

(Courtesy of Janet Sonenberg. Used with permission.)

Janet Sonenberg, Director of this production of *The Internationalist*, wrote the following comments for OpenCourseWare describing her involvement with the script, her creative process, and her reasons for choosing to stage this play:

So many of the issues in *The Internationalist* are personal. On the surface the play seems to be about larger questions regarding globalization, the corporate culture and its ethics, but as I began examining the play intently, I realized that Anne Washburn was interested in something else. All of the aforementioned topics clothe a more intimate perspective about what it means to be a person in this world, and more specifically, what it means to be a person in a world that appears so sophisticated, so elevated by the acquisition of multiple languages, international travel and work, the development of a refined palate, and the embrace of urbanity. And, of course, *The Internationalist* explores what it means to be an American. The old saw says, “Nothing is so broadening as travel,” but the play says something more personal: nothing makes you more aware of your cultural inheritance for good or ill, your prejudices and narrowness, your hopefulness and strengths, then being in a foreign country where your “American-ness,” both despised and envied, is set off in sharp contrast for everyone to see. No good play is solely about the protagonist (the American consultant, Lowell), and *The Internationalist*’s theme applies to all of the characters in the play, most of whom are “foreign.” I think Washburn is talking about the person who underlies the urbanity – in other words, “No matter where you go, there you are.” All of the characters in the play reveal themselves. To research these topics required only recalling international episodes in my own life.

What did require research – with surprising results – was the foreign company to which Lowell comes. What do they do? What kind of deals do they make? What the heck is the crime that is committed in the course of the play? We, the cast and I, wrangled with these questions for a while. They are certainly not answered in the play. In fact, the few leads offered up by Washburn are actually nonsense – they make no sense – they are a kind of corporate double talk. Here was a language that seemed to be English and people spoke it with expertise, but it literally meant nothing. This contrasted marvelously with the “foreign language” of the play that the audience could only understand via action.

Once we realized that there was “no there there” we had to invent a business fiction that grounded us. This was essential so that people could act within the context of a reality. The odd thing is that while the fiction gave us a ledge to stand on, its importance completely disappeared. The answers, such as they were, stopped being important – but we could not have proceeded with the play without finding them. The reality of the play started building on itself. In this way I think that Washburn’s play shares something with an episode of *The Simpsons*, which in turn shares something from life. A *Simpsons* episode begins with a story line, and within the first three minutes that story line disappears and the real one emerges. No one returns to explicate the first narrative. But that first story situates the world in action and in its landscape, and then the rest emerges

from a context. Washburn does that as well. But it remains surprising to me that we so desperately needed to understand the reality at first, only to have that need subsumed by the reality the play builds in action.

One consideration remained crucial: What is the etiquette of the office? And specifically, what happens beneath the surface that can take place in an office? Exploring that never stopped. Every performance developed it further, or violated it in a damaging way.

Washburn interjects a short scene as a transition moment between two scenes. In it, Irene, is shown at home yelling at/parenting her 12-year-old son. The scene is no more than one minute long and it's peculiar in that no one else in the play has such a revelation of the private self in her home. I liked it though, and it led to the solution to another problem: how to move the set around. I decided to incorporate more "real people" on the stage. They'd be going about their real lives while changing the scenery in character. Karen Perlow, the lighting designer, started calling them "the Zolas," after the realism of Emile Zola. The name stuck and we had several Zolas who played a librarian, a house painter, a car salesman, a waiter, a club kid, a working mom, a carpenter, a waiter, etc., all while effecting the scene changes. All of these roles were played by four people, two of whom also played the bartender in the Observatory bar and the Anonymous Woman (read: prostitute). I liked the Zola solution, and thought the scene changes were interesting, amply supported as they were by Leah Gelpe's sound design and Karen Perlow's lights. Actually, as I write this I realize that I cannot separate these elements from the great specificity and wit of Leslie Held's costumes and most fundamentally, from the lovely flexibility and elegance of Bill Fregosi's set, engineered by Michael Katz, the technical director, who made everything sound good as well as look good. *The Internationalist* was the kind of collaborative effort that we all wish for. Everyone was open to suggestion and, most happily, we were all pleased with each other's work – and working relationships – from beginning to end. It was a felicitous experience in the theater.

Why I chose the play:

I chose the play because I wanted to direct something that posed a linguistic challenge to our students. I know that this seems like an odd point of departure, but it was my honest impulse. MIT students rise to that sort of bait and then you cannot stop them. I was also in the frame of mind for a comedy. I began by thinking about the fast-paced American comedies of the 30's and 40's. Just figuring out how to speak *that many words per minute* and still play all of the actions in a grounded reality is a worthy challenge. But I could not find one that I liked that suited our student make-up at the time, i.e., how many men, how many women. Professor Jay Scheib saw *The Internationalist* in NYC and kindly brought me the script. The challenge of several pages of text in the fake foreign language, combined with the fact that the life as depicted in the play is one that our students will likely be living soon made the play a compelling choice.

At the end of the day, I was very pleased with the production and with the way our students handled themselves and the material. Their intelligent, passionate dedication was peerless, from stage management, to props, to the cast, etc. That excellence is the

hallmark of MIT students and their work. It is an honor to associate with people of their caliber.