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Jill Stanley Wright

*The University of Montana*

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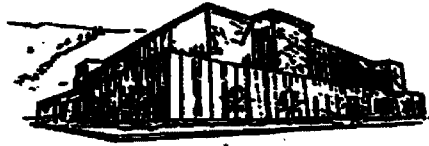
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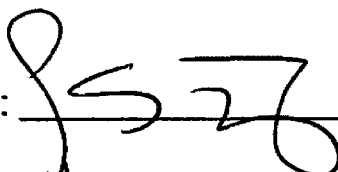
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A Director's Artistic Journey

A Personal History on the Healing Power of Art through Dickens'  
Classic, Oliver Twist

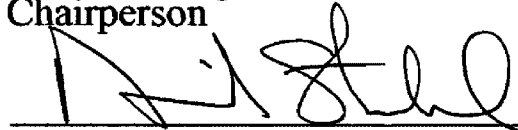
by  
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B.A., University of Alaska – Fairbanks, 1985

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Fine Arts, Integrated Arts and Education  
The University of Montana  
2004

Approved by:



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**A Director's Artistic Journey: A Personal History of the Healing Power of Art  
Through Dickens' Classic, Oliver Twist (16 pages)**

Chairman: Dr. Randy Bolton *R.B.*

Directing and producing a children's adapted version of the musical Oliver Twist was the vehicle used to reintroduce the director to public performance. This journey is documented from past and present theater, dance, and visual art experiences.

Through this personal, artistic journey, the director was trying to document the reawakening of the essential component of creating art for an audience. This introspective journey resulted in many successes, the greatest being the director's public performances of the adapted Oliver Twist. The director affirmed that creating art with vision, passion, and hard work leads to the confidence to express one's art publicly. The difficulty with this whole process has been its empirical documentation.

The director, after finishing the Oliver Twist musical, found the experience to be not only personally enriching and satisfying, but also found the project to be an intricate and essential part of the arts education program for public schools.

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## I. The Beginning and the Mistakes

The public element has to come forth because it is that exposure of our art to one and all that signals healing. I journeyed from one end of that artistic spectrum; public performance in front of hundreds, to a protected place of introspection and safety, and finally, back again to a public exhibition of my art. This past year, I directed a children's adaptation of the classic musical Oliver. This final leg of the trip, for me, has been much like my "re-debutante," my coming out of sorts; a new beginning with a passion that had been missing for four years. In retrospect, it has been the segment in my artwork that has taken the most courage and required, by far, the most risk for me.

I often ask myself, where and when did this journey begin? I knew my journey did not begin with my final project, directing a cast of 73 kids in the musical of Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist this year. The production of Oliver Twist is where my journey has ended and where I am resting. My journey began years ago in 1975 when I was cast in another Dickens' favorite, A Christmas Carol. Through the years, I have been involved in many classical drama and dance productions. In one dance performance entitled "Refrains", produced through Simon Fraser University's dance department, I was placed at the bottom of a body pile being smashed and suffocated all in the name of art?

Each one of these experiences has shaped me artistically in some way. They all have strengthened what I like about my own art and what I dislike about my own art. My art, although it can be abstract, needs to have direction and purpose to satisfy the goal-driven part of myself. For validation, there needs to be a finished product or purpose. I



have learned from the pointless body piling in “Refrains” that it is not enough just to try something for effect’s sake. There needs to be passion and vision behind my art. That is why I enjoy directing and acting because the result is more concrete, more visible.

More recently in 1999, I was encouraged to direct the children’s play The Boy Who Could Fly written by a local playwright. I never realized what agreeing to direct this production meant, especially being a complete novice. Not only did I agree to direct this play, but I also thought it would be so much more professional if we took the final production to our local theater in Homer, Alaska. With sophisticated and computer generated light and sound panels, the technical piece of this production was beginning to outweigh the performance piece. In the end, this part of my artistic journey was very successful, and the palm trees made out of cardboard that fell over each time wind was generated from the opening and the closing of the curtains, made it all the more endearing.

My artistic journey at this point seemed more successful when I directed projects that involved students’ input and creativity blended with mine. It is this realization in retrospect that drives my new projects. After The Boy Who Could Fly, I continued with several smaller productions of Romeo and Juliet and Star Trek: Trouble with Tribbles, to scenes from West Side Story and Little Women. Each of these mini-performances was done on a makeshift stage in my classroom with an old curtain hung with “s” hooks from the ceiling. I derive great pleasure from the technical simplicity of these performances. They are produced much more quickly, and the students have an audience and feedback much sooner than in the larger scale productions. This immediacy is important to young

performers. I was comfortable with my success to this point.

I felt mounting pressure to direct another “BIG” musical. I decided upon Annie, Jr. mainly because I could cast lots of kids. I am still evaluating whether or not the majority of the stress to produce this show came from my desire to be “bigger and better”, or if it really was outside pressure from staff and community. I lost the focus on my art and my teaching of the theater arts to my students. Instead, I was overwhelmed with logistical concerns and did not fully understand the importance of releasing artistic control to some degree and delegating some of the responsibility. In my previous experience with The Boy Who Could Fly, with the exception of props management, I did everything: promotion, casting, choreography, costumes, etc. What I failed to realize soon enough, was that this new musical was far too big for me to do it all. I directed this project through February of 2001 and then, essentially, I had a nervous breakdown. Was it only because of this musical? Of course not, there were other huge issues in my life as well, but the importance of this discussion is to focus on how this breakdown affected my art. One of the hardest moments of my life was when I had to admit, publicly, that I couldn't do it; I couldn't finish this musical. End of story.

I called my friend, dancer, and choreographer Luanne Nelson and simply said, “I can not finish this project. I will be taking the rest of the year off from work.” I did not ask her if she could finish for me. That next week she told me she would finish the Annie production. Although I was relieved that all the kids' hard work wouldn't be in vain, I had a feeling of failure that compounded my depression. At this point then, the public part of my art, the invincible spirit infused in every other artistic endeavor, was now broken, and, as I saw it then, exposed as a failure.

What do I do with my partially finished master's degree? What are my options artistically? What do "people" (my students, colleagues, family, and students) think of my art, think of me? Maybe they thought nothing, but these were my fears. This was the turning point in my journey. The biggest question that I needed to answer, that finally came out after months of counseling, was: what do I want? This translates, for my purposes now, into: what do I want from my art? And even, what is my art? What makes it worthy? It is from this point that my artistic journey began to take shape, but instead of it taking someone else's shape, I began to direct my journey from a more instinctive place. I began to travel down a path of healing, a path I sometimes controlled and sometimes didn't. But whatever began to happen, I felt more connected, more satisfied.

## II. The New Beginning

It is important to begin this phase of my journey by explaining my decision to continue *The Pulse* in the summer of 2003. I took two summers off between my first and second year of the program. I did this for several reasons. First, I wanted to make sure that physically I was ready for the long hours and academic end of it. Second, I needed to be really certain that I was ready for the emotional and spiritual side of the Pulse. Third, I wanted to be off my antidepressant medication. And last, but most importantly, I needed to figure out what to do for my winter project required for the Creative Pulse.

My idea for the winter project came about very naturally. I had a student teacher working with me in my classroom early that school year of 2001-2002. She was looking

for units to introduce and complete with my two classes of gifted students ranging in ages from seven to fourteen. She asked me for direction in developing her unit. I asked her what she loved to do, as that passion or love for something bleeds into students' enthusiasm for a new project. She replied that she loved quilting. So, I told her, "make a quilt with the kids." That is indeed what she did. She modified parts of it for the younger kids and gave the older students the more difficult paper piecing sections.

In short, after this project, I had learned so much (not being a quilter or sewer of any kind) from my student teacher about the art form of quilting that I really wanted to spend some concentrated energy doing my own, more abstract, quilts; thus, the birth of my Creative Pulse winter project, quilting.

It was the solitude and the very private nature of quilting that I embraced. I chose the fabrics without consensus from others. I created the design and flow of the fabrics alone at my kitchen table. I even found that when I was done with my two wall hangings, that I didn't really have the desire to share them with anyone. They were mine. They weren't being judged or applauded. This solitary sewing period was healing for me in rediscovering how much I love to create something from a simple image; that image became more elaborate as the pieces were sewn together.

It was these from these quilts that I eventually found the courage to share, once again, my art with the Summer 2003 Pulse group. The moment I got up in front of our group last summer and stumbled through my presentation, talking about sewing with my mother as a child, the process of these two quilts, and the incredible sense of support I felt from the group, I knew I could go public again with my art. Throughout the course of the summer, I became reassured that my art is my art. The fact that people either

accept it or reject it is now of little consequence to me.

I remember a discussion I had with Randy Bolton on the phone when I decided to change my final project from doing another quilt to directing the musical Oliver Twist. He asked, "Why, Jill, do you want to change?" And I responded with, "Because I am ready once again to go public. The quilts were the private side of my art; the musical is the public side." He accepted my change. The journey had almost come full circle, back to that public, big production beginning I had once loved. This time, however, my ultimate success or failure did not paralyze me as a director. I felt inspired to share with my cast what I knew and, more importantly, admit what I didn't.

### III. The Journey Continued With Fewer Obstacles

The intent of my final project, directing and producing a children's musical adaptation of Oliver Twist, began as a very personal goal; to reawaken the public side of my art, and, as I rediscovered, these large productions are anything but private and personal. They take on a life of their own. As much as I wanted the anonymity to create alone, that was not the reality! What I discovered was that my artistic vision blended with another's and another's makes such a finished piece. Being alone in my art doesn't make it safer for me to create; it just makes it only for me. Artistic creation or invention is enhanced by a community of artists working together. What I once saw as artistic compromise I now see as a better idea. What I once wanted to call mine I now call ours.

#### IV. The Process

My decision for selecting this particular children's musical version of Oliver Twist was spurred by the question, what musical can I choose that will involve a lot of kids? It is important to first point out that I did not set out on this leg of my journey to prove that arts in education is a worthy curriculum, rather my motivation comes from a more grassroots, holistic, approach that I have learned through my own arts education that experiencing is learning. Creating theater experiences for kids takes a lot of time and a lot of energy, but in the end it is worth every moment, every sacrifice because I see directly how my dedication to my artistic process allows the cast and crew to recognize the importance of their own art and expression. This transfer between myself and my cast has made that leap back into public performance so worthwhile.

Our small school, Chapman School in Anchor Point, Alaska, like many rural schools, does not have much in the way of facilities that might enhance performing arts education. The fact that we are starved for the enhancement of the arts made this leg of my journey even more interpersonal. I could directly impact my need for taking the risk to go public with my art while at the same time provide a needed artistic outlet for the kids and community.

Like many, our school falls far short in terms of its facilities for rehearsing. On occasion, we would have upwards of twenty-five to thirty cast members singing and learning choreography in a classroom with all the desks and tables moved out into the hallway. Eventually I was desperate for more space, so I began to rally my administrator

for more gym time. We eventually got one day a week in the gym for rehearsal, and two weeks before the performance, we had the gym almost nightly. These kinds of details and logistics sometimes take the art out of my directing. It's frustrating to have to spend time and energy on rehearsal space. But I continued.

I wanted every piece of this show to be as close to the time period as possible. That was a vision I struggled with from the onset in that we were limited on funds. Costuming could communicate time period enough so that we could cut down on set design, etc. My biggest challenge was the conflicting vision I had of a character's look and what vision the actor had. Oliver was overdressed and suffering from the heat, Nancy's dress wasn't full enough, and we either squeezed kids into tuxedos that were too small, or we had to use masking tape for their sleeves and legs due to length. I did make some changes, but stuck with my original vision of costumes reflecting 18<sup>th</sup> century England. As a director, I made the right call even though I did not please every cast member and parent. Though subtle, costuming I discovered is invaluable. It is the final stroke of the production's canvas.

Management of the hordes of kids and volunteers also took away from my artistic sense as a director. This is so because it's more about logistics than it is artistic process. Again, I was frustrated by this but at the same time knew due to the size of the production it would be a factor to reckon with. I did not mind, however, choreographing all the bodies into each scene. This process was a challenge that when the puzzle was figured out, added a very specific layer to the show. I was in control of carefully fitting these many bodies into an organized mass. I found great pleasure in this process of directing this chaos into order. I would not have discovered this in a private, solitary art form.

Throughout this production my learning never stopped. This has been a huge asset supporting my desire to go public again with theater. The whole idea of multiple sets and props at first threatened me. I found if I took each piece separately and wrote it out in the form of lists, this seemed to minimize the threat. Then, I would give that list to someone else to gather or build. Like costuming and make up, props add an essential dimension to theater. I learned three things about props: 1) keep them simple, 2) rehearse a lot with them, and 3) have a system to know where they are! Here is what I learned about sets: 1) keep them simple, 2) have a flow chart and rehearse moving set pieces on and off stage, 3) practice with set pieces in place from early in the rehearsal process so kids become familiar with them and 4) have a strong adult on hand at all times. This may seem elementary to a professional, but I was in many a rehearsal scrambling to help kids find props or move set pieces. I enlisted these rules and rehearsals went better.

One very important part of my journey was being moved by others' art in addition to my own. There is one experience that reinforced my understanding of working together as an artistic community and the value that holds. The third scene was the city scene which can be seen in the attached DVD. It is a work of art in itself. There is something magical in this painted backdrop. When it was first hung and I saw it completed, I stood with tears in my eyes that someone would care enough about this production to put so much time, feeling, and artistic energy into this backdrop. The process involved in making this scene warrants a brief description.

A fellow teacher, Marilyn Kirkham, drew this city scene , graphed it, and then



painted it in sections on to a 30' x 30' sewn backdrop made up of over 50 twin and double white sheets. This backdrop took five gallons of latex, white interior paint for the undercoat. Then, with the help of four Jr. High art students, they painted the outline of the city scene onto the backdrop. This was not painted with brushes; rather they used rollers because of its size. The final phase of detail painting was done at the theater where several local artists assisted in putting in the needed touches of perspective, depth of view, and final color blending. We then used 30' of metal conduit and thread it through the bottom to keep the backdrop from swaying after was hung. The final phase was to punch grommet holes in the top of the drop and attached it with poly card to the fly. Again, that whole idea of demonstrating dedication and passion towards your art form through hard work is something I have gathered on this journey (see appendix DVD).

It is important to me to discuss the failures in this production too, as this journey has met with some bumps. Although not life threatening, the problem with moving these two alternating scenes still is a sore spot with me. The trick was how to quickly transition between Fagin's lair and Brownlow's interior scenes. Because we had furniture to move on and off, the audience waited. If I was to do this again, I think I would have both scenes exposed to the audience, eliminate the curtain, and just switch scenes by lighting one and blackening the other. The transition would have been faster. Why didn't I do this to begin with, you ask? Change is hard. I got caught in that trap of seeing the scene only the original way I had mapped it out. At the time, I thought the lighting would not create the desired affect of two different rooms or locations. Now I know the power of lighting, and how much it can simplify the needs for your sets.

I did not make this artistic journey alone, and what I have discovered is even if

you're not walking side by side, all involved are headed down the same path. I began to refine my concept of "all knowing". Originally, I had written a lighting script for both my student and his dad who volunteered to run the lights. I had originally wanted all these glorious, tricky lights for several of the scenes using special screens to only show shadows of actors in the shooting scene, but found out in reality that time and knowledge were lacking. Since neither of my lighting volunteers had ever done lighting, nor worked on the lighting computer system used at the Homer Mariner Theater, this limited my creative vision but not their's. I was concerned at first that we were not lit well enough. I kept saying, "We need more lights on their faces!" They passively resisted my need to control their every move and the lights were fine.

## V. The Unexpected

The most unexpected lesson that I learned through this whole journey is the importance of simplicity. Simplicity does not mean less; it means less distracting. I now understand this concept. What matters with children's theater, ultimately, are the children. It is not about my detailed curtain, lighting, sound, and props' scripts. It is not about make up or set design either. It is rather about the beauty of children moving on stage, taking responsibility, listening to their changing voices, embracing their mistakes, and cherishing their willingness and fearlessness to perform.

I know this now, and I learned it slowly through this second attempt at directing a children's production. I know I have lost focus on a lot of these simple beauties of

performance in my own performances. What simplicity has come to mean in my own art is stripping away all the barriers I put up to keep others from really knowing what I meant to express. Purposeful complexity in my art is a masked fear of exposing something I was afraid, in its simplest form, wasn't worthy enough.

Here is one example of my initial lack of understanding of the simplicity concept. I spent an entire evening drawing up an elaborate three page sketch of the set I wanted built for the Oliver Twist project. This included panel walls and doors to divide the rooms, beds for every urchin, a real exterior of a house, and the list goes on and on. I took this master sketch into the theater manager for her advice. Lynne, the manager, is a twenty year veteran of theater and dance from all angles of production and performance. She looked admiringly at my sketch and said, "Boy, you have spent a lot of time on that set design." Silence.

I asked, "So, is it doable? What do you think?" She was silent for a moment more. Then she said, "What is your goal for this performance?" I didn't understand. "What do you mean goal?" "Is it to spend a lot of money and time on set design? Don't try too hard to create the illusion. Let the kids do it for you." We continued this conversation at some depth, and I began to realize what she meant. These lessons in simplicity are the poignant ones.

## VI. So What?

I wrote earlier that I did not purposely launch into the Oliver phase of my artistic

journey to make a comment about arts in education, but I have now participated again in theater education and I am convinced that it is an intricate and essential part of education in public schools. Now, I need to continue assessing the significance of this project beyond me personally.

The first place to explore is how this project has impacted kids. What does being involved in a musical production provide for kids? In the simplest sense, it gives them something to do after school. Like a sport or any other extracurricular activity, Oliver has kept, in any one day after school, upwards of 20 kids busy. It has kept them productive and safe during the most tempting time for kids to get in trouble. It has also given them that sense of being a part of something successful, much like that of being on a successful athletic team. You become extended family by sharing the same experiences and overcoming the same challenges. You must learn to problem solve and find a way to “make it work” if you are acting opposite someone you really don’t know or care for.

Secondly, this musical has provided an excellent, real life situation for setting goals and assuming responsibility. The first goal the student had to overcome was preparing for the audition by memorizing a scene and singing, solo, in front of a small panel of directors. Once that goal was met, they then needed to get their parents on board and be responsible for bringing home correspondences about the play rehearsal schedules. Then, especially for the larger character parts, line memorization had to be completed within certain timeframes. Even the idea of sacrificing what you really wanted to do on Friday to attend rehearsal is an important, significant piece of being a

part of the production.

The fine arts and liberal arts education that comes from the hands-on experience of being in a musical is surpassed by little else. In six months, my students learned about: setting, storyline, climax, resolution, dialogue, scripts, some of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century England's history, dialect, prop building and selection, backdrop painting, lights, sound systems, stage directions, projection, staying in character, make-up, striking a set, being quiet on the set, helping others, costuming, keeping track of your costume, patience, choreography, and the list goes on and on!

It's very important to me to recognize this tremendous bond or kinship I feel with the kids I have worked with all these months. It is different than just being their classroom teacher; it goes deeper than that relationship. It's almost as if we have all been through some kind of test or challenge, and because we all came out alive and the better for it, there is a connection between us all. I believe many of the kids feel the same way. Maybe they can't express it in words, but their feelings towards me (and I am sure other adults who were involved) come out in their smiles in the hallway, their "remember when" talks, the "what's our next play going to be?", their comfortableness hanging out in my room, and in some cases, even a marked upswing in their academics. These are the intangible pieces of directing a show like Oliver Twist that can never be replaced or forgotten. To me that's success.

## VII. The Finale

My journey has given me more than knowledge about children's theater, it has forced me to explore strange and unknown places. As I journeyed, I discovered new art forms, uncovered my lost art , and found my confidence to present them publicly once again. For me, an epic journey.

I retire from teaching July, 2006 and there is a possibility of me directing one last children's show. I'm sure the kids want it to be big and glamorous, but who knows, maybe the whole idea of the beauty of simplicity has sunk in. I would like to challenge myself and try some improvisational theater with kids, culminating in some kind of impromptu performance. Also, I would like to learn the technical side of theater, specifically in lighting, as I have seen how lighting can work magic. So, the journey continues.