

October 10, 2015

David Z. Saltz
Head, Department of Theatre and Film Studies
University of Georgia

Dear Dr. Saltz,

On October 2, 2015, I had the pleasure of visiting Athens to see the University Theatre production of Martin McDonagh's 2010 play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, directed by Associate Professor Kristin Kundert. The production successfully blended the excellent work of three undergraduate actors with that of Associate Professor Ray Paolino in a central role.

The students, who had a lot to carry in the show, were very well handled: they were quite apparently confident and grounded; they interacted bravely and seamlessly with a powerful professional; they made bold choices; they often turned on a dime, as required by the material; and they were not at all shy about committing to the comically offensive language of their characters. That they characteristically spoke through to the ends of their lines is a sign of the director's skill as a teacher of voice. While there were a few clarity problems with one actor's articulation, his shaping of a long comic speech about a fictitious hand and a freezer was well executed and evidenced careful coaching with respect to how the material might build.

One of the undergraduates is a very funny young performer, and it was apparent that he was free to use his quirky, sometimes flamboyant comic sensibilities to explore his role. It was also clear that the director had carefully shaped some of his impulses: e.g., his quick, shy look after a request to "Look at me," which seemed pitch perfect for the character; and his silent search of a hotel room, in which he makes a series of discoveries. The bold comic staging of his story about a school massacre – just a few days after the most recent mass shooting in the news! – seemed especially dark in the vein of the playwright.

There was much to admire in the direction: terrific pacing; an efficient, economical handling of the play's one change of location; the mysterious opening discovery of the central character in the shadows; the classical triangular staging of a key speech about the title incident; the careful build to the revelation of the shocking contents of a suitcase. All McDonagh plays have bloody elements, and the severed hands flying back and forth were adroitly handled – and this event built on the well paced and comically aimed throwing of several shoes earlier in the play.

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Given my own experience of directing student actors as they interact with professionals, it was a pleasure to see how seamlessly the work of these four performers was blended. Paolino's excellent rapport with and support of the spirited student actors evidenced that the director had integrated their work in rehearsal – further evidence of Professor Kundert's skills as a teacher.

She also enabled Paolino to shape a powerful performance in the central role, even as his darkly pulled-in Carmichael effectively balanced the brighter comic energies of the other characters.

In the shaping, the pacing, and the speech energy of the production, one senses the director's considerable experience with Shakespeare – and how muscular traditional skills can inform contemporary scripts, particularly those with larger stylistic horizons than psychological realism.

The direction of *A Behanding in Spokane* is substantial evidence of Kristin Kundert's value to the Department of Theatre and Film Studies as a teacher of acting and voice, and as a director.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tim McDonough". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tim" being the most prominent.

Tim McDonough

Chair, Department of Theater and Dance, Emory University

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