ABSTRACT

Title of Document: ATOMIC-AGE COMEDY: THE CREATION OF THE TRAMP’S NEW WORLD

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*The Tramp’s New World* is a new work of theatre written, adapted and performed for the MFA in Performance Festival of New Work at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. From his office atop the 50th floor of the Chrysler Building, American Pulitzer Prize winning author James Agee struggles to complete a screenplay entitled *The Tramp’s New World*—which tells the story of Charlie Chaplin’s "Tramp" character as the lone survivor of a super atomic blast. Agee enacts the Tramp’s tale of survival amidst the backdrop of a devastated New York City.

Using projection, physical comedy, music, and silent film technique *The Tramp’s New World* adapts a lost screenplay for the stage described as “so dark it was without precedent” and tells the story of a writer's struggle to find redemption through his art. The play explores the question: can a man's desire to create be a match for his proclivity towards self-destruction?
ATOMIC-AGE COMEDY:
THE CREATION OF THE TRAMP’S NEW WORLD

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Performance 2013

Advisory Committee:
Professor Leslie Felbain, Chair
Professor Derek Goldman
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Dedication

To those who in all times have sought truth and who have told it in their art and in their living…
~James Agee, “Dedication”, *Permit Me Voyage*
Preface

*Atomic-Age Comedy: The Creation of The Tramp’s New World* is an account of my own creative process from initial idea to performance of my MFA in Performance Thesis. *The Tramp’s New World* is a bold, new work of theatre blurring the line between the tragic and comic, real and unreal, theatrical and cinematic, technical and imaginative to tell the story of man’s struggle against self-destruction. To show how this work was created the following thesis booklet is divided in two main Chapters.

Chapter 1, entitled “Artist as Scholar: Research and Influences” will attempt to demonstrate the dramaturgical research and theatrical practices that went into the creation of *The Tramp’s New World*. In Chapter 2, entitled “Artist as Practitioner: Analysis of Creative Process”, I will seek to illustrate how *The Tramp’s New World* was initially inspired, conceived, designed, written/adapted, rehearsed, produced and the plans for further development. Through the entire booklet I will reveal the artistic techniques and methods I used in the process—some of which I came in with, some of which I learned in the graduate program, and some of which were learned through the creative process.
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Chapter 1: Artist as Scholar: Research and Influences

For in the immediate world, everything is to be discerned, for him who can discern it, and centrally and simply, without either dissection into science, or digestion into art, but with the whole of consciousness, seeking to perceive it as it stands: so that the aspect of a street in sunlight can roar in the heart of itself as a symphony, perhaps as no symphony can: and all of consciousness is shifted from the imagined, the revisive, to the effort to perceive simply the cruel radiance of what is.

~ James Agee, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (Agee, 9)

With a new work it is impossible to narrow down all of the research and influences that come into its creation. Moments of discovery arrive from asking questions and hoping to perceive, what James Agee describes as, the “cruel radiance of what is” (Agee, 9). When the lights first come up in The Tramp’s New World the audience sees James Agee on a single night in the year 1947 in New York City caught in a moment of creative inspiration. For my artistic process I attempt to immerse myself in dramaturgical research about the subject matter I am exploring. In The Tramp’s New World there were three areas of dramaturgical research, which were James Agee’s screenplay treatment, the life and work of James Agee, and the physical comedy of the silent film era. Through this section I will show how these areas of dramaturgical research influenced the creation of The Tramp’s New World.

The Tramp, The Writer, and the Lost Screenplay

The primary source for The Tramp’s New World was John Wranovics’s book Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, The Writer, and the Lost Screenplay. American writer and film critic James Agee was a huge admirer of Charlie Chaplin. Reading Wranovics’s book I discovered Agee wrote a screenplay treatment for Chaplin’s Tramp character. The screenplay was never fully developed, but the story behind its creation inspired my adaptation of The Tramp’s New World.
The inciting incident of my play comes directly from the rejection letters sent to James Agee from Chaplin Studios found the first part of Chaplin and Agee. The letter Agee reads from Chaplin Studios rejecting his screenplay idea and his written response were adapted directly from the actual letters printed in Wranovics’s book. Agee began writing to Chaplin with his idea for a predominantly silent film in 1947. At that time silent film was dead. The talking picture was ushered in with The Jazz Singer in 1927, as the first full-length sound film. Twenty years of talkies had come to dominate motion pictures by the time Agee began writing letters to Chaplin Studios with his silent film idea for the Little Tramp. Even Chaplin himself, one of the last holdouts of the old era, had given up on silent film in 1936 with Modern Times. Nevertheless, Agee was determined to convince Chaplin to bring back the Tramp. I was deeply moved by both Agee’s screenplay and his passionate pursuit to see it get made. In a way, my thesis project was a continuation of Agee’s long, heartfelt plea to bring back the Tramp.

There are many details from Wranovics's book I used directly in my thesis project. For the set of The Tramp’s New World I was drawn into the descriptions of James Agee’s office while working at Time magazine on the 50th floor of the Chrysler Building. Wranovics quotes a Time magazine tribute comparing Agee’s office to the “trash filled home of the reclusive Collyer brothers” and as “cluttered with old playbills, newspaper clippings, magazines, handouts, scraps of paper” that “flowed across the desk… and drifted onto the floor” (Wranovics, xvii). These descriptions of Agee’s office influenced the stage directions for the world of the play:
A late evening in New York City.

An office on the 50th floor of the Chrysler Building.

Front center a desk, surrounded by a huge chaos of papers, old newspapers, books, letters, unopened correspondence, etc. On top of the desk is an open bottle of bourbon whiskey, a glass, and an ashtray full of smoked cigarettes. Next to the desk, sitting on top of a stack of suitcases, is a record player.

A trunk sits in the corner next to which is a suitcase filled with clothes. There is a coat rack on which sits a single hat and an umbrella.

James Agee is discovered alone at his desk with a cigarette. He is faintly rustic in appearance. His clothes are old, worn, tramp-like.

Descriptions of James Agee’s clothing influenced the creation of his character in The Tramp’s New World. Robert Fitzgerald, a friend of Agee’s and fellow worker at Time, described Agee’s clothing as “blue or khaki work shirts and under the armpits there would be stains, salt-edged, from sweat” (Wranovics, xix). Film director John Huston, who collaborated with Agee on The African Queen, fashions Agee in “black shoes scuffed grey, wrinkled collar, a button off his shirt and a raveled tie” (Wranovics, xix). Walker Evans, photographer and collaborator on Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, says Agee “got more delight out of factory seconds and a sleazy cap than a straight dandy does from waxed calf Pearl shoes and a brushed Lock & Co. bowler” (Wranovics, xix).

Chaplin and Agee also significantly influenced the development of the central conflict. One of Agee’s greatest struggles in life was with addiction. A writer who had the office next to Agee describes his desk as always having “a bottle of whiskey” and “a bottle of Benzedrine tablets (then a newly discovered stimulant)… He would tank up on whiskey while he was writing until the point was reached where he could
no longer concentrate. Then he would take Benzedrine to sober up, reach the point of concentration again, and remain there until he felt he needed more whiskey—and so on back and forth” (Wranovics, xvi). Moments inspired from this description appeared directly onstage in *The Tramp’s New World* as Agee drinks himself to near collapse and then takes pills to resume working on the screenplay.

Chapter 2 of Wranovics' book is entitled “Agee and the Atom Bomb” and describes how profoundly nuclear weapons affected Agee. In his cover story for *Time* titled “The Bomb” and published two weeks after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima Agee writes,

> When the bomb split open the universe and revealed the prospect of the infinitely extraordinary, it also revealed the oldest, simplest, commonest, most neglected and most important of facts: that each man is eternally and above all else responsible for his own soul, and, in the terrible words of the Psalmist, that no man may deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him (Agee, 693).

The sense of humanistic urgency captured by Agee here would be explored even deeper in his writing of the screenplay. There are echoes of “The Bomb” in Agee’s notes for a final speech by the Tramp that I adapted into the ending of my play,

> Our chance is a very slim one at best, to win the world by simplicity, forcelessness, and love; the attempt of each man to be himself and to honor his neighbor. Can you not, will you not, give us that one slim chance? We must indeed put away childish things: and we must become as little children. And may God help us if we don’t (Jansen, 24).

Agee wanted to teach the world simplicity, forcelessness, and love and could think of no better teacher than his childhood hero—the Tramp. The writing of the screenplay became Agee’s attempt to save the world from nuclear self-destruction.

Part two of *Chaplin and Agee* contains the screenplay treatment itself. This screenplay was a primary source used in the adaptation and writing of my thesis.
project. The opening of my play is adapted from how Agee begins his screenplay treatment,

Without warning, a super-atomic Bomb is dropped, which out does the grandest expectations of those who set it off. All life on the planet, human and subhuman, is instantly exterminated, so far as we can tell; so, of course, is the Power by which civilization had been run.

But there is one survivor…The Tramp (Wranovics, 159).

While the source material is rich in imagery and descriptions of camera shots, the treatment is not a developed screenplay. There are large sections where Agee admits to “having no suggestion” for how a certain character appears or how the story is told (Wranovics, 180). Agee wrote a work in progress and his hope was Chaplin would fill in the holes of the screenplay during the process of filmmaking. The challenge this presented as a writer/adaptor was how to tell a story from an unfinished source material. To help tell the story and to further develop the character of my protagonist, I researched the life and work of James Agee.

James Agee

All my people are larger bodies than mine, quiet, with voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds. One is an artist, he is living at home. One is a musician, she is living at home. One is my mother who is good to me. One is my father who is good to me. By some chance, here they are, all on this earth; and who shall ever tell the sorrow of being on this earth, lying, on quilts, on the grass, in a summer evening, among the sounds of night (Agee, 7).

To capture the essence of James Agee I immersed myself with Agee’s writing.

There was a wide range of material to familiarize myself with since Agee was a journalist, a novelist, a screenwriter, and a poet. I began with Agee’s posthumously published Pulitzer Prize winning novel A Death in the Family. Published in 1957, two years after his death, this autobiographical novel tells the story of the death of Jay Follet from a car accident, which destroys the happiness of a young family. The novel
takes place in Knoxville, Tennessee—which is James Agee’s hometown—and tells the story of how the loss of a father impacts a 6 year-old boy named Rufus—which is Agee’s own middle name. However, the novel does not open with family tragedy, but with comedy. Young Rufus and his father sneak out of the house to go see a Charlie Chaplin picture. Reading A Death in the Family gave me an insight into the wound inflicted on Agee in childhood from the death of his father. The destruction of his familial home at such a young age haunted him all his life. In the play this is revealed through a speech of Agee’s where he retells first finding out about his father’s death as a 6 year-old boy.

Laurence Bergreen’s biography James Agee: A Life was a major source for developing the story for The Tramp’s New World. Entire scenes were written from a quote or description in Bergreen’s book. For example, the scene where Agee takes a girl to the movies was inspired from Agee’s description of having an incredible “shyness around girls” as a younger man, however, he was always able to open up when the conversation turned to movies (Bergreen, 38). I weaved this early film essay Agee wrote into a scene where he sits with a girl after seeing a movie, Most people today scoff at the movies. But in twenty five years there will be very few scoffers; in fifty years the most cultivated men will be reading movie literature; in a hundred years such men as Chaplin and Keaton will be spoken of as reverently as Mozart or Dickens are today (Bergreen, 38).

A scene was developed from a photograph. After reading about the deep relationship between Agee and his second wife, Alma Mailman, and then seeing the image in Bergreen’s book of her in a nightgown I was inspired to write a scene. There was something in Alma’s look away from the viewer that made me want to know
what was happening in the room. The scene I wrote was in some way an attempt at filling out the rest of the picture.

Another dramaturgical resource for my thesis project was the Academy Award nominated documentary Agee, directed by Ross Spears. This film explores the life and work of James Agee largely told through interviews with the people closest to him. One particular area of interest in the documentary is a recording of Agee’s actual voice. In studying the role I questioned the extent of Agee’s accent since he grew up in the South. While I had read many descriptions of his voice, it was useful to hear him actually speak. I was surprised to hear there was not much of an accent, only subtle Southern quality in his speech patterns. Agee’s voice was soft and gentle. From doing more research on Spears, I discovered that the director of Agee lived only a few miles from the University of Maryland. After contacting him to tell him about my project, Spears and I set up a meeting where we discussed our mutual appreciation for James Agee. He gave me a book he had written entitled Agee: His Life Remembered and a copy of the DVD of his Agee documentary. Both the book and documentary were useful dramaturgical tools in the rehearsal room. Often times I would begin rehearsal by reading a quote from Agee: His Life Remembered, as it is full of interviews Spears conducted with those closest to Agee.

Reading about Agee’s addiction to drinking, smoking, and excess, influenced the development of The Tramp’s New World. Through this research I discovered what would drive him down the path of self-destruction. About drinking Agee describes himself as a “naturally hard drinker” after “one drink it’s hard very hard not to take another, and after three it is even harder not to take three more, and after that
I’m apt to lose count and stop caring how much I drink” (Bergreen, 274). As for self-destructive tendencies, Agee admits, “I have an enormously strong drive, on a universally broad front, toward self-destruction” (Bergreen, 255). Through an understanding of Agee’s personal struggle I was able to arrive at a central thematic question: can a man's desire to create be a match for his proclivity towards self-destruction? Or, as Agee puts it in his screenplay: “Can man come in age in time to prevent his own destruction” (Wranovics, 211)?

Silent Film

The physical comedy of the silent era was a major influence on The Tramp’s New World. The focus of my research was on the silent comedians Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. The ability to capture both the tragic and comic was what inspired me in these two silent film comedians. Their characters face the bleakest situations, but are always able to invoke laughter and while repeatedly getting knocked down, they always manage to get back up. Finding elements of the tragic and comic was central to the creation of The Tramp’s New World.

Two major Chaplin film references that appeared in my thesis were The Kid and Modern Times. In The Kid the Tramp takes care of an abandoned child and in this relationship I saw many connections to Agee’s own relationship to loss of family. In The Tramp’s New World I used a clip from The Kid while Agee has a monologue about seeing Chaplin films with his father as a child. The intention was to juxtapose the images from The Kid with Agee’s own personal yearning to be reconnected with his father.
Watching *Modern Times* I was struck by the images of the final scene with the Tramp and the Woman on an abandoned road in the middle of nowhere. The shot so closely resembled the same elements of the post atomic world in Agee’s screenplay that I wanted to use this scene as the basic storyboard for the filmed silent scene in *The Tramp’s New World*. The more Chaplin films I watched combined with a deeper reading of Agee’s screenplay treatment I began to realize how Agee himself was adapting moments from his favorite Chaplin films. In the treatment Agee adapts such scenes as the Tramp discovering a baby, the Tramp caught in unrequited love, and being chased by cops. This realization inspired me to adapt a moment from *Modern Times* as a way of telling the story of *The Tramp’s New World*.

The silent physical comedy of Buster “The Great Stone Face” Keaton was a major influence on discovering my own embodiment of the silent era. While I watched a number of his films, there was one film in particular that was directly adapted for *The Tramp’s New World*. In Keaton’s silent comedy *Sherlock, Jr.*, his film projectionist character makes a magical, dreamlike entrance from the audience into a film projection. In *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies*, Gerald Mast describes this moment as Keaton’s “greatest cinema game” where he is “toying with the differences between cinema and reality” and blurring of the line between the “depiction of life-in-cinema and cinema-in-life” (Mast, 132-133). Mast explains, Once Buster gets inside the film screen, he finds he is at the mercy of film space and film time, not reality’s space and time. As Buster stands in a single spot in the frame, the environment surrounding him undergoes the editing process. Buster remains fixed; he maintains is spatial continuity. But the universe does not as it instantaneously shifts from a desert, to an ocean, to a snowdrift, to a lair of lions. Buster knows who and what he is; he has complete control over himself and his actions. He merely is powerless to control the filmic montage that instantaneously
changes his physical surroundings without allowing him to do anything about it” (Mast, 132).

In *The Tramp’s New World* I wanted Agee to jump into a cinematic universe similar to the one Keaton’s character finds himself in *Sherlock, Jr.* While nodding off at a projector is the catalyst for Keaton, the trigger into the cinematic for Agee is the combination of alcohol, pills, and the atomic bomb. In a montage occurring on the projection surface behind Agee, we see moments of silent comedy contrasted with atomic explosions and the countdown of a clock. The last projection is a close up of an atomic explosion that slowly zooms into whiteness. It is this whiteness Agee is drawn to and eventually steps in to. Once in the projection, Agee is magically transformed into the Tramp as a bowler, over-sized shoes, vest, tie, coat and moustache all appear on his body. After this transformation, his cinematic journey mirrors Keaton’s (including moments with traffic, snow, an ocean, and lions) until the last change of setting when Agee encounters a huge mushroom cloud. Agee mournfully removes his bowler before stepping out of the projected world and back into the office. The cinematic game is over having lost its thrill when faced with the reality of nuclear holocaust.

After *Sherlock, Jr.* was released everyone who saw the movie wanted to know Keaton’s cinematic trick for entering a film. Keaton was a lover of magic from his boyhood days touring on the vaudeville circuit with Harry Houdini, but despite his best efforts was never able to figure out the magician’s tricks. Since Harry Houdini never revealed his magic, Keaton choose not to disclose his own. After performing *The Tramp’s New World* an audience member asked how I had managed to enter the projected film. They honestly had no idea how this happened and guessed it was a
lighting trick of some kind. Staying true to the spirit of Keaton and Houdini, I replied, “A magician never reveals his tricks.”

Influences on Artistic Process

The theatrical techniques and practices used in the development of my thesis project included physical comedy, adaptation, and the integration of cinematic projection in a theatrical work. Three influential texts represent my exploration of these theatrical practices—The Moving Body by Jacques Lecoq, Chamber Theatre by Robert S. Breen, and The Cinematic Theatre by Babak A. Ebrahimian.

Jacques Lecoq and Physical Theatre

One of the reasons for selecting a thesis project based on silent film comedy was the opportunity to explore physical comedy. In the silent section of The Tramp’s New World there are twenty minutes where not a single word is spoken on stage. This forced me to find a way to tell the story through physical movement. In developing a piece around the work of silent film comedian Charlie Chaplin I knew I would be exploring the realm of theatrical clown, which is an important component of Lecoq’s physical theatre technique. Lecoq describes how the theatrical clown “doesn’t exist aside from the actor performing him” and that we “are all clowns, we think we are beautiful, clever and strong, whereas we all have our weaknesses, our ridiculous side, which can make people laugh when we allow it to express itself” (Lecoq, 145). With Lecoq’s idea of clown deeply rooted in my mind and body I was able to apply technique to creating a silent clown on stage.
Adaptation

James Agee’s use of a more novelistic style in his screenplay treatment made some of the tools described in Robert S. Breen’s *Chamber Theatre* useful in the adaptation process. *The Tramp’s New World* was not an attempt to create a Breenian Chamber Theatre production, but an element of the technique is “presenting stories that depend on their value on the point of view expressed in the narration” (Breen, 86). The play begins with Agee in a moment of narrative description. While on the page this description does not bleed with dramatic tension, I knew it could play onstage with a strong focus on Agee’s point of view.

Another tool of *Chamber Theatre* used was the concept of mirroring. Breen states the function of Chamber Theatre is “to use the art of the theatre and all of its theatrical devices which encourage the illusion of direct apprehension in order to reflect the sort of world which mirrors itself” (Breen, 13). James Agee and the Tramp are characters who come to represent “the shadow, the alter ego, or the ‘double’ of the protagonist”, as well as, “the human mind at odds with itself” (Breen, 14). Rather than having two actors, one actor to play James Agee and the other the role of the Tramp, I choose instead to adapt them both to be played by one performer to heighten the sense of the double. The most direct mirroring we see on stage happens after the Atomic Explosion when Agee steps into the projection. Prior to stepping into the projection Agee exists simultaneously in the projected world and the world of his office. The audience watches him cautiously place his hand, arm, and head into the projected world before jumping in entirely. In this sequence projection is used as a mirror creating two James Agee’s—the projected Agee and the physical Agee.
Projections

Projection design plays an integral role in *The Tramp’s New World*. Through the course of the play, as James Agee gets deeper into developing his story of the Tramp as the lone survivor of a super atomic blast, the stage becomes a manifestation of his mind and begins to be filled with images from his imagination. As his projections of silent film and the anxiety of the atomic age crescendo and collide, we see Agee himself literally step into a silent film. Babak A. Ebrahimian’s book, *The Cinematic Theater*, was influential in the development of my thinking about how theatre and film can co-exist onstage. Ebrahimian imagines through “combining sounds and images in their full potential, the theater will go beyond its current limits, creating a new form for new times: the cinematic theater” (Ebrahimian, 9). In *The Tramp’s New World* I wanted to create a work that was both cinematic and theatrical.
Chapter 2: Artist as Practitioner: Analysis of Creative Process

Inspiration and Development

The initial inspiration for *The Tramp’s New World* came when I went to the American Film Institute in Silver Spring, Maryland my first week of graduate school to see a Charlie Chaplin Film Festival. The AFI festival featured *City Lights, The Great Dictator, Modern Times, The Kid, The Gold Rush, Limelight, Monsieur Verdoux*, and some of his short films. While I had seen Chaplin films, I had never before seen them on the big screen with a live audience. My first Chaplin film at the festival was *The Circus*. In *The Circus* the Tramp becomes, accidently and unbeknownst to him, the star attraction of the big top. Midway through the film I looked behind me to see the whole audience caught up in tremendous laughter at the Tramp’s hilarity. At this moment, I felt connected to something special. I was witnessing how silent comedy made decades ago was still able resonate with audiences.

After seeing *The Circus* I was eager to return to see other Chaplin films at AFI. Over the next few weeks, I saw everything from the romantic comedy *City Lights* to the more tragic comedy *The Kid*. Each film drew me closer to the wonder of seeing silent film comedies up on the big screen. Two years later when it came time to write a proposal for my thesis project, I decided to create a piece about silent comedy. The initial proposal was not an adaptation of James Agee’s screenplay treatment, but was to recreate moments from the silent comedy era on the stage. By putting the characters of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin onstage, I hoped to have theatre audiences have a similar experience I had when watching *The Circus*. This
project also had James Agee as a character who would act as a narrator for the audience. The title of this piece was *Let Us Now Praise Funny Men* and was inspired by James Agee’s book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* a study of Southern sharecropper families during the Dust Bowl.

The idea for including Agee as a narrator came from rereading his essay “Comedy’s Greatest Era” from *Agee on Film: Volume 1*, which begins with the preface,

The appearance of this essay in *Life* magazine, September 3, 1949, received one of the greatest responses in the magazine’s history. The surprising element was the reaction from people who could have seen few, if any, of the silent comedies, simply because they were too young. The article makes it possible for everyone to be nostalgic for something that perhaps they have never known (Agee, 22).

With *Let Us Now Praise Funny Men* I wanted to create a theatrical work where an audience becomes “nostalgic for something…they have never known” by taking them into the comedies of the silent film era. While this idea was never developed into a full production, creating a sense of nostalgia about silent comedy remained part of my thesis project. In the first proposal Agee’s screenplay treatment is mentioned, but only as part of a larger whole. I came to the realization there was enough textual and thematic material in the Agee screenplay treatment to create an entire play. The title of the piece then became *The Tramp’s New World* and was described in a new proposal as an adaption of Agee’s screenplay into a one-man show incorporating animation, puppetry, physical theatre, and multiple devising techniques.

Another shift in my thesis occurred when I decided to make the story about James Agee’s artistic struggle to write the screenplay. Previously the play was going to be an adaptation of the screenplay treatment and not have Agee appear as a
character. The decision to make Agee a character came from wanting to provide a lens through which to present the screenplay. Making the piece about Agee and his struggle to complete the story made the unfinished state of screenplay a strength as it could be used to propel the protagonist forward. The theme of the unfinished runs throughout the life and work of Agee, and the screenplay is just one of many examples of work that never got around to be completed. As an artist I connected with Agee’s struggle to finish work.

As self-destruction was being developed as the major theme of The Tramp’s New World, I came to realize Agee’s real struggle was with moderation. Whether it was writing, music, art, alcohol, smoking, sex, conversation, friendship, ideas, or women, Agee’s desire was always far beyond the moderate. Desire for living was part of his genius and his tragedy. While this appetite for the full life created great works of art, it also brought on Agee’s untimely death.

The women characters in The Tramp’s New World were developed to provide a vital lens into Agee’s character. I wanted the women characters to be representations of women in Agee’s personal life. The women characters would all be played by one performer and included: The Girl, Alma, The Mother, and The Silent Woman. The woman characters change between the real and the unreal, the past and present, the projected world and the world of Agee’s office. Each woman is different in how they appear and interact with Agee, but each one pushes him along in the story. Including these woman characters in the play strengthened the storytelling and allowed me to delve deeper into the character of Agee himself.
Elements of Design

Collaborating with MFA in Design candidates contributed greatly to the realization of *The Tramp’s New World*. What was crucial in collaborating with the designers was to be sure all elements of design had an understanding of the story I was attempting to tell. There were critical moments when costumes, lights, set, sound, and projections all needed to work simultaneously on stage. Below I go through each of the elements of design and how each one contributed to my thesis project.

Costume Design

One of the first questions when working with Costume Designer Rebecca DeLapp was how to make the transition of James Agee into the Tramp. I choose to set the play in 1947 so having period appropriate costumes was important to telling the story. In initial design meetings I talked about wanting a “Tramp-like” appearance to Agee when we see him working in his office in the Chrysler Building. In the end, the collaboration with Costume Designer Rebecca DeLapp proved to be quite rewarding as the look of the costumes told the story I wanted to tell with specificity to both the time period and the characters.

Scenic Design

The goal with working with Scenic Designer Andrew Cohen was to achieve the look of James Agee’s office in the Chrysler Building. As with the Costumes, bringing out the period of 1947 was important for the storytelling. Scenic Designer Andrew Cohen and Lighting Designer Drew Kauffman came up with having an Art Deco style light fixture hanging in the office, which was a magnificent detail of that helped tremendously with putting us in the world of the play. There were some
practical needs in terms of having enough projection space. Cohen was able to use the back wall of the set for projection. The door on the back wall was useful in establishing the moment at the end of the piece where the Tramp and the Silent Woman step out of the projected world.

Lighting Design

Through numerous discussions with Lighting Designer Drew Kauffman over the course of the development of The Tramp’s New World we were able to establish the worlds of the play. The overall look of the play was Agee’s office and we were in agreement in not wanting to veer drastically away from this look. However, there were other moments in the play where lighting was able to help in the storytelling, such as the explosion of the atomic bomb. Since our tech time in the evening was limited to just 4 hours it was critical Kauffman and I had as much prep time together as possible. A note I wrote at the beginning of the play touches on my intention for lighting,

Action is continuous. The scene titles are for reader/actor orientation, and should not be felt by an audience, except in tone shift or light change (Jansen, 2).

By working through the script together and making subtle adjustments to lighting we were able to sculpt a lighting design that helped tell the story.

Sound Design

From Agee’s screenplay there are specific sound cues that Sound Designer Jeffery Dorfman and I were in discussions about from early in the process. In describing the “March of Time” sequence Agee calls for a “newsreel fanfare” (Wranovics, 209). We tried using different fanfares taken directly from some newsreels, but all of them were interrupted by the voice of the newsreel announcer.
Dorfman had the idea of using the work of John Philip Sousa and came back with some samples that ended up being used in the production. Possibly the most important sound in the piece was the Atomic Explosion. I told Dorfman how the inspiration for this moment of sound came from seeing a production of *The Love Song of J. Robert Oppenheimer* by Carson Kreitzer during a scene involving the first test of the atom bomb. Dorfman and I worked together to try and achieve a similar sound for the atomic explosion in *The Tramp’s New World*. This moment of sound needed to be connected to lights and projection. This was the most complicated cue of the production as it involved so many different elements of design coming together.

**Projection Design**

Projections design was an integral component of *The Tramp’s New World* to capture the essence of the silent film era. Several people worked together to help take what I imagined for projections and make it exist on stage. In order for the projections to work in the production, I needed to have a projections designer in the room with me during the rehearsal process. Bringing on Shane Murphy O’Loughlin as Assistant Projections designer allowed projections to be designed through the rehearsal process.

An idea I had during the rehearsal process was to shoot an entire silent film scene for *The Tramp’s New World*. For the production we needed to do a full shoot of the scene with location, costumes, hair, and make up. For this shoot Projection Designer Andrew Cohen came along with Shane O’Loughlin, Sadie Koeppel (who was playing the Silent Woman), and myself (dressed as the Little Tramp). The final step in the Projection Design process was working with Projection Programmer Jeff Wood to make the media design work on stage. This involved taking time to figure
out the timing for entering and exiting projections, sizing projections to the space, and collaborating with lighting and sound to make sure all elements worked together.

Creation

During the creation of *The Tramp’s New World* I was stretched as a writer, adaptor, director, deviser, collaborator, and performer. All of the performance technique I have been working towards was put into practice—physically using Lecoq based movement technique to create the Tramp, technologically taking new skills learned around Media Design to create silent film on stage, and experimentally exploring a combination of adaptation and devised theatre practices to create *The Tramp’s New World*.

Rehearsal, Creative, and Collaborative Process

Theatre is a collaborative act, and the success or failure of a piece of theatre is dependent on the creative relationships of the people in the room. On top of the designers and stage management assigned to the production, the artists I brought in to the process for creating *The Tramp’s New World* included Drew Barker as the dramaturg, Colin Hovde as a collaborating director, Shane Murphy O’Loughlin as Assistant Projection Designer, and Sadie Koeppel as a Performer.

Having a dramaturg in the room provided an outside eye to the rehearsal process. Drew Barker met with me prior to rehearsals to discuss the script, my vision of the piece and my overall goals for the project. Periodically, Barker came to observe the rehearsal process and gave feedback based on our initial discussions. This feedback was helpful in maintaining the initial creative impulses of the project.
As an actor it is difficult to be present in a scene while at the same time thinking about staging, or how the moment is landing. As a collaborating director, Colin Hovde allowed me at times to focus on simply being an actor. Hovde was only able to be at about half of the rehearsals. Initially, not having a director in the room for the entire process frightened me, because in many ways I wanted to focus more on developing my performance. However, having the added responsibility of being the director in the room, making choices, setting the daily schedule, giving acting notes, and staging the play challenged me. I discovered I am capable of developing new work as the writer, director, and performer. In the end, the piece was able to develop further as a result of my direction throughout the rehearsal process.

Arguably, the most important decision a director can make involves casting. With the development of a new work, I learned how important it is to cast an actor based not only on their audition, but also on their willingness to collaborate on a work in progress. For an actor, this means being able to play new scenes as they are written, letting go of attachment as scenes are cut away, and constantly adapting to the process as the piece emerges. Casting Sadie Koeppel was a wonderful directorial choice and made the process of creating a new work much easier due to her diligence, her serious approach to the work, and her overall belief in developing the project.
Rehearsal Process

Through the rehearsal process I was balancing the roles of writer, director, and performer. While this was a challenge, it was also an incredible opportunity to learn about my artistic process. In any one day of rehearsal I would have to jump back and forth between the roles of writer, director, and performer. Through this process I was able to strengthen my technique in all of these roles.

One of the main artistic challenges from a writer’s point of view was to find the narrative structure of the piece. The play’s structure revealed itself through the choice to make James Agee the protagonist. This made Agee’s character arc in terms of his artistic struggle to complete the screenplay became the dramatic arc for the piece. Looking at the rehearsal process as a writer clarified what text was needed to tell the story of Agee’s artistic struggle and what could be cut away. Through this process I discovered the old playwriting adage that a play is not written, but re-written. A total of ten drafts of *The Tramp’s New World* were written before arriving at the final performance script.

As the director, establishing the rules of the world was an important distinction to make for telling the story. With Agee jumping in and out of the real world of the office to the projected world of silent film, there needed to be rules established as to why and how he moved between these worlds. The initial break into the projected world occurs with the atomic explosion. This act of destruction makes stepping into the projection possible. As the director, I wanted the sound, projection, and lighting cue for the explosion all to happen at the moment Agee throws his torn manuscript pages in the air. As the Tramp, Agee is able to explore this new, projected
atomic world. The play’s expression is no longer through the language of the writer, but now the playfulness of the Tramp. A rule of the Tramp is his ability for transformation. Where before the papers surrounding Agee’s office represented rejection letters and artistic struggle, the Tramp transforms the paper into a flower to attract a girl. Other kinds of transformation include an old dress becoming a woman, a used cigarette becoming a fashionable cigar, and an ashtray becoming “Spam!” (Jansen, 21).

One of the most challenging aspects of the artistic process was the role of performer. Constantly changing roles in the process made it difficult to focus on crafting a performance. This challenge was probably most apparent in the technical process, where instead of focusing on my work as an actor, I had to direct the technical run of the show. This meant coordinating with lighting, sound, projections, and costumes while acting on stage. This was a very difficult and stressful task to collaborate with all elements of design as a director watching from the outside. At times I had to act entire scenes facing upstage in order to better see the projections and lighting so I could give directorial notes.

While I would not change the process I had in creating this production, looking forward there are things I would change. One of the biggest changes would be to have a process where I can focus on developing and deepening the performance. Delving even deeper into the self-destruction of Agee and the playfulness of the Tramp will make for an overall stronger production. In order to take this approach as a performer, I will need a director for the whole process. Having a director would allow me to focus on character development.
Having this experience of working as writer, director, and performer in developing *The Tramp’s New World* was an artistically empowering experience. Going into the process I had doubts about my ability to coordinate all the aspects of the production. However, I proved I am capable of taking on all of these roles to effectively tell a story. Through this I learned more about my artistic process as a writer, adaptor, director, and performer. I was also able to learn a great deal about the technology of projection and new media. Having now created *The Tramp’s New World* and taking it from inspiration to production I have a deeper understanding of my artistic process for creating new work.

**Performance**

In any theatrical production the final collaborator is the audience. Through this collaborative relationship many questions for the performer are answered, such as: Does an intended comedic moment generate laughter? Does a dramatic moment hold the audience’s attention? With a new work this feedback from an audience is vital to learning how the piece is working and what may potentially need to change through further development. Although there were only three performances of *The Tramp’s New World*, I was able to learn some important information from the audience.

No matter how long one crafts a comedic moment, in the end it is the audience who will judge what is funny. In performance I was delighted to find the comedy played extremely well with the audience. Scenes involving silent comedy techniques received outbursts of laughter. The audience opened up particularly during the second half of the play when Agee’s Tramp emerged. The childlike quality of the Tramp was
reciprocated with the audience. Specifically, there is a moment where the Tramp dances with a dress and then transforms a piece of paper into a flower. These comedic moments not only inspired laughter, but as a performer I also felt a deep connection with the audience.

While the audiences’ response to the comedy exceeded expectations, the sense of tragedy in the play needs further development. The tragic element evolved largely from choosing James Agee as the protagonist. From the performance I did not sense the audience felt the depth of Agee’s tragic struggle. By showing Agee fighting more deeply and failing more frequently with his writing of the screenplay, I will delve deeper into the tragic struggle.

This sense of tragic struggle was attempted with the Tramp’s final speech at the end of the play. The ending was a moment I was searching for throughout the process and did not connect with the audience as deeply as I had hoped. During the run I was still attempting to find how the final moment should be played. The comedic moments of the play required me to have a childlike playfulness with the audience. The more tragic moments needed a deeper connection to the material as a performer, which in order to find would have needed more time for character development. While I heard from audience members after the run that they were moved by the final speech, I did not feel it resonated as a performer as fully as I know it is capable of. With a full rehearsal process devoted to working as a performer and with a longer run, I feel this last speech of the play could be played with a deeper sense of the tragic.
Conclusion

*The Tramp’s New World* is largely about an unfinished creative process. It is written and adapted from a screenplay treatment by James Agee, an American writer whose entire life and work could be classified as unfinished. Arguably one of the greatest artistic talents of the 20th century, Agee could not always find his way from intention to performance and his life was cut short from a heart attack. Yet, in his unfinished life, he produced: a Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, an experimental book on Southern tenant farmers, a volume of poetry, screenplays, film criticism, journalism, and many letters. Intention was never the problem. In fact, it would be difficult to find a writer with a stronger, purer artistic intention than James Agee. However, as Agee says himself, “performance, which the whole fate and terror rests, is another matter” (Agee, 13).

As an MFA in Performance candidate, I deeply connected with the life and work of James Agee. Reading, writing, and performing James Agee’s story inspired me as I look forward to my transition beyond graduate school. In the end, this process left me with many questions, such as: What does it mean to be an artist? How do I want to develop work? When is a work finished? What do I want to spend my time as an artist creating? These are all questions I will live with and hope to find my way into the answers as I continue my work as a theatre artist.
Chapter 3: Future of Thesis Project

In terms of future development, I would like to workshop *The Tramp’s New World* in order to refine and explore the production. One idea I am considering is to make this a solo performance. The scenes with the Girl, Alma, the Mother, and the Silent Woman would all be in the piece only they would rely more heavily on using props and projections.

To take the project to a further level of development it will need more extended run in front of audiences. I learned so much from the three performances at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, but having more performances with audiences would help in finding the timing and sense of what in the story is landing. As of now I have a few theatre companies interested in developing the project and possibly producing it in the future. Cincinnati Shakespeare Company’s Producing Artistic Director Brian Isaac Philips has expressed interest in developing *The Tramp’s New World* with a workshop or producing the play. I have also been in contact with Joseph Megel the Co-Artistic Director of Street Signs Center for Literature and Performance in Chapel Hill, North Carolina about a workshop production as part of their Process Series.

From the beginning this project has been something I have wanted to take to Fringe Festivals. In the next year I would like to research and apply to various Fringe Festivals in the US, Canada, and Europe. While there are a number of logistical questions I will need to figure out in terms of projections with this piece, I am excited about the potential future of *The Tramp’s New World*. 
Chapter 4: Play Script

THE TRAMP’S NEW WORLD

Written and Adapted
By
Rob Jansen
SETTING:
50th Floor of the Chrysler Building

CHARACTERS:
James Agee / Tramp
Girl / Alma / Mother / Silent Woman

NOTE:
Action is continuous. The scene titles are for reader/actor orientation, and should not be felt by an audience, except in tone shift or light change.
THE TRAMP’S NEW WORLD

A late evening in New York City.

An office on the 50th floor of the Chrysler Building.

Front center a desk, surrounded by a huge chaos of papers, old newspapers, books, letters, unopened correspondence, etc. On top of the desk is an open bottle of bourbon whiskey, a glass, and an ashtray full of smoked cigarettes. Next to the desk, sitting on top of a stack of suitcases, is a record player.

A trunk sits in the corner next to which is a suitcase filled with clothes. There is a coat rack on which sits a single hat and an umbrella.

James Agee is discovered alone at his desk with a cigarette. He is faintly rustic in appearance. His clothes are old, worn, tramp-like.

Agee

Without warning, a super-atomic Bomb is dropped, which out does the grandest expectations of those who set it off. All life on the planet, human and subhuman, is instantly exterminated, so far as we can tell; so, of course, is the Power by which civilization had been run.

But there is one survivor...The Tramp.

Projection: Quick flicker of Charlie Chaplin’s Little Tramp.

When this last living creature on earth, so far as we know, is on the verge of dying, of pure loneliness, awesome horror, and meaninglessness, he discovers in quick succession two good, all redeeming reasons to be alive: an almost newborn baby, which he tries to take care of; then a young woman.

Transfigured now with an abounding energy and hopefulness, the Tramp and the Girl improvise, any of the broken relics of the slain civilization, the first human shelter, and build the first fire in the new-born world whose human symbol is the baby. They are a kind of Adam and Eve, Holy Family Robinson, and this is the high point of hope, peace, beauty and joy in the picture: the largest and smallest unit of which something like thorough good and happiness can be hoped: the family.

However, as we now begin to learn, there are other survivors-
THE LETTER

Agee finds a letter.

Dear Sir,
Your letter dated April 13, 1947 as forwarded to this office from New York. In accordance with the rule of this studio we must decline the offer of your ideas for the Tramp character as neither Mr. Chaplin nor this company is in the market for material for photoplays. Thanking you for your courtesy, we are

Sincerely yours.
Charlie Chaplin Studios

Tosses letter aside.

Drinks shot of whiskey on his desk.

Removes yellow pad of paper from desk drawer and begins to write.

Dear Charlie…

Through the sequence of attempts Agee throws out each piece of paper.

Charles,

To “the Tramp”,

Dear Mr. Chaplin,

Satisfied with greeting.

I am deeply grateful to you for reading what I am sending…

Takes a look at what he has written and is unable to discern his own writing.

Throws pad of paper in trashcan.
Speaks aloud as if addressing Chaplin in the room.

Dear Mr. Chaplin,

In all courtesy I should write to you by hand; but my handwriting is a discourtesy in itself. I’d rather spare your eyes.

A couple of months ago I wrote to ask you whether I might submit some ideas I have for a new movie, for the tramp character. I should not intrude on you again, or risk further embarrassment for myself; I do so only because I am sure these ideas would really interest you. Please let me assure you that I am not trying to gain money or
reputation. I am anxious that you consider these ideas because they mean a great deal to me, and belong essentially to you, and could, I believe become a great film as you would use and develop them. This letter, if you should so care to use it, would sign the ideas over to you, free of charge or of screen credit or any other strings. But meanwhile I can only hope you will be willing to give the ideas a hearing. I realize that my persistency must offend you. I regret that, and my own embarrassment. But under the circumstances that cannot be helped.

My deep apologies for bothering you…again,

Pours shot. Drinks.

James Agee

LOVE OF MOVIES

This persistence is not easy for me, Charlie. You may not have realized this from all my letters to you, but I am a naturally shy person. For the longest time I hardly said a word to anyone, but movies changed that for me because they gave me something to talk about.

At Philips Exeter Academy I first realized the power talking about movies had on other people. It was my first time taking a girl to a movie theatre and gritting my teeth, half dead with fear I griped the steering wheel silent with fear.

Girl enters and sits on the desk next to him. The two have moment of holding hands reminiscent of Buster Keaton in SHERLOCK JR.

Girl
What did you think of the movie?

Agee
What?

Girl
The movie. I asked what you thought of it?

Agee
It was ok.

Girl
Just ok?

Agee
Yeah, I guess so.
You hated it.

Agee

No… Well, yes- It’s just…

Girl

What?

Agee

It could have been so much more.

Girl

What do you mean?

Agee

Most people today scoff at the movies. But in twenty five years there will be very few scoffers; in fifty years the most cultivated men will be reading movie literature; in a hundred years such men as Chaplin and Keaton will be spoken of as reverently as Mozart or Dickens are today.

I really like the movies.

Girl

I really like the movies.

Agee

His passion grows.

To me, the great thing about the movies is that it’s a brand new field. I don’t see how much more can be done with writing or with the stage.

Girl

Yes, every kind of recognized art has been worked pretty nearly to the limit. Of course, great things will undoubtedly be done in all of them, but I don’t see how they can avoid being at least in part imitations.

Agee

But as for the movies their possibilities are infinite- that is, in so far as the possibilities of any art CAN be so. So far as I can see, all that’s been done so far is to show that art is really possible on the screen. We’ve barely begun to stir the fringes of their possibilities, though-

She stops him with a kiss.

I REALLY like the movies!

The Girl exits
THE KID

But my love for film began with you, Charlie.

Crosses to sit on the trunk.
Projection: Scene from THE KID where the Tramp is fighting for his “son” plays over his head.

It was going to see THE KID with my father. I was 6 years old and it is one of the last memories I have of my father. We snuck out of the house to the picture show knowing my mother would disapprove.

“He’s so nasty!” she said, as she always did. “So vulgar! With his nasty little cane; hooking up skirts and things, and that nasty little walk!”

My father laughed, as he always did. My mother despised you, but me and my father and the rest of the world couldn’t get enough of The Little Tramp.

Your Tramp who would fall and get up, fall, get up, fall, up, fall, up. That is what I loved as a small shy boy who was constantly being pushed down by the older boys. I told myself I had to get up just as the Tramp would always get up.

Going to see THE KID my father’s hand taking mine as we laughed together while your baggy pants, hat and cane jumped all over the screen.

When my father died I was only 6 years old and your films became in some way a substitute for him, or a memory of a time we were together. I wanted my father to come back for me the way you fought to remain with your son in THE KID.

He never did come back.

As Thomas Wolfe says:

The deepest search in life is man’s search to find a father…

THE TRAMP AND THE WRITER

Well, the world needs the Tramp now, Charlie. The Tramp is the only character who could pull this story off, because the tramp is the free soul intact in innocence, eagerness for love, ridiculousness and sorrow; we recognize in him much that is dear to us in ourselves.

What would you say to bringing the Tramp back Charlie and allowing him to reach millions of people again?

Agee picks up cigarette butt addressing it as a personification of Chaplin.
Chaplin
Well, first of all young man. I hate to have to be the one to deliver the bad news to you but the Tramp is dead. He died when the silent film died, he died when people began talking on screen.

Agee
But don’t you see we could bring him back!

Chaplin
People have suggested that the tramp might talk. But don’t you see this is unthinkable, for the first word he uttered would transform him into another person.

Agee
But in the scenario I have imagined with the atomic blast the whole city is destroyed. So, in essence there is no one but the Tramp. He is alone. If he is alone then there is no one for him to talk to. It could be almost entirely silent.

Chaplin
Even if you could do what you say and somehow create a scenario where in a talking picture the Tramp could be silent, I am just too old for the Tramp. I cannot move like him any more. The Tramp has left me and we both must move on.

Agee
But there is more and I know with your help there is a great movie here. I just need to write it!

And to write this the way I know it needs to be written it is going to take discipline. But discipline, Charlie, has never been my strength.

Pours shot. Drinks.

Since I know what it is I want to write I guess you could say I’m now on my own deadline.

A deadline in its original use was a line drawn around a prison, which no inmate could cross without being shot. If you crossed the deadline you would literally be, well…DEAD.

Stands on top of desk. Lighting around the desk distinguishes the deadline.

This is my DEADLINE!

I am not to cross it until my story is written. Or I die trying.

Ok, Charlie. Here we go!
THE BEGINNING

And how do I begin?

_Lights cigarette._

It could be exceedingly powerful and perhaps best to start off the picture with the explosion itself, for complete directness, surprise and terror.

_Picks up ashtray and crosses to sit on the floor in front of his desk._

The audience walks into the theater, sits, the lights go down and they stare at an all white screen for several minutes until we begin with the sound.

_For this section as Agee describes the sound we hear it in the space. As if the power of his imagination is able to conjure the sound in the room. He resembles in some way a concert conductor._

For pre-explosion sound, perhaps just intensify a subtle hissing crackling as of a fuse;

_Sound: of a hissing fuse is heard and intensifies until Agee cuts it off._

Or, some odd sound such as boiling, bubbling oatmeal;

_Sound: of boiling oatmeal is heard and intensifies until Agee cuts it off._

Or, interrupt dead silence, with the full blast.

_Sound: Powerful atomic explosion!_

And then bring the camera to a close up of the Tramp cowering, somehow miraculously alive.

But we still need to find the paranoia and anxiety behind the atomic bomb. How do you make it land for the individual moviegoer watching the screen?

What if we begin in a movie theatre?

THE MARCH OF TIME

_Agee imagines the theatre audience as the movie audience._

We open inside a big, midtown New York movie theater. Opening shot is midway through the closing scene of Capra’s _It’s a Wonderful Life._

_Sound: Auld Lang Syne from IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE._
While they are all shouting, crying, hugging each other, singing *Auld Lang Syne*.

Then the March of Time is on:

*Agee slams hands down on desk.*
*Sound: News fanfare*

*Voice low, clipped, and portentous:*
The Almighty Atom!

*Projection: THE ALMIGHTY ATOM!*  

Friend: or: Foe!  

*Projection: Friend or Foe*  

On the night of July 16, 1945, a few brilliant Allied scientists first saw what the atom could do.

*Projection: Faces of scientists from the Manhattan Project.*  

On August 7th 1945, we told the world what it could do!  

*Projection: A low, fast air view of flattened Hiroshima.  
V-J celebration in Times Square.*

Further experiments only brought the point still more forcefully home. Grim necessities of war and the unparalleled genius of our scientists have put into the hands of the US and her gallant little allies, the greatest most fearsome responsibility in the world’s history.

The greatest potential for world suicide:

*Music: a few soured chords from Gotterdammerung*  

Or for world liberation

*Music: Narcissus*  

that this bewildered old planet has ever known.

Frankly. We are frightened.

And frankly, we know we have good reason to be frightened.
Can man come in age in time to prevent his own destruction?
And if so, how?

Projection: A question mark zooms from tiny center to fill screen with its ragged vibration, synchronized with a violently twanged note.

OBNOXIA

Agee takes a drink. The effect of the drink and the intensity of the “March of Time” sequence weigh heavily on him. He is near passing out before reaching into this shirt pocket to remove a bottle of pills. Takes pills. This provides the jolt of energy he needs to continue working.

The March of Time sequence could lead us directly to the launching of the bomb. We pan out of the theater, above the New York skyline, over the Atlantic Ocean, to the launching of the bomb.

Picks up paper and begins to make a paper airplane.

I feel the Nuclear Attack should not come from an actual place, but should instead be from a tiny country I have named: Obnoxia.

As I see it Obnoxia as a country is little, old, monarchistic and deeply religious, as well as mythical. It is a seventh rate power among seventh rate powers, but somehow it has managed to develop the technology for a nuclear weapon.

Crumpled a piece of paper.

From Obnoxia we see the plane takes off.

Steps on top of his desk and flies paper airplane over his head.

Back to the US, chiefly New York: unaware crowds in streets; the plane comes over swift and silent at super sonic speed, followed by its terrifying whine of sound across the sky;

Throws paper airplane.

a tiny parachute, planted in the zenith, idles delicately and still oblivious faces:

Slowly lowers crumpled paper to the ground.

a hideous detonation and light effect.

Huge column of flaming smoke and as it clears we see enough of the entire world to be sure that it is deprived of all life and of all power!
THE WOMAN

_He hears a voice offstage:_

Alma

Jim…

Agee

Who is it?

_Alma enters._

Alma

It’s me, Jim.

Agee

Alma? It’s late, Alma.

Alma

I know I just had to see you.

Agee

I’m working.

_Removes her coat._

_She is dressed in a nightgown._

Alma, where are your clothes?

Alma

Do you like it?

Agee

We ended this.

Alma

I knew you would be here.

Agee

You can’t just stop by my office-

Alma

It’s good to see you.

Agee

I’m still _married._
I know.                       Alma

So, why are you here?         Agee

I was lonely.                Alma

*Touches his sleeve.*

Aren’t you lonely, Jim?       Agee

You need to go.              Alma

Is someone else here?        Agee

*She begins to search the office.*

*Removes manuscript from desk drawer.*

*Sits at his desk.*

No.                          Agee

I heard you talking to somebody…  Alma

I was working, Alma.        Agee

Were you having another of those conversations with one of your imaginary artist friends, Jim?  

You need to leave.          Agee

Who is it this time?        Alma

Please leave.               Agee
Is it Byron, *again*?

No.

Beethoven?

Leave.

You haven’t started talking to Jesus now have you?

Please go!

*Pours a drink.*

Ok, how about a drink?

I shouldn’t do that.

Well, that certainly has never stopped you before.

*Holds drink in front of him.*

Come on. Have a drink with me?

*Agee hesitates.*

Have a drink and I promise to leave you alone.

*Takes shot quickly.*

Time to go.

You must really want to *work*. 
A woman’s not supposed to drink you know?

Why not?

It’s not lady like

Who said I was Lady-like?

True.

What your mother never drank?

Nope.

Not a drop?

Nope.

You never saw her sneak even one. I bet she did. I bet she would sneak them all the time when nobody was looking.

Maybe. Once.

See. I knew it. What was the special occasion?

It was the night she found out my father died.

Oh.

I was only 6 at the time and I snuck downstairs because I heard some voices. I saw my aunt, uncle and my mother talking.
Alma pours herself a drink.
My uncle was pouring my mother a drink and she drank it.

Drinks.

Took it straight like she had been doing it for years. I’d never seen it before in my life. I ran upstairs and got in bed. Alma

Did you know? Agee

What? Alma

Your dad was dead? Agee

Not then. In the morning my mother told us. Me and my sister. Alma

What did he die of? Agee

Car accident. He was killed instantly. Alma

How many have you had tonight? Agee

Too much. Alma

Then you are almost there. Come on, get in the car and let’s go for a ride.

She kisses him and pulls him away from the desk to the edge of the deadline. Agee

Get out. Alma

What? Agee

I said, get out.
Alma
You can’t throw me out! You know how this night is going end. Why put things off any longer?

Agee
GET OUT!!!

Alma
You know you are going to end up just like your father! That’s who you are, Jim! You can’t deny who you are!

Agee
Leave me alone.

Alma
Ok. But remember you asked for it.

MOTHER

*Alma puts on trench coat turns around.*

*Projection: Agee’s mother on back of Alma’s trench coat.*

*The voice of the mother is haunting.*

Mother
Just like your father.

Agee
Mother…
Mother I am trying.

*Removes manuscript and places it on the desk.*

Mother
Your father would say the same thing.

Agee
It is just that time.

Mother
TIME…

Agee
I’ve been finding more and more constant awareness of the shortness of time.

Mother
Time wasted.
Agee

Yes.

Mother

Just like your father.

Agee

I’m horrified every time I reflect on the amount of life and gift I have wasted.

Mother

Do you still write poetry?

Agee

I’ve thought of going back to poetry but the very effort to write a line is like signing my name with a fingertip on a hot stove lid.

Mother

You simply lack the courage and the stamina.

Maybe.

Mother

You do. You always have. You have always had promise. Even as a boy your teachers saw so much promise in you as a writer. But you are too old to be considered promising anymore.

Projection fades.

ATOMIC EXPLOSION

Agee pushes manuscript aside. He stares at the whiskey bottle for a moment before taking a drink. Pours another larger shot. Drinks. With each shot the projection sequence (described below) grows in the space.

SOUND: During the projection sequence a rumble is heard as if far away thunder, which continues to grow in volume.

PROJECTION SEQUENCE: This begins a projection montage of atomic explosions, silent comedy moments, and countdown from 10-1. The atomic explosions should start from a greater distance and get closer as the sequence continues. The silent comedy moments should be of people being knocked around, falling down, getting hit, and blown over. Some examples are Harold Lloyd from Safety Last hanging from a clock, Buster Keaton having a house fall on him in Steamboat Bill, Jr., and Charlie Chaplin boxing in City Lights, etc.
Agee is on the verge of passing out and takes pills. Lays manuscript papers on desk attempting to sort them out. Crumples them and throws manuscript papers in the air. As he throws them:

HUGE ATOMIC EXPLOSION SOUND AND PROJECTION!

THE PROJECTION

SOUND: A projector.

The projection now fills the entire upstage wall and has gone from the smoke of the mushroom cloud to an all white projection. Agee turns and is drawn to the projection screen. He puts arm behind the screen. When he does this his projected arm is shown. He removes his arm and the image goes away. Agee continues to play with putting his arm in the projection followed by his head both of which get projected on the screen. He then decides to enter the projection entirely. In the projection Agee is transformed into “The Tramp” through jump cuts of articles of clothing appearing on him—such as a bowler, over-sized shoes, tie, vest, jacket, and (finally) a Chaplinesque moustache. He wanders through the cinematic world in a series of scenes that change behind him similar to Buster Keaton’s character in SHERLOCK, JR. The scenes Agee discovers himself in are in the traffic of a busy city street, a snow storm, a pack of lions, and finally he witnesses an atomic explosion. After which he removes his hat and his “Tramp” clothes disappear and he is back to what he was wearing before.

He exits the Projection and enters space now in a “Silent Film World”.

PROJECTION: A film card of THE TRAMP’S NEW WORLD.

When he re-enters he goes to the coat rack. He takes a hat and fashions it to be more “Tramp-like”, puts it on. He takes an umbrella and uses it as a cane.

SOUND: Huge explosion.

He cowers behind desk.

THE TRAMP

NOTE: This begins a section of the play that works as a silent film. There are projections of placards as in silent films and underscoring where indicated.

The Tramp is hunched deeply over, in the tiny narrow space under the desk. A rigid forefinger is still jammed in each ear. He is motionless; frozen.
PLACARD 1:
As the dust settles, the Tramp comes up slowly, as a grass blade recovering, which has just been stepped on.

He comes up slowly, timorously, tremulously out of his crouch. He pulls the fingers in each ear timidly away. He kneels on desk and takes a physical account of himself: counts the fingers on each hand, straightens, and starts straightening his legs and arms inside clothes, and the clothes themselves, turning very slowly. He continues to straighten his clothes, going over them very carefully: tie, collar, lapels, skirts of coat, readjusting trousers; cuffs (flicking off explosion dust); polishing toes of shoes on calves of pants; sleeving his derby and resetting it with care on his head: then a sudden trembling shrug involving a full check-over of body as well as clothes), which is a blend of what a suddenly dampened dog does, and the feather adjustments of a suddenly rumpled hen. His excitement at having survived grows until he cannot contain it any longer and jumps off the desk.

PLACARD 2:
The Tramp’s reaction exceeds that of Monte Christo when he cried, “The World is Mine!”

His exuberance overflows into his whole body as he does a little dance. He sprints, whirls around and round like a dancer, arms out flung, in great wild childish arrogance. He greedily and joyously goes through everything in the room. He throws papers in the air, plays with the typewriter, and goes through the suitcase. In the suitcase he finds suspenders, which he shoots across the office and a pair of aviator goggles he shakes around before discarding. He moves on to the trunk where he finds books he throws behind him and different clothes he examines as if to wear but nothing is to his taste. He finds a beautiful dress in the suitcase, stares at it momentarily, and then playfully lays it in front of himself as if trying it on. When finished with the joke he hangs it on the coat rack.

Then he crosses to the desk and picks up a cigarette. Leans back with feet up on desk. Ashes out the cigarette a couple times as he assumes the state of a Wall Street plutocrat.

PLACARD 3:
He assumes the state of a Wall Street plutocrat.

He enjoys this momentarily until finally exhausted with power and happiness; his eyes gradually lower to the ashes of the cigarette. As he looks to the cigarette and ashes the cigarette goes dry in his mouth; his jaw moves more languidly; then sickly; he spits it out.

He walks down toward the audience. Stares out the office window. Through staring out at the audience he sees the devastation of the entire city. He is no longer Monte Christo. Everywhere, faintly on glass and more clearly on stone and cement and
metal, on the walls and windows of buildings, on the sidewalks and streets he sees how the ordinary crowds of an ordinary city mid-day are flattened and arrested in photographs.

PLACARD 4:
He sees the destruction of the entire city.

He backs up and stands on the desk as if to get a better view of the devastation. In a state of deeper and deeper awe, dread, and loneliness hit slowly sinks down on the desk. He dumps the cigarette ashes on the floor in some way suggesting the tremendous loss of life.

While sitting in this state of loneliness he turns back and sees the dress. This will begin a section where the dress transforms for the Tramp into a woman, or at least a fill in for the real thing. He walks the dress hanging on the coat rack to the front of the desk. Flirtatiously he makes a flower out of the paper on the office floor. He offers the dress a flower, which it cannot accept so he dejectedly puts it in his own buttonhole. He flips over the trashcan to create a seat for himself. He gestures as if asking, “May I sit next to you?”

PLACARD 5:
“May I sit next to you?”

Hearing no response, the Tramp takes this as a yes and sits down. He sits nervously for a moment before slowly he places his hand on the sleeve of the dress where the woman’s hand would be. This should in some way mirror the Sherlock Jr. moment with the Girl from earlier.

PLACARD 6:
This touch has the feeling of young lovers holding hands for the first time.

He then gets a little too excited and tries to lift up her dress for this he is slapped by his own hand in rebuke. Ashamed, the Tramp turns away and is saddened for a moment at having seemingly lost his chance. Then he has an idea and begins setting up a dinner table at the desk. In the trunk he finds plates, napkins, glasses, and he creates the atmosphere of a romantic dinner.

PLACARD 7:
He finds plates, napkins, glasses, and creates the atmosphere of a romantic dinner.

He then finds a bottle of whiskey he pours for both of them as if it were fine champagne. He looks for something to eat. He picks up an ashtray and holds it forward.
PLACARD 8:
“SPAM!”

He attempts to cut a cigarette with a fork and knife while assuring the dress it will be the finest meal they have ever have. He lifts fork with tiny paper of cigarette towards his mouth, smells and then tastes it. Makes a horrible face. Puts the rest of it on the other plate in front of the dress and encourages her to eat it. When she does not he acts offended for a moment before clearing the table. The Tramp spies an old record player. He cranks it a few times and it begins playing Beethoven’s “Arch Duke Trio”. He bows.

PLACARD 9:
“May I have this dance?”

The Tramp then begins to dance around the room romantically with the dress possibly dipping it at times, spinning around the room, and on top of the desk. Finally, he goes in for the kiss. For a moment he believes he feels an actual touch and in this moment he drops the dress. Instantly the illusion is broken and he realizes he is alone.

PLACARD 10:
He realizes he is alone.

He sits and stares at dress on the floor for a moment before he gets up and walks to the window.

PLACARD 11:
The grand, silent, wasted city by moonlight.

He looks out of the window; looks still more widely out upon the city, and suddenly lets loose the loudest, longest (silent) scream that he is able. A long silence while he waits for some kind of response. Very abruptly, he yells again, biting the yell off sharply.

PLACARD 12:
His face is still waiting, listening for the possibility of any answering voice, long after the last echo has died out.

His intensely, hopelessly listening face which should in some way give the impression of the enormous perspective of the echoes, the silhouette in the sound, of the city’s shape, beats inward on his changing face; the bite off of each echo a little like the blow of a hammer, a little more like the cracking of a whip. His face comes to absolute resolution of solitude, absolute hopelessness, absolute acceptance, and existence as a human being. He removes his “Tramp” hat breaks it in the middle making it return to the look of a businessman’s hat. He hangs the hat on the coat rack and carries it back to where it was before in the office. When he sets the coat rake he turns as if he hears a sound.
THE BABY

PLACARD 13:
The Tramp hears the terrible, distant, stifled screaming of a Baby.

He walks back towards the desk to the dress on the floor. He picks up the dress and holds it as a new-born Baby.

PLACARD 14:
It is a Baby so nearly new-born that it is an identical symbol of the new-killed, new-born world, and human race.

The Tramp lays the Baby on the desk and picks up books, which he holds as birds above the head of the Baby trying to provide some entertainment.

PLACARD 15:
The Tramp has the realization that he now has something to live for!

THE SILENT WOMAN

While entertaining the baby he looks up and as he does there is a projection of a deserted road and as the camera pans we see there is a Woman. She is alone, tying a bundle, and then begins to cry. The Tramp turns to see the Woman in the projection. He then runs and jumps into the projection.

PROJECTION: A woman alone on the road, which in some way mirrors MODERN TIMES. Tramp jumps into projection and has a scene with the woman. Possibly carries books, which he drops into the projection when running into the woman. This scene will be filmed and projected and look similar to MODERN TIMES with similar silent film cards.

THE NEW WORLD

The woman and the Tramp walk out of the projection. Agee is now dressed fully as the Tramp with bowler, cane, and moustache. Beethoven’s Arch Duke Trio plays and the two dance. The Tramp moves in for the kiss, but they are interrupted by the projection of the Scientists. The couple cowers together in front of the desk.

THE SCIENTISTS

Placard 16:
A group of Atomic Scientists emerges, unscathed thanks to hiding in great underground laboratories. They sunder the Tramp’s simple, humanistic community with the promise of their avalanche of labor saving technology...
PLACARD 17:
…the Scientists stress the great possible threat of another Nuclear Attack and the need for everyone to pitch in to help in developing more devastating weapons than the Bomb for National Defense…

The woman gets up to leave, but the Tramp pleads with her to stay. She hands him his paper flower back that he gave her in the MODERN TIMES projection sequence.

PLACARD 18:
...Even the woman abandons him.

THE TRAMP SPEAKS

The Tramp is alone.
He steps on the trashcan and speaks to the audience.

I realize the great possible threat that the Scientists speak of and I don’t know whether the difficulties can possibly be solved in my way; but I am quite sure that they cannot be solved, by any other: least of all, I fear, by the way that prevails in the scientific community. My way is fundamentally very simple: to put away childish things such as greed and envy and moral cowardice and hatred and doubt of one’s own right to listen to one’s own mind and to one’s own heart. To put away all which arrays people in groups so large and in factions so at odds that they no longer know and honor each other as single human beings. For we are not yet even wise enough to deal kindly with ourselves, our families, our immediate neighbors; how then can we be wise enough to multiply those problems by millions? Of course, it is impossible that any man can learn to trust another, who has not learned to trust himself; who has not dared the adventure, difficult and painful to cut away all that is dead in him; and face the good and evil which are in himself. People who make this attempt only may succeed it isn’t certain; for fear runs very deep; and material rewards of forgetting your heart and soul are very great and very tempting. But on the possibility of such a success, and on that possibility alone the one faint hope of the world rests. Our chance is a very slim one at best, to win the world by simplicity, forcelessness, and love; the attempt of each man to be himself and to honor his neighbor. Can you not, will you not, give us that one slim chance? We must indeed put away childish things: and we must become as little children. And may God help us if we don’t.

He removes the bowler, coat and moustache. Sits on trashcan.

Who will stay with me?

Lights create an iris around Agee and fade to black.

END OF PLAY
Appendices

Figure 1

Figure 2
Figure 13
Figure 16

Figure 17
Figure 22
Figure 26
Figure 27

Figure 28
Figure 40
Bibliography


