

The photograph shows a deserted beach—cloudy water and gray hills beneath a blue sky.

"This play has always had a kind of weird aura attending it," playwright William Hoffman says. He crosses his sparsely furnished office, plucks the photo off the wall, and hands it to the interviewer.

"In 1993, I went to Latvia with my assistant to research the play. None of my relatives—they haven't been back since before the war—none of them would go back with me.

"I'm doing my research. I'm filming this and that, and we're on this beach. Not a remarkable beach. But something tells me to take this picture. So I did. Later, I found out..." He taps the picture.

"This is the beach," he says.

"This is the place where the Nazis and their Latvian helpers murdered my family. December 8, 1941."



Journe Cer of a Pla

by Michael



Arizona State University's College of Fine Arts became part of that aura last fall when a couple of prestigious faculty hires, a building full of computerized video equipment, a very private artistic crossroads, and a very public social ill converged on the Institute for Studies in the Arts. ✎ For four weeks last fall, award-winning playwright and ASU Guest Artist William Hoffman shared his searing personal vision of life and love in the post-Holocaust era. Hoffman's newest play-in-progress, *Riga*, was given an intensive workshop at the hands of Obie Award winning director Marshall W. Mason, the newest member of the ASU Theatre faculty. ✎ For Hoffman, the *Riga* workshop held two very different dimensions: his technical skills would be tested in a hail of feedback, questions, alternatives and ideas. But *Riga* would be a journey for Hoffman's soul as well. For *Riga* is largely the story of his mother's family, and an exploration of his own identity as an heir to the legacy of the Holocaust. ✎ "Everything about this rehearsal will be peculiar," Marshall Mason says to his newly-formed cast. In the lounge of the ISA's Drama City complex, the late afternoon sun throws shadows across the cast members and the mismatched furniture. The air conditioning has failed, but nobody seems to notice. ✎ "We will be working on a script that will transform as we touch it," Mason says. "And we will be integrating our work and accommodating it to film and music and slides. ✎ Workshops are the bread and butter of playwrights these days. In Broadway's heyday, a promising new play was tried out 'on the road.' Audiences in Chicago, Boston, New Haven and Philadelphia told the writer which scene was too long, which jokes didn't work, which song didn't hold the third act together.

Sixty years later, budget constraints have redlined every theatre's margin for error—a new play must succeed in its first production. The right to fail has become a luxury.

Enter a low-risk alternative: the staged reading. A director puts a play "on its feet"—sans scenery, props, or major production values. Actors move around, reading the author's words, creating the author's reality for audiences or prospective backers or both. Along the way, problems are encountered, questions are asked, and revisions are made. The workshop circuit has become a kind of dramatic minor league—with a few good scouting reports and a few recognizable names being enough to make a theatre risk production.

At the first meeting, Mason sketches out the actors' marching orders, attention then turns to Hoffman for a few words on why *Riga* was written. Often, such playwright statements are either frivolous ("I've always wanted to write a piece about...") or mundane. But Hoffman's long-dead aunts and uncles will look down from projection screens as this play unfolds. For Hoffman, *Riga's* story always begins the same way:

"In 1941," he tells the cast, "my family was murdered by the Nazis and their Latvian helpers..."

Riga is the story of Wolf, the grown child of Latvian Holocaust survivors. While living in present-day New York, Wolf falls in love with another man—a young black musician known only as "Z." But their relationship is haunted by Wolf's obsessive need to understand the Holocaust, his own obligations as a modern-day Jew, and the fragmented prejudices that exist today.

Riga's first rehearsal concludes with a crash course in fascism. The cast is shown a collection of Hoffman's research: Nazi-era

propaganda films, generously interspersed with current footage of skinheads and Klan rallies.

A skinhead demonstration prowls the streets of an American city, to the rallying cry of: "Six million more."

At a Nazi firing range somewhere in the modern day American South, young men with tattoos and AR-15 automatic rifles take target practice, while a Nazi spokesman expresses the need to establish an all-white homeland. Of his teen-age soldiers, he intones: "We try to recruit our people young. Young people have a desire to change the world. And an impatience to do it right now."

An eerie similarity underscores Hoffman's fear that the world may, indeed, be headed for another Jew-killing.

"Our mission here is to awaken a moral horror that is in danger of recreating itself," Mason tells the actors.

"To do your part in this, you have to ask yourself tough questions: 'What do I understand about dying? About genocide?' We have to think of everything as actors. We have to think dangerous thoughts."

While "*Riga's*" aims are ambitious, the cast's first read-through dramatizes the play's problems: Wolf's lover, Z, seems to lack the dimension of a real person; the lovers' relationship is unclear and the flashbacks to pre-war Latvia lack a legible storyline.

And the multimedia element remains largely unfathomable—how many projections should be used? How many slides? How much film?

Video technicians are dispatched to their studio to sort the tangle of Hoffman-acquired slides, family photos, and propaganda films. These will be filtered into a smooth succession of images and sounds that will act, Mason says, very much like an additional character.

"You can fall into a high-tech trap, I think, putting the play at the mercy of projected and electronic images," Mason says. On the other hand, if you under-use the resource, you make the piece seem stylistically inconsistent. I'm trying to think of the projections and

slides as another voice in the ensemble; to be layered in at the service of the message."

Not many directors approach Mason's talent for bringing a play into its own. The founding artistic director of the Circle Repertory Theatre and the guiding force behind America's most definitive new plays of the 70s and 80s, Mason directed Lanford Wilson's most renowned productions, including *The Hot I Baltimore*, *The Fifth of July*, *Talley's Folly*, and *Burn This*.

In the ISA's Drama City theatre, a stage is taped out on the hard black floor. Two rows of chairs frame the right and left sides of the stage. At the director's table, Marshall Mason leans over his *Riga* script.

"I saw a previous *Riga* workshop in New York," Mason says, "and Bill lost me in the first act a couple of times, but I found the second act incredibly moving and very smooth storytelling."

"The problem lies in setting up that smooth second act. Our workshop will stay in the first act, where the major problems are."

One of Mason's most profound professional triumphs came in 1985, directing the award-winning play *As Is*.

A pull-no-punches story of a dying young man and his lover, *As Is* became the first mainstream play to deal with the burgeoning Aids crisis. A moving and dignified plea for compassion, *As Is* helped put Aids into the national conversation.

As Is was written by William Hoffman.

"I wrote the play in response to this as-yet-unnamed phenomenon that was sweeping through New York," Hoffman says. "And, if I could write a play that would make a noise about something like that, well, it was the right thing to do."

"*Riga* is written on the same basis. It is written in response to signs I see of a coming new holocaust. I believe we are headed for a grand slaughter. There are lessons yet to be learned from the last holocaust. But Hitler's Holocaust is safely in the past. With *Riga*, I wanted to bring it back into the present."

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Once in the rehearsal process, Hoffman plays the answer man—articulating his basic ideas so Mason and the actors can make accommodating smaller choices of their own. And the questions abound:

“Is Wolf stalking Z here?”

“How smart is Brad?”

“Does this homeless character really have a dog?”

Certain questions seem insignificant. But a good plot is like a mosaic. Something as tiny as the wrong cross by an ensemble member or a dubious vocal tone will stick out like a clod of dirt in a stained glass window.

One transitional scene grinds to a halt when a single line of dialogue rings a little stilted. Hoffman and Mason exchange a glance, and Hoffman changes the line. The actor protests: “When you think about it,” the actor says, “that line makes sense.”

“You’re right,” Mason tells him, “but you have to stop the story to think about it.”

Hoffman answers all his questions gamely, notes criticisms, and provides any helpful background. He is jovial and encouraging and a living playwright’s presence is an early luxury for the actors.

“I have a lot of questions for William Shakespeare,” actor Scott Balthazor says. “But he never gets back to me.”

“Marshall and I have worked together on and off for 30 years,” Hoffman says.

“Having a director you trust is great. A director once staged an entire play of mine on ladders, and expected me to like it.”

The body of the rehearsals belong to Mason, who must shape two main characters and an ensemble of eight into a chorus of faith healers, Islamic fundamentalists, phone sex patrons, Manhattan pedestrians, and God. Mason starts with the small details: the way an umbrella is folded, the way a suit-case is packed, or a cigarette is held.

“Ensemble members, don’t make piddly choices,” he tells them. “Don’t say to yourself, ‘Oh, I’m just part of the background.’ If an audience member wants to watch you, you’d better give them committed acting choices.”

The remarkable aspect of Mason’s rehearsals is the near-total lack of egos. Mason has enjoyed a legendary career, and some of his actors are only recently out of high school. But Mason fosters a remarkable sense of mutual comfort that allows everyone to draw on their creativity.

He is virtuoso of positive reinforcement.

“We have to concentrate on bringing that moment up to the level of your best work,” Mason tells an errant actor at one point.

Finding a play’s voice is very much like composing music, and as the script is per-

formed, pieces of errant writing will “bump” Hoffman’s ear with the surety of a sour note.

But revisions are difficult because Hoffman has structured *Riga* with such complexity. A single scene will bounce back and forth between continents, eras, and social issues. Every chopped or transplanted scene leaves a number of thematic loose ends.

Hoffman makes small line changes on the fly, writes larger problems down, and takes Mason aside only when an actor’s portrayal obscures the script.

The end of each evening finds Hoffman holding a collection of cryptic notes. If the rehearsal has been fruitful, he seems to look right past people to a distant computer keyboard somewhere.

The workshop presents such invigorating technical and artistic challenges it becomes easy to forget that there are personal stakes, as well.

On-stage, Wolf’s Aunt Ida relates a story of how she passed as an Aryan in order to survive. During a pause in the proceedings, Hoffman is expected to change a line or ask a staging question. Instead, he says simply, “This is my Aunt.”

A sepia tone photograph of five women is brought to the table. The women in the picture greet the camera with a range of impish grins and wide-eyed stares. Without ceremony, Hoffman points the actresses to the people they portray: Johanna, whose expulsion from the family and passage to America saved her from the Nazis; Jenny, who watched the Latvian militia kill her baby when the two of them were caught foraging for food; and Ida, who returned from work one day to find her neighborhood razed, and took a job with the German Army, surviving in the shadow of the Final Solution.

The moral issues explored in *Riga* often bubble over into passionate discussions from the actors. But revelations of this kind from Hoffman often render them silent.

Slowly, with a series of Hoffman cuts, switches and rewrites, *Riga*’s troublesome first act begins to sort itself out. The structure of the play is determined by the evolving relationship between Wolf and Z. As the relationship between the characters intensifies, so, too, do the memories of the Holocaust, of Watts, of bigotry past and present.

Later rehearsals usually find Hoffman in a high state of anticipation and *Isa* stage



Director Marshall W. Mason

manager Megan Morris buried under the sea of collated pages that signals more rewrites. Actors dutifully take seats around the directors table, and disembowel their script binders: inserting scene 6(J) between scene 6 and scene 7(K). Hoffman seems his most excited at this time, when the newly discovered words are about to become airborne.

“You know that thing you told me?” he says to actor Tony Hall. “The thing you said last night—that your grandmother always said?”

Hall nods, and Hoffman grins at the script. “It’s in there.”

The new pages are read at the table. Tonight, it is new scene 7(K). An earlier draft of this scene had Z planning a trip to California and telling Wolf, his lover, very little about it. Discussions about Z’s weak characterization have led Hoffman to show a little more about him, and flash-back vignettes from a host of ‘memory characters’ add momentum to the conflict.

But the scene reads like a nightmare. A twice go-round over the table sounds like a cacophony of thrown-in lines with everybody acting in different directions. The scene appears to lack a narrative structure, and the story runs into the ground. Some of the cast seem ready to dismiss it as a bad rewrite before Mason chimes in:

“What do we have here? Z and Wolf are arguing, that’s the main thing. But we have Mohammed and Z’s mother whispering in Z’s ear, and Wolf’s uncles and mother whispering in Wolf’s ear. Let’s just run the argument alone: Wolf and Z. Then let’s try Mohammed alone. Then the uncles alone. And then we’ll put it all together again.”

“Marshall Mason reminds me very much of a sound engineer,” Renee Morgan Brooks, a professional singer and *Riga* actress, has seen Mason take many scenes apart this way.

“He will break a scene down by its voices, put the voices on different ‘tracks,’ work each ‘track’ and then layer everything thing in so that the whole has a kind of harmony.”

Slowly, Mason walks each actor down their throughline—their character's journey in the scene. The process helps each peripheral character understand their role in the moment. Getting the actors into a stage picture defines their relative importance even more. Within the hour, scene 7(K) runs with miraculous clarity: two men are having an argument, each attended by a retinue of painful memories. The stage picture nicely abstracts the idea of the play: two decent men who are thrown into conflict because they are unable to see each other's ghosts.

"Bill?" Mason asks, after attending to the scene's millionth detail. Hoffman sits behind the director's table, nodding.

"Yes," Hoffman says. He allows himself a small grin, "yes, I think that's it."

The workshop process climaxes with a series of "open rehearsals." For *Riga*, seats at the Institute's Drama City are SRO. Out goes the director's table, in comes a set of risers for the audience. Three projection screens fill the back of the stage floor and a series of still photographs come and go, dominated by *Riga*'s trademark image: A sepia photograph of a woman, looking out on the world with a weary composure. Hoffman's mother, Johanna.

The first photographs play to a talkative and non-attentive crowd. Then the film images on the center screen begin to move in grainy surrealism, and the crowd quiets as it watches the German Army occupy Latvia to a chorus of flowers and cheers. A bouncing subtitle tells the crowd of "the filthy Jews" and German revenge "against the Semite." The crowd is eerily uncomfortable as the film runs to black and the actors file in. Brent Roam, the actor playing Wolf, turns to the audience and smiles apologetically.

"I'm afraid," he says, "this is going to be one of those message plays."

Riga does not please everybody. The close proximity of gay rights issues and Holocaust memories unsettles some people who have come to terms with one and not the other. And *Riga*'s sporadic irreverence with the sacred may strike some people as blasphemous.

"If you're not making someone uncomfortable," Hoffman says, "you're probably not saying anything."

But the play holds its audience with undeniable force. Loose strands of poetry or plot have been condensed into powerful themes. And *Riga* shows promise of becoming that rare fine play that can engage an audience artistically, intellectually, and emotionally.

The irony of this workshop is that *Riga* remains uneven. The frantic fragmented first act—the act that "lost" Marshall Mason a couple

of times in New York—is now a sleeker well-told story, surpassing the "smooth and incredibly moving" second act, which now seems a little high on tech and lean on narrative.

"The second act needs the work now," Mason says shortly after the workshop. "I think that's a sign that good progress was made."

Perhaps the hardest lesson of the new play circuit is learning how very long the road to completion can be. While a blessed few scripts pop out fully-formed and ready to entertain, most require a kind of parental patience: to find their voice, assert their identity, and say their piece clearly. *Riga* is still a workshop away from that kind of clarity.

In the meantime, the Kennedy Center and the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities has awarded a grant to *Riga* from the Center's Fund for New American Plays.

Riga's status—as one of only four such recipients in the nation—does not guarantee the play's eventual success. But the award, as well as interest in the play from both New York and Los Angeles, does support the notion that the young play *Riga* is clearly a child prodigy.

For more information about making Riga, contact Marshall Mason, Department of Theatre, College of Fine Arts, 602.965.0779. For information about other projects at ASU's Institute for Studies in the Arts, contact Director Richard L. Loveless, 602.965.9438.

Giving *Riga* A High-Tech Voice

The studio layout nicely illustrates the mission of ASU's Institute for Studies in the Arts.

One half of the space resembles mission control: a bank of monitors bounce a variety of images off the dark faces of busy technicians as they dub, lift, record, dupe, grab, load, and dump sounds and images to a background of groaning hard drives and spiraling LED read-outs.

A lone camera points to the other half of the room where a bare white space awaits the artist. There dancers, actors, singers, and performance artists bring their very personal skills to the table, while the talented group across the room integrates those skills with the age of the microchip.

"It's a dangerous proposition to bring film media into a play for its own sake," says Patricia Clark, studio manager for ISA projects. "You can't bring in media as a gimmick—'Ooooh, its multimedia'—without making it an integral support system to the story. Audiences are smart. They will recognize and feel the inconsistency if the multimedia is not woven in properly."

As images from the ever-vigilant monitors play off her lenses, Clark discusses creating the video.

"Marshall Mason and William Hoffman brought in the raw material: VHS films, old 16 millimeter films, pictures, slides," Clark says.

"Marshall and I went through all the material. We grabbed still images off the video, transferred them to SCI crimson. Via the Internet we used 'Fetch' to bring them onto a Macintosh computer for mirror image manipulation in Photo Shop," she explains. "The chosen images were processed as the more than 200 slides that float across the periphery of the *Riga*."

The play's video installments required the ISA to take Hoffman's myriad sources and convert them to Beta for stylistic continuity. For the sake of technical expediency, the Beta tapes were then duped backed onto VHS.

Mason's ideas and Clark's wizardry resulted in six VHS tapes, containing everything from footage of a Jewish ghetto in Latvia to gay-bashing talk show preachers to 1992 election returns.

"We wanted the operation to be no fuss," Clark says. "Just listen for the cue line, pop 'em in the VCR, and let 'em go."

Clark enjoyed the development process, characterizing Mason as decisive in his own right but open to opinion, as well.

"We would talk about which eagle to use, or what particular group of faces might elicit what effect," she says. "Much of my advice was technical. The set required a black screen, for instance, and you can only throw certain images against a black screen."

"But, after the first three video tapes, we had a good understanding of what he wanted, and Marshall let us develop the last three tapes ourselves," Clark adds.

In performance, Clark's video showed a careful subtlety—complementing the stage action instead of overwhelming it. One of the most interesting applications of multimedia is that, dramatically, it can serve the same role as the ancient Greek chorus: commenting in the margins of the play, and putting the conflict in a larger context.

"I thought the multimedia worked well," Clark says. "It provided another layer of social background. It reinforced the parallels the play was trying to make when, for instance, you see contemporary men discussing contemporary issues on the stage, and on the screen behind them you see the same issues explored by Nazis 50 years ago. It can be chilling."

Clark says that editing the propaganda films—without being affected by their content—was the hardest part of her job.

"I had no idea what kind of imagery to expect when Marshall brought these in," she says. "You're so appalled, but you can't turn your eyes away. All this stuff about 'the dirty Jews' and how the Holocaust 'didn't happen.' I did a lot of yelling at the screen while I was editing."—MICHAEL GRADY