were now an indirect part of the memories that came to life in the story. This photograph

became representative of David, and found a place on the mantle as a visual reminder for Sarah, Mary, and Alice.

We held three workshop performances of the show in Halifax on February 2-4, 2012. These performances were invaluable for me to be able to see the show in front of an audience, at a time when I was so deeply inside the story and its characters that it was becoming difficult to view the work objectively. Releasing my project for others to see was both enlightening and terrifying. The actors gave strong performances each night, and I received very helpful feedback from the audience. My peers in the choral music community were able to give detailed feedback regarding the choral singing and were impressed by the amount of narrative in comparison with Xara performances, while colleagues in the devised theatre medium asked lots of questions about the process and my source materials. Ann-Marie Kerr, who I had met with ten months earlier to discuss the piece in its early stages, wrote to me wanting more out of the story, and urged me to delve more into the details of the scene work:

I craved more of everything basically. More events in the story, more detail in the writing of those events, more information about who those women were and the about the thing that happened to the brother (he was euthanized by his wife?) that we learn about via the letter. There is an aesthetic there, a design and a world, and so staging-wise, some of the next steps could include work on transitions that lift the story and lay in information physically or gesturally. I wasn't always able to connect the music to the narrative, as a stand-alone it was beautiful but it didn't seem to make the narrative deeper all the time. In terms of performance, and I'm sure you didn't have tons of time to do scene work because you were writing and creating it, but there is lots to be mined in the beat to beat work between the actors, what do they want, need, what is their personal arc and how do they go about getting what they need? (personal communication)

Ann-Marie's advice to work beat to beat with the actors was a direction I hadn't touched in my process, partially because two of my actors were unfamiliar with this type of scene work, and also because I think the parts of the play based in realism had not received the type of attention I would normally give them if working on a pre-existing theatre script in light of the ethereal nature of choral work. We never think "beat to beat" in Xara rehearsal because the majority of

people are coming from a choral performance background, but perhaps that kind of work could also be beneficial to our process in future in terms of clarifying the objectives of the characters. As I received feedback from more spectators, a few key elements kept recurring across audiences: one was the lack of clarity in the beginning of the show that Sarah was actually a sister-in-law rather than a biological sister, and that one of the main plot devices, the discovery of a letter of Sarah's that reveals her part in David's death, was not believable enough. Many people felt that because the play included realist scenes, the letter was too much of a cliché to be accepted by the audience.

Both Christina, Xara's conductor, and I felt the same urge to make more of the conflict between lived and recorded history. I felt that this element was too under the surface and not a focal point for the audience. I also began to think more about the set design and how it played a critical role in bringing the sense of history to life for the audience, especially in light of my friend and theatre colleague Dawn Tracey Brandes' comments after seeing the workshop performance:

Sitting in that room before the show began was an interesting experience, especially knowing that the play was about reviving memories of the past--it felt less like a set and more like a museum, which I think fit very well in the context of the show. When the lights went down for that first number, the museum was suddenly inhabited with ghosts of the past, and we were transported to a space that was neither past nor present . . . It was in the fully past scenes that I wanted more of a connection to the present through the objects around the room. When the girls danced and you could hear the creaky floorboards, it felt like their presence was bringing the museum space that we encountered at the beginning to life . . . There were other moments when I wanted this to happen--when the wife picks up the photo of her dead husband, I wished that I could have seen the photo better from the beginning, and while she was talking to it...Or even just the girls playing cards tracing the scratches on the floor as they chat (did this happen, or did I just imagine it?) (personal communication)

Dawn's feedback was very helpful in terms of thinking of the ways that the space interacted with the audience starting from when they take their seats. I was keen to bring out more of the feeling of the house as a character in the performance, and Dawn's reactions only reaffirmed that. I also knew that when we moved into the Mackie Lake House, much of that work would be done for us

thanks to the beautiful preservation of the building. However, it was still up to us to look for every instance possible to bring the house to life through text, movement, and song.

I also had a long meeting with a friend and former director/teacher Anthony Black, who asked many questions about my process and gave me lots of provocations to think about. The main issue that stayed with me after our conversation was his uncertainty about why Alice left the house following the reveal of Sarah's secret. Why was *this* the climax of the play? I thought, in my insular bubble of writing and directing, that this was obvious, but once I began thinking about it I realized it was living only under the surface. I was able to explain that it was her sense of betrayal that was so wounding because her memory of her beloved brother was now irreversibly altered. Staying in the house with Sarah and all of David's pictures and belongings would have meant being reminded of this betrayal around every corner. When I went back to the script, I looked for ways to make this stronger in the story by building in more tender moments of recollection for Alice about David. In my conversations with friends and colleagues, it was sometimes difficult to hear my work analyzed in such a detailed manner from people whose work I admire, but ultimately it was helpful to have to answer pointed questions and be open to suggestion.

Following the performances I went back to the script, and made an effort to build in more subtle references to Sarah's status in the family earlier in the story. I also rewrote an entire scene so that Alice would unearth a whole trunk packed with fragments of recorded history: photographs, letters, documents, a man's wallet. I had this image of her spreading it all out on the floor and having to sift through it to find the answers she was looking for. We also shaped the story of David's death so that a letter from the doctor merely implied Sarah's actions, leaving Alice and Mary to put the pieces together themselves. I felt that this was a stronger narrative choice because it fell in with the mysterious atmosphere that we had created for the house, and juxtaposed the written word against the sisters' memories more concretely. In addition, we had

created a program for the show based on the birth and death certificates that I had used in my research, and needed that element to serve as an omen of the importance of records in the narrative. While I had strong feedback that “I lie” was an evocative and powerful moment musically, a few people noted that as the only non-English text in the piece, perhaps there should be a stronger connection to the piece’s meaning. We decided to include the first three verses of the poem to be spoken by Mary while Alice and Sarah continued the ostinato pattern underneath her text. I think this also helped to make the connection stronger between the image of the train and the piece itself. Ultimately, as we rehearsed the final version of the performance, I agreed with the observations from my friends and colleagues that the stakes needed to be higher in order to drive the plot forward, and that some of the narrative choices I made were perfunctory rather than rooted deeply in the themes I was aiming to explore. In reflection, I would have structured my process differently and staged the workshop presentation at least a month before the final thesis performance, giving me ample time to rework the story and shape the narrative in light of seeing the performance in front of a live audience. In the limited week and a half timeline that we had in between the workshop performance and our performance in Coldstream, there were only minimal changes we could implement. The actors found adding in these new elements to the story challenging, but were willing to take the risk of learning new material in order to make the project stronger. Especially for Zoe and Tenille, who rarely work with text and were unfamiliar to devised theatre before this process, it was challenging to incorporate new dialogue a week before the final performances.

On February 13, we packed up the show and headed to British Columbia. We had productive rehearsals the following day at the UBCO MFA studio space, partially thanks to the feedback we were able to receive in rehearsal from my supervisor Virginie Magnat and thesis committee member Stephen Foster. Both faculty members were able to provide helpful suggestions to distill and hone in on the piece, in particular the movement and text in the first

scene, and some provocations regarding the character relationships. This experience was valuable, and although this part of the process was sacrificed due to my decision to work in Halifax rather than on campus, I wished we had had more time to work with my committee members on a practical level to help shape the piece.

The next day we arrived in Coldstream at the Mackie Lake House. As soon as we walked in, there was an incredible sense of excitement from the whole group. In contrast with our bare bones but workable performance space in Halifax, the Mackie House is a preserved heritage house with furniture, artwork, and character from the time period in which the play is set. It was like we were walking onto a set that was fully dressed, without having to do any of the dressing ourselves. We were given a tour of the house by manager Christine Kashuba, and were delighted by all the historical details she could share with us about the house and its owners. It felt as if the house were truly alive and a character in the show, itself full of stories to share. Although the house is not distinctly connected to the Maritimes, it felt like the best possible compromise considering the circumstances. Zoe even remarked “it smells like Grammie’s house,” referring to our maternal grandparents home in Truro, Nova Scotia, that they had lived in for over fifty years. We were also lucky to be able to make use of the grand staircase off of the main drawing room for characters’ exits upstairs, which helped the feeling that this was a living and working household. Kristin later expressed her experience as an actor working in a found performance space:

I found the experience in Kelowna of performing the piece in the Mackie House to be extremely rewarding from an acting standpoint. From the acting side, having an entire historically accurate house broke down a specific barrier of what the "stage" was; going "backstage" became not just about being apart from the play, but instead we were escaping off into other rooms that these family members could have also lived in. (personal communication)

The only major disappointment with the Mackie Lake House was that due to its lower ceilings, the choral sound was not as full and resonant as it had been in our performance space in Halifax.

As well, due to the number of historical pieces in the house, we were unable to use the real candles that we had loved working with in Halifax. While battery powered candles were an adequate substitute, I was sad to lose the smell of the candle smoke and the unpredictable flickering of open flame.

We held an open dress rehearsal that evening and several students and faculty members were present. Following the performance was an engaging discussion about the piece and our process. It was interesting to show the piece to an audience of mainly academically-minded people, in contrast with the general public and working arts professionals who had seen the performance in Halifax. The discussion centered mainly around the sense of place, the rehearsal process, and the roles of the women in the piece. It was helpful to receive feedback from those who did not live in Nova Scotia, something that I had turned over in my mind since embarking on the project: would non-Nova Scotian audiences be able to relate to a story about Maritime women? Their questions and comments also helped me to reconsider the piece itself as research, an element that had sometimes become secondary in our process compared to the artistic and logistical effort of putting on the production.

The next day we headed back to Coldstream through a snowstorm, and hoped that the roads would be clear enough for our audience to make it from Kelowna. Luckily, we had a full house of friends, colleagues, faculty members, and the general public. It was emotional to see the piece performed for the final time, the culmination of nearly a year's worth of research and rehearsal. I feel that the actors gave their cleanest and most connected performance to date, and am incredibly proud of their efforts through the entire process. I am grateful for the amount of time and energy they poured into the project, and for their willingness to perform in mediums that were out of their comfort zone, all in the name of advancing the art form that we began several years ago with Xara.

## Epilogue - Reflections

After taking some time away from the project, there are many things that have come to the surface for me. I learned a tremendous amount about myself as a practitioner from this process. I had been very eager to break away from the usual format of Xara and to try something more intimate and narratively concrete. Ultimately, I loved working in the intimate environment, as it only enhanced the vibratory power of choral singing by decreasing the proximity between audience and performer. I also felt that the audience connected strongly with solo singing in this setting, as the performer's emotional intent was much more present in an intimate setting. I enjoyed the freedom of shaping a narrative on my own, but admit that I found it challenging without my creative partner in Xara, Christina Murray. Sourcing music is difficult when you have very strict parameters, and I had little experience with this process as it is Christina who spends hundreds of hours choosing the repertoire for each Xara production. In addition, she and I spend countless time bouncing ideas off of one another, and helping to move the project forward via our own artistic dialogue. Although I communicated with my actors as best I could, I missed that partner relationship. In future, I would consider working with a dramaturge to help facilitate the process, a practice that is common among devised practitioners in Canada. I feel that I also did not take enough time to carefully delineate the working process that we would use as a group, noted by Magnat as being essential when working with an ensemble in devising: "although good intentions do not necessarily make for good devising, it is nevertheless crucial to collectively define the overall philosophy of devising as well as the working conditions and production objectives that will shape the collaborative process" (Magnat *Devising Utopia* 82). I now think that the concrete narrative can exist in this medium, but I struggled to find the balance between the abstract and ethereal nature of the lyrical choral sections in comparison with the domestic scenes that were dialogue dependent. I think there were a few moments when the choral music and text blended cohesively, particularly at the beginning of the piece during "I



lie”, in the deathbed scene during “When I Was in My Prime”, and the final scene during Alice’s solo line as she leaves the house. These three fairly stylized moments felt as if they lived in the same world *and* in the same performance medium. The other attempts at combining concrete text and choral music still felt a little uncertain, and I would revisit those scenes extensively if I were to remount the production. Perhaps the whole play needed to live more in the abstract, dream-world that choral music so effortlessly conjures. But at the same time, the specificity of place and the details of these women’s lives were important in my research and I felt they needed to be directly communicated. As I go forward as a practitioner and researcher, I will continue to develop further explorations in this hybrid art form to attempt to find a way to balance both the specificity of detail as well as the stylized otherworldly nature of choral performance.

Although I am eternally grateful to my friends who were willing to take part in this process with me, I will admit that we often struggled to find a productive working method, and this was partially due to my leadership skills. I feel more capable of handling the position of creator/director now that the project has finished, but there were many stumbling blocks along the way. However, my initial theory that each person would develop new skills through the process was proven right; I saw marked difference in Kristin’s ability to learn new music and incorporate vocal technique, and saw Tenille and Zoe become more comfortable and adept with handling text. I think each of them has left the project with new facility in interdisciplinary performance, and stretched their potential as performers through the process. In an ideal world, I would be able to work with performers who all had extensive training in choral singing, acting, and movement, but as I discovered, these performers are extremely rare. Of course, this is part of the long-term goal of Xara as an ensemble: to provide training and encouragement for choral performers to excel in all three mediums. It may take many years to produce professional-level performers who feel comfortable in all areas, but if the ensemble continues to move forward, it is a serious possibility. At the same time, the sense of community that is a hallmark of Xara is

essential for the health of the ensemble. For many, Xara is like a second family with a regular Sunday gathering of singing, performing, a group meal (our weekly extravagant Xara snack provided by different singers each week), and social time. As Xara is made up of young women at a stage in their life that is both very foundational and transitional, Xara aims to facilitate a culture of support and care for one another, celebrating the successes of our members while also helping singers through big life events such as pregnancies, mental illness, and loss of family members. This sense of community is crucial for singers to be able to push their performance boundaries, creating a space that is both safe for exploration while challenging the singers artistically. Christina and I aim to guide the group rather than enforce a top-down hierarchy, constantly working to find a balance between leading and allowing the performance to develop organically. In her article “Potholes in the Road to Devising,” Joan Schirle speaks from her experience as a devised theatre practitioner and pedagogue, recommending the development of a set of collective guidelines to define how the process will attempt to function for each collaboration. The creation of a “shared space” facilitates trust and respect among participants, which furthers the ensemble’s ability to make decisions (Schirle 91). Schirle sees the creation of a horizontal working model as parallel to what each performer is contributing to the project: “the nonhierarchical nature of devising mirrors the horizontal spectrum of each individual’s talents” (96). Particularly when working in larger groups, there is usually a diversity of skills and experience present, so by each performer contributing not only her own opinion but also her own unique talents, the overall production is enriched further than if just designed by one person. While challenging, for us this methodology has fostered an ensemble with very little internal conflict or competition. Our small team working on *The Record of the Lonely House* functioned similarly, with lots of laughter, snacks, and sharing of personal stories throughout the process of new skill-building and exploration of an uncharted performance medium. As a way of

developing trust between artistic leaders and actors, it was important for me to create an environment where this was acceptable and encouraged.

It was also challenging to work on a narrative that felt so deeply personal. I experienced considerable stress and anxiety during the creation and rehearsal period for the performance, and I am sure that this is partially a result of my personal connection with the setting and the characters. Many moments in the text were based on my own childhood experiences of Lower Economy, and my own family's relationships with relatives who are no longer among us. There were moments where I felt the characters echoing my own mother, who holds on tightly to the memories of her three late brothers and my grandparents who are now both deceased. It felt sometimes morbid, sometimes curious, and sometimes painful to dig through memories of the past in order to re-imagine what life might have been like for the women who came before me. At the same time I felt as if I were doing what I could to preserve some sense of the past and to bring to life a part of the world that had deeply influenced me. I felt like I was constantly treading the line of paying homage and doing disrespect; I feared misrepresenting a place and its people. At the same time, I felt that few others would be able to describe the landscape and the memories that haunt Lower Economy and my own family history. Zoe shared my sentiments regarding the struggles of working on a piece that includes close personal and familial elements:

Writing the piece ["Back Road Farm"] (and working on the play in general) was an emotionally intense experience at times and often exhausting because although the environment itself was so familiar, being able to put myself in a place where I could imagine the suppression the women in this play feel by this place that has for me always been the opposite, was difficult. This being said, creating images such as what their pastures would look like, or the cliffs where one might stand over to recite such a text as "Back Road Farm" was startlingly clear and made writing the piece one of the most fluid compositional experiences I have had to date. I think my experience of Lower Economy and the people who have once lived there and live there now will forever be changed . . . I feel my personal connection now has a complexity that draws me further into that region while deepening my understanding of the history behind it. (personal communication)

Like my sister, I feel I have left the project with a greater sense of connection to my ancestry and the forces that shape my own identity. Even now, I feel a continually growing sense of curiosity about Lower Economy and its ghosts.

As I move forward, I still strive to further push the possibilities for choral performance to incorporate narrative and movement. Rather than focusing on a detailed narrative that utilizes psychological realism as its main driving force, I now wonder how narrative can be communicated solely via physical action, or in a way that uses text in a more abstracted form. The experience of working in an intimate setting was powerful and I hope that both Xara and my solo projects will be able to explore more of the spaces haunted by Halifax ghosts. I have long dreamed of performing a show that takes place in many rooms of a large Halifax house or building, each involving small choral scenes with a few performers. The audience would move in groups from room to room, experiencing each scene on its own, but when taken together, the story in each scene would build a larger narrative. I now feel that my facility as a director could help to shape this idea more concretely and sensitively, particularly in terms of my understanding of working in found spaces. I feel the pull of Nova Scotia's shores even more strongly now after finishing *The Record of the Lonely House*, and I am eager to find ways to further incorporate the history of my home into my work. I feel the need to continue to explore how my memories and experience in this particular part of the world have made an impression on me, my family, and other communities of women. By continuing to foster Xara's development and focus on interdisciplinary performer training, I hope that in the future I will have the chance to work with choral theatre performers who are well trained, curious, and eager to push boundaries with me. Both with Christina Murray and on my own, I will continue to explore and refine the methodology that guides the choral performance process. I am eager to experiment more with how devising can function in the choral theatre environment. Finding a balance of push and pull between director and performers is at the heart of devised work, and I

need to continue to tread that territory in search of a balance that will work in the medium of choral theatre. Ultimately, I hope to produce work that is truly hybrid in nature, balancing evenly the worlds of choral singing and theatre, to create performances that are expressive in both voice and body, and that live in a world that is resonant and full of possibilities and surprises.

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## **Appendix A: *The Record of the Lonely House* Full Script**

*Lower Economy, Nova Scotia. 1920. The house.*

*Sarah, age 26*

*Mary, age 20*

*Alice, age 18*

*Mary and Alice are sisters. Their father, a prosperous shipbuilder, died shortly after the shipbuilding industry died. Their mother was not long to follow. Their older brother David , their caretaker, fought in the war. Sarah, his sweetheart, waited for him while he was away. They were married when he returned, and he died at home shortly after. Mary, Alice, and Sarah live together in the old house.*

## Scene 1 - Dreams/Waltz

*Sarah, Mary, and Alice stand at the ends of the house. They each carry a candle. They sing **I lie**. After a few bars, Sarah and Alice continue singing, while Mary speaks.*

Mary: I lie down in bed alone  
and snuff out my candle  
Today he will come to me  
who is my treasure

The trains run twice a day  
One comes at night  
I hear them clanging  
Yes, now he is near

The night is full of hours  
each one sadder than the next  
Only one is happy  
When my beloved comes

*Mary joins them and they finish singing.*

*They dream.*

Alice: Back through clouds

Mary: Back through clearing

Alice: Back through distance

Sarah: Back through silence

Mary: Back through groves

Alice: Back through garlands

Sarah: Back by rivers

Mary: Back below mountains

Alice: Back through lightning

Sarah: Back through cities

Mary: Back through stars

Alice: Back through hours

Sarah: Back through plains

Mary: Back through flowers

Alice: Back through birds

Sarah: Back through rain?

Mary: Back through smoke?

Alice: Back through noon

Sarah: Back along love

Mary: Back through midnight

*Shift - they bring their candles in to centre, then begin to move through space.*

Mary: It's cold in here.

Sarah: It wouldn't be so cold if you had stoked the fire before you went to bed.

Mary: Why is it my fault?

Sarah: You were the last one to bed.

Alice: Enough!

*All stop. Sarah folds clothing.*

Mary: I had a dream last night.

Alice: What did you dream?

Mary: I dreamt that we were walking by the shore at night, and we could see a train, sort of off in the distance. You know, we could see its lights flashing up ahead. And we could hear the sound, you know. The sound of the wheels on the tracks. And so we started running, faster, to try and catch it, but before we really got anywhere, it was gone.

Sarah: What train are you talking about? You know there isn't a train anywhere near here.

Mary: It was a dream, Sarah. It doesn't have to make sense.

Alice: I had a dream last night too. It was more of a memory though. It was that time when you and I were little, and we were playing hide and seek in the orchard, you know? And you were it, and I was hiding. And I crept over to that far crabapple tree, the one that hunches over like an old man?

Mary: And you thought that you could hide behind it, but you were wearing your red dress so there was no way I could miss you.

Alice: I know, but I thought I was invisible! So I started to hide behind the base of the tree, and I was peeking around the corner to spy on you when all of a sudden I heard these footsteps behind me and then there were these big arms around my waist and David....

*She stops. She and Mary look at Sarah. Sarah drops what she's folding.*

Alice: I didn't mean to...

Sarah: I know.

Alice: It's just I can't always keep -

Sarah: I know. It's fine. I'll go make the beds.

*She leaves.*

Mary: I wish that you would remember not to do that.

Alice: It was an accident!

Mary: I know, but you know how she gets...

Alice: I know. But sometimes his name just slips out. And I don't mean to upset her.

Mary: It doesn't matter whether you mean to or not. She still gets like that, all quiet and still. Frozen.

Alice: It's not like I don't miss him too.

Mary: I know. So do I.

Alice: Remember that song he used to sing to help us fall asleep when we were little?

Mary: The one about the rose?

Alice: Yes...

*They sing the first verse of **Tis the Last Rose of Summer**, slowly, then faster.*

Alice: So, what shall we do today?

Mary: Hmmm. We could go for a stroll down into the orchard.

Alice: It's getting too cold for strolling.

Mary: Oh come on! Maybe we'll see someone while we're out.

Alice: Who is there to see?

Mary: Oh I don't know...I've seen Lloyd McIver up this road a few times in the past two weeks.

Alice: Oh, really...?

Mary: Yes. Any idea why that might be...?

Alice: I'm sure it's because his uncle just lives at the end of the road. Maybe he was helping him with something.

Mary: Maybe...maybe he was coming to see someone else.

Alice: I don't know who that would be.

Mary: You know who - !

Alice: So maybe we do go down to the orchard today.

Mary: And maybe Lloyd McIver walks by.

Alice: And maybe he stops to say hello.

Mary: And then maybe we stop to say hello.

Alice: And then maybe he says

Mary: "Alice, darling, I must have you, I need to have you!"

Alice: And I say

Mary: "Oh Lloyd, how dreamy!"

*Sarah enters and watches them in silence.*

Alice: And then he gives me a ring and says he's going to take me to the big city.

Mary: To Halifax...or maybe New York City!

Alice: And then I say "Oh Lloyd I couldn't possibly go without my dear sister Mary!"

Mary: And then he says "Not to worry my darling, we have a spare room at the manor in the city. And I'll introduce Mary to all my eligible bachelor friends."

Alice: And then we live happily ever after!

Mary: Together!

Alice: Oh wouldn't that be just the best?

Sarah: It must be nice to spend your time day-dreaming.

Mary: It's not day-dreaming. It's imagining.

Sarah: I don't think I see the difference.

Alice: Day-dreaming is thinking about things that can't possibly happen.

Mary: Imagining is making plans for the future.

Sarah: You really think Lloyd McIvor is going to come down this road and take you away to New York City?

Alice: Well it won't happen if we don't imagine it first!

*Mary and Alice begin to sing a waltz. They start to dance.*

### ***Hurree Hurroo***

Hurree hurroo, my bonny wee lass,  
Hurree hurroo, my fair one,  
And will you come away, my love,  
To be my own, my fair one?

*They pull Sarah in.*

Smiling the land, smiling the sea,  
Sweet was the sound of the heather.  
Would we were yonder, just you and me,  
The two of us together.

*The three of them dance.*

All the day long out by the peat,  
Then by the shore in the gloaming,  
Tripping it lightly with dancing feet,  
Then we together roaming.

*They laugh. Mary and Alice leave. Sarah is left. She dances alone for awhile.*

Sarah: How do I remember you?  
You liked brown bread,  
And milk, and autumn leaves,  
And white shirts, and a wide bed;  
And any hill that soared,  
And ships, and the grey sea,  
And dogs, and old songs -  
And you loved me.

How do I remember you?

You liked the spring,  
And dawn, and daffodils,  
And ebb tide, and a gull's wing;  
And any kind of sweet,  
And snow, and the blue sea,  
And rain, and old books -  
And you loved me.

I could have married a man I didn't love. I could have married any man who would ask me as long as he was a kind man, a decent man. I could have even married an old man. But instead I had to marry a man whose life was almost over. + **wrinkle action**

*When I Was In My Prime*

When I was in my prime, I flourished like a vine  
There came along a false young man,  
Come stole the heart of mine, come stole the heart of mine.

The gard'ner standing by, three offers gave to me  
The pink, the violet, the red, red rose  
Which I refused all three, which I refused all three.

The pink's no flower at all, for it fades away too soon  
The violet is too pale a hue,  
I think I'll wait til June, I think I'll wait til June.

In June the red rose blooms, that's not the flower for me  
For then I'll cast the red rose off  
And plant a willow tree, and plant a willow tree.

And the willow tree shall weep, and the willow tree shall whine  
I wish I was in that young man's arms,  
That stole the heart of mine, that stole the heart of mine.

If I'm spared for one year more, and God should grant me grace,  
I'll weep a bowl of crystal tears  
To wash his deceitful face, to wash his deceitful face



## Scene 2 - The Shipyard

*Sarah reads. Mary and Alice play cards.*

Mary: So I went up to the attic yesterday.

Alice: That's where you disappeared all afternoon?

Mary: Well, we waited in the orchard for Lloyd for about two hours before it was clear he wasn't coming.

Alice: I knew it was a bit of a long shot...but I stayed awhile after you left.

Mary: I figured you would. So I decided to go back up to the attic.

Alice: We haven't been there since we were kids!

Mary: I know, and I had been avoiding it since the last time we went and those bats came flying at us.

Alice: Ugh, I feel like they could crash into me any second.

Mary: Well, I decided to take my chances.

Alice: And?

Mary: I found all kinds of things.

Sarah: Like what?

Mary: Well, old things of Father's that Mother had packed away. Clothing, mostly, and some newspaper clippings. Plans from the shipyard.

Alice: Anything good?

Mary: Well, you know how the shipyard closed down a long time ago?

Alice: Yes.

Mary: Well, there were a bunch of clippings from then. And then from when they started up again.

Alice: Right before I was born!

Mary: Yes!

Sarah: It was very busy around that time.

Alice: I don't remember it, really.

Sarah: You were only little.

Alice: I know.

Sarah: It was different here. This land was once moving. There was a rhythm, a steady pulse. The boots heading to the shipyard beat a path into the dirt. You could hear the ringing of hammers on steel drifting up to the house from the shore.

I remember, I was only eight. I thought the ship was going to be the biggest and most beautiful out the sea. Every day I walked down the lane to look at her before the launching. I remember walking by the cookhouse, which always smelled good, and next to it was the blacksmith shop...which smelled awful.

Mary: I found this newspaper clipping...it said there was a big crowd at the launching and that the ship was the biggest built in 18 years. It said it slid right into the bay...can you imagine what the wharf would have looked like. You can't even see that there used to be a wharf anymore. The story mentioned Father.

Sarah: Well your father was the owner! They left out some important parts though... When they christened the ship, they swung this bottle of champagne and it struck Mr. Morrison on the head and knocked him out.

Alice: It didn't! That didn't happen!

Sarah: Oh it did! And then when the ship started to move into the bay, something got caught with the anchor, and there was a big hole on the left side of the hull!

Alice: Really?

Mary: That's not a very good sign.

Sarah: No, I suppose it wasn't. The shipyard closed right after she sailed away.

Mary: And Father...

Sarah: Yes...it wasn't long before he...

Alice: David was there, though.

Sarah: I know he was.

Mary: I don't know what we would have done if he hadn't been there.

### ***Back Road Farm***

This house is built within a sheltering  
Sweep of the hills. You will not find the sea  
From attic windows; and the seasons bring

No lift and change of tide, here in the lee  
Of the land's high windbreak, where the buffeting  
Onshore wind is tripped on the mountain's knee.  
No mist of blowing salt is flung to sting  
The trusting flesh. You will not find the sea.

This property is private. Drifting rain  
Beats on its shingles and its native stone;  
The wind of August on its leaning grain  
Is dark with shadow, and the leaves are blown  
To a soft thunder. But the hills remain;  
Their strength is certain and their purpose known.  
Only at night, in the stillness, low and plain  
You can hear the far deep rumor of sea on stone.

Sarah: Now the land throbs inside, slowly, quietly. Its heartbeat is in the slow change from  
winter into spring. Worms move through the dirt and the steady hands of weeds creep up and  
hide the memories of stone and wood that used to be our livelihood.

### Scene 3 - To David

*Alice sits.*

Alice: Things are different now, since you were here. It's quieter. Emptier. The house doesn't feel as full. Of anything.

I mean, some things are the same. The lupins still bloom each spring. We still hay every summer. The orchard is still full of deer every fall when the apples drop.

Sarah still gets up first every morning. She still makes sure we have everything we need. She still gets annoyed when I leave things around the house. I know she misses you.

What was it like, when you married her? Were you nervous? I think I will be, when I get married. You didn't seem nervous. You were smiling. Waiting for her at the front of the church. It didn't even matter that you had your cane with you, you were standing up so straight and proud.

I don't know how much longer I can stay here. It's hard, without you here.

#### *He's Gone Away*

Oh he's gone, he's gone away,  
For to stay a little while.  
But he's comin' back if he goes ten thousand mile.  
Look away, look away,  
Look away over yondro.

Oh who will tie my shoe?  
And who will glove my hand?  
And who will kiss my ruby lips when you are gone?

My pappy will tie my shoes,  
And mammy will glove my hand,  
And you will kiss my ruby lips when you come home.

*She exits.*

*Shift - Sarah sleepwalks. She traces a pattern on the floor. Mary enters.*

Mary: I heard a noise.

*Sarah says nothing.*

Mary: Why are you up so late? Everyone is in bed.

Sarah: Yes. I want to.

Mary: Sarah? Is something wrong?

Sarah: It's the right thing.

Mary: Sarah, you're frightening me.

Sarah: Don't worry, I'll take care of you.

Mary: What is going on?

Sarah: It won't hurt much longer, I promise.

Mary: Sarah?

#### **Scene 4 - Sheets**

*Mary and Alice fold sheets.*

Mary: Do you ever wake up at night?

Alice: No. I sleep so heavily.

Mary: That's what I thought.

Alice: Why?

Mary: I just saw something last night.

Alice: What did you see?

Mary: I saw Sarah.

Alice: What do you mean you saw Sarah?

Mary: I mean I saw her up last night. She was awake. I think.

Alice: What do you mean 'you think'?

Mary: Well I couldn't tell. She was walking. But it was like she didn't see me.

Alice: She was sleepwalking?

Mary: I don't know. Maybe?

Alice: That's spooky.

Mary: It was. And she was talking.

Alice: Well, what was she saying?

Mary: Something about it being "right." And something about it not hurting any more.

Alice: What?

Mary: I know, I told you, it was spooky.

Alice: Maybe she was talking to someone.

Mary: Who would she be talking to?

Alice: I don't know...

## Scene 5 - Spying

*It is night. Alice turns and walks through the house. She looks around to see if anyone is awake. There is no one around. She turns. She goes to the trunk. She opens it and goes through the contents. She pulls out many letters, certificates, books, pictures. She looks at them, reads them, turns them over. She lays them out. She reorders them. She tries to make sense of them.*

## Scene 6 - Letters

*Mary comes in singing **Hurree Hurroo** and dancing. She sees the pile of things all over the floor and stops.*

Mary: What are you doing?

Alice: I'm looking.

Mary: I can see that, but what are you looking at?

Alice: It's all from the attic. I went up there last night. I started going through some things...all of this was packed away.

Mary: What is all this stuff?

*She starts to look through things.*

Alice: Letters. Photographs. Things of Father's and David's.

*Mary picks up a photograph.*

Mary: Wow, is that David?

Alice: Yes. Right before he shipped out.

*Mary picks up another photograph in a cardboard frame.*

Mary: Hey, this is us!

Alice: We were so small!

Mary: I barely remember that day...I just remember David off to the side and he kept making me laugh! And we had to keep a straight face because if we laughed we would ruin the picture!

*Alice is looking through the contents of the trunk. She picks up some papers and reads them.*

Alice: Mary.

Mary: Yes?

Alice: I found something.

Mary: What?

*Alice is silent.*

Mary: Well? What did you find?



Alice: This doesn't make sense. I thought the doctors said that what David had was fatal.

Mary: They did.

Alice: But that's not what this says. It's a letter from the doctor. It says here "patient will be bed ridden and suffer from crippling chronic pain".

Mary: Why would the doctor even send a letter?

Alice: ...Sarah must have written him first. To ask him about David.

*Alice starts to dig through the documents. She pulls out more papers and looks at them.*

Mary: Alice what is going on?

Alice: I just had this feeling. What you said the other day, about when you saw Sarah up at night. I couldn't get that out of my head. I knew she must be talking to David. That's why I went up to the attic.

Mary: Oh, Alice.

*Silence.*

Mary: Well what does this mean?

Alice: It means...

Mary: What?

Alice: It means that...

Mary: What is it?

*Mary takes the letters, reads them.*

Mary: She...she couldn't! I can't believe...

Alice: I know.

Mary: But...

*Sarah sings a lullaby. **Hurree Hurroo verse 1.** She sits. Alice and Mary stay looking at each other.*

## Scene 7 - Confrontation

Alice: I know about David.

Sarah: What are you talking about?

Alice: I found all the papers you hid in the attic. The letters from the doctor.

Sarah: You had no right to look at those!

Alice: Well you left them in the attic, with our parents' things, so can you really blame me for finding them?

Sarah: Our parents?

Mary: She didn't mean that -

Alice: Yes I did, Mary!

*Silence.*

Alice: I know that you -

Sarah: If you would just let me explain -

Alice: What is there to explain?

Sarah: He was in pain.

Alice: That didn't give you the right to -

Mary: I can't even believe we are talking about this.

Alice: He's our brother, Mary!

Mary: I know, but this, this doesn't help anything.

Alice: We have to talk about this.

Sarah: You're right. It's time to talk about it. You've always tried to keep me out from this family. And I understand why. You were David's little one. The one that he needed to take care of the most. But you didn't know him -

Mary and Alice: Yes we -

Sarah: No. You didn't. Not the way I did. I knew all the things that you couldn't know. The way he carried you to bed when you fell asleep downstairs. The way he looked at me with those blue eyes. The way he talked about the war when he came home.

*Silence.*

It wasn't easy, you know. It's never easy to look at the person you care about most in the world and know that they are in pain. But after he came home from the hospital, it just got worse. We both knew he wasn't getting any better. I could have waited, let him suffer for weeks, maybe months. But I knew deep down that he didn't want that kind of life, one where I was sitting by his bedside all day and night. So when he asked me -

Mary: He asked you?

Sarah: He did. And I said yes.

Alice: I just don't know how you could -

Sarah: For love, Alice. For love.

## Scene 8 - Decision

*Alice packs a suitcase.*

Mary: What are you doing?

Alice: I'm leaving.

*Mary is silent.*

Alice: Lloyd asked me to marry him.

Mary: When did this happen?

Alice: The other day in the orchard. I waited after you left. We've been meeting in the orchard for weeks now.

Mary: I thought so.

Alice: At the time I didn't tell him yes or no. I couldn't imagine leaving you.

Mary: And now?

Alice: Knowing about Sarah...I don't know if I can stay here.

Mary: But, this is our home, Alice.

Alice: I know, but it's different now. The memories of our home are changed. It's like they're polluted.

Mary: Just because one thing is different doesn't change the rest of your memories. I'm still your sister, and David's still your brother, even if he's gone. There are still lots of good memories here.

Alice: I know. But if I left with Lloyd I wouldn't be reminded of all the bad ones every time I turn around. I wouldn't have to avoid saying David's name because Sarah would get angry.

Mary: I know but -

Alice: You should come.

Mary: What?

Alice: You should come with us. You know, like we were saying the other day. We'll go away together.

Mary: And leave Sarah here alone? In our house? Mother and Father would never have wanted that.

Alice: Mother and Father expected David to grow old in this house.

Mary: I know, but's he's not going to do that, Alice. So someone needs to stay.

Alice: But you'll be all alone.

Mary: I'll make it.

## Scene 9 - Lullaby

*Mary sits, sobbing. Sarah comes in quietly and watches her. She softly starts to sing a lullaby as she moves closer to Mary. She sits. She holds Mary.*

### ***Tis the Last Rose of Summer***

I'll not leave thee, thou, lone one,  
To pine on the stem;  
Since the lovely are sleeping,  
Go sleep thou with them.

Mary: Sarah, how did you keep going after David died?

Sarah: Faith.

Mary: Faith in what?

Sarah: Faith that it wasn't a mistake. Faith that once enough time had passed, I would find peace.

Mary: But it's so hard. Father and Mother, then David. How am I supposed to believe in anything now that they're gone?

Sarah: I think we must have faith, and if we haven't, we must look for it. We must have some explanation why the birds fly south, why children are born, why there are stars in the sky.

Mary: But that doesn't make my heart feel any better.

Sarah: Faith isn't about feeling better, Mary.

*Silence.*

Mary: Alice is leaving.

Sarah: I thought she might.

Mary: I don't know what I'm going to do without her.

Sarah: Well, you have me.

Mary: I know.

Sarah: If you still want me to be here.

Mary: I do...I still can't believe what happened...but I think I understand why you did it. I don't think Alice is right, to leave like this. To split up our family.

Sarah: She needs time. She's not leaving forever.

Mary: How do you know that?

Sarah: The pull of the shore is strong here. This house will call her back. You will bring her home, eventually.

Mary: Do you think?

Sarah: Yes. It's why I'm still here.

## Scene 10 - Leaving

*Alice stands in the doorway. She wears a coat and holds a suitcase.*

Mary: So you're going then.

Alice: Yes. Lloyd should be here soon.

Sarah: And you have all your things?

Alice: Not all of them. But enough.

*Alice puts down the suitcase and she and Mary hug. She and Sarah look at one another.*

Alice: My grandfather owned this house. It was named after him. My brother was named after him too. It makes me feel strange about leaving. Like I'm turning my back on them.

Mary: When I went up to the attic, I found a diary of mother's. It said how in the summer they used to travel by boat around the mountain on the out-going waves. And they'd come back the next day on the flood tide.

*Shift. Alice stands by the window. Sarah and Mary stand behind her.*

Alice: Now that I have your face by heart.

Sarah: Now that I have your voice by heart.

Mary: Now that I have your heart by heart.

Sarah: So you'll come back?

Mary: On the flood tide?

Alice: I hope so.

*I lie. She slowly crosses the floor starting mm 91. She looks back. Blackout.*