

## **Distribution Agreement**

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of the thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Lia Marianes

\_\_\_\_\_  
4/12/10

Date

*An Exploration of The Lover*

by

Lia Marianes

Adviser

John M. Ammerman

Department of Theater Studies

---

John M. Ammerman

Adviser

---

Lori Teague

Committee Member

---

Donald McManus

Committee Member

---

John Bugge

Committee Member

---

6<sup>th</sup> April 2010

*An Exploration of The Lover*

By

Lia Marianes

Adviser

John M. Ammerman

An abstract of  
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
Of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Highest Honors

Department of Theater Studies

2010

## Abstract

### *An Exploration of The Lover* By Lia Marianes

The goal of this thesis was to explore, through the performance of my adaptation of *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, the interplay between human memory and the factual reality of events, to discover the responsibilities of an adaptor and an actor in a potentially autobiographical work, and to use a new piece of theater to cause audiences to examine the impactful events of their own lives. Additionally, with over 70 published plays, novel, and screenplays, Marguerite Duras was one of the most prolific modern French writers, and yet she remains relatively unknown in the United States. Therefore, another of the project's goals was to introduce Duras to American academics. I also intended to further Duras' established tradition of cross-discipline production through the adaptation of *The Lover* into a play.

The research questions I pursued centered on the interplay between memory and reality in Duras' work. The novel was written in 1984 when Duras was an old woman, and yet is written about a time in her life of enormous youthful exuberance, growth, and change; this is interesting because it raises the question of whether this is autobiography or fiction, or both. Although Duras did factually have a Chinese lover as a young girl in French Indochina, Duras wrote several accounts of this story (*The North China Lover*, *Wartime Writings*, *Eden Cinema*, *The Sea Wall*), and the account of that lover and her relationship with him is entirely different in each retelling. Therefore, what of the novel belongs to fact, and what to fiction? Additionally, what is the adaptor's responsibility to represent fact in a fictional, potentially autobiographical, work? This question had a great impact on me as the adaptor of the piece, as I too had a responsibility to the text that had to be met. To answer these questions, I explored Duras' life and her fiction, as well as the existing criticism on her oeuvre, through dramaturgy. I then applied the dramaturgy to the adaptation and rehearsal process to create a theatrical production of *The Lover* that was firmly rooted in research.

*An Exploration of The Lover*

By

Lia Marianes

Adviser

John M. Ammerman

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
Of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
Of the requirements of the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts with Highest Honors

Department of Theater Studies

2010

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Chapter One—The Dramaturgical Protocol</b>	1
The Life of Marguerite Duras	3
The Place of <i>The Lover</i> in Duras' Oeuvre	16
Outside Influences on <i>The Lover</i>	31
Historical Dramaturgy and Duras' Contemporaries	44
Critical Reactions to the Novel	54
Textual Difficulties	64
Explanation of my Adaptation Choices	79
<b>Chapter Two—The Adaptation Process</b>	89
<b>Chapter Three—The Rehearsal Process</b>	119
<b>Chapter Four—The Performance Process</b>	144
Appendix A—The Performance Draft	161
Appendix B—Adaptation Exercises	184
Appendix C—Rehearsal Exercises	198
Appendix D—Lighting Design Research	204
<b>Bibliography</b>	207

## Chapter One—The Dramaturgical Protocol

The writing of Marguerite Duras enchants and ravishes me. As her biographer and friend Laure Adler writes, “Often Duras speaks secretly in us—but on occasion for us... She is able to give us emotions drawn from the darkest and most hidden areas of the psyche” (Adler 4). When I first studied Duras in a creative writing class, I knew nothing about her life or the enormous oeuvre that awaited my exploration; I saw only the words of *The Lover* rising from the page to capture my imagination and haunt me with their poignancy. Following my decision to embrace the challenge of adapting and acting Duras as my senior honors thesis, however, I recognized a burning desire within myself to know more about the woman behind the words. Because of this passion I felt for Duras, the dramaturgical protocol became an exciting adventure into the world of academia rather than a chore undertaken for the sake of a stronger production. Learning about Duras’ life, her literary career and the place of *The Lover* within it, her literary models, her relationship with her critics and readers, her childhood in Indochina and her adulthood in France and their impact on her writing, and even immersing myself in the many textual difficulties that face an American adaptor of a French author’s work, all led me closer to a thorough understanding of Duras’ work and her life. This understanding allowed me the freedom to adapt Duras’ novel however I desired, as I was able to support all of my creative interpretations of her mysterious language with strong academic research. The purpose of the dramaturgical protocol was to provide a deep foundation of knowledge surrounding the Durasian literary tradition from which I could draw to support any and all artistic decisions I made about my own work with Duras. However, the more I researched Duras, the more I fell in love. She wrote in her early novel, *The*

*Tranquil Life*, “If I’d known that one day I’d have a history, I’d have chosen it; I’d have been more careful how I lived it, so that it would be beautiful and true with a view to pleasing myself” (Adler 111). This became the story of *The Lover* that I chose to tell; the story of a lonely, vulnerable old woman who lived a life of regrets, and needs to confide the most beautiful part of herself to the man who transformed her life by loving her. Therefore, all the research that follows supports this vision of the play, and will provide the readers with an insight into the woman who was Duras.



### The Life of Marguerite Duras

As *The Lover* is the product of a mature artist approaching the end of her life, it is important to examine Duras' life experiences as a valuable contributing factor to the novel's commercial success, its literary acclaim, and the place of honor it holds in Duras' oeuvre. However, her life defies description in a way, as she herself was most resistant to the "vulgarity of biography" (Vircondelet 328). Therefore, the following analysis of Duras' life includes the major events of her life, but has a strong focus on those parts of her life that most heavily impacted *The Lover*, since a chronological biography of such an enigmatic author, who so frequently misled her readers with her autofictive prose, would not only be difficult, but also untrue to *The Lover's* own autofictive nature.

Born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of April in 1914 just outside of Saigon, which was then a part of French Indochina, Marguerite Duras' given name was Marguerite Donnadiou. She published only one work under this name, however, before renouncing both the book itself and her father's name, adopting instead the name of the small French village where her father lived, Duras, as her last name. Duras' father died in France in 1921 when Duras was only seven, and she was raised in French Indochina by her mother, a schoolmistress, along with the two brothers who featured so prominently in her later works. Duras' poverty-stricken youth in Indochina was the foundation for many of her novels, including her first commercial success and third novel, *The Sea Wall*. In fact, Vircondelet, one of the few biographers of Duras' life, boldly claims that "her entire oeuvre feeds on sources in white Indochina" (Vircondelet 13). Other famous Durasian characters had their roots in Indochina, as well. For example, the beggar woman of

Savannahket inhabits many of Duras' works, becoming the archetypal image of the poverty of the Indochina colony. The beggar woman also serves as the image that later fuels Duras' political movements against colonialism, particularly the Algerian conflict of 1954-1962, for which Duras wrote and signed *Manifesto 121* in 1959, the Parisian intellectuals' document supporting the right of the Algerians to revolt. In addition to the Savannahket beggar, the Indochinese general administrator's unfaithful wife, Elizabeth Striedter, became the Durasian character Anne-Marie Stretter, present in many of Duras' most famous works, such as *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, *The Vice-Consul*, and *India Song*. As much as these characters from her childhood influenced her fiction, however, they also had great impact on her life. She learned about scandal from Elizabeth Striedter's affairs in the colonies, and she adopted a life of scandal for herself; her time in Indochina and her affair with the lover initiated her into "the world of scandal that she will inhabit from this point on" (Vircondelet 44). Duras always created drama; she had a tempestuous relationship with the press, with her lovers, with the Communist Party, with everyone.

Vickroy, a Durasian scholar and critic of *The Lover*, attributes this adoption of a life of scandal to the oppressive nature of Indochinese culture. In Indochina, Vickroy writes, Duras experienced the evolution of her identity that is part of the growing up process, but within the rigid cultural limitations of a white, male-dominated society. Duras accepted the scandal that followed her in Indochina, which was a result of her family's destitution and the expression of her own budding sexuality, and indeed scandal would follow her for the rest of her life. In her childhood, Duras experienced a duality of self, one that would later bring her trouble in the Communist Party. In the colonies,

Duras had social status because she was a white woman, but she was ostracized from proper society because of her poverty and her sexual relationship with the Chinese man, who was her social inferior in every way except for his wealth. In the same way, her Communist political beliefs and strict adherence to party lines represented only half of her self; the other half longed for freedom of speech and expression, and to embrace left-wing intellectual ideas. Vickroy also believes that the revolutionary Duras—the Duras who once joined the Salvation Army, abandoned the Communist Party, and wrote vehemently to support Algerian independence—was born in Indochina, and resurfaced again in the writing of *The Lover*. “The linkages she makes between sources of sociopolitical power and individual suffering in *The Lover* outline how Duras... explored her personal resistance to cultural and societal norms even in adolescence. Hers was a voice struggling to be heard... When her society... silenced her with alienation and abuse, she honed her skills as a writer and an artist, using her experiences... to fan the flames of her future resistance” (Vickroy 9). Additionally, Vickroy attributes the strength of Duras’ artist’s voice to the hardships she endured during her Indochinese childhood, writing that “Duras demonstrates how her artist’s voice emerged from the powerful shifts in her youthful identity, prompted by the dynamism of adolescence, sexual discovery, and her will to break with her family” (Vickroy 12). In a sense, Duras’ childhood in Indochina created the older self that narrates *The Lover*. This establishes the profound paradox of the novel: “...As the artist recreates the teen Duras, the latter has given birth to the voice of the artist” (Vickroy 1). In *The Lover*, Duras re-envisioned her youth in Indochina as a time that was invaluable to the creation of her literary imagination. Duras’ biographer and friend, Laure Adler, even goes as far as to suggest that Duras’ entire

being is embedded in the depths of Indochina. “Duras became the ambassador of a forgotten Indochina” through constantly revisiting the place in her writing, and through her enchantment with the place, so clearly communicated through her interviews, novels, and films (Adler 9). Vircondelet supports this in his more romanticized view of Duras’ childhood, writing “She always returns to the distant lands of that exotic childhood... Duras’ life is there, in that phantasmal geography... in this dwelling and on this land doomed to mourning, in what is the very end of the Western world whose death she never stops singing...” (Vircondelet 278). Ironically, however, for as much as Duras became a champion of the forgotten Indochina in her later career, her first book was a book lauding colonialism. This book, entitled *The French Empire*, was co-written with Philippe Roques and published under the name Marguerite Donnadieu. It was commissioned by the Colonial Office, where Duras had been working for the previous three years. Published in 1940 with Gallimard, Duras’ future printing company, it was a militant book designed to raise French awareness of and to cultivate national pride in their overseas empire. Although the name of Marguerite Duras is rarely connected with the book today, it remains Duras’ first published venture into the world of writing. All that remains to be said of her childhood in Indochina is that, although she allowed her readers and her biographers into her childhood through her autofiction, until the end of her life, Duras herself remained “the ultimate witness of her earliest childhood... All she wants to retain are a few images of which she has kept a trace in her memory... stories she tells one after another... which make people think that ‘Duras always says the same thing’” (Vircondelet 4). Upon closer examination of her work, however, one notices the subtle

variations in each retelling that demonstrate her simultaneous mastery of her past and her tragic inability to forget.

At the age of seventeen, Duras returned to France from Indochina, where she left her family and moved to Paris. She briefly attended law school in 1933, but she interrupted the pursuit of her degree when she dropped out of school for six months to join the Salvation Army. This brief and early exposure to poverty in France served as a precursor to her later political activism; when asked about it, one of her friend's from University recalled, "We were still young, still innocent, politically apathetic," (Adler 76) but Duras felt something like activism, something that called her to spend six months living with and caring for the poverty-stricken of Paris. When asked about the experience later in life, however, Duras forgot her activism, saying instead, "Why? I don't know. It was so depressing" (Adler 76). The true beginning of her political activism, however, began during the Occupation. Having worked for the French government before the outbreak of World War II, during the Occupation Duras worked for a department of the Vichy government whose purpose was to designate paper to approved publishers. In 1944, Duras, her husband, Robert Antelme, and their dear friend Dionys Mascolo, joined the Resistance at the invitation of François Mitterand. Two years prior, in 1942, Duras suffered the loss of her beloved younger brother, Paulo, and also the loss of her first child, who was stillborn; despite her previous history of political activism, joining the Resistance seemed as much about escaping the tragedies she experienced as it was about serving her country. Regardless, she became a sort of divided self during this time, with one self wholly absorbed in the mire of her own

writing, and the other sinking into the whirlpool of political activism.<sup>1</sup> Mascolo later said of the Occupation, “We lived in that oblivion, that insensitivity, during [the] whole... Occupation” (Vircondelet 73). Many Durasian scholars and biographers refer to a surprising sense of guilt that Duras carried throughout her life, particularly in reference to the Jews, that is believed to stem from this time of hopelessness, loneliness, and despair. This sense of guilt fueled her throughout her career to be an advocate for those suffering, for the voiceless, and for the oppressed. This literary goal manifests itself continually throughout her career, perhaps culminating in a newspaper story she wrote during the Algerian conflict. The story recorded the overturning of an Algerian man’s flower stall by some policemen; at the end of the piece, the people of Paris who witness the event buy the ruined flowers from him<sup>2</sup>. These feelings of guilt that resulted from the Occupation resurfaced time and time again in her writing. Many of her characters are Jewish, and the torment of exclusion because of Jewishness, whether overt or simply suggested, is a recurring theme, “as though she is constantly asking forgiveness, as though plagued, tormented by guilt” (Adler 153). When she reached the end of her life and was raving during detoxification, she yelled out that she saw Jews being burned and killed, and she despaired once again at her helplessness. Even in *The Lover*, which is about her adolescence, and occurs well before the Occupation, she included war-time characters like Betty Fernandez; Fernandez was Duras’ neighbor who was accused of collaboration due to her husband’s German sympathies. Glassman, a Durasian scholar, points out that the impact of the Occupation on Duras was that in *The Lover*, “in the only real leap beyond Indochina,” (Glassman 112) women like Betty Fernandez appeared in a novel

---

<sup>1</sup> (Vircondelet 80).

<sup>2</sup> (Vircondelet 73).

written almost forty years after the war. The Occupation greatly affected Duras and her future literary works, and not just because of her husband Antelme's terrifying experience in the concentration camp at Dachau, where he was sent after being arrested as a member of the Resistance in late 1944. "If she [Duras] has one persistent quality, it is that constant mobility for articulation and bearing witness. Film, the novel, the interview, debate, silence, a cry from the heart... at the most crucial source of pain, of distress" (Vircondelet 94). In Duras' work during the Occupation, "the very act of writing was transformed, turned into an act of solidarity that consisted of outsmarting the enemy, of setting invisible traps for him, of saving anonymous, innocent people" (Vircondelet 88). This idea of using writing to save the forgotten people of the Nazi Occupation would later shift to the idea of using writing to save herself when she abandoned herself to alcoholism in the 1970s. However, despite her brave work during the Occupation, Duras never recovered from Antelme's experience in the silence and horror of the camps. From this point forward, her writing was heavily influenced by Antelme's experience; the vociferous and enormous outpouring of work that followed the Occupation was no doubt a response to the enforced silence of the period due to the printing bans and the Gestapo's activities. "...Writing [becomes] the place of transgression, of ambiguous desire, of unlimited possibility, of impropriety, of disobedience to all laws..." (Vircondelet 116). Writing later became an act of rebellion against the Communist Party, but during the Occupation, with the war notebooks, it was a glorious outpouring of all that was suppressed, and at the time it was for her and her alone. Still, already she was thinking of and establishing her characteristically intimate

relationship with her reader, as evidenced by the beginning lines of the notebooks, “Learn how to read: these are sacred texts” (Vircondelet 117).

Following the war and the return of Antelme to the apartment they shared on the rue Saint-Benoît, Duras developed a new writing style based on “the gaze” (Adler 154) that Adler judges amateur. In Duras’ path to self-discovery, she lost herself in the everyday details of the worlds she created, eventually getting discouraged, particularly in light of Mascolo’s harsh criticisms, and looking for new sources of inspiration. Duras’ Italian friend, Elio Vittorini, helped her to discover repetition and style; she respected him as a fellow writer, a friend, and a fellow Communist and fighter of the Resistance, and allowed herself to be led away from the classical models towards a more lyrical, melodious style of writing that read more like a libretto than a novel. She also began to utilize poetry; “Duras’ art owes much to the Vittorinian technique of repetition, the incantatory return of words, a position in the sentence that compresses their usual meaning and a certain indistinct aura, distinctly resistant to analysis” (Adler 159).

After the Liberation, Duras, tired of the repressions and short-sightedness of French democracy, lent her support to the politics of Communism, and eventually became a member of the Party in 1945 along with Antelme and Mascolo. Her loyalty to Communism was wrapped up in her loyalty to the Resistance, to her fight for justice and for an end to the oppression of capitalism. However, the Party’s desperate need for control and its determination to repress public speech and any press that even slightly deviated from Party lines disturbed Duras, and she never managed to reconcile herself to such restrictions. After all, “If there is a constant in [Duras’] life and work, it is most



certainly that of revolutionary, subversive, transgressive speech” (Vircondelet 126). Her rue Saint-Benoît circle of intellectual friends still met and discussed politics with a freedom unheard of in the strictly run Party meetings, and Duras’ duality of being both a member of the Communist Party and being an avant-garde intellectual began to work against her. “She [Duras] was proud to belong to a party that presented itself as ‘the party of the shot,’ to don her resistant patriotism and enjoy the same kind of prestige as the Red Army. Marguerite was a Communist because it was the party of the working classes, because it defended the poor and the pure. But she was a particular kind of Communist, a euphoric, utopian, idealistic Communist... She believed she was fighting for a world where equality and justice would prevail” (Adler 152). However, her liberalism and her failure to adhere to the Party lines regarding freedom of expression eventually led to her expulsion from the Party in 1950, along with the expulsion of Antelme and Mascolo. Although she had her disagreements with Communism and with the way the Party was run, her forced exclusion from the Party hurt her deeply, and from that point on “she makes a clean sweep of everything that sets itself up as an institution, from the family (the couple) to literature (the nouveau roman), from religion (churches) to politics” (Vircondelet 272). The one pseudo-exception to this was the Feminist movement, of which she retained a kind of understanding due to her enormous respect for some of the movement’s great writers. For example, Duras was quite close to Michelle Porte, author of *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, and Xavière Gauthier, with whom Duras later collaborated on *Woman to Woman*. Additionally, Duras felt sympathy for feminist writers because of the difficulties she herself endured when it came to expressing her femininity in her writing, and in breaking free from the male-dominated world of

intellectuals she had gathered around herself at the rue Saint-Benoît. These difficulties carried over into her personal life as well as her literary career; for instance, following Antelme's return from the concentration camps and after Duras nursed him back to health, she decided that she wanted to have a child with Dionys Mascolo, the couple's long-time friend and her new lover. She divorced Antelme in 1946, and Dionys fathered her only child, Jean Mascolo, in 1947. She and Antelme continued to share the apartment on rue Saint-Benoît for several years after the divorce, and he remained one of her most trusted literary advisors and one of her closest friends.

Duras' sympathy and admiration for feminist writers continued throughout the rest of her career. Duras had what Vircondelet described as a "commitment to women" that was based on the belief that "women are closer than men to all transgressions," that they have within them "access to silence, to madness, to the child's absence of knowledge which no man will ever approach" (Vircondelet 76). Duras' relationship to feminism is discussed in greater detail in later sections, but her shift towards feminism is important to note in her biography, as it was for many years a driving force in her fiction.

The period of time between 1950 and 1985 was the most successful and most prolific time in Duras' life. The 1950s for Duras marked an enhanced commitment to writing, and by the end of the decade, she had published eight novels, one of which was short-listed for the Goncourt, one of France's most esteemed literary prizes, although it did not win. Additionally, Duras made her first foray into the world of theater with the adaptation of her novel *The Square* in 1956, and she became associated with the nouveau roman tradition following the publication of her novel *Moderato Cantabile* in 1958. Also in this decade, Duras' mother died in Indochina, and Duras left Mascolo and began her

long affair with Gérard Jarlot, with whom she collaborated with on a number of projects in the following decade. By the end of the 1950s, Duras had achieved fame on both a national and an international level for her screenplay *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. Not all the attention she received was positive, but throughout her entire career, Duras had a way of charming even the harshest critics. Even when condemning her for her many faults, the critics still praised her talent and distinctive style. For example, White writes, “Preposterous, self-obsessed, eloquent, unstoppable, Duras left her mark on French letters, theater, and cinema... Elisabeth Schwarzkopf once said that to be a successful opera singer you have to have a distinctive voice and be very loud. By those standards Marguerite Duras was a great diva indeed” (White). The fame she achieved in the 1950s catapulted her into the prolific 1960s. Although she experimented with the world of film and theater in the previous decade, Duras began to include these forms in her artistic endeavors regularly, as well as continuing to write profusely. She published six novels, four plays, and two film scripts, both of which were collaborations between Jarlot and her. By 1960, which was also the year she was elected to be a judge of the prix Médicis, Duras was “very much a part of literary society... highly acclaimed by the country’s top critics and fashionable in the world of avant-garde cinema” (Adler 238). Duras’ writing goals changed; although “she continued to write to exorcise her childhood and bewildering adolescence, and constantly return to territory scorched by the absence of love,” (Adler 189), she also turned her attention to the idea that writing is an act of self-destruction. Duras said, “I write to move myself from me to the book... to massacre, ruin; damage myself in the publication of the book. To popularize myself. To lie in the street. It works. The more I write, the less I exist” (Adler 239). Writing became the

exercise of self-destruction, which was a potential precursor to her alcoholism of the 1970s, but it was also a way of creating a relationship with the public. From 1970 to 1980, Duras devoted her time almost exclusively to film, producing 13 films in just this decade alone. Her alcoholism also raged during this time, until she agreed to go to a detoxification hospital in America at the beginning of the next decade. Although she feared that her new sobriety would negatively affect her creative output, as she had always used her late night drinking as a source of fuel for her stories, she needn't have worried; the 1980s were a time of great literary and artistic success for her. She produced eleven novels, six plays, one film script, and four films. Additionally, in 1984, she was awarded the Prix Goncourt for *The Lover*. This was a shining moment in her career, as it dissolved some of the bitterness she felt at being passed over for the Goncourt for her third novel, *The Sea Wall*, published almost thirty years before *The Lover*. Vircondelet states that with the presentation of the award to Duras, "the Academy crowns an entire oeuvre rather than a book, revealing to the public a literary figure who for too many years had been rejected and repudiated" (Vircondelet 330). Contrary to her love of scandal, Duras chose to accept the prize. However, her bitterness towards the Academy could not be suppressed, and resurfaced in an interview with *Les Inrockuptibles*: "250,000 copies of the book had been sold when I received that boys' prize. There were some committee members who were crying... that evening. All because a woman had won the Goncourt, I suppose" (Vircondelet 330). In addition to her great literary output of the 1980s, this was a special decade because it marked the introduction of Yann Andréa Steiner into Duras' life. Andréa, 38 years her junior, met her in her seaside home and became her companion and secretary until the end of her life. He was also her last great impossible

love affair, as Andréa was a homosexual; the impossibility of their relationship is the subject of much of Duras' later fiction. The 1980s were the last fruitful years of her life, as she published her last three novels by 1992, and died in Paris on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1996, of throat cancer; she is buried in the Cimetière of Montparnasse. Her tombstone contains two simple letters: M.D.

### **The Place of *The Lover* in Duras' Oeuvre**

Written towards the end of Duras' lengthy and varied writing career, *The Lover* is undoubtedly among the best of her work. It is the only one of her novels to receive the Goncourt and is clearly the work of a mature artist, incorporating all her major themes and all the characters that, in various incarnations, haunted her previous works. The novel appeared during her Indochinese Cycle, at the beginning of which she seemed to have made an autobiographical (or at least autofictive) pact with her readers. After so many fictionalized accounts of a young girl in Indochina, she seemed to commit to a new, perhaps more honest, version of the truth than she had in any of her previous novels. Additionally, she was finally writing about her family after they were all deceased, which freed her from the necessity of distorting the truth to protect them. She was also writing the novel as a recovering alcoholic; she wrote in part about the effects of alcohol on her life, but particularly its effects on her body, which is a difficult topic to address successfully, and therefore demonstrates the maturity and honesty of *The Lover*. Lastly, she was honest, perhaps for the first time, about her relationship with the lover, providing a detailed account of not just the relationship itself, but also its impact on the rest of her life. For all these reasons, *The Lover* is to me the greatest literary achievement of her prolific writing career, and deserves thorough exploration in its exalted position in her oeuvre.

Authors and biographers view *The Lover* as a work of a mature artist for different reasons. For example, Vickroy writes, "The connections between death and 'symbolization'—that is, articulating one's inner world—are evidenced in Duras' novel.

This struggle is associated with the voice of a mature writer” (Vickroy 3). Adler, however, views the maturity of the novel as an extension of the maturity found in Duras’ personal life at that time, as she had recently ended her turbulent and destructive love affair with Gérard Jarlot. Following the unfolding of this violent relationship, Duras threw off the masters and subscribed only to herself and her own thoughts on writing. Duras said, ““One day I had a love affair and I think that’s when it all started...”” (Adler 205). Adler takes this thought a step further, declaring, “Her [Duras’] writing... changed. She discovered her true self through her burgeoning sex life and this gave her the will and the courage to cast off a few masters... Thereafter the strength to write came from within” (Adler 205). Duras made what she termed her “shift towards sincerity” (Adler 205) with the publication of *The Lover*. Throughout her career, there were a few major themes to which Duras frequently returned. Vircondelet classifies them as, “madness, death, the mystery of all human behavior, and the impossibility of judging any act...” (Vircondelet 238). These themes obsessed her, and all four are present within *The Lover*; because the novel is thematically thorough and rich, its themes helped to shape the novel as a masterwork.

*The Lover* was also a part of the fulfillment of her shift towards autobiography in the early 1980s. Vircondelet writes, “As if bound by the ‘autobiographical pact’ she signed with *L’Ete 80*, in this self-affirmation, and in her relationship with Yann Andréa, she begins writing *The Lover*... The autobiographical process accelerates, as if the eighties had opened a crevice through which life can now pour, bringing to life the founding childhood events carried along for so many years in the dark night of the fictional world” (Vircondelet 322, 327). Adler reports that Duras changed after writing

the novel; she became wrapped up in the critical acclaim she received, even referring to herself in third person, thereby giving the critics fuel for their campaign of parody. Adler asks, “Who was Duras really? Mischievous Duras who wore so many masks... Or the one so expert at autobiography, so adept at confession, who had us believing her lies. In the last years of her life, Duras believed more in the existence of her fictional characters than in the lovers and friends who had accompanied her along the way” (Adler 4). Hewitt writes that *The Lover* is “a hybrid that brings together elements of Duras’ writings from other periods” (Hewitt 96). It is more accessible than the short stories that precede it and a more diverse novel than any that came before. Still, it fits well with the tradition of violence, scandal, passion, and autobiography that Duras established in the 1980s, which was reflective of her autobiographical attempt with her first popular novel, *The Sea Wall*. The element of the novel that is most deeply rooted in the Durasian tradition is its tenor of autobiography, and the fact that it is, in a sense, a “rewritten” story. “Duras’ *Lover* is not a foundational text of truth, but a new version or offshoot of other fictions. This act of rewriting—selecting a new focus or frame from familiar material, bringing out a fragment already present in another work, bringing out what wasn’t said in a previous fiction—characterizes nearly all of Duras’ writings. Her novels, plays, and films continually overlap and defy generic categories” (Hewitt 97). This is one of the many reasons I felt the freedom to adapt this work for the stage; Duras was always searching for new mediums and for crossover in her work, and she had a deep love for the theater, so it seemed a logical step to recreate this novel for theater.

Vircondelet records that Duras writes “‘texts’ as she says, not novels... their emotional charge, their power of attraction, neither share the status of ordinary narration



nor have anything to do with the publishing industry's wheelings and dealings. Instead, she roams around the 'memory of oblivion'" (Vircondelet 223). Although this is certainly true of the majority of Duras' fiction, *The Lover* does not exactly fit this category. *The Lover* is more commercial, and it is a novel, not a text; it also opened a new direction for her life and her writing career. Following the novel's publication, she developed a new relationship with her public, with her autobiographical pact, and with her writing, and yet she remained solidly connected to her past. Although the autobiographical nature of the text and its commercial appeal are certainly important, it is the unique, romanticized tone of *The Lover* that is perhaps the most indicative of its status as a fully realized novel. As Adler writes, "Often Duras speaks secretly in us—but on occasion for us... She is able to give us emotions drawn from the darkest and most hidden areas of the psyche. She has been accused of egoism, narcissism, and all-consuming self-love... [but] Marguerite Duras believed in her own talent" (Adler 4).

Perhaps the most important item of note about the novel's appearance during Duras' Indochinese Cycle or Yann Andrea Cycle of writing is that it marked a genuine change not only in her subject matter, but also in the way that she approached writing. A few years earlier with the Indonesian Cycle or the Lol V. Stein cycle, Duras committed to an "emptying of self," or an "ordeal of truth" (Adler 248). Duras said of the experience, "As I write, I hear... voices. I don't know where I'm going. It's great fun" (Adler 249). Continuing in the same vein of a pouring out of self, Duras returned to the scene of her childhood with the Indochinese Cycle, uncovering once again the subjects of youth, French Indochina, her broken mother, and the story that Vircondelet refers to as "the

legendary epic mythicized by memory...” (Vircondelet 295), or the story that evolved into *The Lover* and *The North China Lover*. Vircondelet addresses most thoroughly the great shift in Duras’ writing style and her approach to writing that occurred in the eighties. He writes, “The 1980s give her a new momentum, a stronger desire to write, freed of writing itself, at the mercy of the great movements of the universe” (Vircondelet 302). Duras abandoned film—which to this point absorbed much of her creative energy—for the sake of writing, as she no longer had confidence in the medium of film to be able to communicate the dynamic and mysterious power of the written word.

Duras’ own history became the life blood of her novels in the Yann Andréa Cycle; there was something about the arrival of Andréa that allowed her to succumb once again to the vulnerability of having a man in her life and her living spaces again, which is something she swore she could never do again after the disastrous end of her relationship with Jarlot. Vircondelet attributes Andréa’s arrival to the “new vein” of writing that follows, believing that Andréa’s commitment to Duras allowed her to see that “everything is not all used up yet, all has not been said. The living matter within her has not yet yielded each particle to her wringing, gleaning efforts” (Vircondelet 308). In many instances, Andréa himself became the subject of Duras’ fiction, particularly in her collection of reflections, *Practicalities*, in which two stories, “Trouville” and “Alain Veinstein,” are solely about Andréa, and he featured prominently in many others. Duras wrote about him as she wrote about everyone in her life—brutally, unabashedly, but most of all, lovingly. She exposed his faults, his depressive moods, his alcoholism and its impact on her own, and his irritating habits (like his habit of calling random people on the telephone and talking all day), but she also recounted in great detail his laughter, his

love of the sea, and his way of caring for her. She wrote of Andréa, "... the man is here... guarding me against death," and she said their affair is "unapproachable, even by us" (Duras *Practicalities* 69). They never knew how to behave with each other; all they knew is that "neither he nor I can bear the idea of going on living after the other one dies" (Duras *Practicalities* 69). Duras herself gave him the name Andréa—his given last name is Steiner—which tied him to her even further. Adler describes him as "a cheerful person who loved laughing and walking... he looked after you. Whoever you were, man or woman, you always felt safe with him" (Adler 327). This is perhaps why Duras finally felt that she could open herself up to autobiography, to relive these memories from childhood; above all else, she felt safe with Andréa. He would care for her for the rest of her life, going with her to the detoxification hospital in America, drinking with her, transcribing her words for her when she could no longer write. Her last words were for him.

Her writing in the eighties became both more honest and more autobiographical. For the first time, she acknowledged her readers, seeming to desire a truthful communication with them. She revisited the autobiographical attempts of her early career in greater depth, removing "the veil from certain moments of her life that had been muddled by legend... Her readers are getting to know her better... [as she is] devoted to this other form of writing, a fluent 'stream' of words, catching the spirit of the time... and stirring up emotions and questions in her wake. Placing herself before her readers, she creates magic among them, shocking them, arousing in them desire to write" (Vircondelet 314). Duras opened herself more and more to her readers' scrutiny, revisiting the image-

laden places of her childhood, her complex relationship with her mother, her fear and loathing for her older brother, and the secret, possibly incestuous, love she shared with her younger brother. Vircondelet implies that this leads her to harsh realizations about herself, like the understanding that she is incapable of loving anyone as much as she loved the younger brother; of *The Lover*, he writes, “never had the work come so close to the obscure depths of Duras’ accursed life” (Vircondelet 318). However, *The Lover* is neither biography nor chronology; “Nothing is more consistent with Durasian aesthetics than *The Lover*; nothing is less chronological, further from the vulgarity of biography, the visible thread of events” (Vircondelet 328). Therefore, the novel gives its readers glimpses of truth, but it is truth confounded by incongruity and a breach in the autobiographical pact, as evidenced by Duras’ own line, “The story of my life doesn’t exist” (Duras, *The Lover* 8).

The deaths of Duras’ younger brother, mother, and finally, her elder brother, allowed her in *The Lover* to fully and truthfully explore her relationship to them. She wrote of her family as she later writes of Andréa, with nothing held back or repressed, remembering the terror and loneliness just as vividly as she remembered the rare instances of harmonious living. Glassman comments on Duras’ new liberty when she says, “If *L’Amant* is a family epitaph, it is no less an interment of familial passions and rages that produces a catharsis which her heroines rarely enjoy.... *L’Amant* acknowledges the loss of passions which, in their living, prohibited their telling” (Glassman 110). The Durasian essayist Rachel Criso also connects the mother’s death to the publication of the novel when she writes, “the narrator [of *The Lover*], like Duras, resents her mother,

indicates her madness, suggests that she was not really a ‘good’ mother. Perhaps the novel *L’amant* was, among other things, a way for Duras to voice repressed but very real resentment toward the now-deceased mother” (Cranston 45). Duras herself supported this idea that the novel was a new expression of the truth of her family when she wrote in the novel itself, “I’ve written a good deal about the members of my family, but then they were still alive, my mother and my brothers. And I skirted around them, skirted around all these things without really tackling them... Now I’m talking about the hidden stretches of that same youth, of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried” (Duras, *The Lover* 7). However, since the novel is technically autofiction rather than true autobiography, I feel it necessary to include a quote from Duras outside the novel that supports this view: “Je pense que c’est ça, *L’Amant*. J’ai innocenté tout le monde... Depuis que j’ai raconté en toute liberté. C’était fini, le ressentiment terrible que j’avais contre [mon frère aîné]”<sup>3</sup> (Glassman 111). With the novel, she both freed her family from blame and freed herself of the weight of the repressed memories of her family. And yet, despite this new ability for exposition, it seems unlikely that Duras could ever fully loosen the hold her family had on her. Vickroy says of *The Lover*, “One senses a need to explore this territory again, better equipped with the will, the insight and writing skills that she had in earlier narratives like *The Sea Wall*... She also gives readers a sense that this past still continues to rule her life and probably will not be fully resolved” (Vickroy 1). Adler addresses this same idea, but in terms of the “Durasian framework,” meaning the repetitive elements of Duras’ fiction regarding familial structure. For instance, we can observe time and time again the pattern of the destroyed mother, almost oedipally

---

<sup>3</sup> “I believe that that’s *The Lover*. I disculpated everyone. Ever since I freely told the story, it was over, the terrible resentment which I had against [my older brother]”

smitten with the vicious elder brother, turning a blind eye to the violence exerted against the weak, feminine younger brother, and to the terror of her daughter. The elder brother controls the family, and the family is woven together inextricably by mutual financial disgrace. “This strange family’s cloying and yet protective bubble of love and hate forms the subject” of many of Duras’ novels (Adler 107). She could not live outside the family. In fact, Adler writes that “she spent her whole life searching for that lost brotherhood. It haunts a whole area of her work” (Adler 105). Her lovers always became brothers, particularly Robert Antelme and Dionys Mascolo, and Andréa was a brother from the beginning of their nonsexual love affair. He was a brother-child-lover, as was her younger brother, and the lover, as well. In *The Lover* itself, Duras writes, “It’s still in the family that I live, to the exclusion of anywhere else...” (Duras, *The Lover* 75). Even when she grew older and moved to Paris, living apart from her family and trying to forget them, she still lives in the family, in “the awfulness of the family in Sadec, its inspired silence” (Duras, *The Lover* 33). Duras never recovered from losing her younger brother, either. She said of him, most gratefully, “never, do you hear, never did he ever hurt me” (Adler 105). Because she could not forget him, and could not mourn him, she recreated him in her fictional works, not just as himself, but also as the lover.

The death of her mother, to whom Duras’ novel *The Sea Wall* was dedicated, was also a hugely significant event in Duras’ life, and it influenced her fiction in a way that even the death of the beloved younger brother did not. Duras said that while attending her mother’s funeral, she could only think of her lover, Jarlot, waiting for her in the hotel. She did not weep at her mother’s interment, though her elder brother, Pierre, did. She returned to Jarlot, and they drank, screamed, hit one another, attacked each other, and had

sex until the next morning. Duras later said that she succumbed to madness that winter. She indulged deeply in her insanity, and in the alcoholic behavior and eroticism that accompanied it. Then she said, “After that, it became less serious, a love story” (Adler 206). After a while, she was able to write *Moderato Cantabile*. She wrote this novel for Jarlot, attempting to “describe the indescribable” parts of love and the pain that accompanies it (Adler 206). In a way, Duras survived her mother’s death because of the intense emotional outlet Jarlot provided. However, she continued to live the pain of her mother’s neglect for many years following her mother’s death. For example, at the premiere of *Whole Days in the Trees* at the New York Film Festival, Duras wept as she said, “Her last words were for my older brother. She only wanted him at her bedside, only her son. She asked for him, only for him” (Adler 254). This pain certainly helped create the somewhat romanticized version of the relationship between the mother and daughter in *The Lover*; the desire to feel close to her dead mother, a mother who rarely expressed an interest in her daughter outside of the interest the mother took in money. This is why I chose to include the scene entitled, “It’s only for the money that I see him,” which ends with the line, “She had suddenly noticed her daughter, wanted to talk to her” (Duras, *The Lover* 94). The neglectful, broken mother is a cornerstone of Durasian literature, which is why she remains one of the four characters in the adaptation, and why her death so heavily influenced Duras’ future works.

Another weighty influence on Duras’ writing, particularly on her later works, was her burgeoning alcoholism. Later in her career, she began to write about alcohol and her relationship to it “with painful authenticity” (Vircondelet 329). In *Practicalities*, the

expository reflections on her life, Duras wrote a short story entitled simply “Alcohol,” in which she addressed the scandal of being a female alcoholic, and wrote about people who drink as a way to replace God, a way to “replace creation,” and a way to cut oneself off from the rest of mankind (Duras, *Practicalities* 17). In the typical Durasian way, she also linked alcoholism to death, in the same way she perpetually linked love to death:

“You can’t drink without thinking you’re killing yourself. Living with alcohol is living with death close at hand. What stops you killing yourself when you’re intoxicated out of your mind is the thought that once you’re dead you won’t be able to drink anymore... And after a time you have the choice—whether to keep drinking until you’re senseless and you lose your identity, or to go no further than the beginning of happiness. To die, so to speak, every day, or to go on living” (Duras, *Practicalities* 18).

Alcohol became more and more present in her fiction, sometimes becoming a driving force or a major source of conflict in a piece, as in *Suzanna Andler*. In this work, the heroine confesses that her nightly drinking scares her, and that it is in part her lover’s fault, as he pushes her to drink. This story was a direct reflection on Duras’ life and her relationships with both Jarlot and Andréa, and alcoholism took its place among the other obsessive themes of her oeuvre (O’Neil 154). She wrote two telling poems about her relationship to alcohol and her scornful understanding of her need for it: “Tonight, it’s me who writes/ Alcoholic, what a joke, I can stop when I want/ With a trembling hand she confides/ the other’s the alcoholic, the one we don’t see/ It’s only for ourselves we drink” (Adler 259), and also “No one can replace God/ Nothing can replace alcohol/ So God is irreplaceable” (Adler 323). As her career and her alcoholism progressed, she pretended



that she only drank to understand the weight of the despair of characters like the Vice-Consul, but this tactic eventually only led Duras herself into depression and hopelessness. Of this time in Duras' life, Adler writes, "Marguerite drank more and more so that she could give a better picture of that alcoholic groping for words" (Adler 259), but it was more than that. Alcohol was at first a medicine for her, but it soon became a sickness. Although it was scandalous for a woman in Saint-Germain-Des-Près at the time to drink as heavily as Duras did, no one noticed because she was so sociable. She drank in secret, realizing she had become an alcoholic, and yet none of her friends knew it. Jarlot was a contributing factor to her alcoholism as well, since he, too, was a heavy drinker. She increased "the dose" of alcohol when her mother died, and she entered a "self-destruct" mode in 1975; she finally shut herself away and drank like an alcoholic, seriously and with no intention of doing anything but wallowing in alcohol (Adler 310).

Because of her alcoholism, the previously sociable Duras became aggressive towards her readers, actors, collaborators, and even her dearest friends. Perhaps one of the greatest effects of her alcoholism at the time was her involvement in the production of a catastrophic double flop with the film and stage play of *The Naivre Night* in 1978; throughout the entire rehearsal process of the play, Duras was there unsettling the actors with nonsensical comments and forcing them to wear uncomfortable costumes. They could not remember the words of the play, and the director had to prompt them from the audience during the actual performance. Adler relates this crash-and-burn to Duras' tempestuous relationship with her readers, saying, "having seduced her readers, Marguerite was throwing them out" (Adler 317). O'Neil, on the other hand, clearly attributes Duras' behavior to her out-of-control drinking; Duras was unable to work with

the actors and the directors because she was often incoherent or aggressive with her demands, and she continually asked members of the production team to buy her alcohol without any promise or hope of reimbursement (O’Neil 158). Duras’ alcoholism caused a kind of desperation in her writing that is also reflected in her return to the habit of perpetually revising what she wrote. She was “continuing to expose her life in order to reconnect with it...” (Adler 353), and Duras says of the constant revisions, “It was instantly too late. My returning to the texts was from a kind of fear that it might soon be too late, that I no longer care or that I might die without seeing them again” (Adler 353). Duras also said in *Practicalities* that “alcohol was invented to help us tolerate the void that is the universe, the swaying of the planets... their silent indifference to the site of your pain” (Duras, *Practicalities* 15). In the early 1980s, having decided to take the plunge into detoxification, writing became increasingly difficult for Duras. Previously, she wrote her books late at night after she had been drinking heavily, and detoxification forced her to become suddenly “face to face with herself,” (Adler 252) which inspired a great deal of fear. She wrote in her lucid moments in the detox hospital in the United States, and when she came out, she would often dictate to Andréa, who would type or write for her. Having crossed through her alcoholism for the first time by the publication of *The Lover*—she would relapse at least two more times—Adler poses the question, “How was she to go on living?” and answers it herself in the next sentence: “By writing” (Adler 319). Writing eventually saved Duras from her alcoholism.

Lastly, in examining *The Lover*, it is important to remember that the work is autofictive, and therefore the events of the novel hold some kind of personal significance

to Duras. Having already discussed her family and the impact their deaths had on Duras' ability to write the novel, it is necessary to briefly address the title character and Duras' relationship to him. The lover clearly held a life-long position of importance in Duras' memories of her childhood, as this relationship marked the boundary between childhood and womanhood. He was the one who helps her begin the long, arduous process of escaping her family, and he also remained in her memory "because of what the relationship is not" (Vickroy 11). The lover was the first in a long cycle of impossible loves for Duras, and so the memory of this unfulfilled, desperate affair initiated a perhaps painful reflection on her life and the men she has loved. To use Vickroy's conclusion, "The memory of the affair, the image of the snapshot never taken, continues with Duras throughout her life, gaining strength and importance with time... This experience [the relationship with the lover] defines Duras' adolescent image and becomes a focus of her art throughout her entire life" (Vickroy 11). The impossible loves that Duras suffered in her life, beginning with the lover from her childhood in Indochina, create memories within her that she cannot escape, and so she releases them into her writing. In *Practicalities*, she expressed her bitterness and exhaustion when it comes to heterosexual love affairs: "Man and woman are irreconcilable, and it's the doomed attempt to do the impossible, repeated in each new affair, that lends heterosexual love its grandeur" (Duras, *Practicalities* 35). Additionally, Duras addressed her impossible love affair with Andréa in *Practicalities*, when she wrote, "we confronted the impossibility of that love without flinching or trying to escape. It was a mysterious love, impossible to imagine... we took it as it came—impossible—without doing anything to suffer less... and it wasn't enough" (Duras, *Practicalities* 80). Later, she mourned the inherent impossibility of their

relationship: “You are gay and we love each other... Nothing will be any good” (Adler 329). Duras’ lengthy history of impossible love affairs lent weight to her reflection upon what was perhaps her first impossible love affair as written in *The Lover*. The novel is a novel of unavowed love, a book in which an unknown force prevents the young girl from confessing her love to the Chinese from Cholon. Duras wrote, “The essence of this love is that it can’t be written” (Duras, *Practicalities* 76), and also that they “love each other unawares, it happens outside the book” (Duras, *Practicalities* 77).

In conclusion, the strength of *The Lover* lies in the fact that it is the work of a mature artist, but it is also particularly moving because it is part of Duras’ autofictive work of the Indochinese Cycle in the 1980s. Additionally, the deaths of her family members permitted her to write perhaps more honestly than she had ever written before about her childhood, which lent the story a stunning truthfulness rarely before seen in Duras’ fiction. Lastly, Duras’ confession that she loved the Chinese from Cholon all those years ago, as well as her admission that she still loved him at the time the novel was written, shed new light on the cycle of impossible loves that haunted her adult life in France and heightened the poignancy of the adaptation’s final scene.

### Outside Influences on *The Lover*

When examining the literary influences on Duras' writings, it is necessary to keep in mind what the biographer Laure Adler says about Duras: "Marguerite belonged to no one and compared herself to no one" (Adler 210). For the most part, this is true of Duras; her literary influences were few, and mostly confined to the traditions of Realism, particularly American Realism, and the Nouveau Roman<sup>4</sup> tradition, although it is possible to draw a comparison between some of Duras' later works and the literary tradition of Surrealism, as well.

Duras was introduced to her foreign contemporaries during the brief period of time that she spent in law school in 1934. Her lover at the time, Jean Lagrolet, helped her to discover the major writers of the era, such as the British writer Joseph Conrad, whose work she enjoyed for the rest of her life. However, Duras was particularly captivated by the Americans: William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway. As Hewitt writes, "During this 'existentialist period,' Duras... seems to have been literarily influenced by American realism... Similar to Camus in *The Stranger*, Duras shuns psychological analyses of intimate feelings, preferring instead to trace a rugged ethos via actions, terse dialogue, and attitudes" (Hewitt 100). In fact, Duras was so deeply influenced by their work that her first novel was rejected from Gallimard publishing house because of its American, specifically Faulknerian, overtones; it was only upon the intervention of her friend Ramon Fernandez (whose wife, incidentally, appeared in *The Lover*) that Duras managed to arrange a meeting with Queneau, one of the publishers at Gallimard, and it was he who inspired her to turn away from the Americans to create a style wholly her

---

<sup>4</sup> "New novel" (Translation mine)

own. He reportedly gave her two pieces of advice that inspired her. He first suggested that she “abandon her American models, simplify her style, and get straight to the point,” which Duras did quite effectively in her third novel, *The Sea Wall*, and he also told her to “write and do nothing but that. Being a writer is a profession. You have to stick at it” (Adler 97). Duras continued to write, going through stages of fascination with various types of stories, like her wave of crime stories published in the 1960s, or her collection of autobiographical novels in the 1980s. She also experimented with different styles of writing, such as the Nouveau Roman tradition, feminist writing, and Surrealism.

In the later part of her career, around the publication of *Moderato Cantabile* in 1958, Duras’ novels diverged permanently from the tradition of Realism and the Hemingway/ Faulknerian models she always admired, as demonstrated in *The Little Horses of Tarquinia*, for example, and moved towards a new language and style. Coincidentally, this shift in her writing happened to correspond with the beginning of the Nouveau Roman tradition. Duras certainly shared some characteristics of this tradition, such as the search for “new avenues of fictional exploration,” which involved deliberately frustrating “conventional literary expectations” and letting go of traditional novelistic tools such as “plot, dialogue, linear narrative, and human interest” (“New Novel”). However, Duras clearly differed from this tradition in that while the new novelists actively avoided “any expression of the author’s personality, preferences, or values,” Duras had clearly turned to autobiography or the exploration of autofiction during the time in which she was numbered among the new novelists (“New Novel”). Unlike certain authors for whom being categorized as a ‘New Novelist’ brought them fame, by this point in her career, Duras’ fame was already in place, and she

remained utterly indifferent to the movement in general, except to occasionally denounce it. Rather, she attributed her change in writing style to her violent, sexy love affair with Gérard Jarlot, saying of herself that “the veering around toward sincerity happened then,” and happened because of Jarlot and nothing else (Hewitt 101). As she stated publicly over and over again, Duras did not ever associate herself with the Nouveau Roman tradition, despite her transfer to the Minit publishing company for *Moderato Cantabile*, a publishing company known for its publication of Nouveau Roman writers. However, in spite of her claims that she had nothing to do with the Nouveau Roman, it is irrefutable that her writing style changed dramatically with *Moderato Cantabile*. As she began to explore the idea of what Adler calls “describing the indescribable,” Duras wanted such a drastic change to be obvious to her readers, so she briefly switched publishers. Duras is classified as a ‘New Novelist’ in the reviews of *Moderato Cantabile*, and at the time, Adler notes that she did nothing to change the public’s view of her as a writer of the Nouveau Roman. She was simply satisfied to be compared for once with other novelists whose work she respected, like Sarraute. However, in classic Durasian fashion, once she had allowed the public to classify her as a new novelist, she formally declared that she never understood the Nouveau Roman and was never a part of it.

Whether or not Duras technically fell under the category of new novelists, the Nouveau Roman techniques she utilized eventually fell to the background, particularly during the Indonesian Cycle and the Indochinese Cycle of her writing, both of which took place in 1970-1990, when the feminine characteristics of Duras’ later writings emerged. As Hewitt writes, “Duras’ outlook evolves to a feminist position linking her life as a woman and her art... For Duras, women writers constitute a group of outsiders to the

cultural institutions, a group supportive of one another's efforts to chip away at the literary traditions and conventions." In addition to the new view of Duras as a feminist writer (or at least a feminine writer) that emerged with *The Ravishing of Lol V. Stein*, there is also a school of thought, explored primarily by Lisa Signori, that Duras also had a relationship with Surrealism in which she, in effect, "feminized" the literary tradition of Surrealism. Surrealism, a literary movement closely tied to Dadaism, was mainly a reaction against the supposed "rationalism" that led Europe into World War I. Unlike Dadaism, however, the surrealists focused on the beauties and mysteries of "positive expression," rather than the negation so prevalent in the Dadaist movement ("Surrealism"). The reason that Signori writes about Duras' feminization of Surrealism is that this tradition is a primarily male-dominated literary movement, controlled by such literary titans as Camus and Sartre, and the female characters in this literature are generally underdeveloped, existing simply as objects of the male gaze. Signori believes that Duras, while falling into Surrealism when it came to her obsession with 'the gaze' and the voyeur, departed from Surrealism when she created vibrant female characters who subjected men to *their* gaze, and not the other way around. For example, Signori writes, "For Duras, in what I call her feminization of Surrealism, the link between the unconscious and exterior reality was often a man, since she frequently reverses the male and female positions within a text" (Signori 27). In Duras' work, it is the *woman* who desires the man—he is the object of *her* gaze—and this desire eventually transforms her character in a dynamic way<sup>5</sup>. Also unlike Surrealism, the male characters in Duras'

---

<sup>5</sup> This Durasian phenomenon is clearly demonstrated in *The Lover* when Marguerite is empowered by the lover's desperate love for her and his inability to act upon it.



works are thoroughly explored; the lover is a strong example of a well-developed male character who is the object of female desire and who is frequently subjected to her gaze.

Strong surrealist female characters like Lol V. Stein, Anne-Marie Streidter, or even the girl in *The Lover*, are not to be found in Duras' early works, leading Signori to write, "They [the passive heroines of Duras' early novels] seemingly need a healthy dose of Surrealism" (Signori 27). It is both a Durasian and a surrealist aesthetic for love to be inextricably connected with "rebirth and a freer, more liberated existence," (Signori 31) but her early characters did not experience the dramatic changes that spring from love. However, in her novels that followed the standard prescription of the male gaze, Duras revitalized Surrealism by daring to imagine the feelings of the woman who is being admired. In *The Sea Wall*, for example, the young female protagonist, Suzanne, begins to see herself as desirable and begins to appreciate the power of sexual passion when she is pursued by her older suitor, M. Jo, particularly when he begs her to permit him to watch her as she showers. Although this storyline roughly reappeared thirty-four years later as the semi-autobiographical plotline of *The Lover*, by that time Duras had developed into a writer who sympathized strongly with the feminist tradition, which led to the above shift from male gaze/female object relationship to female gaze and desire/male object relationship that we observe in *The Lover*. This shift is indicative of Duras' transformation of the surrealist tradition, since, according to Signori, "nowhere in Surrealism do the male surrealists take into account the woman's thoughts as she is examined and desired. Duras begins the process of feminizing Surrealism by making room for woman's sexuality" (Signori 44).

Another link between Duras and Surrealism is her use of Breton's "amour fou<sup>6</sup>," but again, she revitalized the principle in a feminist way. In Duras, it is the woman who feels the amour fou for the man, and not the other way around, as in her play *The Ravishment of Lol V. Stein*. *The Lover* seems to break this pattern, however, returning to the simplistic surrealist amour fou of her early career, clearly observed in *The Sea Wall*. Signori points out that in *The Sea Wall*, the male character, M. Jo (whom we have already compared to the character of the lover), exhibits the surrealist tradition of "l'amour fou" for the protagonist, Suzanne. The same mad love appears in *The Lover*; in fact, one of the lover's early lines in both the novel and my adaptation is, "I love you madly."

Signori also points out the understanding surrealists have of the immense power of discovery, which is partly due to the fact that they believe that, in the words of Matthews' *Anthology*, "the world of true existence is not divorced from the world... but contained within it, waiting to be uncovered." Duras operated under the same assumption, and lent the same weight to moments of revelation, as exhibited in the final discovery of *The Lover*; the girl discovers her previously unrealized love for the lover, and this realization impacts her deeply for the rest of her life. So much so, in fact, that she writes a novel about it when she is well into her seventies. This surrealist power of revelation led to my choice to make this discovery the climatic event of the adaptation.

Finally, the last connection between Duras and Surrealism is drawn when Signori quotes Herbert Gershman, stating that "'Surrealists were seekers more than finders,' especially since for Breton, 'true life lay in searching for the unknown... in inventing a new form of love'" (Signori 54). This is true of Durasian literature, as well; Duras was nothing if not a seeker of love.

---

<sup>6</sup> "Mad love"

In addition to the style of the American writers, the Nouveau Roman tradition, and Surrealism, Duras was also influenced by the social movement of feminism, particularly in the later part of her career. Throughout her career, Duras was subjected to reviews of her work that were often heavily sexist. For example, one of the critics of *La Gazette de Lausanne* wrote of one of Duras' early works: "It is difficult to believe that a woman could have thought up and put together in a form so abrupt, so intensely cynical and peremptory the short stories that make up *The Little Horses of Tarquinia*" (Adler 192). She also experienced derisive and sexist criticism from Dionys Mascolo, one of her closest friends and her most trusted critic. Of her early novels, he said, "You've been reading Hemingway again, haven't you?" Such criticisms were perhaps the beginning of her feminism. Adler suggests that Duras yearned for the day when she could fully demonstrate her abilities to the critics and freely celebrate her femininity. Duras herself, in her 1987 work, *Practicalities*, demonstrated her newfound feminist stance when she stated, "a writer who has never known women and yet thinks he is involved in literature is mistaken" (Duras *Practicalities* 36). Other of Duras' contemporaries, like French feminist writer Hélène Cixous, recognize Duras as a "practitioner of feminist writing," (Hewitt 106), but perhaps Duras herself summed up her stance on the feminist movement best when she wrote in *Practicalities*, "Perhaps before everything else, before being Duras, I am—simply—a woman" (Duras *Practicalities* 33).

In addition to Duras' relationship with the literary traditions of her time, it is valuable to discuss Duras' involvement in Jean Jacques Annaud's film of *The Lover*, her

own reactions to the film and the critics' reactions, and also to analyze the impact of the film on her future films and her future writings, despite the fact that the film adaptation was made and released after the novel's publication.

In order to understand Duras' many objections to Annaud's film adaptation, one must first understand how Duras approached film-making, as well as her understanding of the adaptation process. Adler writes, "Duras made text-film, filmed text, film of text, call it what you will, but it didn't exist before her" (Adler 283). Making a film was, to Duras, a logical continuation of the art of writing, and it is an art form deeply tied to language. Generally speaking, the critics were extraordinarily harsh when it came to Duras' films, especially her later films, the majority of which involved no images, only sounds and broken language. As film critic Pierre Desproges wrote in 1986, "Marguerite Duras didn't just write bullshit... she also filmed it" (Adler 283). However, despite the negative reactions of the critics, and since her detoxification at the end of the 1970s, actors from around the country loved to work with her because she had a gift for understanding the actors and communicating with them. Annaud's style of film-making, with a big budget, filming on location, and with actors she felt were wrong for the parts, violated Duras' fundamental understanding of what films should and should not be, and above all, how they should be filmed. According to biographer Vircondelet, Duras rejected commercial cinema for the same reason that she rejected commercial novels: "...it will never deal with her chosen subject, the essential quality in words, gazes, gestures, and invisible exchanges" (Vircondelet 250). It was for this reason that Duras' films were usually low-budget and shot quickly, so that they lost "no time in expressing the mysterious human force that always interested her" (Vircondelet 250). Annaud's film

exhibits no such respect for the mysteries of mankind that Duras continually explored. He used screen time for elaborate, decorative shots of the Vietnamese countryside, had a thirty-million-dollar budget, and he took almost five months to film, even going so far as to film on location in Vietnam. He also focused a great deal on the sex between the young girl and the Chinese man rather than the compelling, complex relationship they shared. Incidentally, Annaud's commitment to filming the erotic scenes described in *The Lover* made the film an instant international sensation, but sincerely alienated Duras from the project. The storyline was one of the biggest points of disagreement between Annaud and Duras; she questioned Annaud's interpretation of the novel because of the way that he "confused biography with 'translation,'" or the way he tried to interpret "what really happened on the ocean liner" as opposed to "the account she gave of it," or the translation of her life that she provided (Vircondelet 55). She also disliked that he focused more on the sexual relationship between the girl and the Chinese man, as opposed to the girl's journey towards becoming a writer, which Duras came to believe was the true focus of the novel. Duras, in opposition to the film, declared that, "What's needed is a kind of cinematic commando..." (Vircondelet 353). She also claimed that none of Annaud's ideas or materials were given to her, although producer Claude Berri declared this to be untrue. Vircondelet points out that everything about Annaud's film, "especially the size of the budget, contradicts her conception of cinematic art as being open, poor, spontaneous, exposed to outside influences. The eternal debate between Duras and the adaptors of her novels!" (Vircondelet 354). Duras' disapproval of the film and of Annaud himself was public, cutting, and specific. Vircondelet writes, she is "mockingly skeptical of his [Annaud's] ability to create a successful rendition of the work"

(Vircondelet 352). She criticized him for the extremely high budget for the film, and for finding an actress to play the young girl who was, as Duras put it in an interview with *Le Monde*, “too pretty. In my book, I noted: ‘If the little girl is too pretty she won’t look at anything, she will let other people look at her.’ It’s not Annaud I am worried about, it’s the inherent limits of the film” (Vircondelet 352). Part of the difficulty that Duras might have experienced in this controversy was the difficulty of ceding her work to another artist to recreate in film. Although she typically granted adaptors and translators of her work great freedom, she appeared quite tied to *The Lover* in a different and deeper way than any of her other novels. Duras wrote the original screenplay for the film, and as a tool to help her create it, she was reading the novel out loud on camera. She could not remain composed when she was reading it aloud; she was deeply affected by certain parts, such as the death of the younger brother, and she stated, “Is the greatest enemy of the film not the novel?” (Adler 375). She was writing a different screenplay than Annaud wanted to film, wanting to ignore the family, the autobiography, and the eroticism, and simply focus on the story of a young girl discovering her desire to write. The Annaud film obviously contradicts Duras’ desire, as it has sex scenes so steamy that when the video was released in Vietnam, about a fourth of the film was censored, and upon its release in the United States, three minutes of the film had to be cut before the film could be rated R instead of NC-17. Therefore, Duras struck a financially strong deal to remove herself from the writing of the film. She later said, “If I granted the rights... it was for the money” (Vircondelet 353). Despite the large amount of money she got for the rights to the novel, she was immediately dissatisfied with the new direction of the film and began to work on *The North China Lover*. She denounced Annaud’s film multiple times,

and even rejected *The Lover* itself, stating “*The Lover* is a load of shit. It’s an airport novel. I wrote it when I was drunk” (Adler 378). She was wholly pleased with *The North China Lover*, however; upon its publication, she wrote, “I think my life has finally begun to reveal itself to me” (Adler 378). Although she published *The North China Lover* as her own cinematic version of the film, Annaud eventually borrowed Duras’ ideas from that text, as well. The film was highly successful in Europe particularly, winning the Golden Reel award in 1993 from the Motion Picture Sound Editors' for "Best Sound Editing—Foreign Feature," and it also received the César Award for Best Music Written for a Film in 1993. The majority of its success was due to its commercial sex appeal and scandalous sex scenes. Despite the fact that Duras showed such contempt for it, Günther tries to highlight its strong points. For example, the film makes concrete Duras’ abstract images, and brings the beautifully described atmosphere of the book to life. In Günther’s opinion, filming in Vietnam truly captured the feel of the country that Duras described so vividly in the novel. The film falls short, however, in exploring the girl’s journey towards self and identity. Additionally, important identity-forming female characters, such as Anne-Marie Stretter, Hélène Langonelle, and Dô, are left out or appear only briefly. I cannot personally call this a failing of the film, as in my adaptation I chose to exclude those same characters due to time constraints, but in a full-length feature film their absence is more keenly felt. Additionally, Günther writes that the film is not “elusive” like Duras. The film “does not reflect the complexity and subtleties of the book. Perhaps only Duras herself can successfully film Duras” (Günther 84). Finally, when it came to the film, Duras had much to say—the majority of it negative—but, as a woman of brilliant and public contradictions, and although she claimed never to

have seen the film, Adler reports that when she saw Annaud in a café after the film's release, she whispered to him, "I went to see your film. It's wonderful" (Adler 382), a comment which effectively ended the war between Duras and Annaud surrounding the film of *The Lover*.

Lastly, it is important to understand Duras' place in the history of French literature. Vircondelet writes that, despite the heap of criticism stacked up against her, the critics were simply refusing "to hear what she keeps uttering in a secret voice, not wanting to admit that, in the wasteland that France has become, she is the greatest living author" (Vircondelet 357). Another of Duras' biographers, Laure Adler, says that, after her third novel, *The Sea Wall*, Marguerite Duras was already considered "one of the best novelists of her generation," and "among the very best of our young writers" (Adler 181). She did not win the Goncourt for *The Sea Wall*, a slight for which she was always bitter, but the general critical acclaim at the time and from that time on in her career was positive. Duras' influence in the French literary scene was widespread even while she was still alive, which was evidenced by the worldwide "Duras Weeks" that were organized, the international colloquium on her work that occurred in Cerisy-la-Salle in 1993, the widely broadcasted radio interviews she gave, and the acclaim she earned for the nation-wide lectures she gave before her death. Beyond her national fame, and the fame she enjoyed in Europe, Duras frequently shared a more personal relationship with her readers, as with Durasian scholar Deborah Glassman, who writes, "Duras is a writer for our times even as she continues to polarize her readers and befuddle pigeonholers... Duras moves beyond the personal... True to her own modernity, her filmic and literary



language pose the limits of representation... Duras' oeuvre taken in its largest and most radical aspect dismantles traditional text-making operations, while remaining profoundly anchored in real experience" (Glassman 121). With over seventy published works, Duras remains "one of the most prolific French writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," and her "distinctive voice" and "mixing of genres" sets her apart from other writers of her time (O'Neil 148). As for the importance of *The Lover* in her oeuvre, Duras herself addresses it in her book, *Practicalities*: "Some books are perfect as they stand: *Summer 1980*, *The Atlantic Man*, the vice-consul crying out... *M.D.*, *Lol V. Stein*, *The Lover*, *The War*, *The War*, *The War*, and *The Lover*" (Duras *Practicalities* 78).

Therefore, although Duras could be counted among any number of literary and social traditions that were present during her lifetime, she somehow managed to remain outside of them all, particularly with her iconic works like *The Lover*. Additionally, although other sources outside of her own work certainly influenced her, such as Annaud's film of *The Lover* and the opinions of the critics and her readers, Duras eventually became an almost legendary figure in the French literary world, a position of fame almost unheard of for a woman to achieve at the time, thereby proving her dynamism and the enormous impact of her work.

### Historical Dramaturgy and Duras' Contemporaries

Following the discussion of the influences of literary traditions on Duras' writing, it is important to address briefly the significance of her childhood in French Indochina and its impact on her life and her writing. Also, since half of the adaptation takes place in Paris in the 1980s, a brief explanation of the revolutionary events of May, 1968 and their effect on Duras is necessary. Lastly, although I have discussed the literary traditions to which Duras occasionally subscribed, I have not yet addressed Duras' contemporaries and their literary influence on her. Despite Duras' claims to be an outsider, a subscriber to no traditions and influenced by no one, the fact remains that her earlier writing clearly draws inspiration from several of her contemporaries. Thus, I have included a summary of her most significant literary models.

French Indochina holds an exalted place in Duras' oeuvre. The French colonies provide the setting for some of her most famous literary achievements, such as *India Song*, *The Vice-Consul*, *The Lover*, *The North China Lover*, and *The Sea Wall*. However, even her novels that do not take place in Indochina were still heavily affected by her childhood there, as much of her writing has an Eastern influence. Her novels and plays are steeped in a sensuous specificity that springs from her childhood in visceral Indochina. Vircondelet addresses this Eastern influence when he writes, "Duras' places are always permeated with that smell of churches, Asia, and crematoriums where memory is concentrated, places recalling death and things long gone, with only remembrances as proof. Places like mausoleums... where victims of love lie in state on beds that might as well be coffins: Marguerite Donnadiou's body in which the Chinese

lover ‘is engulfed,’ Delphine Seyrig’s unassailed porcelain body in *India Song*, Duras’ body in the grip of a coma, in a secret room in the American hospital” (Vircondelet 40). *The Lover* is not a novel about class struggles and white supremacy in Cochinchina, mostly because of the poverty of the little white girl. However, the evocative sensuality of the language and the vivid descriptions of the places, such as the native housing estate where the lover lives or the bustling streets of Cholon, certainly speak to the influence of Indochina on Duras’ oeuvre. While writing the adaptation, I did spend a great deal of time exploring the importance of the class and colonial structure issues inherent in the novel. In the rehearsal process, too, most of our attention was focused on the relationship between the lovers and its impact on Duras’ life and writing, but it is impossible to adapt this novel and not have any reference to the class structure of colonial France. For example, one of the first remarks Marguerite makes about the elegant man in the limousine who is watching her is, “He’s not a white man.” Although she herself is at the bottom of society because of her poverty, she is still aware that the lover is socially beneath her, simply because he is not white. Therefore, although Duras’ deep connection to the world of Indochina and her passion for writing the class struggles inherent in the colonial relationship was certainly not a focus of our interpretation of *The Lover*, it is an inescapable part of the novel itself, and therefore worthy of further research and exploration.

French Indochina<sup>7</sup> in the 1920’s and 1930’s, the time of Duras’ childhood there, enjoyed relative prosperity in comparison to other Asian colonies, but French policy and governance was extraordinarily strict. The number of Europeans was tiny in comparison with the large population of native Indochinese living in the province of Cochinchina,

---

<sup>7</sup> Present-day Vietnam.

which is the setting of *The Lover*. There were approximately sixteen thousand European colonists living among and governing almost four million Indochinese natives. Cochinchina was the most valuable province in Indochina because it had the richest land, and its two biggest cities—Saigon and Cholon—were seaports. Cochinchina was perhaps the most progressive of the provinces, which simply meant that it was more fully exposed to the influences of French culture than the other provinces were (Ennis 1). All of Indochina, however, was subject to the strict mastery of the French government in Indochina, as France had a particularly oppressive view of the colonies (Ennis 2). A colonial scholar writes, “The French ‘nation’ is uppermost, while the English and Dutch regard local conditions” (Ennis 6). However, he also writes, “It is true that French writers have a more complete understanding of the natives than either the English or Dutch; yet governmental France, with its passion for *ordre*, frequently causes maladjustments in the lands under that tricolor by the destruction of local traditions and institutions... the French policies stifle colonial individuality” (Ennis 7). In fact, a large part of the governance issues of Indochina stemmed from the fact that the colony was not only micro-managed by the French government, but it was also over-weighted with far too many officials. As Ennis recorded in the 1930’s, “France has colonial agents partly qualified, partly ‘nominated,’ with the higher posts, as a rule, going to politicians. Consequently the Republic’s empire contains a plethora of officials... in Cochinchina in 1910 there were eighty-six high agents for a region which England controlled with fifteen...! It is not surprising, then, to see that... one-third of the general and one-half of the local budget is spent for the maintenance of French officialdom” (Ennis 7-8). This understanding of colonial governmental structure is helpful particularly when one

considers the mother character in *The Lover*. The mother was abandoned to her fate by the French government because colonial governmental officials were corrupt and she did not have the money to ensure their support. One of the promises the French government made to potential colonists was the promise of land in Indochina, but in the case of the mother, she poured her life savings into worthless salt lands that were flooded every spring by the sea simply because she did not have the money to bribe the officials to allow her to purchase better land. This research on colonial France, although it was not the primary focus of the adaptation, provided me with a much deeper understanding of Duras' mother, as well as a deeper understanding of the shame inherent in Duras' scandalous liaison with the Chinese lover.

In his biography of Duras, Vircondelet provides a more poetic description of the land of Duras' childhood, one that is perhaps more in keeping with the way Duras' herself viewed Indochina. He records that French Indochina, Cochinchina in particular, was referred to as "The Paris of the Far East," though whether that was an attempt by locals to lay claim to the fashion and grace of Paris or an attempt by colonial France to eradicate the "local color" of the region is unknown (Vircondelet 29). Vircondelet describes the colony in great detail, referring to it as "an artificial, factitious world, drawing together in the famous rue Catinat Saigon's high society, its elegantly dressed women, its businessmen, its colonial administrators, its crooks in tailored suits with pencil mustaches, sipping Martell-Perrier... at sidewalk cafés in the warm late-afternoon humidity or amid piano bar sobs provoked by exile nostalgia and soul-sickness" (Vircondelet 29). At all the social events, everyone arrives in "white colonial outfits prescribed by fashion magazines brought from Paris, with slight alterations on account of

the climate” (Vircondelet 29). The Saigon high society congregates at the theater, where opera is a great success, or in the movie houses, or at the large colonial balls, described as “veritable junctions of social life where time glides by in an atmosphere of ennui and unsatisfied desire. Pre-World War I social codes are still in effect, giving the city an immutable, almost cellular way of life... It was here, in the false order of this society ruled by decay and the disorders of the soul, that she [Duras] received her first intellectual training. More than from books, it came from the discovery of this bastard world, divided between civic morality and the mystery of the rivers and the forests...” (Vircondelet 30). The divide between the French colonial world and the native world of the land itself is a theme Duras will revisit time and time again in her work. Duras herself experienced both sides, as she enjoyed the social status of a white Frenchwoman, but suffered the ignominy of poverty at the same time. Many critics attribute the political activism she exhibited later in life to the political and social injustices she both witnessed and experienced during her youth in Indochina.

My understanding of Duras’ activism, an activism that resulted from her childhood in Indochina, led me to stage the Old Marguerite sections of the play in her rue Saint-Benoît apartment in Paris, rather than in either of her countryside chateaus because her Parisian life was the foundation of her political activity. The 1970s and 1980s were very politically active times for Duras, and it was during this time that she wrote *The Lover*. She was enormously outspoken against the Gaullist regime. Indeed, even before the so-called revolution of May 1968<sup>8</sup>, she and Mascolo and the other intellectuals of the

---

<sup>8</sup> In the “revolution” of May 1968, almost two thirds of the French work force went on strike, as did many students in the high schools and universities throughout France, as a way of protesting the de Gaulle administration and other right-wing policies, such as the new consumerism and the modern technological movement that was sweeping the French nation.

rue Saint-Benoît apartment were among the first to call for a boycott of French radio and television that supported de Gaulle in his suppression of the worker and student strikes. Duras was also one of the writers for *Le 14 juillet*, an anti-Gaullist publication published by Mascolo and the other Rue St.-Benoît intellectuals. “She is seen again in the troubled times, a firebrand vibrant with the fierce energy that keeps her alive, in her own element on the liberated streets, breaking the law... inventing the revolution” (Vircondelet 242). In support of this revolution, she herself wrote the manifesto that emerged. She declared, “We are bound by nothing but refusal. On a separate, marginal path from that of mainstream, class-bound society, we lead unclassable, unbreakable lives, and we say no... we refuse to allow our refusal to be tied up, packaged, and stamped with a label... or to let anyone turn back its course” (Vircondelet 242). Despite the failure of the strikes to destroy the Gaullist regime, this mini-revolution led to a general shift in French philosophy that was championed in Duras’ writing. Her sexually liberated novels, her commitment to human equality, and her perpetual stand against colonialism by remembering French Indochina and writing for the voiceless Algerians of Paris were all results of this revolutionary shift, and heavily influence her writings in the 1980s when she wrote *The Lover*.

It is hardly surprising that the heavy-handed regime of de Gaulle reminded her of the French government’s cultural suppression of the Indochinese people during her childhood. How could this political awareness not lead her back to Indochina, the place in which she first became aware of social injustice and oppression? Of the post-revolution Paris in 1968, Duras wrote: “I’m happy to know the mental hospitals are full. That’s proof that the world is unbearable” (Vircondelet 254). It is this feeling of

intolerance with the political failures of de Gaulle and the memories of the injustices she witnessed in the colonies, as well as a newfound willingness to reveal the injustices of her own life, that spark the writing of books like *The Lover*. As Vircondelet reminds us so many times, “her books, open to limitless interpretations, to the vastness of the seas, are like sketches in which one can find Duras’ life” (Vircondelet 37), and so her experiences during these two periods of her life greatly influenced her writing and created her fiction. Vircondelet speaks to the mirror-like relationship between Duras’ life and her literature when he writes, “Duras’ story, her life, is to be found in the writing, her books, the hollows and the pockets, beyond the obscure trapdoors that she has left gaping, not covering them with words, events, in the reflections sent back into the books by the mirrorlike facts” (Vircondelet xi). In 1988, Duras herself admitted, “My life is in the books. Not in order, but does that matter?” (Vircondelet 37). Her life is her books, so naturally her childhood experiences and places like Indochina, as well the political awareness of her adulthood, are a huge part of her oeuvre. Still, even within her commitment to autobiography, political activism, and anti-colonialism, Duras’ writing is impossible to characterize. Hewitt writes, “...Duras’ writing performs chameleonlike transformations that make it impossible to connect her name with just one literary movement, one political stance, one style, or one kind of feminism. *The Lover*, moreover, bears witness to some of these multiple, often contradictory trends through its intriguing combination of traditional and avant-garde figures of literature” (Hewitt 99). Thus, although her childhood experiences in Indochina and her anti-Gaullist activities in the 1970s and 1980s certainly colored the writing of *The Lover*, once again, it is evident



that Duras' writing cannot be pigeon-holed into any one motivation or source of inspiration.

In the same way, although Duras' writing has been attributed to a number of literary traditions, she herself denied her affiliation with the majority of them, and her distinctive voice emerged outside of the constraints of any one tradition. However, Duras did freely admit to admiration of certain of her contemporaries, as well as subscription to the models of many of the literary masters, such as Hemingway and Faulkner. Duras was always an "other," but she still had literary influences, particularly early in her career. Very early in her life, Duras was turning to literature for comfort and guidance in her life. When she was fifteen, following Indochinese society's rejection of her because of her lover, she turned to Shakespeare and Molière for comfort, both of whom she loved for her whole life. She also sincerely admired Lewis Carroll and his imaginative, fictitious worlds. In her early writing from the 1950s, Vircondelet compares Duras to Proust in discussing the intensity of her exploration of the "inner [universal] geography" of mankind (Vircondelet 265). He writes, "the texts press forward hurriedly, seeming to escape their author's control... always reworking Duras' main themes: madness, odyssey, death, the massacre of memory and its intermittent resurgences, motifs all comparable to the winding course of the Mekong" (Vircondelet 265). Again, we see that her work can always be linked to Indochinese influences and metaphors. In her later years, however, Duras turned from Proust towards Musil and Ségalen. She also said that one of the most vibrant "and most shattering thing" that she had read in many years was "Matisse on the Barnes Foundation Ballet" (Duras, *Practicalities* 107). At that time in her career, she

also admitted to being influenced by Renan, Eustache, and, surprisingly, the Bible. Adler recognizes Duras' foreign contemporaries, particularly the Americans: Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Conrad, the latter of whom stays with her for her whole life. In her 1987 novel *Practicalities*, Duras stated, "I wish Conrad were still alive. How marvelous it would be to have a new Conrad novel every year" (Duras, *Practicalities* 107). Additionally, Hemingway's *The Green Hills of Africa* in particular influenced her enormously, to the point that she could recite entire paragraphs from memory. Mascolo, in some ways her harshest critic, but also one of her dearest friends, could immediately pick out Hemingway's influence from the pages of her writing that she showed to him. In addition to Mascolo, Duras' ex-husband, the poet Robert Antelme, proved to be a big literary model for Duras. It was Antelme who exposed her to "seeing literature as a stripping bare of the self," one of Duras' most successful writing techniques (Adler 168). Duras respected Antelme's opinion because of the brave, boundary-pushing work he did with his first novel, *The Human Race*, based on his experience in the Nazi concentration camps. When describing Duras' regard for Antelme's literary genius, Adler even goes as far as to say that "had *The Human Race* never been published, *The Sea Wall* would not have been written," because the "revolution" that occurred in Marguerite's writing style at the time is the direct result of Antelme's simplicity of language (Adler 168). Lastly, Duras herself was particularly vocal about her contemporaries whom she did not respect. In *Practicalities*, she wrote, "What do I think of Sartre? I don't think anything about him most of the time... I see him as alone in a wilderness created by himself. As kind of exile" (Duras, *Practicalities* 107). This is ironic because Duras herself was, in many ways, an exile, like Sartre. Later, Adler records Duras' active dislike of Sartre, Simone

de Beauvoir—against whom Duras was often publicly antagonistic—Louis Aragon, and Camus. Duras did, however, dearly love Sarraute, and she was one of the small number of living writers who Duras openly applauded (Adler 193).

In conclusion, Duras' childhood in French Indochina, as well as her political experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, were both factors in the writing of her novel *The Lover*, as many of Duras' life experiences were reflected in this work. Additionally, even though Duras often referred to herself as an outsider or a literary martyr, her writing was clearly influenced by a number of her contemporaries, particularly in the early part of her career before she had the experience necessary to throw off literary models and develop her own distinctive and captivating literary voice.

### Critical Reactions to the Novel

Throughout her entire career, Marguerite Duras carried on a love-hate relationship with her critics and her readers. In one interview, she would show humility and gratitude to her readers, and in the very next interview, she would reject their praise and repudiate the novel they had loved. She met with many harsh criticisms during her lengthy career, particularly towards the end of her life when she was indulging her alcoholism and producing experimental films that contained text without images. She was never deterred, however, and continued to write, continued to make films, continued to refer to herself in the third person; in short, she continued to be Duras, despite the sometimes harsh opinions of the critics. The critical acclaim and public adoration of *The Lover* was, in a way, the reward for the many years she had spent as a literary exile. In order to understand the importance of *The Lover*'s success, however, one must first understand the critical reactions to the rest of her work that she received.

Duras' writing career, though long and fruitful, began slowly. She published only nine novels in the years of 1943 to 1960, and her first two novels, *Les Impudents* and *The Tranquil Life*, were virtually ignored. Although it was her third novel, *The Sea Wall*, which secured her place in the French literary scene, her career did not begin in earnest until 1960; she published nine novels in the 'sixties alone. Even Duras herself, looking back on her first novel, criticized it harshly. Duras frequently disparaged her own work, particularly later in life during her alcoholism, as she would often write a piece or a story in a drunken stupor, and then reject the work or even fail to recognize it when she emerged from her drunken haze hours, or even days, later. However, her later criticism

of her first novel was genuine, and the product of a mature writer's reflection on her early work. The book, *Les Impudents*, was fortunate enough at the time to receive a complimentary review from Ramon Fernandez, a critic and Nazi sympathizer whose wife was also one of Duras' dear friends. However, despite the positive review, decades later Duras admitted to herself that, since the book saw several rejections from publishers before it was finally picked up by Plon, the publication of the novel might have had a great deal to do with her job as a paper distributor during the Nazi Occupation. Duras wrote of the book, "If my first novel finally appeared ...it was because I was part of a paper commission (it was during the war). It was bad..." (White).

However, for as much as *Les Impudents* failed to garner the attention of critics, Duras' third novel, *The Sea Wall*, was a great success. Published in 1950, *The Sea Wall* was the first of the many books Duras would write about her childhood; the lover appears for the first time in this story, although he is referred to as M. Jo, and the young girl from *The Lover* is named Suzanne in this version. The book was shortlisted for the Goncourt; after only three novels, Duras was already being talked about as one of the best young authors France had to offer to the literary scene. Her burgeoning political activism—a remnant of her time in the French Resistance—was recognized when a critic said of *The Sea Wall*, "Duras was describing an 'Indo-China that was calling for, justifying, and needing an uprising'" (Adler 181). Still, despite the recognition *The Sea Wall* received, it remained her only widespread success until the screenplay for *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, which was released in 1960. Her next big literary accomplishment was not until *The Lover* was published in 1984. Duras was continually criticized for the American influences present in her novels. *The Little Horses of Tarquinia*, published in 1953, was

especially criticized for the Faulkenerian presence in the novel. In fact, critic Blanzat of *Le Figaro littéraire* wrote, “This novel... is just like all the others, wholly inspired by American stylistic devices”, and a fellow critic agreed, saying, “After four novels, we have to accept that Marguerite Duras only wants to write in American French” (Adler 189). The critics also harped on her dramatic use of repetition and her flagrant violation of grammatical rules. When considering the body of Duras’ work, her early writings were actually quite conventional, particularly in comparison to some of her later works, like *Le Shaga*. However, for the remainder of her writing career, “Duras had the reputation of... being the expert on nothingness and the Paris intelligentsia’s mistress of navel-gazing. But she was not discouraged. She continued to write to exorcise her childhood and bewildering adolescence, and constantly returned to territory scorched by the absence of love” (Adler 189). André Ducasse, a critic from *Le Provençal*, cruelly writes about *The Ravishment of Lol Stein* in 1964, “In the age of the twist, Freud, and whiskey, to say you don’t like a book by Marguerite Duras is to admit to being a cretin. There are still a few of us cretins around, who prefer intelligence to madness, lucidity to alcoholism, self-control to pathological ravishing” (Adler 253). The critics were also particularly cruel about *Le Shaga*, Duras’ 1968 language play—potentially set in an insane asylum— in which there is a character who only speaks in the fictional language of ‘Shaga.’ The critic Caviglioli from *Le Canard enchaîné* writes an article about Durasian theater in general, but particularly about *Le Shaga*, entitled “‘While plucking off the petals of La Marguerite Durasoir,<sup>9</sup> the theater gives birth to horrors,’” and Guilleminault “announces that on the evening of the dress rehearsal, ‘Fascists and anti-

---

<sup>9</sup> Translation Note: “A play of Duras’ name that could be translated ‘Daisy the Deadly Bore’” (Vircondelet 237)

fascists fraternized in utter boredom” (Vircondelet 237). Amazingly, Duras remained unaffected by the shower of witty criticisms that rained down upon the show, and her self-assured attitude positively affected the actors, who, thanks to Duras’ brave indifference to the critics, had the courage to remount the show ten years after its opening to audiences who were much more open-minded.

Duras did not just receive criticism from journalists and book reviewers, however. Her lover and the father of her child, Dionys Mascolo, was often her harshest critic when it came to her novels, and even her poet ex-husband Robert Antleme offered an occasional assessment of her latest work. Her cruelest critic, though, was Yann Andréa, and more often than not, he attacked her personally in addition to attacking her professionally. He would often escape the home they shared to further explore his homosexuality, and he frequently screamed at her, “Why the fuck do you sit there writing all day? Everyone’s abandoned you. You’re crazy; you’re the slut of the Normandy coast, an idiot, an embarrassment” (Vircondelet 281).

In addition to criticism, Duras was also often satirized. She was an easy figure to mock, particularly in her later years, with her throaty voice, the Duras ‘costume,’ her alcoholism, and her direct way of speaking. Following the success of *The Lover*, as Duras sank even deeper into old age, her alcoholism, the narcissism of referring to herself publicly in the third person, and her hermit-like behavior, the critics began to satirize her harshly. Patrick Rambaud of the magazine *Actuel* mimicked the Minit cover art of the 1987 novel *Emily L.* and signed Duras’ name “Marguerite Duraille<sup>10</sup>” (Vircondelet 344). He was certainly not the only one to mock Duras and her fading popularity. As Vircondelet records, “Duras’ very own personality exasperates... [and] all of this is

---

<sup>10</sup> Translation note: “Duras + déraillé = Duras, the raving lunatic” (Vircondelet 344)

followed by sarcastic articles in the major dailies on ‘Madame Marguerite... the burst windbag’ (*Le Figaro magazine*), ‘Marguerite Du Rable,’ ‘Miss Dourasse’ (*L’Événement de jeudi*), ‘Queen Margot,’ ‘La Maguy de Saint-Germain’ (*Le Monde*)...” (Vircondelet 345). Vircondelet defends Duras faithfully, however, stating that “few people see that her absolute, scandalous shamelessness is part of an attempt to understand the world and herself. Part of the tragic force encircling and isolating her, the ‘unflagging hope’ that never leaves her alone” (Vircondelet 345).

The book reviewer, Edmund White, rather than dismissing Duras’ self-interest as narcissism like so many critics, discusses her admiration for herself in a positive light, believing that it was her reflection of self that permitted her to create such vibrant retellings of the stories of her life. He writes, “She loved herself, she quoted herself, she took a childlike delight in reading her own work and seeing her old films, all of which she declared magnificent... It's easy enough to make fun of her narcissism and her prevarications. But her work was fueled by her obsessive interest in her own story and her knack for improving on the facts with every new version of the same event” (White). It is reported that in the early ‘nineties, she encountered her old friend from the Resistance, François Mitterand, in a restaurant, and she inquired how it was possible that she had garnered more fame and attention worldwide than he. The perfect gentleman, Mitterand answered smilingly that he had always been sure that her fame would overshadow his (White), but the fact that Duras could ask such a question of Mitterand demonstrates the depth of her self-confidence and the delight she found in herself and her work.



Also in the 'nineties, a "new benevolence" emerged towards her work (Vircondelet 349). Following the publication of *Summer Rain* in 1990, despite the usual storm of love-hate mail she regularly received from the critics, her readers now possessed a new kindness toward her work, finally giving their approval for her "courage to speak out, for 'telling it like it is'" (Vircondelet 349). She also enjoyed a positive response, both critical and financially, to *The North China Lover* in 1991. Rather than simply recasting *The Lover*, critics were surprised and pleased to discover that *The North China Lover* was a novel in its own right, and a delightful blend of text, film ideas, and theatrical conventions, as well as a "smoother version of her elemental life story" (Vircondelet 353). Indeed, in *Le Figaro magazine*, where previously she was quite harshly reviewed, Nourissier characterized her "'as a true writer... one who goes back over old themes, hammering out the words, plunging into several enormously haunting memories'" (Vircondelet 353). And so, despite the turbulence of her lengthy relationship with critics and readers alike, at the end of her career and her life, Duras found acceptance from those whose love she had always craved.

The critical reactions to *The Lover* were quite different from those Duras received throughout the majority of her career in that they were almost uniformly positive. A large part of the novel's success stemmed from the public's firm belief that the novel was autobiographical; they desperately wanted to believe that they were being granted a glimpse into the 'true' life story of the enigmatic Duras. "The book's success is immediate, as if the public, frustrated for so long, would finally know, penetrate the author's intimacy, satisfy its curiosity" (Vircondelet 328). Her readers believed they

were finally being invited into the inner mystery of Duras, allowed to see inside her enigmatic childhood and observe the path of development from the sensuous, wild fifteen-year-old into the successful seventy-year-old novelist, filmmaker, and playwright. Duras initially rigorously denied that *The Lover* was in any way autobiographical, despite her readers' determination to make it so. However, in her later years, she finally relented and "agreed to remember herself as a fourteen-year-old girl," (Adler 345) and at last admitted that the unnamed young girl from the story was indeed herself. Adler offers another explanation for the wild success of the novel, stating that "*The Lover* is an experimental construction site designed to awaken the reader's imagination. This could be why it was so successful, for the reader is the main character and, in reading, rewrites the story" (Adler 347). The readers of *The Lover* become a character in the novel through their acceptance or rejection of the narrator's illicit love affair. Either way, the novel immediately sprang to the top of the best-seller lists, where it remained for several weeks, selling approximately one and a half million copies. The response of the critics was almost overwhelmingly positive, praising the book for its "enchantment, the delight it produces, the musical score that unfolds and glides from theme to theme" (Vircondelet 330). The American critics loved the book as well, "perhaps recognizing in Duras' language the rhythm of their own literature" (Vircondelet 331), although they later had many qualms with the film of *The Lover*, most of which stemmed from its almost pornographic nature. The novel was hailed by the critics as "absolute literature," and they wrote about the "grace, the radiance, the inner drive that carries the words" (Adler 348). Some even elevated her to the sublime: "Duras has not manufactured a book. She has lived a book the way people live a religion" (Adler 348). Minuit ran 25,000 copies—

usually they ran only 10,000 at most—and all were sold out the following day. Overnight, she was both a “publishing phenomenon” and a “social phenomenon,” (Adler 348) with people dressing like her in the ‘Duras costume,’ sending fan mail, and talking about her throughout all forms of media. And then, later in 1984, Duras received the Prix Goncourt for *The Lover*, and she suddenly experienced an entirely new flood of public attention and a new audience base. However, for the most part, readers who bought the book simply because it won the prize were disappointed in the work, due to its complicated structure and language, the apparent detachment of the narrator character, the violence, eroticism, and even the tightness of her focus. Since none of her later novels met with the same level of immediate and international success as *The Lover*, “Duras returned to the status of an exile temporarily brought back to the human community by a single book” (Vircondelet 331). Additionally, in classic Duras fashion, the moment she received the Goncourt, Duras dismissed the book, saying that she had hoped for a violent reaction from her readers rather than a friendly one. She was not prepared to settle either with her readers or with the critics who failed to award her the Goncourt in 1950 for *The Sea Wall*. She even went so far as to attack her critics, a common pastime for Duras, when she said, “it strikes me as quite extraordinary that we still tolerate from the old theatrical guard... a critical view based on the same forty-year-old criteria of psychological plausibility, of what shouldn’t be said and shouldn’t be done, criteria founded solely on their concerns for their reputation” (Adler 351). Still, she was honored even further in 1986 when she won—and accepted—the Ritz-Paris-Hemingway Prize for *The Lover*, which recognized narrative techniques reminiscent of Hemingway in the novel; the award is worth \$50,000, and this prize, in addition to the money she made

from royalties and the rights she had to films, ensured her continued financial security throughout the remainder of her life. Financial independence from Mascolo and Antelme had always been a primary goal of Duras when it came to writing, perhaps a remnant of the poverty she experienced in her early childhood, and so to her, the financial prize was almost worth more than the prestige that inevitably followed. Finally, it is important to remember that underneath the bluster and the over-confident public self that she presented on a daily basis lived a woman who, on some level, desperately needed the world's approval. Even though she herself wrote, "I think I have given literature an author named Duras," (Adler 381) she revealed her insecurity within the confines of her rue Saint-Benoît apartment. For encouragement, she pinned up a graph showing the sales figures for *The Lover*. Also, one could witness her self-deprecatory humor and the remnants of her self-doubt in the picture posted above her writing desk; in the picture, there were penguins sitting on ice floes with her hand-written caption: "The readers of *The Lover*" (Adler 381). And so, even at the end of her long and fruitful career, despite her scorn for the critics, Duras needed them. Adler records that sometimes, before a review was due to be published, Duras would call a critic and ask in a worried voice his honest opinion of the work. When one considers the facts, it is entirely possible that her love-hate relationship with the critics stemmed from her deep love-hate relationship with herself.

In conclusion, the length and prolific nature of Duras' career, as well as her great financial and critical successes with such works as *The Sea Wall*, *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour*, *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*, and *The Lover*, all indicate that Duras was an author

with great depth, despite her tempestuous relationship with her critics and with the public.

### Textual Difficulties

When writing the adaptation of *The Lover* for the stage, I encountered several textual problems that stemmed from both the critical thought surrounding the novel and the artistic decisions required to solidify the author's original intent. There are several textual difficulties surrounding my adaptation, perhaps the most important of which surrounded the critical question of whether *The Lover* is an autobiographical work or a work of pure fiction. Therefore it was important to consider the adaptor's responsibility to any potential autobiographical material in a text. Additionally, there were difficulties inherent in the necessity to work from a translation of the novel, albeit a good one, and often simply finding strong criticism in English on a French writer proved to be astonishingly challenging. Finally, another textual dilemma stemmed from the prolificacy of Duras' long writing career; her continual reproductions of this story about her childhood lover caused me to ask the question, "What is important about this particular retelling of the story out of the multiple retellings that exist, and what is the role of the author's memory in these different versions of the story?" A writer of Duras' talent and length of career naturally produced a great deal of textual difficulties, all of which needed to be addressed before an adaptation could emerge that was both in harmony with the original text of the novel and translated the text into a new artistic medium.

There is a great deal of critical thought amongst Durasian scholars surrounding the potentially autobiographical nature of *The Lover*. Despite the fact that a great many of the events described in the novel can be biographically traced to Duras' young life in

French Indochina, the interplay between memory and reality in this novel is extraordinarily complicated, and therefore raises the question, “Is the novel autobiography or fiction?” Because of the sheer volume of critical thought surrounding the issue, and because the author herself involved herself in the debate, this is a question that was absolutely critical to address before writing an adaptation of the novel. The argument is quite polarized; few critics vacillate between the two options. However, a few scholars believe that there exists a third possibility between autobiography and fiction, a strange mixture of the two called autofiction. I found myself in the last group, a choice which my adaptation clearly reflects. Still, it is necessary to understand and to explore both schools of thought before one can fully appreciate the choice to blend the two.

Although I originally believed that the author’s own treatment of the question of autobiography would be helpful in determining under which category the novel falls, in actuality, Duras only perpetuated the controversy. First, she stated publicly and on numerous separate occasions that *The Lover* was not autobiographical, and then contradicted those declarations in her novels and her comments in later interviews. For example, in a 1991 interview she granted to *Le Monde*, Duras declared, “*L’Amant* n’est pas un récit autobiographique, c’est une traduction<sup>11</sup>” (Cranston 2), and in a 1987 interview with radio producer and fellow writer Alain Veinstein, she stated, “There is no book outside of oneself” (Vircondelet 317). In fact, in the text of *The Lover* itself, she wrote, “The story of my life doesn’t exist,” but then later in the same passage contradicted herself: “The story of one small part of my youth I’ve already written... [But] now I’m talking about the hidden stretches of that same youth, of certain facts,

---

<sup>11</sup> “*The Lover* is not an autobiographical story, it’s a rendering.” (Rough translation mine)

feelings, events that I buried” (Duras 8). The fact that she had, until this point, “buried” the part of her youth that she revealed in *The Lover* seemed to be the key sentiment, as it implies a need to release the past through exposing it, or at least a need to revisit it. Critic Laurie Vickroy even goes so far as to say that this need for semi-autobiographical expression stemmed from a desire to expose herself to the intimate scrutiny of her readers in an attempt to connect with them and to further inspire her writing.

Vickroy is not the only critic to draw a connection between Duras’ hints at autobiography and her relationship with her readers. Renate Günther, a French critic of modern writing, discusses the connection between Duras and her readers in terms of the ‘autobiographical pact,’ a term developed by Philippe Lejeune. In his text *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Lejeune defines autobiography as a work in which the author, narrator character, and central character of the novel are one and the same. However, particularly in Durasian texts like *The Lover* in which the main character and the narrator are not named, it is often difficult to discern to whom the “I” of the novel refers, and to determine exactly why the narrative voice switches from “I” to “She” in the exploration of certain critical events, such as the one that occurs in the scene in which the girl first has sex with the lover. Lejeune believes that if the narrator acts in the same manner as the author might, as in *The Lover*, one can view the work as autobiography, because the author has created an “autobiographical pact” between herself and her readers. However, Duras defied such a definitive understanding of her work when, despite her numerous documented claims that she herself was the young girl in the piece, she still sometimes referred to the book as a novel or a work of fiction, thereby distorting the autobiographical pact and the claims made within the novel, and furthering the



autobiographical conflict surrounding her later work. Günther concludes her discussion of Lejeune without reaching a firm conclusion about the novel's authenticity as an autobiographical source, stating that "*L'Amant* has been considered as a work apart from the rest of Duras's literary production, partly because it has been read as her autobiography" (Günther 19-20). However, Günther, as one of the rare critics daring to imagine a third possibility, disagrees with such a reading, believing instead that there is a large possibility that the novel could occupy a unique dual position as both autobiography and fiction.

In the "coy slippage between fact and fiction" (Cranston 52) found in *The Lover*, perhaps the greatest argument against the novel as an autobiographical work is its severe lack of chronology, or its contradicting chronology. Duras scorned the well-ordered biography, as the Duras scholar Alain Vircondelet rather ironically records in his poetic biography called *Duras*: "She doesn't believe in well-ordered biographies, as if they could ever really describe the inner reality of true life, the obscure play of desires, wonders, and terrors: 'They set off at the beginning of a life and, following the rails of events, wars, changes of address, marriages, they come down to the present,' she says, deploring such logic" (Vircondelet 333). Günther also recognizes this rejection of time and a well-ordered life in Durasian literature, but particularly in *The Lover*, pointing out that not only does the novel contradict the chronology of books that came before it, but it also contradicts its own chronology in places. Of the treatment of time in *The Lover*, she poetically writes that "Linear metaphors of time conveying a sequence of logically related events are replaced by images of open spaces... empty places from which only disconnected fragments of experience can be retrieved through memory with all its gaps

and blanks. In this sense, *The Lover* contradicts those critics who have considered the book as a revelation or confession about ‘the truth’ of the author’s life” (Günther 55). Therefore, the text itself refutes any classification of one or the other. Instead, it inhabits a place of true imagination, both the readers’ and Duras’, a place in which fact bleeds into fiction, and fiction intertwines with fact.

Thomas Spear, a professor and critic of French and Francophone literature, also subscribes to this school of thought, believing that, in addition to her texts’ dual nature of autobiography and invention, Duras’ presentation of her public self also walked the fine line between fact and fiction. She continuously adapted and transformed her “self-portrait” in her novels and interviews, which Spear claims endows the readers with the right to combine our often conflicting knowledge of Duras into one enigmatic character (Cranston 28). Spear believes that she “becomes the Duras persona,” in her novels and theatrical endeavors, as well as in her public appearances. “Her life story has become theater,” Spear writes, and the Duras of the 1980s, with her new focus on exposing the constantly shifting memory of her childhood, transferred “her identity into that of a fictive character, [and] becomes this character in interviews” (Cranston 14). While most artists fight for distinction between their lives and their fiction, Duras embraced the fiction of her life. And, according to French literary theorist Gérard Genette, there always exists “paratext” within a work of literature that includes not just the author’s notes or her introduction to the work, but also everything she may have said or written about the work in interviews, rewrites, and communication with other artists, etc. Through the use of the external aspect of her relationship to the writing world, “Duras... firmly and willfully establish[ed] this paratextual identity which exposes the

autobiographical elements of her fictions” (Cranston 24), but her work remains fiction nonetheless. Lastly, because the story in *The Lover* appears to be neither autobiography nor fiction, Spear claims that it becomes “autofictive.” *The Lover* becomes not an autobiography but a translation, a display of narcissism, an opportunity for voyeurism, an exhibition of self that Duras undertook as a paid storyteller. Duras herself admitted to the narcissism of continually fictionalizing one’s life story when she wrote, “Je vais de moi à moi. C’est ça le narcissisme<sup>12</sup>” (Cranston 36). In the end, the fact remains that Duras was obsessed with writing herself, desiring only to put herself on the page and the stage.

Thus, having researched the question surrounding the autobiographical nature of *The Lover* and determined its autofictive character, the next logical question surrounds the value of autobiography. What is lost or gained when a work of fiction is rejected as a wholly autobiographical work? This question led to a necessary exploration of identity in *The Lover*; the narrator and the enigmatic main character in the novel are both unnamed, and therefore require further definition outside of their strong ties to the life of the author.

Identity and self-representation are cornerstones of the text. The two most distinct voices in the novel, that of the detached, almost voyeuristic narrator and that of the young girl, offer two entirely different perspectives on the events and relationships in the novel, thereby creating dual identities that must be addressed when adapting the text for the stage. The fact that the majority of the novel is written in the present tense and the present perfect tense lends both immediacy and a sense of completion to the action of the novel; both the narrator and the young girl use each of these tenses, which implies an intimate connection between the two women. The young girl occasionally experiences

---

<sup>12</sup> “I go from me to me. That’s narcissism.” (Rough translation mine)

flashes of insight and a sense of finality surrounding her actions that is out of step with her identity as a fifteen-year-old girl discovering passion, as in her revelation about her ravaged face: “I acquired that drinker’s face before I drank. Drink only confirmed it. The space for it existed in me. I knew it the same as other people, but, strangely, *in advance*” (Duras 9 emphasis mine). Additionally, the narrator experiences memories in a vivid, tangible way that is incompatible with her identity as a woman with many years and experiences behind her, as when she states, “For the past three years white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets, and my mother’s men friends have been kindly asking me to have tea with them while their wives are out playing tennis at the Sporting Club” (Duras 17). The delicate blending of these two distinct identities that takes place throughout the novel furthers the confusion surrounding their respective roles in the novel, as well as their relationship to the author of the text. As Günther writes, “‘Identity’ in *L’Amant* corresponds to a number of points of view, voices, and subject positions, all of which can be ‘I’ but none of which ultimately defines the author’s, narrator’s, or character’s ‘self’” (Günther 22), thereby rejecting Lejeune’s definition of autobiography and forcing us to ask the question, who is “I” in *The Lover*? Günther provides an answer: all the many selves and perspectives are unified by a single sentence: “Je veux écrire<sup>13</sup>.” Throughout the course of the novel and throughout all the narrator’s and young girl’s different expressions of self, there is the underlying desire to write, the knowledge of a future career in writing. Therefore, all characters are identified by the author’s personal burning desire to write, meaning that they are all at least connected to Duras, if not a part of her. Due to this vibrant connection between characters and author, I made the artistic decision in my adaptation to assign the identities of Marguerite and

---

<sup>13</sup> “I want to write.” Trans. Barbara Bray.

Old Marguerite to the two unnamable characters of Duras' original text. Spear successfully uses Genette's theory of "paratext" to link the autobiographical elements of Durasian literature to the author herself (Cranston 24), in a sense proving that there are elements of autobiography in every writer's work, so I named the lead female characters in my adaptation accordingly.

And so, who is "I" in *The Lover*? The few characters in the novel who are unnamable are the young girl, the narrator, and the lover, which seems to indicate that their identities are in formation (Günther 29), the girl's and narrator's because they are exploring themselves through the lens of immediate experiences and memory, and the lover because he is continually redefined by both the women's memories. By naming the women in my adaptation Marguerite, but continuing to blur the lines between their identities by assigning both characters to a single actress, a direct autofictive connection to the author herself is firmly established, and yet the enigma surrounding Duras' elusive "I" in *The Lover* is preserved.

The above consideration of naming the unnamable characters in my adaptation led me to consider briefly the adaptor's responsibility to the autofictive nature of the novel. I have a duty to unravel the meaning behind Duras' aesthetic timelessness, her poetry, her characters and the inexplicable things that they do. And yet, perhaps the most beautiful element of Durasian aesthetics lies in its uncertainty. Duras' perpetual contradictions, rewritings, reinvention of self, and redefinition of characters all allow the reader, the adaptor, the audience member, the filmmaker, the actor, the critic, or the scholar the absolute freedom to accept that which she offers and translate it to his own

experiences<sup>14</sup>. The stories her readers and audiences fabricate for themselves out of the incomplete stories Duras provided are far more truthful than anything a single person, no matter how brilliant, could create on his own, and the stories created from her work and her life explain more about her readers than words ever could<sup>15</sup>. Her writing cries out for an audience, a thinking, feeling, hurting audience to impose their own understanding onto the “why” of her life. When she wrote of her decision to leave her lover, she says, “Then I said I agreed with his father. That I refused to stay with him. I didn’t give a reason,” thereby inviting the reader to create his own reasons for leaving, to understand the novel through the lens of his own experiences (Duras 83). As she wrote in *Practicalities*, “Ecrire ce n’est pas raconter des histoires... c’est raconter une histoire et l’absence de cette histoire. C’est raconter une histoire qui en passe par son absence<sup>16</sup>” (Cranston 66). Towards the beginning of the adaptation process, I struggled with the idea that the parts of the story that I chose to include and the scenes that I wrote would heavily impact, perhaps even distort, the audiences’ perceptions of Duras’ autofictive story, and I almost instantly began to fear making any sort of decision for fear of betraying the story of Duras’ life. However, Vircondelet’s claim in *Duras* that “In the entirety of her childhood, she is today the ultimate witness” (Ricouart 218), and Duras’ own firmly stated belief that “L’histoire de ma vie n’existe pas<sup>17</sup>” (Duras, *The Lover* 8), led me to understand that the readers’ or audiences’ experience of the piece is as crucial as the adaptor’s or actor’s experience, and is even comparable in a way to the writer’s

---

<sup>14</sup> “*L’Amant* n’est pas un récit autobiographique, c’est une traduction” (Cranston 2)

<sup>15</sup> “What is contained in books is more authentic than the author who writes them... The stories invented by Shakespeare tell more about Shakespeare than his life does” (Vircondelet 59).

<sup>16</sup> “To write is not to tell some stories... It is to tell a story and the absence of that story. It is to tell a story that passes by its absence.” (Rough translation mine)

<sup>17</sup> “The story of my life does not exist.” Translation: Barbara Bray.

experience. Therefore, my duty as the adaptor of the piece was to reach out to Duras' work, unbound by the restrictions of autobiography or critical thought, to experience it, and then to translate it.

One of the most halting barriers to this process of experience and translation was the elusive and captivating interplay between memory and reality, or past and present, of the novel. Due to the frequent switches from “je” and “elle<sup>18</sup>” and past to present found in *The Lover*, an examination of the roles of reality and memory in the novel was necessary. As the Kleinian disciple Carol Hofmann writes, “For Duras, memory is an endless and fleeting repetition/ variation of itself... forgetting is a ceaseless process of remembering and repetition, in the end an acquiescence to this repetition and to a hopeless and painful yearning for the impossible” (Hofmann 151). True to Duras' complex understandings of that which makes up a life, “Memory is... fiction” (Cranston 129). It is a recreation, a distortion of reality, an undefined world in which nothing is certain, a tool for forgetting. More than that, however, “Memory is a constant motif [in Duras]. Not only do the narrative voices attempt to recall the stories of the now-dead characters, but they also continually invite Duras's audience to revisit other works from her corpus” (O'Neil 156), and encourage readers to consider the transitive nature of memory. Memories change with each remembrance. This is why the repetition of Duras' story and her themes are valuable; repetition becomes a key for mastery. As Hofmann points out, “In Durasian forgetting, memories come to at least fleeting consciousness and are remembered or repeated. They change each time they are remembered, one memory displacing the last. Memory from this perspective is a constant and endless forgetting” (Hofmann 82). The challenge therefore in adapting

---

<sup>18</sup> Je: I. Elle: She.

Duras' literature was that of providing the audience with a cohesive, engaging chain of events in the story, while still retaining the interplay between memory and reality and its impact upon the characters. In my adaptation, the effort was made to achieve this goal by blurring the lines between past and present, allowing Old Marguerite to speak for Marguerite the young girl, and using the detached third person present tense to describe a critical interaction in the novel. In coming to an understanding of the critical thought surrounding the motif of forgetting and memory in Duras' oeuvre, the textual difficulties surrounding such a complex motif were resolved through the artistic choices made in the adaptation.

Yet another textual difficulty encountered in the study of Durasian literature was the language Duras employs. Unfortunately, I am speaking of the difficulty of understanding her actual spoken language for me, and not her literary narrative voice. For an American student or scholar who is barely fluent in French, as I am, there are great difficulties surrounding a novel written in French. Working from a translation is never preferable, despite Barbara Bray's brilliant job of translating the Durasian French voice to the American ear. However, I successfully completed my struggle through the text in its original French, which provided me with a basic understanding of the creativity inherent in translating, as well as a stronger foundation for judging strong or weak translations. Additionally, American Durasian scholars experience difficulty surrounding criticism, as a great deal of critical writings about Duras are in French. On top of the difficulty surrounding the artistic translation of the novel, there are practical difficulties surrounding the translation of the critical texts, as well. For example, despite the book's



depth and innovation, Deborah Glassman's discussion of *The Lover* in her volume *Marguerite Duras: Fascinating Vision and Narrative Cure*, was a difficult resource in which to invest because of the poor translations it employs. Although the language of the translation is certainly technically sound, there is little of Duras' wild poetry to be found in Glassman's words. To quote O'Neil, Duras has a "distinctive voice," one that is "poetic and enigmatic," a voice that Glassman seems to be missing in her translations (O'Neil 148). They are far too literal, as though translated by a person with a severely limited understanding of French, and Glassman's words do not fit with Duras' aesthetic of poetry. For example, Barbara Bray's poetic translation of Duras' complications with the process of writing her family back to life reads this way:

"I've written a good deal about the members of my family, but then they were still alive, my mother and my brothers. And I skirted around them, skirted all these things without really tackling them" (Duras 7).

Glassman, on the other hand, translates,

"I have written a lot about these people in my family, but while I did so they were still alive, the mother and the brothers, and I wrote around them, around those things without going right up to them" (Glassman 110).

Notice the distance of Glassman's translation, the clunkiness of the language, the 'direct translation' feel, particularly in contrast with the strong action verbs and softened tone of Bray's translation. However, as much difficulty as I had accepting Glassman's translations, yet another enormous translation issue I faced was my own struggles with the necessity of translating French quotes from critical sources. The fact is that in approaching this issue, I possessed neither the qualifications nor the poeticism necessary

to successfully translate Duras, and yet I was aware that I could not simply leave the responsibility to my reader, as many critics do. For instance, earlier in the paper I agonized over the decision to use the word “rendering” as opposed to “translation” for the French word “traduction<sup>19</sup>,” the poeticism and strength of the word “rendering” seemed more appropriate, but not possessing the colloquial understanding of this foreign language created a large potential for mistranslation, which can only be described as a tragedy when it comes to the study of a true master of language and sound like Duras. Therefore, this was a textual difficulty that could only be resolved through practice and a close attention to detail on my part.

Lastly, it was important to address the significance of the retelling of the story of the lover when it comes to the textual difficulties that surround Duras. She recounted the story many times, beginning with *The Lover*, and reexamining the work in *The North China Lover*, *Eden Cinema*, the film of *The Lover*, *The Sea Wall*, the War Notebooks, and others. What is important about the retelling of the story found in *The Lover*? Vircondelet offers a sentimental reason, believing that it is only through her compulsive and never-ending return to the story that had the greatest impact on her life as a young adult that she can discover “the absolute secrets of writing” (Vircondelet 350). Vickroy provides a more practical view, which is that, coming from a place of intense youthful trauma (both familial and sexual), “Duras’s obsessive returns to [the story]... [reflects] the trauma survivor’s struggle ‘with how to cohere and how to absorb and in some measure confront what one has had thrust upon one, what one has been exposed to’” (Vickroy 2). Therefore, based upon the writings of psychoanalyst and Kleinian disciple

---

<sup>19</sup> “*L’Amant* n’est pas un récit autobiographique, c’est une traduction” (Cranston 2)

Hanna Segal, Vickroy states that “Duras simultaneously mourns what is lost and shows us the creation of her life as a writer which will help her recover fragments of that lost past in ways that are symbolically meaningful to herself rather than factually accurate” (Vickroy 2-3). Hoffman, in agreement with Vickroy, asserts that “endless creation and destruction *are* this process of true forgetting” (Hofmann 53), meaning that the arduous process of remembering an event inevitably leads to both forgetting and mastery of the event’s impact. O’Neil returns to the question of autobiography or fiction when she writes that Duras “challenges the very notion of autobiography by writing multiple versions of the story of her childhood” (O’Neil 148). This reworking of past stories was characteristic of Duras. In fact, one of the three most common character types that she invented is the “storyteller who relates past events.” She created a character type that mimicked her own writing tendencies, and through constant retelling, exposed her audiences to her past. Lastly, Duras herself says, “A progressive loss of identity is the most desirable experience we can know,” (Adler 201) which seemed to indicate her desire to forget through remembering, or to write her story again and again until she was at last free from the pain of her past memories.

As evidenced by the fact that she told the story of *The Lover* many times and in many different ways, clearly memory was an eternal and perpetually changing replication of itself for Duras. We remember, we repeat, we surrender to our yearnings for ‘I’mpossible’ that are tied in with the acceptance of repetition, and “there is no ‘truth,’ no end point that is not also a beginning, no answer that is not also a question” (Hofmann 152).

In conclusion, it was imperative that all of the textual difficulties inherent in a complex novel like *The Lover* be thoroughly examined in order to create the most powerful and most cohesive artistic interpretation of the original text, one that respected the strength of Duras' original intention, but also followed her tradition of revisiting and reinventing her past works. A thorough understanding of these difficulties and their incorporation into the writing process was a pivotal part of the creation of an adaptation, and it was important that every effort be made to reconcile the artistic vision of the original text to the new interpretation.

### **Explanation of my Adaptation Choices**

As the entire second chapter is devoted to the adaptation process and a discussion of Durasian literature, in this section I have provided only a basic outline of the goals of the adaptation and a brief explanation of the design of the production.

First, it is important to ask the question, ‘Why this play now?’ It is easy (probably too easy) to say that the novel is one of my favorites, and I thought it would make an interesting and challenging senior honors thesis. However, it is true that I am captivated by Duras in a way that few other writers have managed to captivate me, and this is partly because of Duras’ own spirit of adventure and lust for challenges. Of her film-making, Duras said to *Cahiers du Cinéma*, “Just because you don’t know where you’re going is no reason for not going there” (Vircondelet 252). The same holds true for my thesis. I took on a large project, and I performed roles (both onstage and off) that were hitherto unknown to me, but that is an excellent personal reason for the development of this play now. In fact, one of the most important academic results of the project is that it provides a challenging subject for a senior honors thesis. It also provides the perfect intersection for all of the skills I have developed in college through my double major in Theater Studies and English, as I served as adaptor, dramaturg, producer, actor, as well as set, sound, costume, and props designer.

Additionally, one of the more universal reasons for performing this play is that, with over seventy published plays, novels, and screenplays, Marguerite Duras is one of the most prolific modern French writers, and yet she remains relatively unknown in the United States. Therefore, one of the goals for the adaptation is to introduce Duras to American academics and audiences. I also hope to further Duras’ established tradition of

cross-discipline production through my adaptation of *The Lover*. An important result of the project is the production of a new play in English adapted from Duras' "most celebrated novel," (O'Neil 149) an adaptation created specifically for American audiences.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, an excellent case for the performance of this adaptation now is the perpetual relevancy of both the novel and Duras' writing in general. The story of the adaptation is a discovery both of passion and a deep, abiding love, as experienced by two characters of different ages, social situations, and physical circumstances; this story is therefore widely universal, and can touch audiences of all ages and backgrounds. In addition, because the majority of the story is written in the present tense, regardless of which character is speaking the words, the line between past and present is blurred, and the story is beautifully timeless. Both Duras characters (Marguerite, the girl, and Old Marguerite, the narrator) are currently living and experiencing the story, which lends it a present tense significance that verges on urgency (Vickroy 6), an urgency that audiences recognize. Duras' work frequently has this energizing effect on her readers and her audiences. Critic Julia Balén, for example, writes: "Let's say her writing ravishes me. That it leaves me languishing. Perhaps in the fullness of the knowledge of my own forgetting. Perhaps in the power of her forgetfulness. Reading her corpus I face mortality... In this moment I love... her" (Cranston 100). Of another of her more famous works, *The Ravishment of Lol Stein*, Jacques Lacan writes, "Cet art suggère que la ravisseuse est Marguerite Duras, nous the ravis<sup>20</sup>" (Cranston 100). In fact, Duras intended such a dynamic relationship between her

---

<sup>20</sup> "This art suggests that the ravisher is Marguerite Duras, we the ravished ones." (Rough translation mine)

readers and her work. In *Practicalities*, she wrote, “*The Lover* is very difficult... you can’t understand these books anyway. That’s not the right word. It’s a matter of a private relationship between the book and the reader. They weep and grieve together” (Duras, *Practicalities*, 107). Therefore, there is a place in contemporary theater for an adaptation of *The Lover* because such a project will successfully expose American audiences to Duras’ work, and because of the brilliant immediacy of the story of *The Lover*.

Duras’ oeuvre is rich with a variety of powerful themes. *The Lover*, written from a place of maturity achieved near the end of her career, contains all of her most important themes: “memory and forgetting, love and desire, poverty, injustice, insanity, silence, and death” (O’Neil 148). *The Lover* touches on all of these, and, through her poetic storytelling, frequently transforms the usage of such common themes as love and desire by forcing readers to re-imagine the world, this time using Duras’ own definitions and meanings. Her themes, particularly those mentioned above, are always relevant, and to all age groups. Perhaps modern readers may not be able to relate to French Indochina and the poverty of colonialism, but they certainly understand poverty and death, and they understand injustice and insanity, etc.—all very common Durasian themes. Another traditional theme of Duras’ work is the mother-daughter relationship and its complexities. Therefore, the mother features prominently in the adaptation—she is one of four characters in an eleven-plus person novel to survive the cuts necessary to perform the piece as a two person show—and thus supports this motif in Durasian literature.

Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of this project in terms of its educational value for me is the design component inherent in performing the adaptation. I have little to no experience with costume, sound, set, or properties design, and yet I served as the designer for all of these elements. The dramaturgical work I did for chapter one was invaluable to me when it came to designing the piece, and it is the dramaturgy's relationship with the design that forms the foundation for this discussion of the show's design elements. For example, dramaturgically speaking, it was a critic's connection with the "constant metonymy" present in Durasian literature that most heavily influenced the properties design of the adaptation (Günther 76). Articles such as the man's hat, the gold lamé shoes, and the big glasses became hugely significant when analyzed in symbolic terms. Although it is certainly the actor's responsibility to denote character shifts through her acting work, when there are metonymical objects present in the author's original text, as in *The Lover*, they provide an enormous advantage for a props designer. Therefore, I combined the props specified in the original text, such as the hat, shoes, and the lover's diamond, with props of my own choosing that sprang from the dramaturgy, such as the glasses, the cigarettes, and the decanter of alcohol, in order to create clear, metonymical symbols to aid the audience in understanding the many character shifts that occur. Vickroy writes, "Throughout *The Lover*, the narrator tries on different selves... Symbolizing her different selves is perhaps Duras' clothing" (Vickroy 8). The props part of the clothing is therefore hugely important when it comes to differentiating one character from another, and was a top properties priority. For instance, the gold shoes, man's hat, and dark lipstick symbolize Marguerite, the bun and worn down shoes, the mother, and the big glasses and the perpetual smoking and



drinking, Old Marguerite. Although they were initially difficult to contend with from an actor's perspective, particularly as there was no stage manager to track the props for us, the props eventually became tools for further exploration of the characters' bodies and attitudes, and emerged as a successful, positive element of the production.

Hand in hand with the properties design was the costume design. It was extraordinarily difficult to find one dress that both fit the description of the shapeless dresses in the novel and also could be successfully transformed into a young girl's dress, a middle-aged woman's dress, and a very old woman's dress from one moment to the next. Again, Vickroy addresses the importance of clothes when she writes, "She [the young girl] is aware of the control she possesses over her body and image. Changing her identity begins with changing her clothes" (Vickroy 10). In this adaptation, as in Duras' life, costumes are more than just the clothes one wears. They are the signifying pieces that represent an entire character's emotional and psychological development or maturity. Duras is quite specific about the clothes that the lover and the young girl wear; she describes them in great detail, from the silk tussore suit of the lover, right down to the "clothes that might make people laugh, but don't" that the girl wears (Duras *The Lover* 11). The fedora and the shoes illustrate the whimsical and immature nature of the young girl, just as the silk business suit denotes the lover's maturity and age, as well as his nationality, since his suit is the "the light tussore suit of the Saigon bankers" (Duras *The Lover* 17). The costumes are also used to provide contrast, as is the case with the young girl and the mother; the girl, who has her whole potentially happy future in front of her, wears gold lamé shoes, whereas the washed out mother, the woman who "shrieks in the desert of her life," (Duras *The Lover* 45) wears shoes that are worn out, unimaginative,

and “down-at-heel,” (Duras *The Lover* 22) illustrating her despair and the cruelty of her life. The costumes are beautifully described in Duras’ original text, and I held as true as possible to her artistic conception of the characters’ clothes, since the descriptions play such a large role in the events of the novel, and also because clothes played such a large part in Duras’ own conception of herself. For example, in her novel *Practicalities*, Duras wrote about the clothes she began to wear when she was in her fifties, the clothes that became famously known as “The M.D. Uniform.” Duras reveals, “For fifteen years I’ve had a uniform—the M.D. uniform... black cardigan, straight skirt, polo-neck sweater and short boots in winter. I said I didn’t care about clothes, but that’s wrong. A uniform is an attempt to reconcile form and content, to match what you think you look like with what you’d like to look like... you find this match without really looking for it... and eventually it comes to define you” (Duras *Practicalities* 65). Everything Duras says about her M.D. uniform in her age applies to the outfit—or uniform—that she wore continually in her youth. In Duras’ world, the uniform defines a person. This is one of the many reasons why the costume design was such an important element of the production.

The lighting design was another critical element when it came to the success of the production, but as I was fortunate enough to have a very talented and experienced lighting designer on board with the project, my involvement in the design was much more limited than in the other areas of design and production. The basic function of the lights was to indicate to the audience where and when the action of the scene was taking place through shifts in the lighting each time we changed location, and sometimes when we changed characters. As I was playing three out of the four characters, anything we

could do to make it immediately evident to the audience whether they were in Indochina in 1929 or in Paris in 1984 was enormously helpful, and the lighting, hand in hand with the use of props, accomplished that goal. There were two basic “looks” for the show; the first was a cool, dark, harshly shadowed look for the Paris apartment, with shadows across my face that were designed to age me even further as I explored the Old Marguerite character in this environment. The second look was a hot, bright, tropical look for the scenes in French Indochina, meant to highlight Marguerite’s youthful beauty and her sexiness. This look had a modification to it in the middle of the show, when we added shutters—through the use of a gobo—and dimmed the cue considerably in order to put the lighting in alignment with the text, which states, “It’s dark in the studio, but I don’t ask him to open the shutters” (Duras *The Lover* 36). Additionally, we had a few extra looks, such as the starlight look that we used in the scene “She weeps for her lover.” At the end of the play, we chose to change the lights from Old Marguerite’s typical lights because we wanted her to be permitted to fully relive and rediscover this experience as she does at the end of the passage, when she states, “Suddenly she wasn’t sure she hadn’t loved him... and had rediscovered it only now, in that moment of music flung across the sea” (Duras *The Lover* 115). Some of the dramaturgical research I provided for Daniel Weiss, our lighting designer, was about Paris in 1984, and it came from Duras’ novel *Practicalities*. Of the city, she writes,

“Paris seems a blunder, the kind of city that shouldn’t be allowed to exist... Disorder sets its seals on the suburbs one concentric circle after another... the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, a ravishingly beautiful centre of French culture visited by intellectuals from all over the world... something has happened to this city.

What? Is it the motorcar? I'm inclined to think so... there they [the people of Paris] are. Stagnating. Doing nothing. Except be alive. And watch...people still come here in the hope of getting closer to meaning... people come to Paris, to the capital, to give their lives a sense of belonging, of an almost mythical participation in society... no one can ever describe the beauty of Paris all the year round..." (Duras *Practicalities* 113-116).

The majority of the remainder of the lighting design research which I executed on behalf of Daniel and Ariel consisted of image research on both French Indochina and Duras' life, and can be found in Appendix D.

The set design was perhaps the simplest process, since the decision had been made in the writing of the adaptation to work with a minimalistic set. Therefore, the only question I asked myself was, "What do we need to evoke the other time and place of French Indochina?" The answer was simple: a bed. The bed exists in both times and places; it serves as the set for both Indochina and Paris. In one setting, it is a place of consummating undying passion for the ill-matched lovers, and in another, it is the place for an old alcoholic with many regrets to remember the first love of her life and record it to share with the world. Aside from the bed, the other elements of the set—the shutters, lamps, water jars, and chair—simply served as either decoration for the otherwise bare room, or pieces of furniture that would sensually evoke the audiences' imagination of Indochina, as the water jars might evoke the washing ritual that transpired between the lovers.

Lastly, the sound design was a particularly important element, as it aided us in creating a fully realized world of French Indochina, and showing it to a culture that is

almost wholly unaware of such a place. Additionally, it was originally intended for the sound design to attempt to bridge the gap in time and place between Paris and Indochina. In the design specified in the rehearsal draft, there was a combination of modern music by Andrew Bird and Bobby McFerrin that had an Eastern influence to indicate Paris in 1984, traditional Vietnamese folk music to indicate Indochina in 1929, and 1930's era American swing music; the purpose of the swing music was both to connect Paris and Indochina and to connect American audiences to the piece. Although the sound design changed dramatically in the performance draft, this design element provided an overall thread to the piece that would be deeply missed were it not present.

Therefore, due to the strength of the stated goals of the production and my deep dramaturgical understanding of the relevancy of this play to modern audiences, as well as my commitment to creating a successful design for the production, the process of writing the adaptation was made much easier. Although there were many big changes from the original draft to the final performance draft, overall, the adaptation retained the voice and spirit of Duras, an accomplishment that found its roots in the implementation of dramaturgical research.

In conclusion, the fundamental purpose of my dramaturgical research was its practical application towards both the adaptation and the rehearsal process. The research that I pursued regarding Duras' life, the history of *The Lover* and its place in her career, her literary influences, the critics' reactions to the novel and to her oeuvre, and the time periods of the dramatic action proved useful in many ways. While writing the adaptation, the dramaturgy served as the cornerstone for many of my creative choices, especially

those surrounding the verb tenses I used and the character voices in which I wrote. In rehearsals, I particularly used the research to aid me in finding strong, active character choices that were true both to Duras' life and the history of her work. Serving as my own dramaturg for this process was extraordinarily helpful. As a result of the depth of my dramaturgical research, I was free to commit to bold character decisions, I produced a successful design for the production, and I was able to write an adaptation that was firmly grounded in the Durasian literary tradition and the lyric Durasian voice.

## Chapter Two—The Adaptation Process

Although I briefly addressed the goals of the adaptation in my program at the performance, I would like to begin this chapter about the adaptation process by stating in greater detail my goals for the project and its relevancy to modern audiences.

One of the reasons I chose to adapt this novel is that, with over seventy published plays, novels, and screenplays, Marguerite Duras is one of the most prolific modern French writers. Her career spanned several literary movements, including American Realism, Surrealism, the Nouveau Roman tradition, and the feminist literary movement. However, despite her lengthy and successful career, she remains relatively unknown in the United States. Therefore, two of the project's goals were to introduce Duras to American academics, and also to open a dialogue between the world of literature and the world of theater surrounding Duras' tradition of cross-discipline work. One of the ways in which Duras abandoned herself to cross-discipline work in the later part of her career was through the adaptation of autobiographical works like *The Lover*. "But Duras goes even further: instead of imagining self in terms of inherent (sexual) difference, Duras' autobiography celebrates her sexual initiation as the joy of becoming 'like everybody else.' *The Lover* is the autobiographical testimony that wishes to implicate us all in the circulation of desire" (Hewitt 126). We, as human beings, are all part of desire. Therefore, an enormous part of the play's relevancy is its frank presentation of human sexuality and the implications of desire in relationships.

Based on my research surrounding the various accounts of the lover's story in Duras' oeuvre, including *The North China Lover*, *Wartime Writings*, *Eden Cinema*, *The*

*Sea Wall*, and, of course, *The Lover*, the goal of this project was multi-faceted. I wanted to explore the interplay between human memory and the factual reality of events, to discover the responsibilities of an adaptor and an actor in a potentially autobiographical work, and to use a new piece of theater to cause audiences to examine the impactful events of their own lives. As part of my adaptation work, I deeply explored the adaptor's responsibility to the text, particularly in reference to the Je/elle<sup>21</sup> controversy of Duras' work, which is explained in great detail later in this chapter. Lastly, the project has achieved one of my personal goals in that it has served as a great research, acting, and writing challenge for me, and therefore has been a valuable senior honors thesis topic.

The process of adaptation was a lengthy one. There were many different stages of development and exploration of the Durasian world and of the novel itself before I began to write anything at all. Even then, I wrote six drafts before I first entered the rehearsal hall. In between our week of rehearsals in December and the beginning of our rehearsals in March, there was only one draft, but following our first week of rehearsal, I wrote a final draft that became our performance script. Such a large number of rewrites is very unusual for me, but the more research I did, the more rehearsals we had, and the more I began to vividly experience the text rather than just read it, the more I learned about the way the text would best fit together, and a theatrical interpretation of *The Lover* was born.

To truly understand my adaptation process, it is necessary to share some of the dramaturgical research I pursued which centered on Duras' history of adapting her own work, as well as the style of her theatrical writing. While developing my creative interpretation of *The Lover*, I discovered the minimalism of the piece and the overarching

---

<sup>21</sup> "I/ She"



struggles I would face in adapting the work. Perhaps one of the most important of these struggles was the Je/elle controversy surrounding much of Duras' work, and *The Lover* in particular. My dramaturgical research fueled all the Je/ elle choices that I made in the adaptation. Because of this, an examination of that research was necessary in order to understand the depth and importance of this seemingly trivial matter of perspective in the novel. Additionally, there were many concerns with which I struggled in June regarding the shape the adaptation eventually took. Lastly, although there were many drafts and many minute—as well as titanic—changes from draft to draft, I attempted to summarize briefly the most important changes that emerged, both from the rehearsal to the performance draft, as well as from the novel to the performance draft.

I originally chose to adapt *The Lover* because it was an evocative text full of universal significance and sensuously specific language that seemed to be waiting for the stage. Duras herself said, “Drama is an unveiling of the human being” (Vircondelet 215), and, more than anything, I wanted the performance component of my senior honors thesis to be one that dropped all the veils that we place around ourselves. In *The Lover*, Duras “abandons traditional syntax, leaves the words there, free of apparent meaning, but ready to be reconstructed, like the painter who... ‘doesn’t use colors to reproduce what is, but seeks the point at which his colors create being’” (Vircondelet 247-48). This complete abandonment of the traditional meaning of words in favor of color and life and rebirth is, to me, one of the most significant aspects of Duras’ literary voice. *The Lover* was words on a page waiting to be re-envisioned and recreated in a new form. Throughout her entire career, Duras lent herself to adaptation; following the publication

of *The Lover*, Vircondelet reminds us that “Directors are interested in her work, for, laden with images, it lends itself well to... adaptation” (Vircondelet 331). However, at the same time, Duras’ lack of story often discourages adaptors; rather than embracing the rich atmosphere and environment of Duras’ novels and adapting the complexity of that world, adaptors try to create a new story, as the director Annaud did with the film of *The Lover*. Of Duras’ work, Adler writes, “People are always on the verge of things. Everything could happen but in fact nothing really happens” (Adler 237). This is perhaps why, in a preliminary discussion of the novel with Vinnie Murphy, one of my academic advisors, we reached the premature conclusion that Marguerite’s loss of her virginity was the central event of the adaptation. After all, it is one of the few clearly defined significant events that occurs. However, upon closer examination, I discovered that the most important event in the adaptation is the realization that she loves the Chinese from Cholon and has loved him her entire life. It is this revelation that justifies the character of Old Marguerite; her objective throughout the entire play becomes a brave and perpetually failing attempt to communicate this re-discovered love to the lover, a man long since gone from her life. Following this discovery about the central event, the somewhat passive narrator character was suddenly transformed into a breathing, loving woman who is enmeshed in a dark world of pain.

In order to successfully recreate Duras’ work for the stage, however, it was first necessary to ask, “What is Durasian theater?” Duras perpetually asked herself the same question as she was learning to write for this new medium, and what emerged was “a theater of verbal constructs where fragments of a story echo from the stage and the rest is left to the audience’s imagination” (O’Neil 159). She wrote the marginal characters, the

outsiders who “suffer from madness, loneliness, boredom, or injustice, and they often relate dark and painful stories about love or loneliness or crime” (O’Neil 159). Her theatrical work perpetually juxtaposes tradition and innovation—as in her language play, *Le Shaga*, for example—mixing in “elements from other genres, new forms of communication,” contrasting the “personal and universal,” and creating “powerful drama exploring the human condition” (O’Neil 159). Vircondelet writes, “In drama she sees... that black box from which escape the cries of memory, the same solitude, above all the same fear, present, palpable, carnal, the same danger” (Vircondelet 215). Durasian theater presents an enormous challenge to the actors who undertake it. How does one act the musicality, the intensity, the eternal depths of Duras? “‘With her,’ says Michael Lonsdale, ‘everything remains on the inside. You have to... become a voice in her own symphony... She has in fact no feel for the performance, the images merely reinforce the writing...’” (Vircondelet 239). The answer, then, as I discovered once the adaptation process was finished and it was time to put the words in my mouth, was to live the words as one usually lives the emotion or the objective behind them. Duras herself wrote in *Practicalities*, “acting doesn’t bring anything to a text... the whole drama resides in the words themselves and the body remains unmoved” (Duras, *Practicalities* 9). Ariel de Man, director of the adaptation, instructed me to find a reason to communicate each new thought and to tell the story as though it were the best, most important story of Old Marguerite’s life—one the audience had never heard before. It was this commitment to the text itself, rather than the emotional content behind the words, that most effectively energized the play. Adler writes, “to Marguerite Duras there is no theater that is not tragic. The theater must be the bare bones of passion, and must represent the

unbearable... She says, 'I believe in the sacrificial dimension of the theatrical ritual... where every actor risks his own death, so that the characters he creates can be enigmatic.' Everything can be exposed in the theater" (Adler 342). "To expose" is both the actor's commitment and the adaptor's responsibility in the world of Durasian theater. In fact, Adler records that "Duras always rejected the idea that there was a difference between the stage and writing. The theater came naturally to her. She accepted its codes, its sorrows, its joys" (Adler 254). Since, in Duras' theater, there is little to no difference between the art of writing and the art of acting, it makes perfect sense then for the adaptor to also be the actor, as in the case of my production. Jeanne Moreau, who later performed in Annaud's film of *The Lover* as the voice of the narrator 'Duras' character, once said to Duras, "You, Marguerite, you allow yourself to be dispossessed, it's your vice. Some people are miserly. You, on the other hand, are the opposite, and that is such a great pleasure" (Adler 254). Duras treated theater as "a risky area," and demanded the same abandonment from her actors and collaborators (Adler 201). Therefore, Durasian theater is a wild place, one in which the veils over humanity are dropped, however briefly, and the writing and the stage become one as an avenue for communicating the words and their inherent musicality. This sense of Duras' theatrical world is what I tried so desperately to capture in my adaptation and performance.

In a way, the great challenge I set to myself by being the adaptor of the piece<sup>22</sup> and also acting three of the characters was very much in keeping with Duras' understanding of theater as a place of risks. Duras herself suggested that adaptors and translators of her work take chances with the text, "In the final analysis, I think adaptors

---

<sup>22</sup> Please see Appendix B for the Adaptation Exercises I completed from Vinnie's book entitled *Adapting New Works*.

are too faithful to the original. I could rewrite any scene for the screen, in the same spirit, without it having anything to do with the book. If one wants to remain faithful, it's essential to preserve the tone" (Adler 218). Therefore, I chose to adapt the piece as I did, with dual characters who I was bold enough to name Marguerite and Old Marguerite, because of Duras' own encouragement of experimentation with her texts. After all, "what she says in *The Lover* is what she sees in life, the free play of 'more or less profound correspondences between time periods,' and she is determined to let these forces act, without intervening" (Vircondelet 328), just as I was.

My creative interpretation of *The Lover* originally centered on the interplay between forgetting and remembering, and the various emotional energies that go into reliving our past experiences and discovering anew what they mean to us. Originally, I believed that the novel was about repression in the Freudian sense of the word, meaning an emotional shutting down that "is the result of an inability or unwillingness to experience the unpleasure associated with the conscious ego having to admit to a motivation or inclination coming from the id that is in direct conflict with it" (Hofmann 23). However, the more I came to understand the character of Old Marguerite, the more I came to believe in Carol Hofmann's theories surrounding Durasian repression. The most important of these is that in Duras' work, forgetting and repression are actually a type of remembering. Hofmann writes, "what appears to be forgetting on a conscious level is in fact the means of maintaining that which one is trying to forget" (Hofmann 34). This thought led me into a valuable pursuit of the idea of repetition in Durasian literature. This exercise of repeating—and therefore maintaining—a painful experience is exactly what Duras was doing when she wrote *The Lover*, since "this notion of repetition is

enormously important in any study of a Duras text. An indication of a repressed state, repetition is also an indication of working through the mourning process...” (Hofmann 35). In fact, memory and mourning themselves are repeated motifs in Durasian literature, motifs which “invite Duras’ audience to revisit other works from her corpus” each time they appear (O’Neil 156). All of these motifs of remembering, forgetting, repetition, and mourning apply to Duras herself, not just to her characters, and are particularly important in the adaptation, in which the characters undergoing these processes have been named after Duras. Her repetitions seem to have been almost compulsory, but rather than taking away from the strength of her oeuvre, her repetitions complemented each other. “Perhaps most novels are an adjudication between the rival claims of daydreaming and memory, of wish-fulfillment and the repetition compulsion, Freud’s term for the seemingly inexplicable reenactment of painful real-life experiences (he argued that we repeat them in order to gain mastery over them). And as with music, the more familiar the melody, the more elegant and palpably ingenious can be the variations. Duras certainly loved to return to the same handful of themes again and again,” (White) and these returns became more and more powerful as her career gained momentum. In each repetition of the lover’s story in particular, “with a fulminating shorthand...[and] an ‘art of poverty,’<sup>23</sup> Duras electrifies simple, old words that have become limp from overuse. She revitalizes, complicates, and intensifies an ‘I love you’ so that the words become thoroughly explosive” (Hewitt 103). This revitalization of past words and feelings is exactly what I tried to accomplish by writing the Old Marguerite character, and I think, all in all, my effort was successful.

---

<sup>23</sup> Hélène Cixous’ term

Another large part of my creative interpretation of the novel involved the minimalism of both the set and the casting. I could have written the show as a seven-or-more person play, but I wrote it as a play for two people with one person playing three characters, not because of budgetary constraints, but because minimalism is true to Durasian theater and to her style of writing at the time that *The Lover* was written. Following the publication of *Destroy, She Said*, Duras' style became infinitely more minimalistic, with only the core of the story explored and exposed (Günther 66). Durasian theater explores the images of the writing, but the main focus of the performance is always on the text, a focus which lends itself to performative minimalism. Such simplicity allows the audience both to concentrate more on the text being delivered and to become active participants in the story through their imaginative visualizations of the text. As the *Dictionary of Literary Biographies* records, "There are rarely more than two or three characters on Duras' stage, and minimal settings and subtle movements emphasize the importance of the characters' words. The gaps and omissions in Duras' scripts require the reader or spectator to play an active role in the construction of her narratives" (O'Neil 148). My adaptation required the audience to participate in the show more than they might ordinarily participate, as my transformations from Marguerite to Old Marguerite to Mother and back, sometimes all within the same scene, forced them to be actively engaged in the story in order to follow it. My desire to engage the audience was not the only reason, however, that I chose to include a young and old version of the same character. Critic Laurie Vickroy writes, "Though the 'older' voice gives perspective and shapes the representation of the youthful self, this is not simply a dialogue or a contrast between youth and age. They are intertwined in ways that suggest

equally that as the artist recreates the teen Duras, the latter has given birth to the voice of the artist” (Vickroy 1). She also later refers to the “creation of past and present selves which are simultaneously split and connected” (Vickroy 2). Based on this criticism, it seemed that the only way to tie the narrator and the young girl together onstage was to have the same actor play both roles, and to write them as two parts of the same individual. Along the same lines, it was easy to justify the Mother character, both as a character in the play, and as played by the same actor who plays the Marguerites, since Vickroy writes that in *The Lover*, “Duras participates in the common female adolescent struggle between identification with and disassociation from her mother... In the search for personal identity, adolescent girls struggle with the boundary between self and mother. While driven by a natural and healthy desire for personal and sexual experimentation, Duras must examine where her mother’s identity stops, and her own begins. Throughout *The Lover*, the narrator tries on different selves, both in reaction to and in anticipation of her mother” (Vickroy 7-8). Mother and Marguerite are inextricably linked, and should therefore logically be played by the same actor. Additionally, it was easy to find a place for these two characters in the play because in Duras, children like Marguerite, and women like Mother and Old Marguerite, are considered “the mad ones, the prophet of truth,” and “it is the child who is right” (Adler 100). Therefore, as the adaptor, these three women deserved my full attention in the script, since they are simultaneously ‘mad’ and the ‘prophets of truth.’ This is a unique literary perspective, but one that is adopted and highlighted by this adaptation. Therefore, I adapted the play so that I could perform these three vastly different characters not just for the academic and acting challenges, but also to pay tribute to Duras’ own understanding of the



“interchangeability of the positions that people occupy in language and in relationship to one another” (Hewitt 104). Foucault and Cixous write of Duras in “Marguerite Duras,” “And when I speak of these other women [Duras’ characters], I think of them as containing me in them; it’s as if we were porous, myself and them” (Hewitt 104). I chose to adapt this material and to perform it this way because I, too, see myself in these women. Who are Duras’ characters? They are me.

Another element of the adaptation process that is important to understand fully was the struggles I encountered as the text developed. I asked myself questions like, “How true should I be to the text?” and “Is the original author’s vision paramount?” While writing the first adaptation draft, my greatest priority—and my greatest struggle—was to preserve the Durasian style at all costs. One of the potential pitfalls I foresaw in this commitment to Duras’ words and her literary style was the fact that I was working from a translation and not from the original text. Therefore, although I have great respect for the translation skills of Barbara Bray, my first task was to read the original French and the English translation side by side, so as to get a feel for Bray’s understanding of *The Lover* and her own creative interpretation of the text. As Bray wrote in her introduction to Duras’ *Four Plays* entitled “Translating Duras,”

“These two elements [of Duras’ writing]—the oddness and the intensity—are perhaps the greatest problems that face the translator of Duras into English... French language and culture have a relatively high intensity threshold, while Anglo-Saxons... and American-speakers dislike taking matters too seriously... So the translator... must be careful, when rendering some of Duras’ most powerful

moments, to bear in mind that a similar cause may produce a very different effect in another linguistic and cultural context. In order to avoid striking disastrously wrong notes, he or she, while eschewing the timidity that steamrollers everything into blandness, must sometimes dare to transpose boldly” (Duras, *Four Plays* 6).

Bray also claims that Duras herself gave translators a generous freedom, since Duras stated in 1987 that all languages are different, and so it is necessary to “transport” a book from one language to another, rather than translate it. This allows the book to become essentially a “different entity,” as the translator inevitably conveys his or her own individual sense of the text (Duras, *Four Plays* 6). It is the translators’ job, according to Duras, not to preserve the absolute *meaning* of the text, but rather to remain faithful to the musicality of the language, to its sound, and therefore to work with “the freedom of the text... its natural respiration, its folly... Mistakes about the music are worse than mistakes about the sense” (Duras, *Four Plays* 7). Therefore, Bray has a commitment to Duras’ “own music—a particular, often incantatory, voice with its individual notation and rules of composition. Yes, and its own ‘folly’ or madness” (Duras, *Four Plays* 7). Bray’s simultaneously respectful and bold commitment to the musicality of Duras’ words was immediately evident to me as I read the original French and Bray’s translation side by side. So that I would be prepared should any questions about the occasional awkwardness of words and phrases arise, I read *The Lover* in both French and English, after which I finally felt prepared to begin to write within the Durasian music. Of this music, O’Neil writes, “Duras is a playwright concerned not just with dialogue, but with the way it is spoken and with silences and pauses that fall between the words. These works require careful reading, for much of the narrative takes place in the characters’

tone of voice, in their silences, and in their movements” (O’Neil 152). The places for these pauses, the various ways that lines should be spoken, and the characters’ physical choices did not come to life for me until March, when we left the table and began rehearsing on our feet. In my commitment to Duras’ theatrical style regarding the importance of the characters’ words and their physical life, I made a concerted effort to preserve these elements in my own writing of the adaptation. Fortunately, in rehearsal Ariel demonstrated an instinctive understanding of where and how lines should be delivered that seemed perfectly in keeping with Duras’ commitment to the musicality of the language and the interplay between sound and silence, an understanding which brought new life to the text in performance.

Another of my adaptation struggles surrounded the number of characters in the play. From the very beginning, I knew I would have to make some painful cuts. Therefore, the first character to go was one of my favorites: H el ene Langonelle, Marguerite’s fun, erotic schoolfellow at the boarding school. Once I cut H el ene, who I so dearly loved, it was much easier to cut the other minor extraneous characters, such as D o, Marie-Claude Carpenter, Betty Fernandez, the younger brother, and Duras’ son, Jean. In the first draft, I still had a few additional characters, including the elder brother, the headmistress of the school, and some of the young girls who excluded Marguerite in the original version of the scene “News spreads fast in Sadec.” However, by the third draft I realized that the headmistress and the young girls could be more dynamic if I explored Marguerite’s reaction to their judgment, rather than allowing the audience to hear the judgment itself. This was a positive choice, as it allowed for Marguerite to demonstrate a rare moment of vulnerability. Next, I cut both of the brother characters from the text—I

left in the occasional references to them because they were such a presence in Duras' childhood, but they no longer had any lines. The brothers, although they were frequently present in Duras' work, they were not as deep a part of Duras' oeuvre as was the mother, and so could be excluded from the adaptation. Additionally, the elder brother seemed more terrifying and dark to me when he was merely a threat lurking on the outside of scenes, rather than ever actually being present with lines, so I did not miss him from the adaptation. Also, cutting his lines from the scene "My mother attacks me for my lover" allowed the mother character an opportunity to shine; since the elder brother was not there to goad her into attacking the child, her animosity seemed to spring abruptly forth from her madness, which made her character much stronger. In the end, the mother was the one character besides the two Duras' and the title character who I knew we could not lose. I knew this instinctively before I did any dramaturgical research, but what emerged from the dramaturgy I did on Duras' major themes of her oeuvre was the theme, '*le mer et la mère*.<sup>24</sup>' These two themes actually emerged in the rehearsal process as some of the most important dramaturgical work incorporated into the production. While I was writing the adaptation, the mother clamored more and more to be seen and heard, so she became the third character that I played. In the final draft, she seemed inextricably linked with both Marguerites in the way that Vickroy describes, "Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other... a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside of one another" (Vickroy 7). The mother is a titanic figure in Duras' oeuvre, which is a large part of why and how she found her place of importance in the adaptation.

---

<sup>24</sup> 'The sea and the mother.'

The last of my major struggles with the adaptation was more a question of personal preference. I needed to decide how to demonstrate or suggest the sex in the piece without becoming pornographic, as occurred in the film. It is true that “Marguerite shocked. She loved shocking” (Adler 216), and I had to decide whether or not I planned to follow this Durasian love of shocking and alienating her audiences. I asked myself, ‘What is Duras’ treatment of the sex in the novel?’ The answer originally emerged as one word: prostitution. Hewitt supported this view of sex in the novel as prostitution when she writes, “On one level, *The Lover* is a romantic, emotionally charged tale of intense desire and impossible love set in the sizzling tropics... on another level, Duras’ first sexual relationship could easily be described as a female victimization scene—with the lure of the man’s wealth, a poor, adolescent girl is seduced by a much older rich man” (Hewitt 113). In a way, the couple in *The Lover* exchanges sex for money, which forces anyone performing the play to address the idea of prostitution. Hewitt provides a critique of this idea from Duras’ perspective, “Instead of fighting prostitution as a pernicious institutional subjection of women... Duras perverts its structure from the inside by the idea of confusing ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ (agressors/victims) and their gender assignations. She extends the definition of prostitution so that it becomes a metaphor for all social interactions. Early in the book, Duras associates the imaginary photo of her frail adolescent body and its outlandish attire with the (future) act of writing, suggesting the tie between the prostitute and the writer” (Hewitt 116). Therefore, prostitution becomes not just about sex in exchange for money, but about any action undertaken as a result of either desire or necessity of survival.

Although this view of the sex in the novel is certainly a thought-provoking one, my decision about how to present the sex onstage emerged when I realized that the story I was writing was not one about emerging sexuality, but rather a discovery of a lost-but-never-forgotten love. The story I was writing was not about sex—it was about love. Therefore, I decided that I did not want to alienate my audiences during the ‘First love-making and pillow talk’ scene; on the contrary, I wanted the audience to witness the lovers’ first passion and emerge from that scene with a deep sense of pity for both of the characters, and also with a deeper understanding of their impossible attraction to one another. When I read Duras’ novel *Practicalities* and her short story entitled “Men,” I felt a sort of validation of my interpretation of this story when I read the following paragraph:

“Some men have been repelled by the couple in *The Lover*—the little white girl and the Chinese lover. They skip some pages, they say, or shut their eyes. Shut their eyes while they’re reading! To them *The Lover*’s just the crazy family, the drives, the ferry, Saigon by night and the whole colonial caboodle. But not the little White and her Chinese lover. On the other hand, *The Lover* fills most men with a strange desire—one that rises up from the mists of time and the depths of humanity: the desire of incest and rape. For me that little white girl walking through the town as if she were on her way to the high school, but really, as she goes along the vast boulevard full of trams... making her way towards the man, towards her slavish obligation towards her lover—she has a freedom I myself have lost” (Duras, *Practicalities* 37).

Duras herself, with this passage, seemed to support my idea that the focus of the story is the relationship, not the sex, and it also seems to reflect her own understanding of the affair as one based in a deep-seated impossible love for one another.

The original idea of how to tastefully handle the sex in the piece was given to me by John Ammerman, the head of my thesis committee, who suggested that I use a spotlight to isolate the lovers' hands, and use the way that they touch each other as an indication of the sexual elements of the piece. In my dramaturgical research, I found strong support for this creative choice. For example, Hofmann writes, "hands [are] an important leitmotif and a sign of desire in this and many Durasian texts" (Hofmann 96), and Adler notes, "Durasian lovers all have beautiful hands, and Marguerite describes them brilliantly and in great detail. The hands are erotic. The hands are a prelude to passion. Even the first lover, the puniest, the most grotesque, the most pathetic, had this redeeming feature" (Adler 55). However, although this idea was brilliantly constructed and could be well supported by research, in the production of the piece, we realized that, in such a small, intimate space, it was hardly feasible to isolate such a small area in spotlight, and Ariel was not certain there could be enough directorial staging to support the concept, so we abandoned this idea in favor of the removal of the lover's clothes as Marguerite recounts the experience of undressing him for the first time, which I believe emerged as both a successful and a tasteful choice.

In addition to the many struggles I faced in the construction of the adaptation, including working from a translation, the number of characters to include, and how to effectively show the sex in the piece without alienating the audience, I also had a

criticism-based concern regarding the adaptation of the novel. I have come to refer to this concern as the Je/ elle controversy, since it regards the dual identity present in the novel—narrator and young girl—and the way that both voices often transfer from “I” to “she” during critical moments of the story.

Perhaps the most in-depth analysis of the Je/ elle controversy in the *The Lover* can be found in Rachel Criso’s essay, “Elle Est Une Autre<sup>25</sup>: The Duplicity of Self in L’Amant.” Criso begins her argument by stating her belief that *The Lover* cannot be truly autobiographical since the story is conveyed from the lenses of two separate individuals. However, rather than devote herself to a fact versus fiction argument, Criso chooses to “explore instead a consciously split narrator who manipulates her narrative stance by the subtle interchange of two pronouns, challenging the reader to discover which facets of the narrator’s psyche are revealed by each” (Cranston 38). Ariel, Nick Surbey, the actor playing the lover, and I also chose to pursue this understanding of the text in rehearsal. We explored this same idea of a “consciously split narrator” through the visible character shifts from Marguerite to Old Marguerite, shifts when Old Marguerite would have to painfully lift herself out of postures and positions far too youthful for her, but positions in which she found herself nonetheless as she relived past experiences in the body of a young girl. Criso particularly explores this idea that the Je/ elle usage implies a split psyche, an idea which supports the same actor playing two roles, as in the adaptation. However, she also asks, “Is it possible that the *elle* subject in *L’Amant* represents this subject as Other; that the third-person pronoun *spoken about* is adopted by the narrator when she intends, paradoxically, a more honest presentation of the *je*? It may be suggested that with the adoption of *elle*, the narrator reveals her hidden emotions, which

---

<sup>25</sup> “She is another,” or perhaps, “She is an ‘other’” (Rough translation mine)



are suppressed when *je* is used. Wherever *elle* appears, the mask of the *je*, public self, is cast aside and a private representation of the narrator is offered” (Cranston 40-41). The possibility that the third person narrative in *The Lover* represents more truthful communication is why I, as the adaptor, chose to leave the final and perhaps most important scene of the play, the one entitled “It’s me, hello,” in third person. Also, the narrator of the novel uses *elle* frequently in reference to her lover, and also her mother, which, according to Criso’s theory, “appears to reveal an intimacy which more openly reflects her emotions, and, consequently, may be considered autobiographical” (Cranston 40). The lover is almost exclusively referred to in third person (“the Chinese from Cholon”), and is never named, providing further support for Criso’s theory.

In my own adaptation, I did lose some of Duras’ *Je/elle* determinations in my decision to write all but two of Marguerite’s speeches in the present tense and first person. For example, in the original text, Duras wrote the loss of virginity scene in the third person, although it was also in the present tense. In my effort to give the audience a sense of Marguerite being present in the room with them, and being a character to whom the events are happening in “real” time, I abandoned Duras’ original specification for the third person, a specification which, according to Criso, implies greater honesty and revelation. Hopefully, my transfer to first person accomplished the same goal by granting the audience a window into Marguerite’s inner world. I did retain the third person in the scene at the end of the play entitled “She weeps for her lover” in an attempt to demonstrate Old Marguerite’s genuine re-living of these events, and the huge personal significance they still hold for her, even after all these years. The use of third person also helped to lead the audience toward the moment when Old Marguerite stops the

storytelling and finally begins writing the story (the moment before the phone call, when she thinks the story is finished, but discovers it is not). Criso believes that the use of *elle* in this particular storytelling moment is a kind of proof that the third-person *elle* reaches more deeply into the true emotions of the narrator than the more repressed *je* can. Additionally, she writes of the final passage in the novel that “despite the lapse of time and the separation, the intensity of their relationship has remained intact; and the narrator, as *elle*, can express this revelation” (Cranston 44). Lastly, in her essay Criso defines the difference between the narrator character and the little white girl as one of self-confidence—the narrator writes from a place of certainty in her career, the “public self” that emerges from knowing what she wishes to gain from life, and the certainty that such a goal is attainable, as well as from “her own perception of her divided self” (Cranston 48). In contrast, the little white girl comes from a place of uncertainty about passion and relationships, which forces her to communicate frequently in the more vulnerable *elle*. In conclusion, Criso determines that, since *je* and *elle* passages in the novel are both written in past and present tenses, it is not possible to say that one denotes present time, and the other denotes time past, although I tried to blur the line between past and present tense in my adaptation. *Je* and *elle* are also both used in the context of current action in the novel, and therefore the pronoun shifts cannot be linked to the action; “they represent, rather, an intentional fragmentation into *je*—used to relate superficial events and situations over which the narrator feels control (e.g. conversations with her family)—and *elle*, used to illustrate difficult emotions...” (Cranston 50). Sadly, it is not until the death of the lover and the author’s entire family that “*je* and *elle* may be united to constitute a coherent narrator, who dares finally to speak freely, and with one voice” (Cranston 51).

I devoted so much time to considering the implications of whether I used *je* or *elle* in my adaptation because it proved to be a common controversy in Durasian criticism surrounding *The Lover*. Although Criso's essay, analyzed above, provided the most in-depth study of the controversy, other Durasian scholars, such as Hewitt, Vickroy, and Adler, provided possible explanations for the pronoun shifts, as well. For example, Hewitt writes,

“This is in part why *The Lover*, as an autobiographical project, is so intriguing: the female narrating voice posits the possibility of resuscitating (creating) her past from her ‘own’ point of view. I place own in quotation marks because Duras continually makes us aware that a point of view is always relative to others and is itself split and mobile, rather than a fixed property of self. *The Lover* poses the question of female subjectivity via the interaction between the narrating ‘I’ as storyteller, and the ‘she’ the narrator remembers having been. In her version of the feminine/feminist autobiography, Duras unveils the feminine as a dynamic, perverse force that calls into question... the oppositions active/ passive, subject/ object, that have been used to assert gender/ sexual difference as hierarchy” (Hewitt 98).

Therefore, according to Hewitt, *The Lover* and its split identity narrator, in opposition to Criso's understanding, has everything to do with Duras' utilization of feminist principles.

“Duras' doubled subject (I/she) draws her strength from the myriad identifications with others' desires, rather than from the presumption of a unique, undivided self, impervious to others' demands. Instead of trying to shore up the split in the subject, Duras' feminine subject—like Duras the writer—is open to the intersubjective currents that pass through/create the subject... Duras uncovers how a certain

‘feminine’ position in language and the social order is exemplary of all subjectivity. She takes on the (male) tradition, assumes its modes of thinking as she dismantles them” (Hewitt 98).

Hewitt’s understanding of the Durasian split perspective in *The Lover*, then, involves feminism and the novel’s relationship with its readers, “Duras constantly plays with our perspective, keeping us guessing as to whether the ‘I’ in a given passage fills the function of narrator or character, or both” (Hewitt 113). However, Hewitt does agree with Criso in that she recognizes that *The Lover* cannot wholly be autobiographical, since there are two distinct artistic voices communicating the story of the affair. According to Hewitt, “autobiography becomes a game of hide-and-seek: ‘I’ does not wholly coincide with the past ‘she,’ nor is ‘I’ completely distinct from ‘her.’ The reader is positioned in the pronominal gap” (Hewitt 113).

Vickroy, on the other hand, has a different view of the split perspective than either Hewitt or Criso, writing that “The narrator is both participant in and observer of her development. The distance of the third person narration and intimacy of first person create an authentic tension: that of a girl discovering and being discovered, loving and being loved, taking and being taken. Duras portrays herself, even as a teenager, as sometimes reliving, recreating, and revising her experiences both as a first-person participant and a third-person observer” (Vickroy 6). And Vickroy is not alone; the Durasian critic Günther supports this view, as well. Vickroy takes the first person expressions to indicate moments of intimacy, and the third person expressions to indicate the narrator’s emotional distance from the story, in direct contrast to Criso’s analysis.

Adler attributes these third person moments to still another cause. In several places in her biography on Duras, she writes of Duras' outrageous narcissism that emerged in the later part of her career, and Adler attributes the third person references in *The Lover* to this character trait. She writes, "Marguerite became increasingly distanced from Duras. Marguerite herself founded the Duras Cult. Soon she began to speak of herself in the third person..." (Adler 300). Again, the third person is equated to distance, not to intimacy, as Criso suggests. Finally, according to Adler, following the publication of *The Lover*, Duras' narcissism escalated and she called herself "la Duras<sup>26</sup>," as though she were a mythical creature, the only one of her kind. She began to live the myth she wrote in *The Lover*. Finally, "Duras, the public figure and author narrating, becomes Duras, a literary character, narrated in her own story" (Vickroy 6).

Therefore, I thoroughly explored the research surrounding Duras' Je/elle pronominal transfers in *The Lover* and came to the conclusion that, although I found Criso's analysis of the controversy to be the most compelling and the most in accordance with the text, it was necessary, for the purposes of bringing the adaptation to life in front of the audience, to translate some of the third person Marguerite speeches into the first person. However, the research that I did on this particular topic heavily influenced my understanding of how to deliver the third person speeches so that they were intimate and powerful, rather than distant.

As the majority of my concerns surrounding the adaptation were resolved within the first few drafts, it is important to understand my original questions about the adaptation in order to see the evolution of the project. The first question I asked myself,

---

<sup>26</sup> "The Duras"

and the question that ended up being the cornerstone of my original research pursuits, was simply, “What is important about the interplay between memory and reality in this novel?” Since the novel was written by a mature author in her early seventies, separated by time and geography from the experiences in the novel, it is in fact likely that the events and conversations did not occur as recorded in the novel. Particularly after reading the other accounts of this story, in which the events unfolded almost entirely differently, I had to decide whether or not it was important to the adaptation if the events of the novel were autobiographically factual, or if they were entirely fictional, or some blend of the two. I could either accept all the events of the novel as fact, or I needed to make memory a character in the adaptation, in which case it had to have a measurable effect on many of the other aspects of the production. For example, lighting would then become a component of memory, as would the order of the story, which characters are involved, the way the sound would be designed, etc. This is the avenue I eventually chose to pursue. Rather than treating all the events as fact, I included lines that indicated the haziness of Duras’ memory, such as, “How I came by it [the hat] I’ve forgotten... But why was it bought? What must have happened is...” (Duras, *The Lover* 12). The text itself makes no apologies about whether or not it is fact. Duras simply acknowledged that everything happened a long time ago, things may have happened the way she is telling them, but it is not certain. She told the story as she remembered it in that moment, whether or not it was fact. I chose to adopt this attitude when writing the adaptation. The interplay between memory and reality is a major Durasian theme, and it seemed that the adaptation would lose too much by simply declaring the novel to be fact and ignoring Duras’ attitude towards the text. Therefore, my lighting designer and I

designed the lights and sound accordingly, using them as tools to indicate the time and place of the action so that the audience might know whether they were experiencing the events as they happened in real time, or the events as they occurred in Duras' head while she was writing them, a method that proved to be fairly effective.

Another of the important initial questions I asked myself centered on the use of dialogue in the production, particularly when I was writing dialogue between two characters that I knew that I would be playing myself. It was at this point in the adaptation process that I realized I needed a second actor, since until this point my original intent was to adapt the novel as a one-woman show. When reflecting on the project, having by this time been through rehearsals with Nick, I literally cannot imagine the project without him, but at the time of writing the first draft, choosing to include a second actor was a choice that I made when trying to write dialogue scenes between the lover and Marguerite, and realizing that another body onstage was absolutely essential. My strategy for dealing with the other part of this question, which was the fact that I would be playing three characters, some of whom talked directly to each other, was simple. Originally, I wrote the scenes as if I were writing them for two people, deciding to wait until we began rehearsals to determine how I was going to make the character shifts. At that time, I was able to look at the play as an actor, rather than as the adaptor.

Another consideration in the adaptation process, one that remained a concern until March when we finally put the play on its feet in rehearsals, was how we were going to play the love scenes. The film is very sexually explicit, but I realized immediately that any kind of sex plays differently onstage than it does in film, particularly in such an intimate space as the Burlington Road Building Theater. Also, the sex certainly would

not have the same effect in our production of the adaptation as it did in the film, simply because I am not a pale, skinny fifteen-year-old, and Nick is not a 30-year-old Chinese man. Additionally, I realized early in the process that I was not interested in the sex of the piece in the same way that I was interested in the simultaneous cruelty and beauty in the story of their relationship. Therefore, although I briefly considered using dance as a way to tastefully demonstrate their passion, I concluded that the introduction of dance would be out of place in such an intimate and text-based piece, and, as previously stated, following a meeting with Professor Ammerman, I emerged with the idea of isolation of the hands as a way to demonstrate the sex, and added it into subsequent drafts.

The last concern I had was regarding the order of the novel. I was initially unsure how much I, as the adaptor, had the liberty to change. I wanted to rearrange the events in the novel for clarity, for precision, for conciseness, and to consolidate descriptions of events, but I asked myself, ‘what is important about the way Duras herself chose to tell the story, and what would I lose by changing the order?’ Although I struggled for some time with the idea of re-ordering, eventually I realized that it was absolutely essential to do so in order to make the story as clear as possible for the audience. The majority of my audience members were entirely unfamiliar with Duras, and the more clear and more concise the story could be for them, the better. Ariel provided excellent guidance on the overall structure of the piece, since, as a person who had not read anything by or about Duras before she began working on this project, she was able to offer input not only on the clarity of the piece, but also on the storytelling aspect of it. Therefore, as the adaptor, I allowed myself the freedom to reorder the events of the novel in favor of providing greater clarity and stronger storytelling.



It was important to the adaptation process to explore the major changes from the novel to the rehearsal draft, and from the rehearsal draft to the performance draft. Having already discussed the dramaturgical research I pursued that surrounded Duras' adaptation of her own work, my creative interpretation of *The Lover*, my struggles with the Je/elle controversy, and my original concerns with the shape of the piece, the changes the adaptation experienced from its beginning in June of 2009 to its final edition in March of 2010 are the last element of the process that require discussion.

The two major differences between the novel and the performance draft are the order of events, as well as the use of first versus third person and present versus past tense. The re-ordering of the events in the novel was absolutely necessary in order to make the story the clearest it could be. When one is reading a novel that leaps around in time and frequently changes narrative voice, as does *The Lover*, it is easy enough to simply flip back to an earlier part in the novel for reference if one becomes confused. However, in a play, the audience is required to listen closely and remember all the major references in the play in order to remain inside the story. In my adaptation, they are constantly trying to process new information, sometimes provided by the same actor playing different characters. Since the goal of the production was to invite the audience into the world of the play, by far the most practical first step in adapting this novel to a play was to be certain that the order of events was as clear and concise as possible, particularly since there was one actor playing three vastly different characters.

The next step with this play was to explore the uses of first and third person and present or past tense, as a way of pursuing clarity. Because Duras so frequently changed

narrative voice in *The Lover*, one of my major desires for the adaptation was to make absolutely certain that the audience always knew who was speaking. I accomplished this by always using the present tense and first person for the mother, always using the present tense and first person for Marguerite—except in the first lovemaking scene and in “The news spreads fast in Sadec,” in which she uses third person to demonstrate her great vulnerability at those times—and using a blend of past and present tenses and first and third person pronouns for Old Marguerite. For example, in the “First declaration of his love” scene, I changed all the “she’s” to “I’s” in order to make them into playable actions, as opposed to simply remembered action (or inaction), since this text came from Marguerite, and not from Old Marguerite, who had the liberty to be more passive in her delivery. Because she exists entirely in the present tense, and therefore exists only in the ‘here and now’ with the audience, the character of Marguerite achieves present tense significance in a way that Old Marguerite does not.

The two major differences between the rehearsal draft and the performance draft were the stage directions and the Marguerite or Old Marguerite line designations. The changes to the stage directions came first from the discoveries we made as actors during our first week of work; after working closely with the text, what Nick and I determined to be our motivations in each scene greatly influenced the stage directions. For example, after their first lovemaking, the stage directions indicated that the two lovers climbed into bed together and had their arms around each other. However, when we rehearsed the scene, such familiarity and comfortable happiness seemed out of sync. We felt that it was more important for the audience to witness their pain and their defensiveness with one another rather than any happiness that might have come from the lovemaking.

Another cause for changes to the stage direction was simple feasibility. Obviously, it would have been quite difficult for Nick and me to safely “roll off the bed in our passion,” as the rehearsal draft dictated, so we were forced to find other ways to convey their passion that kept us safely on the bed. Also, Ariel’s creative interpretation of the adaptation led to some changes in stage directions, since she had blocking ideas that helped to clarify the intentions of each character and their objectives within the scene. For example, the immense physical distance between the lover and Marguerite at the beginning of the scene “First lovemaking and pillow talk” clearly set up their objectives (the scene ends with both characters meeting in the middle of the room on the bed, both wanting sex) and also helped to highlight the emotional subtext of the scene. Lastly, we changed the stage directions based on the discoveries we made regarding what it was feasible for us to achieve as actors. For example, although the rehearsal draft called for a hand mirror to be used to help the female actor in the adaptation achieve the character shifts, we discovered that I no longer needed such a convention, as I learned how to show the character shifts with my body and in conjunction with the changes lighting design.

The last change from the rehearsal draft to the performance draft was the occasional transference of Marguerite lines into Old Marguerite lines, or vice versa. We came to these conclusions intellectually, defending them with other quotes from the work or with our deep understanding of each individual character’s wants and needs, re-assigning the lines only when necessary to convey the emotional impact of those lines. For example, originally the scene “The news spreads fast in Sadec” was intended for Old Marguerite because it was written in the third person, but we realized that the text had much greater emotional weight if we gave those lines to Marguerite instead, allowing her

to feel the hurt in that speech in present time. A few of the other changes we made, however, occurred simply because I kept responding in the opposite character's voice, which seemed to indicate that a change would be beneficial. One of these places was in the scene "I say I've always been sad;" the paragraph that starts with "But that's our fate, my brothers and I..." was originally designated for Old Marguerite, but I simply kept responding in Marguerite's voice to the lover's statement, and we decided that logically, it made sense for that line to be given to Marguerite instead of Old Marguerite. We actively avoided making a change in who was given the line simply to make the transitions easier.

In conclusion, because of the multiple drafts and the plethora of dramaturgical research I did throughout the adaptation process, the final performance draft laid a strong foundation for the positive work we achieved in both the rehearsals and performances.

### Chapter Three— The Rehearsal Process<sup>27</sup>

The rehearsal process for the performance *The Lover* was not a traditional one, which was mostly due to the fact that we had such a small production staff. The entirety of our first week of rehearsals, which occurred in December, was devoted to table work. During that week, we attempted to gain a thorough understanding of where the dramaturgy would be helpful to the production, as well as what changes needed to be made to the adaptation so that we had a clear and cohesive performance draft. Additionally, we also spent a great deal of time on character work, making certain that we understood the emotional drives of each scene before we began to stage the work in March. When we returned to the script for the three weeks of rehearsal in March, we began immediately with staging and experimentation on various thematic elements, such as impossible love and Marguerite's discovery that she wants to be a writer. Our commitment to character work continued, which helped us to make many valuable discoveries that positively influenced the blocking and design elements. The most difficult part of the rehearsal process for me was the memorization, as I had never before been cast in a role with so many lines, but once the lines were in my head, the physicality of the characters followed, as did the successful implementation of the conclusions derived from our character work, just in time for the performance.

Of the many strengths Ariel de Man possesses as a director, perhaps the most valuable skill that she brought to directing this production was her willingness to experiment in rehearsal. For every question that she asked, we would try out multiple

---

<sup>27</sup> Please see Appendix C for completed rehearsal exercises.

answers, experimenting even with ideas that we thought were foolish or about which we felt self-conscious. Some of our best ideas emerged through experimentation. For example, the idea of staging the “First declaration of his love” scene so that the Lover and Marguerite were as far away from one another as possible was an idea that emerged from Ariel freeing Nick Surbey (the actor playing the lover) and me to simply move about the stage as we thought appropriate. That staging idea, which was one of the strongest in the performance, emerged from our rehearsal experimentation. There were two particular experiments in the rehearsal process, however, that deserve special attention. Although neither of them became a part of the adaptation, they were by far two of the more important ideas with which we experimented in rehearsal.

Firstly, we addressed the possibility of writing Duras’ companion, Yann Andréa, into the script as the character to whom she is telling the story of her childhood love affair. During our table work, we discovered that the greatest immediate need in reference to Old Marguerite was to find a reason for her to tell this particular story. It is not possible in theater to have a ‘narrator’ character in the same way it is possible in novels simply because each character needs a reason to be onstage. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, Ariel and I were in need of an immediate and time-sensitive reason for Old Marguerite to need to tell this story right now. We originally explored the idea that Old Marguerite’s objective was “to get the story right.” However, we needed to understand why she had that need, and how she hoped to gain emotional or spiritual fulfillment from this attempt, before this could be our goal. We needed a playable reason for Old Marguerite to tell the story in which she could have a measurable effect on the person to whom she is speaking—her audience would do something tangible or have a

physical response if she told the story right. We asked ourselves, whom does she really want to hear this story, and what impact would telling it to that person have on her? What does she need from her audience? Initially, we thought that, above all, she wanted them to forgive her for her past cruelty to the lover, and she wanted them to love her. She is a vulnerable, lonely old woman. And yet, in what way could her audience offer their forgiveness? What would they do so that we could know we were successful? This line of reasoning led us to explore the possibility of adding in another character to the piece, one that Nick would also play. We toyed with the possibility of writing in her companion from the last years of her life, Yann Andréa. Having someone present in the room with her would allow her to deliver the story to him, as a tactic to get him to stay with her—Andréa was always abandoning her for brief periods of time to have love affairs—or as a tactic to get him to talk openly with her.

If we were going to add a character to serve as Old Marguerite's confidant, Andréa was the clear choice. He was the closest to her at the time of the writing of *The Lover*, but he was also the last great love of her life. However, after experimenting with the idea of writing another character into the play, and due to the complicated nature of Duras' relationship to Andréa, we determined that the story was most clear with just the four original characters. Although we did not end up incorporating the additional character, we discussed Duras' relationship with Andréa at length, particularly the manner in which Duras kept writing again and again to Andréa about their spiritual closeness and physical frustration until her death in 1996. This brought us one step closer to the idea that Old Marguerite was telling this story to the lover himself, a realization that was by far our most valuable discovery for that character. We also incorporated

Andréa's first spoken words to Duras. After several months of exchanging letters, he attended one of her lectures, and introduced himself to her afterwards with the simple words, "It's me," thus the lover's words spoken on the phone to Old Marguerite at the end of the play.

Our second important rehearsal experiment was the thought of refocusing the storyline so that it became the story of Marguerite becoming a writer, rather than the story of a childhood love affair that impacted the rest of her life. Duras herself was tempted to re-envision the storyline this way when she was working on the screenplay for the film of *The Lover*; she asked herself whether or not she should retain the family elements of the novel in the film. Eventually, she determined they should remain in her script, almost becoming the focal point instead of the lover because she realized that, to her, the story had become more about a young girl struggling with familial pressures to become a writer, rather than a story about an impossible love. During table work, Ariel and I added several passages about writing to the script, but in the end, those passages felt less active than Old Marguerite's speeches about her regrets and her love for the lover. Therefore, although we enjoyed our exploration of a new central focus for the play, we chose instead to commit ourselves to the story of the lover and the impact of that relationship on the rest of Duras' life.

Another part of the rehearsal process in which Ariel's directing skills were apparent was in the thought-provoking questions she continually asked in order to encourage perpetual evolution of the characters. For example, she asked me several times why Marguerite was with the lover, and it was not until I found a satisfactory answer within



my dramaturgy that she stopped asking that particular question. The answer I eventually gave her was from Duras' own writing, as she discussed this very question herself in her book, *Practicalities*. She stated, "When Bernard Pivot asked me what made me stay with the Chinese lover, I said: 'Money.' But I might also have said it was the fabulous luxury of the car, which was more like a salon. The chauffeur... the sexual smell of the silk tussore, and of his, the lover's, skin. They conditioned me to love, if you like. I really started to love him after I'd left him...I think love always goes with love: you can't just love by yourself... he loved me so much I had to love him; he desired me so much I had to desire him" (Duras, *Practicalities* 126). After this thorough response from Duras' own work, Ariel moved on to other questions.

Perhaps the most important of Ariel's thought-provoking questions surrounding the character of Old Marguerite was the question, "Why does she write, and to whom?" One of the inherent difficulties in adapting a novel for the stage that contains a narrator character is the difficulty of finding an achievable objective for that character, or a reason for her to be onstage and a part of the story. The action "to tell" is not a particularly captivating action, and has no measurable result. It took me several tries at answering this question to understand that Ariel wanted me to find a strong "infinitive verb action" for Old Marguerite to justify her presence in the story; my original responses to her were along the lines of, "It is important for her to tell this story now because she wants to tell the truth to her readers, tell the truth about her family, to talk about the sadness of her childhood." Finally, I responded to this question without thinking, and said, "She is trying to make herself feel better." Ariel immediately jumped on this more emotional and more active response, and asked, "Feel better about what? And how will telling the

story make her feel better?” Instantly, I delved into the dramaturgy to help me find the answer to this new question, and I found the following quote about Duras from Adler’s biography: “Can love change a life, become a destiny? With Duras it is always too late” (Adler 207). I remembered Old Marguerite’s line in the play, “Very early in my life it was already too late,” and Marguerite’s line, “And I’ll always have regrets for everything I do, everything I’ve gained, everything I’ve lost, good and bad,” and realized that it was her love for the lover that so tragically changed her life from one full of possibilities to one that was lived with regrets and one for which she was always too late. As Duras herself wrote in *Practicalities*, “It’s only late in life that you start drawing conclusions from your experience... it’s afterwards you realize that the feeling of love you had with a man didn’t necessarily prove that you loved him. Now I find evidence of love in memories less strong and less articulate. It was the men I deceived most that I loved most” (Duras, *Practicalities* 125). The implementation of this dramaturgy led to the realization that Old Marguerite, in telling this story, was writing a love letter to the lover himself, desperately trying, again too late, to tell him that she loved him. This love truly did change her life entirely, as her failure to acknowledge her love for him during the affair led to a destiny of impossible love affairs throughout the rest of her life. In an interview given in the later part of her life to Pivot, Duras admitted “that this love eclipsed all others in her life” (Hewitt 125), a confession that supported our decision to state that Old Marguerite’s objective for writing and telling the story was to tell the lover that she loved him, and that she still does love him, and her objective is to get him to forgive her and love her again. Other critics support this view of the narrator’s purpose in the novel. Vickroy writes, “The lover is [Duras’] first ‘reader’ in a sense. He offers

her the safety of love and shared marginalization within which to speak her concerns...In this safe space she can grow but also begin the process of mourning... Her feelings emerge when alone with him: 'kisses on the body bring tears. Almost like a consolation. At home I don't cry...' (46); 'our first confidants are our lovers' (60). He becomes her witness... embracing her passion and her agony: 'His face against hers he receives her tears...' (101)" (Vickroy 12). The intimacy they shared gave her the confidence she needed to become a writer and also provided a story she will write over and over again. In her introduction to the English translation of *The Lover*, Maxine Hong Kingston writes, "One of the pleasures of loving the Chinese man is to write him down. She may be loving him to have something to write. She has a story to tell because of having loved him" (Duras, *The Lover* iii).

Having determined the main reason that Old Marguerite was compelled to tell the story, and after finding a concrete objective for her to pursue throughout the performance, I felt the need to explore this question to its fullest extent. Therefore, although Old Marguerite's primary audience in the actual performance was the lover himself, in order to have a thorough understanding of Duras' other intended audiences, through dramaturgical research, I continued to search for other potential audiences for Duras' story, and I found quite a few.

Firstly, even though Duras often made herself out to be an impenetrable, uncaring force in the literary world, the fact of the matter is that she cared a great deal about what her critics and her readers thought of her, as evidenced by the fact that she posted the sales figures of *The Lover* above her writing desk for encouragement. Therefore, it came

as no surprise to discover that another of Duras' intended audiences was, of course, her readers. In *Practicalities*, she wrote, "Those people are you, whom I love and for whom I write. It's you that frighten me, you who are sometimes just as terrifying as gangsters" (Duras, *Practicalities* 110). She wrote for us, her readers, and, through the adoption of her autobiographical pact, she gave us a kind of power over her, which, for Duras, is one of the greatest gifts she can give to anyone. In *The Lover*, she told us the story that is, in many ways, the most important story of her life, but she also gave that story to us, releasing it to our creative interpretation. Adler remembers, "She always considered reading as a creative act. To read is in a way also to write. So many readers, so many creations. A text belongs only to the reader who gets hold of it. And with this appropriation the author disappears" (Adler 210). However, although *The Lover* was certainly written for and given wholeheartedly to her readers, we must not forget that Duras was also writing the story for herself. Adler believes that Duras wrote *The Lover* in part to create a happier life for herself than the one she had lived: "Marguerite dreamed out loud of what could have been, of what should have been, the story of her adolescence. Marguerite invented this gentle and patient lover, affectionate and tender" (Adler 346). But Adler also provides a second self-interested motivation for Duras' writing, one that has to do with her desire to prove her talent to those who had always been critical of her. For example, Duras named the title character of her novel *The Afternoon of Mr. Andesmas* from "a contraction of three names An/telme— des/Forêts—Mas/colo. Was it Marguerite's intention to gibe at the three men who'd been criticizing her for publishing too much and for speaking too often to the newspapers? Probably. For Marguerite didn't need her tutor-fathers or big teacher-brothers anymore. Everything inspired her" (Adler

241). Writing beautiful, semi-autobiographical works like *The Lover* could have been Duras' way of thumbing her nose at the men who looked down on her for her frequent need for communication with the public. Adler also provides a third, more sentimental, theory on Duras' need to write, for this story in particular, which is to purge herself of the pain of her difficult childhood. Adler says of her more autobiographical writing that took place in the 1980s, "She [Duras] continued to write to exorcise her childhood and bewildering adolescence, and constantly return to territory scorched by the absence of love" (Adler 189). The repetition of writing about her childhood frees her from the painful memories associated with it. "Her ways of recycling her work, of always reiterating the same themes, was also an attempt to annihilate the subject, to wear out the words, to empty them from the inside" (Adler 318). Additionally, writing becomes a way to dull the pain of her tragic love affair. Duras herself said in an interview, "'You don't prevent love from being lived, to love is still the best thing down here on earth.' 'So do nothing, even if it causes pain?' 'That's right. But there's a way to dull the pain and that's to become an author'" (Adler 240). Duras also writes to release the darkness inside of her, a darkness that all of us possess and understand. "Each one of us has an inner shadow. Therefore each one of us could write. The question for Marguerite Duras was—how can anyone not write?" (Adler 193). Duras herself answers the question of why one writes most clearly in her *Wartime Writing* notebooks. Writing can become a manifestation of the instinct for self-discovery, the desire to dig up long forgotten memories and parts of the self and remember them. Duras writes, "It was barely thirteen years ago that these things happened and that our family broke up, except for my younger brother who never left my mother and who died last year in Indochina. Barely thirteen

years. No other reason impels me to write of these memories, except that instinct to unearth. It's very simple. If I do not write them down, I will gradually forget them. That thought terrifies me" (White). And lastly, in the typical Durasian way, Duras admits that she writes because she does not know why she writes. Therefore, she writes in search of answers. An interviewer asks, "Why do you write, MD?" Duras replies, "Every interview I give, I'm asked that question, and I've never yet found a satisfactory answer. Doesn't everyone want to write? The only difference between writers and the rest is that the former write and publish, and the latter only ever think about it. It is in fact the only correct dialectic definition of a writer: a man who publishes. There are loads of people who toy with the idea of writing but never take it any further" (Adler 240).

Therefore, although in rehearsals Ariel and I focused Old Marguerite's passion for writing on one central purpose, which was to confess her undying love to the lover, through my research, I discovered many other reasons for her writing, all of which influenced my relationship with the audience in some way.

Another crucial question to ask when it comes to Old Marguerite's relationship to the audience was, "Does this play have a hopeful ending?" In order to understand the artistic answer to this question, it was necessary first to determine the central event. The central event of the novel is the realization of Duras' love for the lover, prefigured in the novel by the realization of the depth of her love for her brother when she records how it almost killed her when she heard of his death. "Duras' love for her brother is not fully recognized *until he dies*" (Hewitt 124 emphasis mine). In fact, it isn't until writing *The Lover* that Duras fully recognizes this love herself. She says,

“The wild love I feel for him remains an unfathomable mystery to me. I don’t know why I loved him so much as to want to die of his death...’ Similarly, Duras’ love story repeats this structure of delayed meaning: her love for the Chinese man, although intensely lived during the year and a half, is not fully admitted, to herself, much less to him or others, until she is en route to France... In the delayed reaction, the ‘she’ of this passage is no longer the controlling agent of the story: just as the adult retroactively realizes how much she cared for her brother, the adolescent realizes her feelings after the fact. *The Lover* is a voyage of textual discovery, not of a preestablished past, but of pasts as they become alive in the present of writing, and of presents as they are shaped by the representations of the past” (Hewitt 124).

Hewitt seems to believe that the ending of the novel is a hopeful, sentimental one; she writes, “Although the text asserts the interchangeability of partners in love, it also seems to attribute a primacy to Duras’ love affair with the Chinese man. *The Lover*’s remarkably touching ending undoubtedly reinforces the work’s romantic aspects... there is a wonderful generosity in the lover’s final declaration, a love that surpasses the limits of the contingent, the variable, the limited, the superficial” (Hewitt 125). Despite all the critical support for the novel’s hopeful ending, however, we did not decide that the ending of our play was sentimental until we acknowledged that Old Marguerite’s primary goal in writing the novel was to write a love letter. We determined that she regrets never having told him that she loved him, never having said good-bye or thank you, and so she tells the story of the affair and her true feelings about it as a confession. And, at the end of the play, when she thinks the storytelling is over and she feverishly begins to write,

even though she still cannot find the words to tell him that she loves him, her acknowledgement of him with the line, “It’s me, hello,” is somehow enough. The acting choices that we made leading up to that moment allows those words to convey all the love she still feels for him, and she at last finds peace. She overcomes the terror of vulnerability that would cause her not to speak, in order to tell him, in her own impenetrable way, that she loves him.

These are the three questions that Ariel asked most frequently in rehearsals: 1) Why is Marguerite with the lover? 2) Why does Old Marguerite write? and 3) Does the play have a hopeful ending? The answers we discovered to these questions led to a strong understanding of the drive of the play. Once we reached our conclusions, we fully understood Marguerite’s relationship with the lover, as well as Old Marguerite’s objective in telling this story and all her potential intended audiences. However, this left the mother character and the lover to explore, and there were still many more character decisions to be made about Marguerite and Old Marguerite, since the majority of the action and the text in the adaptation belongs to them. Therefore, the following section is devoted to the dramaturgy and the rehearsal work done surrounding Mother, Marguerite, and Old Marguerite. Since the exploration of the lover was primarily done between Ariel and Nick with little help from me, except in the instances when they asked for the perspective of the playwright, the majority of my discussion of his character involves my casting choices, although I do briefly summarize the fundamental character decisions we made regarding the lover.

Our primary character discoveries for Mother centered on the fact that her life was consumed by financial difficulties. Adler writes of Mme Donnadieu, “She was a



woman obsessed with money. With money you can do anything. In Marie's mind—and it was something she believed all her life—only money could bring you respect and happiness. She was never to be satisfied with her lot" (Adler 38). It was her desire for financial security that caused her to invest her life savings in the worthless salt lands that the French government of Indochina granted to her, and it was her need for financial security for her children that motivated her to permit Marguerite's relationship with the Chinese from Cholon. It was also her desire to provide fiscal support to her elder son that led her into the disastrous venture with the chicks described in the novel, as well as the selling of the forest behind the family's château to pay off his gambling debts. In fact, she supported her ne'er-do-well elder son financially any way that she could until the day she died because of her enormous and irrational preference for him over her other children, a preference that greatly hurt Marguerite. The mother emerged from our character study with two primary motivations for all of her actions; her endless search for financial security and her desperate love for her elder son. "To the day she died, Madame Donnadieu would never be anything other than the widow of her husband, and the mother of her oldest son" (Adler 182). In the adaptation, Marguerite describes the mother's almost overpowering self-pity when she says,

"My dreams were of my mother... always just her, a mother either flayed by poverty or distraught and muttering in the wilderness, either searching for food or endlessly telling what's happened to her, Marie Legrand from Roubaix, telling of her innocence, her savings, her hopes... She shrieks in the desert of her life... we are all three of us our mother's children, the children of a candid creature murdered by society."

Adler describes the mother's despair and unhappiness almost as a deep-seated need within her: "The mother was already alone, with her misery, her world-weariness and her endless problems. What was the point of struggling? Marguerite's mother loved misfortune, and misfortune smiled down on her like a beneficent and perverse lover" (Adler 29). Based on this criticism about her and the way she is described in the text itself, we determined that her primary desire was that Marguerite would make money for the family, through whatever means necessary. Her madness, however, made her vacillate between the desire for Marguerite to provide financial security for the family through her illicit love affair with the lover and the desire for her daughter to marry well and provide for the family in that way; because these desires are in direct conflict with one another, her character perpetually struggled with giving in to either mad fury or deep despair. Due to these dramatic, mad vacillations in personality and temperament, discovering the mother's body and voice was a particularly difficult challenge. Because Old Marguerite and Marguerite's bodies were so curved (hunched shoulders and curled finger, and jutting hips and awkward limb placements), it was evident that, in order for a differentiation to be made between the Marguerites and Mother, her body needed to be square to the audience with a particularly straight posture, and to further differentiate her from the Marguerites, I frequently allowed her to have big, overdramatic gestures, such as flapping her arms wildly about her, even above her head. Her voice was closest to my own in range, which made it easier for me to consistently sustain, but in her madder scenes, the pitch of her voice frequently rose or dropped according to the intensity of her emotion, which unfortunately made it a little more difficult for the audience to differentiate between the other two characters I played. However, I believe that the

mother's purpose in the play was perhaps the most clear of the three characters that I played, which was in part due to the specific dramaturgy I found, as well as to the script's own description of her.

Old Marguerite was the most challenging character for me to play mostly because her life experiences are vastly different from my own, which made it more difficult for me to understand her motivations and emotions. Her physicality was also a great challenge, though, since it was so far removed from my own due to our vastly different ages. As with Mother, however, the dramaturgical research that I did for Old Marguerite before rehearsals proved to be extraordinarily helpful when it came to making overarching character choices. For example, the biographical research that I did on Duras' life led me to the realization that her life was a cycle of impossible love affairs; this is significant because this desperate cycle began with her affair with the lover. Hewitt's criticism of *The Lover* in particular supports this idea, as she writes "*The Lover* is both a tale of poverty, desperation, and death, and an intense, alluring story of impossible love" (Hewitt 110).

In addition to the critical research I pursued for Old Marguerite, the photographic research that I did on Duras was extraordinarily helpful in terms of creating a physical life for Old Marguerite. Photos revealed over and over again her hunched shoulders and big glasses, which became the character's most iconic identifying characteristics. Adler's descriptions of Duras in her old age were also helpful for discovering more details about the way Duras' age affected her public persona. For example, Adler describes the way Duras looked on camera when she acted in her own screenplay, *Le Camion*: "Duras had short hair and wore big glasses... she filmed herself as she was with deep lines at the

corners of her mouth, her face tired and worn... her skin cracked and puffy. She made no attempt to improve her appearance with special lighting or make-up to erase the ravages of time and alcohol. No, we see her as she really was—an old lady whose body has deteriorated, but whose eyes are still very much alive...” (Adler 306). She also wrote about Duras’ time of desperate alcoholism in the 1970s, “Marguerite’s legs were so swollen she couldn’t even go out into the garden. She’d stopped washing her hair and wouldn’t change her clothes. She was turning into a tramp... it pleased her to feel disgust for herself. She thought she was rather brave... she wrote pickled in six to eight litres of wine a day” (Adler 336). Adler also remembered “a tired face, wrinkles, grey hair and eyes tiny behind the big glasses. Not quite an old woman, but a woman who has... given up looking attractive” (Adler 281). Although it was impossible for me to truly look the part of Old Marguerite since I could not line my face and grey my hair for this show because I had to vacillate between three characters of very different ages, the descriptions of Duras’ old face and her commitment to the ravaged, disgusting way she looked as she surrendered to alcoholism proved helpful in getting into the mindset of the character. Also, even though the Duras portrayed by Adler was an old, disgusting drunk who seemed sometimes to have given up, there was still a great deal of personality and fire left in her. Even as an old woman, she retained the survivor instinct she had as a child. She wrote to Gallimard, her publisher, “*I have to make a living, I am alone and I am no longer young and I do not want to end up destitute... I’d rather blow my brains out than end up back in the poverty I knew as a child. I have to stand up for myself*” (Adler 297). This blend of frail, disgusting old woman and powerful survivor who is a brilliant writer is what we tried to capture in Old Marguerite.

Looking through my rehearsal notebook, I found some character notes for Old Marguerite that Ariel gave to me as a way of providing some directorial guidance on this difficult character. I tried to implement these character notes in the performance, and so I felt that her notes, as well as my response to them, would be valuable to include:

“Old Marguerite is brim full of pain and a burning desire to tell this story—she’s an old, sick person vibrating with the need to talk about this story specifically. She can’t rest until she tells it. She needs to make this confession—the confession that she loves the lover, and did even back then, although she didn’t realize it—but she has to find a way to make us understand what she means, so she starts at the beginning with an explanation of her ravaged face. She finds calmness and peace in telling the story. The scene ‘She weeps for her lover’ is the scene that contains the big confession, and it is very hard to say until it just comes bursting out of her. Everything else is building to this moment and this spectacular confession.

Originally, for my character goals for Old Marguerite, I wrote: “As Old Marguerite, I want forgiveness. I want the audience to run to me with open arms and say, ‘I love you. I love your mistakes, your generosity, your ravaged face, your disgusting bad habits, the worst thing you’ve ever done, the best, your beauty, and your fears. I love everything about you, and I always will.’” Although this want was strong, it seemed not quite strong enough, and led to our idea to make the entire play a love letter to the lover himself. Old Marguerite does not want the *audience* to say all that to her; she wants *the lover* to tell her that he still loves her, even though “very early in her life it was already too late,” and she has already ravaged her life. Love can be both a feeling and an action, and in this

circumstance, loving becomes an action with measureable results. The way the last scene is written, the lover's confession of love is a clear signal that Old Marguerite has achieved her goal. Ariel approved the idea that Old Marguerite's goal was to write a love letter to the lover not only because it gave that character a strong drive, but also because it provided excellent dramatic opposition between Marguerite and Old Marguerite. Now there is conflict between them; Marguerite wants simply to survive, to wrap herself in the safety of the lover's money and ignore any of the feelings that go along with a sexual love affair, whereas Old Marguerite looks at her young self from a place of pain and disappointment, asking critically, "How could you have been so blind?"

Following this intense intellectual exploration of Old Marguerite's motivations, the next step was to discover her voice and body. At the end of our first week of rehearsal in December, Ariel challenged me to speculate on the physical differences between Old Marguerite, Marguerite, and Mother. I had, until this point, been far too absorbed in my dramaturgical responsibilities and the character work to thoroughly explore this aspect of playing the three characters, and so I drew on my dramaturgy by thinking of one of Adler's descriptions of Duras' voice as an old woman: Duras had a "husky alcoholic's voice, [was] in the winter of life..." (Adler 319). Wholly on the spot, I began to deliver the lines in an unvoiced, gravelly, low rasping voice—a voice which we did not keep, as it was difficult to project and to sustain—and I created the hunched posture that we eventually chose to adopt for Old Marguerite. Being put on the spot and asked to commit to an un-researched choice about the character proved to be beneficial at the time, as it allowed me to put the dramaturgical hat and the playwright's hat aside for a moment, and simply immerse myself in the actor's side of the process for a moment. However, I did

make certain after that day that I did my photo and video research of Duras so that I would be better prepared to defend my choices the next time that we rehearsed.

During our first week of rehearsal in December, the majority of the character work that we explored was on Old Marguerite and the lover, since the greater part of the story's action centers around the lover and the affair, and most of the storytelling is done by Old Marguerite; in order to have a thorough understanding of the play and its forward momentum, it was necessary to delve into these characters first. At the start of our rehearsals in March, though, Marguerite became our first priority, since if we did not understand this character, the audience would never appreciate the love affair. The successful portrayal of the love affair rests on a complete and thorough understanding of Marguerite's motivations and needs.

The cornerstone of Marguerite's character, we decided, was her pragmatic approach to everything, including her love affair. She was the most effective when she was the most matter-of-fact. This is a character who is almost all about survival, with no romance, or no fairy tale love. This perception heavily influenced the blocking; she never snuggles up to the lover unless they are having sex, and even then, she offers herself like a prostitute to initiate the physical contact. The lover perpetually tries to draw her into the melodrama of his life, but she is far too practical for that. The script clearly supports this understanding of the character; one of the best examples is the sequence of lines that begins with the lover saying, "I wish I could take you away, go away with you somewhere" as he wraps his arms around her, and she, unyielding to the embrace, simply says, "I couldn't leave my mother yet without dying of grief." We did not leave our character exploration there, however. We found two moments of great

vulnerability for Marguerite—the loss of her virginity and the scene “The news spreads fast in Sadec”—in which her voice transfers to third person and she exposes a deeper part of herself than we have seen before. Still, these moments are linked to her pragmatic nature; her childlike vulnerability there stems from the matter-of-fact survival mode part of herself. Although she may feel lost or uncertain in those moments, eventually her practicality reasserts itself, and she simply asks, “What else is there to do?”

In addition to her pragmatism, Marguerite possesses one other startling dominant trait, which is her self-declared perverseness. She does not love the lover and does not really even understand love; she is just a child who needs money, and she recognizes sex as a way to accomplish that goal. Because the lover can never understand this, her perversity is also the source of her power over the lover, which she greatly enjoys. She is power-starved, having none in her own life. Ariel had the following vision for this character, one I recorded in my rehearsal notebook and utilized whenever I was having difficulty playing a scene:

“What is most interesting about *The Lover* is that Marguerite is not a victim, the lover is not her savior—he’s actually just another complication. It’s not a tragic book, really. The trauma of this love affair at such a young age doesn’t ruin her life—rather, it gives her an amazing experience and childhood to write about. The lover fuels her writing. A story that one would expect to be about salvation or ruination is actually about becoming a writer. Old Marguerite is an alcoholic and a famous writer... *both* of these facts are a direct result of what happened to her in this story.”



Once we made these decisions about Marguerite's character, her voice and physicality quickly followed. Her body and voice were the easiest to discover for me, as they were the most youthful postures, and therefore the most familiar to me. I did have a little trouble learning to hold my body at deliberately awkward angles, however, as I have spent the past three years of my theatrical education almost exclusively playing roles that require me to look very smooth, sexy, and at ease. However, once I learned that the trick to the physicality was simply to jut a shoulder or a hip and swing one or more of my limbs at every opportunity, Marguerite became the easiest of the bodies to inhabit.

The last component of discovering these characters was determining how Marguerite and Old Marguerite fit into my single body. At first, it felt awkward for me to transition from one to another. I felt as though these two women were too far removed from one another, their desires and perspectives too alien to each other, to ever inhabit the same form. However, in Vickroy's criticism of *The Lover*, she writes, "[Duras'] elder narrative perspective provides psychological consequences the younger could not know—the link between her love for her family and for her lover, for instance" (Vickroy 3). Once I became aware of the duality of perspective in the adaptation and the critical eye that Old Marguerite so frequently turns on Marguerite, the transitions between characters became much more comfortable for me. Additionally, Hewitt speaks to the importance of the body itself when she writes, "The aging face becomes a system of signs to be actively *read*: the body is already a form of autobiography, a personal text wound up in speculation and specularization, that is to say, fiction" (Hewitt 109). In my body, Old and Young Marguerite co-exist, the same way that they co-existed in Duras when she

was alive. During her life, Duras' body was both autobiography and fiction. In the adaptation, my body became autobiographical while playing the memories of Old Marguerite, and became a fictional representation while acting the experiences of Marguerite. In the performance of the adaptation, "One creates from moment to moment and continuously the reality to which one gives metaphoric name and shape, and that shape is one's own shape" (Cranston 37). In this way, the character work that I did on both Old Marguerite and Marguerite melded to form a dual perspective that made the co-habitation of characters within my single form very powerful.

Since the majority of the character work surrounding the lover was done as a collaboration between Nick and Ariel, I do not have as thorough an understanding of his inner life as I do of Mother, Marguerite and Old Marguerite. Still, one element of my creative interpretation of the novel that I should address is my casting choices. Since it is my senior honors thesis performance, and I wrote it in part to give myself the greatest acting challenge of my life, it made perfect sense that I should be the actress to play Marguerite, Old Marguerite, and Mother. However, why choose to cast a twenty-two-year-old white man to play a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese man? It is too easy to say that it was a budgetary constraint, and that Nick was one of the only available senior male actors who had the acting skills necessary to play such a role, although those statements are certainly true. However, I actually chose him because of his type. In her biography of Duras, Adler describes the kind of lovers that Duras writes: "Smooth, perfumed bodies, abandoned to love. The man is effeminate. The lovers are anti-macho, slaves to feminine desire. With Marguerite it's always the girl who calls the tune... but for all that

she's not sure what she's doing or where she's got to" (Adler 55). Casting myself and Nick in these respective roles worked out perfectly. His acting experience as the anti-macho slave to desire was completely outside any acting role he had previously received, but he made a thorough exploration of the lover's clear passion for the pleasure of pain and his melodramatic tendencies. On the other hand, Marguerite's position as the one responsible for making things happen, and yet being the most unsure about the way events unfold, ended up being a perfect fit for me and my personality type. When I wrote the characters of the lover and Marguerite, I did not fully understand who they were or why they made the decisions that they did. Such uncertainty would be impossible for a playwright to defend, but as an adaptor, it was easier to justify the mystery that surrounded Marguerite and the lover. In the same way that Duras left the novel open to artistic interpretation by her readers, the adaptation was open to actors to introduce their own understanding of the characters and their actions within the play. The lover as he appeared in the performance was almost entirely Nick's creation. On his own, he discovered the lover's propensity for overdramatizing everything, his intense desire for pain, his cowardly dependence on his father's money; in the text, Nick found weaknesses in the lover's character that I do not remember writing. Through all of Nick's discoveries about the lover and Nick's own powerful acting choices, I came to recognize Marguerite's pragmatism, her instinct for survival, her confused passions. Nick's often over-the-top melodramatic readings of the lines frequently made us laugh in rehearsal, but they also made me want to react in direct opposition to them, as Marguerite does. Nick and I fed off of each other's acting choices, and so our respective discoveries about the relationship between the lover and Marguerite signified a true collaboration.

I cannot speak to Nick's process of discovering the physicality and voice of the lover, although I know he spent a great deal of time outside of rehearsal practicing wearing a jacket and working with a cigarette so that those elements of his character would be smooth. Nick has a distinctive voice, particularly when he is acting, which in this case worked to his advantage. His voice is often breathy and high pitched, particularly when he is portraying great emotion, and he frequently interrupts his lines with bursts of breath. For the lover, these speech tendencies were ideal, since the weaknesses of his character seem to imply breathy, almost whiny, speech patterns. I feel that, despite the fact that the lover is supposed to be twenty-seven and Chinese, Nick was by far the best actor I could imagine to play that part, and his character choices energized the play in an unforeseeable and highly successful way.

In conclusion, although this rehearsal process was the most unorthodox and the most demanding process I have ever experienced, I learned a great deal about how to develop a character and how to study the text for necessary character information. I also learned how to integrate dramaturgy with rehearsal needs. I discovered the great value of experimentation within the rehearsal hall, even if the ideas with which one is experimenting seem foolish or embarrassing. Ariel's direction was absolutely vital to the success of the play, as she was very skilled in asking the difficult character questions over and over again until we found a satisfactory answer— answers rich with playable actions and character desires. Through my dual role as adaptor and actor, I learned to depend upon the text itself to supply the character's emotional climate and objectives, which was an enriching discovery that will benefit me in all my future roles. Lastly, throughout the

course of the rehearsal process, I had the powerful experience of falling in love with Duras and her words. Michael Lonsdale, who frequently worked with Duras, best summarized my own experience of acting Duras's work when he said, "with her, acting involves the suppression of one's personality... You have to be in love with Duras, become a voice in her own symphony... The cast's job is not to act, but to say the words" (Vircondelet 239).

## Chapter Four—The Performance Process

Having dedicated the first three chapters to summarizing all the work that led up to the performance of the adaptation, this fourth chapter is devoted to a discussion of the performance process, based on both the audiences' reactions and my own personal process and discoveries. All in all, I believe the production of the adaptation was successful. The week leading up to the performance weekend was particularly stressful because I was still finalizing some of the design, in addition to memorizing lines, connecting the scenes to one another, and solidifying the physical work. However, by opening night, I felt well prepared to perform, and I was pleased with the majority of the design elements. This chapter will provide a summary of the performance process, including the end result of the design elements, the preparation I did on show nights, what did and did not work within the production, and all of the surprising discoveries that came about through the performance.

As far as the design elements of the production are concerned, the props were probably the most successful. We keenly felt the lack of a stage manager when we were originally blocking the show, as the props were surprisingly difficult to track given that there were only a few of them. However, because the hat, shoes, and glasses were such clear identifying factors, they proved to be enormously beneficial, both to the audience for indicating which character I was currently playing, and to me, as I was able to learn the progression of the props and use them as guideposts for where I was in the show. The only prop specified in the script that we did not use was the mirror prop, and it was

necessary to cut it for a few reasons. First, when the mirror idea was originally conceived we had not taken into account the lighting of the production; there was quite a bit of harsh front light, which made using a mirror difficult, as there was a great deal of glare. Additionally, we thought it might distract the audience from the text. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, we decided in the rehearsal process that the character shifts could be achieved simply through my acting work and changes in my voice and body, so the addition of another prop to indicate character seemed unnecessary. The only other difficulty we had regarding the properties involved the zippo lighters. It was difficult to find lighter fluid for them, but then it was discovered that we were not permitted to smoke in the Burlington Road Building Theater, so having real flame became much less important. Nick and I both still insisted on flicking the lighter twice or three times, however, as though it were going to light, which a few audience members later confessed that they found amusing. The only disappointment suffered in the properties area was our inability to smoke, since the adaptation script called for clouds of smoke in the lover's apartment, and because his perpetual indulgence in smoking was a large part of his character. It was disappointing not to be able to use these props to their fullest extent, but overall, the properties design was a successful addition to the performance.

In regard to the sound design, although the musical selections for the adaptation were well placed within the piece, and they successfully introduced the audience to the various times and places within the play, there were a number of cuts from the original sound design to the performance sound choices. At the time that sound decisions needed to be made, I was struggling a great deal with line memorization, and I felt confident enough, both in Ariel's understanding of the play and in her position of an outside eye on

the production, to surrender to her the decisions about what music cues to use and where they should come in the play. The result of this was that the modern musical selections, which included two Eastern-influenced Andrew Bird songs and a Yo-Yo Ma and Bobby McFerrin collaboration, were eliminated from the show entirely, as was an operatic recording from the 1920's. Ariel wished to remove the modern music in order to enforce the conception that the majority of the play occurs in a hazy dream world of the remembered Indochina of Duras' childhood, not in the cold, harsh reality of Paris. The only other sound matters were the pre-show music and the post-show party music, both of which were relatively easy mixes to construct. Over the summer, I did a great deal of music research into traditional Vietnamese folk songs, so I had a large database of Vietnamese music to draw upon when constructing our pre-show playlist. My primary focus was to select traditional Vietnamese songs that would not alienate modern American audiences, as the vocal style is very different from anything Americans are used to, and can be somewhat jarring. The post-show music was also a simple playlist to construct, as my interest in American swing dancing has led to my large collection of swing era songs, from which it was easy to select an hour's worth of music from the proper time period.

The set design was also an element of the production that was fairly simple. Although the constraints of the intimate space were such that certain elements in the adaptation were impractical, such as a ceiling fan and functional water jars, I do not believe that the production suffered in any way from their lack. We used a gobo to indicate the darkness of the lover's studio and placed a large white screen onstage to symbolize the shutters. The dual white bedside tables, although not specified in the



script, were strong additions to the piece, as they provided resting places for the decanter, ashtray, lamp, notebook, and, on occasion, the eyeglasses. The bed functioned almost perfectly in the piece. Although I wished for a large headboard, I found that in production we did not usually miss it because we used the bed in so many other ways than the traditional way of sitting up against the headboard. Also, once I stapled down the top sheet to prevent it from getting tangled up while the lover was writhing around in bed, the bed became a functional element of the play. Lastly, the chair was utilized effectively in multiple situations to symbolize several locations—the limousine, the Chinese restaurant, the rocking chair in the house in Sadec—and so was a beneficial addition to the production.

The costumes are beautifully described in Duras' original text. I held as true as possible to her artistic conception of the characters' clothes, since these descriptions play such a large role in the events of the novel. However, despite the beauty and clarity of Duras' artistic vision of the costumes, which was addressed in Chapter One, the costume design was an area of the production which I felt was not as successful as the other elements. We struggled to find a period appropriate dress that accentuated neither the chest nor the hips. The dress which we eventually chose was not as long as I felt it should be in order to be true to the style of the period, and had two rather modern zippers exposed, which were also not true to the period. Similarly, although it would have been true to 1930's Indochinese fashion to have the lover in two-tone brown and white shoes, it proved too difficult to find such shoes in the proper size that were not golf cleats, and so we gave the lover simple black dress shoes. However, one area of the costuming which I believe was effective was the production's use of the kind of non-conformity

costuming of which Duras herself makes mention in *Practicalities*. The just-slightly-too-large nature of the lover's jacket in this production was intended to add a non-conformist quality to his character, as was the awkwardness of the gold shoes we selected for Marguerite. And so, even though the costumes were not exactly as I would have chosen if I had the time or the expertise, I do not believe that they were in any way distracting to the production, and were as true as possible under the circumstances to Duras' original vision.

The lighting design<sup>28</sup> was perhaps the strongest design element in the production, mostly because I hired a designer to take care of that aspect of the production for me since I have no previous experience in that area. By far the most successful element of the design was the smooth use of the lighting shifts to indicate whether we were in Paris or Indochina. This was helpful to me as an actor, since the lighting changes helped me remember where I was, but it was also helpful to the audience in a few ways. First, because it helped to define the time and place of each scene, and also because the harshness of the white, cool Paris light threw shadows across my face, making me look a little older, helping the audience see me as Old Marguerite even when I did not necessarily look old enough to be this character. The bright, orange Indochina lighting was also helpful when it came to evoking the monotonously hot atmosphere of French Indochina. Additionally, several audience members approached me and mentioned how the cool blue lights during "She weeps for her lover"—in which Duras relives the peaceful, starlit night on the Indian Ocean—strengthened that moment so much so that they were almost moved to tears. Therefore, the lighting design, as well as the other

---

<sup>28</sup> Please see Appendix D for the literary dramaturgy I provided to Ariel and Daniel to aid in the lighting design.

elements of the show, met the overall needs of the production and were strong additions to the performance.

In order to fully understand the production in its totality, it is necessary for me to include a description of my activities on show night. The personal preparation that I undertook pre-performance was simple, with a focus toward as much relaxation as possible. I arrived at the theater two and a half hours before curtain in an attempt to settle myself into the space, but also to leave myself enough time to perform the duties that a stage manager would normally do, such as sweep the floor, refill the decanter and wash the glasses, set all the props, and make sure that the dramaturgical photographic display was set up properly. Following the fulfillment of my stage manager responsibilities, I made an attempt to delegate any other responsibilities to members of my family who were there to help or to Daniel Weiss, who was kind enough to serve as the house manager, as well as the lighting designer and board operator. It seemed imperative that for those two nights, I put aside all my other responsibilities and become “just” an actor as a way of both handling the pressure of the evening and making certain that I effectively gave myself over to the experience of performing, doing full justice to the strength of the discoveries we made in the rehearsal process. Therefore, after stage managing, I began to warm up my voice and my body through physical and vocal exercises like tongue twisters, singing scales, and moving my body through the space in swing exercises. For this show in particular, it was vitally important to warm up my voice thoroughly in order to sustain the three different character voices, since I utilized almost the full range of my voice in the performance, with Old Marguerite’s voice at the

bottom of my range, and Marguerite's voice at the top. Next, I warmed up my body further by spending some time in each of the three characters' respective bodies, moving like them, paying special attention to how they walk or sit or get in and out of the bed. This led into what was perhaps the most valuable of my warm-up exercises, which was doing a quick walk-through of the entire show with the text in my hand. This walk-through was partly to cement the transitions in my mind, but mostly it was a final chance for me to absorb the text into my body and my mind as much as possible, and it proved to be very valuable. It was this exercise, actually, that saved me in performance, since its successful completion each night allowed me to trust my muscular and verbal memory in moments of crisis onstage when I could not remember what came next (although there were very few of those moments during the actual performances, and all were successfully resolved). My main goal for performing the show was simply to stay in each moment and to explore each beat thoroughly. In order to do this, I had to blur out the audience as much as possible, since it was easy for me to see friends and family in the house and be tempted to gauge their reactions and perform accordingly. I also did not permit myself ever to think, "what comes next," but I simply trusted in the pre-show preparation that I did and allowed the text to lead me through the play. My pre-show ritual allowed me the freedom I required to fully commit to the text and the work we had done in rehearsal, and allowed me to achieve previously unimagined strength of work in the final production.

Perhaps the only element of the adaptation that did not function in performance as it was intended based on rehearsal and the writing itself was the portrayal of the mother

character. Of Duras and the relationship to madness that emerges in almost every piece of her writing, Adler writes, “All through her life, Marguerite was afraid she might go mad, and yet often she courted madness; she decided to befriend it rather than make it an enemy to be defeated. ‘To be one’s own object of madness and not become mad, now that would be a most wonderful misfortune,’ she wrote in *Green Eyes*. Very much later, when it was already too late, she realized her mother was mad. And as though to exorcize her own share of madness, she admitted it and wrote it” (Adler 36). The mother’s madness was difficult to demonstrate in the adaptation, and it is my feeling that my continual attempts to show her drastic changes between harmony and despair weakened her in the audiences’ eyes. I believe that the mother was the least clear and the least specific of all the characters in the play because her attitude towards her daughter and their poverty changed so wildly from scene to scene. I attempted to create a strong, distinct physicality for the mother that would be evident in each scene she was in; for example, the mother frequently flapped her arms awkwardly, held her body straight to the audience, and had a very vertical posture. Still, her voice was often so different from scene to scene that a few audience members had trouble knowing who I was portraying when I was playing the mother. This difficulty stemmed from the issue of the mother’s madness, which, in my opinion, was not successfully communicated in the adaptation, both in the writing and in the performance.

However, in spite of the difficulty I encountered in successfully portraying the mother character, there were several elements of the final production that I felt were quite successful. Firstly, I received two far-reaching, over-arching notes from Ariel in rehearsals a few days before the performance, both of which I was able to successfully

incorporate into the finished product. Ariel suggested that, above all other notes, I focus on making each sentence a new thought or a new discovery of some kind. She encouraged me to find a reason why each individual part of the story needed to be told at that exact moment, and to whom. In order to do this, I had to lay aside all the dramaturgical and intellectual work I had done until this point, and simply try to rediscover the ways in which this story of Duras and the lover was the most important, most terrible, most wonderful story of her life, and try to convey that to the audience. This note transformed the performance from an actor trying desperately to remember a great deal of text and trying to recreate perfectly each moment discovered in rehearsal to three characters coming to life onstage and reliving the best and worst moments of their lives over and over again. This made an enormous difference in the audience's perception of the story. The second note that Ariel gave me that led the performance to a higher level was to avoid going "off" my voice, or to attempt to eradicate any breathiness or deep throatiness, particularly in moments of great emotion or passion, since it caused the audience to lose the meaning of my words. The successful implementation of these two notes on the nights of the show catapulted me into performance-readiness.

Another element of the production that enjoyed great success was the special attention paid to five specific dramaturgical foci, and their integration into the performance. The first of the dramaturgical aspects we attempted to communicate was the importance of "the gaze," in Durasian literature in general, but in *The Lover* in particular. Although the following passage was eventually cut from the adaptation, Ariel and I agreed that its message was important to preserve in the performance:

“Never a hello, a good evening, a happy New Year. Never a thank you. Never any talk. Never any need to talk. Everything always silent, distant. It’s a family of stone, petrified so deeply it’s impenetrable. Every day we try to kill one another, to kill. Not only do we not talk to one another, we don’t even look at one another. When you’re being looked at you can’t look. To look is to feel curious, to be interested, to lower yourself. No one you look at is worth it. Looking is always demeaning. The word conversation is banished. I think that’s what best conveys the shame and the pride. Every sort of community, whether of the family or other, is hateful to us, degrading. We’re united in a fundamental shame at having to live” (*Duras, The Lover* 54).

Because of this idea that to look is degrading, Ariel and I paid special attention to any moment in the text in which a character regards another, and attempted to make the importance of those moments as tangible as possible. For example, in the first scene between the lover and the girl, the adaptation specifies that she does not turn to look at him until she asks him the question, “Who are you?” This is significant because he becomes the object of her gaze—and, incidentally, the object of her desire—only after he makes a comment about his great wealth. Adler also comments about the power of ‘the gaze’ in Durasian literature when she writes, “From this genuinely experienced distress [of the love affair]... came the model for the sexual blueprint used in several of her books: sexual pleasure for women through ‘the gaze,’ solitary and transgressive pleasure for men” (Adler 24). However, as Hewitt points out, ‘the gaze’ can also have an empowering effect, as it does on Old Marguerite when she re-imagines the image of her fifteen-year-old self crossing the Mekong River, and, by gazing on that girl through her

writing, rediscovers her lost love from all those years ago. Marguerite also receives empowerment in this scene, as the lover's longing gaze projected onto her gives her a power over him hitherto unknown in her life. Hewitt explains, "The narrator's gaze at/ reading of the imaginary photograph is a *mise en abyme*<sup>29</sup> of the adolescent's look that is in turn imagined through others. This 'look' is both active and passive: the young girl sees herself/ is seen by others, sees herself as others would see her, seizes that look (appearance/ gaze) for her 'own'" (Hewitt 112-13). Therefore, the gaze has the ability both to weaken and to empower— a dual perspective we thoroughly explored in the performance of the adaptation.

Another important Durasian theme, along with the gaze, is her perpetual references to *le mer et la mère*.<sup>30</sup> She returns to the immensity of the sea again and again in her writing as a metaphor for all emotions and life experiences that are too large, too impossibly grand, to experience fully without bursting, and she frequently links the sea to her mother, as her feelings towards her mother remain enormously complicated throughout her entire life. This link is exhibited in the adaptation when, not five lines after Marguerite experiences her first orgasm, described as, "the sea, formless, simply beyond compare," she immediately thinks of her mother, wondering "how I had the strength to go against my mother's prohibition, so calmly with such determination." Ariel and I attempted to fully explore this theme and the links between the mother and the sea expressed in the adaptation through character work on the mother and through development of the text.

---

<sup>29</sup> A difficult phrase to translate. Roughly, "mise en abyme" means something meta-theatrical. Poetically speaking, the meaning of the phrase is to look into two mirrors that face one another, and see the reflection of a reflection of a reflection and so on into the abyss.

<sup>30</sup> The sea and the mother.



Another element of the dramaturgical research that captivated us was the idea of the lover's diamond. I discovered a photograph of Duras in her old age with her left hand on display, exposing the fact that she had been wearing the diamond ever since the lover gave it her before she left Indochina. Adler writes, "All her [Duras'] lovers' hands are adorned with diamond rings. The presence of the diamond gives them a princely quality. Marguerite always loved diamond rings. She wore hers until the day she died; never taking them off, not even to wash rice. In Duras' universe, the elements of the love ceremony are always the same. First the sight of the diamond excites desire, and then there's the smell of amber on the skin after lovemaking, and the touch of the lover's silk clothes and in their folds a whiff of opium" (Adler 55). After reading about the place of importance the diamond held in Duras' heart, even sixty years after she left the lover, Ariel and I knew that we had to give the exchange of the diamond a place of importance in the adaptation. This was effectively achieved in the scene in which the lover distractedly bequeaths the diamond to Marguerite while they are lying in bed.

The last two dramaturgical foci we explored incited relatively few changes to the performance of the adaptation, but are still worthy of note. Firstly, Duras' grave alcoholism and her illness brought on by her perpetual smoking are enormous factors in understanding Old Marguerite. If it is true that Old Marguerite is a character who will "always have regrets for everything" (Duras, *The Lover* 34) she has done in her life, then her alcoholism and her raging illness must be present in the performance as the physical manifestations of her life of regrets and the fact that "very early in her life it was already too late" (Duras, *The Lover* 4). The way that we chose to manifest this dramaturgy in the performance was by giving Old Marguerite a racking cough—which led her to light up a

cigarette—and a habit of pouring drinks for herself frequently as she tells the story. Aside from these blocking additions, we felt that the text conveyed this dramaturgy strongly enough, and we made no further changes. Secondly, Ariel and I felt it necessary to discuss the importance of French Indochina on Duras' life and her oeuvre, although our subsequent understanding of Indochina's significance led to increased significance in only two lines. We explored the impact of remembering the Mekong River on Old Marguerite at the beginning of the piece, and we gained new understanding of the line, "With that trembling, suddenly, she heard again the voice of China..." since all those years later it was the lover's voice that reconnected her to the sounds of Indochina. Additionally, we used the importance of Indochina to Duras as a way to further explore the sensuous specificity inherent in the language of *The Lover*. Other than that, although these two dramaturgical aspects are worthy of note, they had little other impact on the production as a whole, although I believe that the performance greatly benefited from the availability and implementation of such strong elements.

One of the most exciting results of the performance process was the surprising discoveries I made as a result of putting the show on its feet in front of a supportive audience. There were certain strengths of the adaptation that would never have been discovered had I not been able to perform it in a full production. For example, I was quite shocked by the audiences' laughter. By the time of performance, I was used to Ariel laughing briefly and in certain spots, not continually and in very random places, and my few invited guests to my dress rehearsals did not laugh out loud at all. The laughter proved to be beneficial for me because on the first night, when I was still a little unsure of

the lines, I used the audience's laughter as little performance "naps" in which I could take a few seconds to make sure I knew what came next. Also, it was a positive addition to the performance because it gave me additional confidence as an actor (an actor friend of mine always says that a laughing audience is a listening audience), so I was grateful for the audiences' support. The laughter the second night was a little more distracting than the first night, both because I had friends in the house on the second night who had very distinctive laughs, and because the laughter the second night came in almost entirely different places than that of the first night, but I was still grateful that the audience was engaged in that way. After the show, some audience members said they laughed because they felt uncomfortable, some because Nick's character was so over dramatic and self-pitying, some because they genuinely thought the situation was amusing, and some because of the way certain lines were written, such as the set-up to the scene "The lover's father doesn't die," but no one laughed because the story itself was amusing. The situation of a certain scene might have entertained and provoked laughter, but audience members said they were always aware of the underlying poignancy of the story. Therefore, since audiences were able to laugh and enjoy the story, but still retain an understanding of its inherent tragedy, I feel that addition of the audience's laughter was a positive discovery of the performance.

Another beneficial discovery that came about as a result of performing the adaptation was a personal one. After working on the text for almost nine months before the performance, it proved very difficult for me to remember what it was like to be entirely new to Duras and her story, as the majority of audience was. In a way, I was able to rediscover the play through the audience's eyes. Throughout the thesis process, I

became so intimately familiar with very detail of Duras' life and every version of this story that I lost the freshness and urgency of the story. However, when audience members told me that they cried during the final few scenes, it made me realize again what a powerful story this is, how poignant, how vibrant, and how accessible it is to people of all ages. In a sense, through performance, I rediscovered why I decided to stage this production in the first place, which was a very fulfilling discovery. Some of the audiences' responses to the story surprised and humbled me a great deal. For instance, my father paid me the greatest compliment, which was that he felt sorry for all four characters by the end of the play. Although Ariel and I were determined to make the young Marguerite character as stony and non-self-pitying as possible, she is still a victim, due to her poverty-stricken state and her mother's blatant (though unwitting) encouragement of her daughter's prostitution, as well as the seduction tactics of the lover himself (although in the adaptation we saw few of those). The lover is a victim because of his dependence upon his opium-addicted father. The mother is a victim of the French government who sold her the unprofitable salt lands in exchange for her life savings. Old Marguerite is a victim of herself and her self-destructive habits, regrets, and her inability to get over this experience from her childhood. All these facts were truths about the characters that I knew going into the rehearsal process, but as I strove to memorize lines and deliver them a certain way, remember my blocking, and make certain I was clearly conveying all of the critical events in the story, I lost my empathy with the characters. The audiences' responses to both the tragic and the more comedic moments of the adaptation immediately revived my love and pity for each of the characters, which was a happy side effect of having such an engaged audience present each night.

The last great discovery from performing this was also a personal one; I discovered that I had the acting skills, the stamina, and the intellectual capability to perform a show as difficult as this one was. When I conceived the idea of writing an adaptation and performing as a two-person show, in the bottom of my heart there was a dark seed of doubt. Could I undertake such an enormous venture and succeed? Overall, the production was successful, which inspired me with a great deal of confidence in myself and my abilities. Also, I grew enormously as an actor during this process, and in some unexpected ways. For example, I am much less vulnerable now as an actor; after all, after being so hugely vulnerable in this project, as a designer, an actor, and a dramaturg, how could I possibly become more vulnerable? Additionally, I became infinitely more able to take direction, but most of all, I became more capable of asking the important character questions that will achieve visible results. Ariel taught me the value of responding both in first person and emotionally to character questions that the director asks, rather than responding in third person, and responding intellectually or dramaturgically. This skill proved to be very valuable in the rehearsal process of such a personal show, and it is one that I will carry with me and use for the rest of my career. It is not enough simply to know what the character is saying or what the words mean; it is necessary to know *why* the character is saying it, and know what it means to the character, not just what it means to the play as a whole. I made so many exciting and surprising discoveries like this during the rehearsal and performance process, both about the adaptation itself and about my own work and development as an actor. Staging the production was an intimate part of those discoveries. I feel very blessed to have been

able to experience a full-scale production of the adaptation, as it was a truly invaluable addition to this learning process.

In conclusion, the performance was technically as perfect as I could make it, and it achieved all the goals I set for it, particularly those objectives specified in the program notes. In addition, I made great discoveries through the performance process about the adaptation and about myself. In retrospect, I am extremely glad that I chose to challenge myself even further by staging a full-scale production of the adaptation.

**Appendix A**  
***The Lover* by Marguerite Duras—Adaptation by Eliana Marianes**  
**Performance Draft**

*Cast Of Characters:*

**Marguerite:** ambitious, overflowing with suppressed sexual energy, childish. A dreamer.

**Old Marguerite:** tired, sexual energy converted to passion for writing, nostalgic.

**Mother:** broken, worn out, cast off, furious, helpless, has the best of intentions.

**Lover:** spoiled, insecure, experienced in the art of sexual arousal, manipulative, rich from “Daddy’s” money, loving.

*Setting:* A mostly empty stage. There is a large bed with a headboard and white sheets in the middle of the stage. It is the only furniture except for a curve-backed chair, a lamp, shutters, and some large jars of water in the corner. The year is either 1929 and we are in French Indochina, or it is 1984 and we are in France, in an apartment on the Rue Saint-Benoît.

**Scene 1**

**Ravaged images**

*((Music: Chopin’s Etude #3 in E, “Tristesse.” Lights up on OLD MARGUERITE sitting upright in bed. She wears enormous eyeglasses, the kind Duras began to wear in the ‘70’s. She is sleeping, but wakes herself with coughing. She lights a cigarette.))*

OLD MARGUERITE

One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, “I’ve known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you’re more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged.”

*(Music fades up slowly: “Luu Thuy Truong—Running Water”)*

So I’m fifteen and a half.

It’s on a ferry crossing the Mekong river.

The image lasts all the way across.

I’m fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that part of the world, we have just the one season, hot, monotonous, we’re in the long hot girdle of the earth, with no spring, no renewal. *(Music Out.)*

It’s not the shoes, that make the girl look so weirdly dressed. No, it’s the fact that she’s wearing a man’s flat-brimmed hat, a brownish-pink fedora with a broad black ribbon.

The crucial ambiguity of the image lies in the hat.

*(OLD MARGUERITE gets out of bed, removes the eyeglasses, and puts on the hat, which was isolated on the set as an image alone.)* How I came by it I’ve forgotten. It must have been my mother who bought it for me because I asked her. The one thing

certain is that it was another markdown, another final reduction. But why was it bought? What must have happened is: I try it on just for fun, look at myself in the shopkeeper's glass, and see that there, beneath the man's hat, the thin awkward shape, the inadequacy of childhood, has become a provoking choice of the mind. Suddenly it's deliberate.

#### MARGUERITE

I see myself as another, outside myself, available to all eyes, in circulation for cities, journeys, desire. Having got it, this hat that all by itself makes me whole, I wear it all the time. *(She puts on the gold shoes and sits on the ship's rail—the foot of the bed.)* With the shoes it must have been much the same, but after the hat. They contradict the hat, as the hat contradicts the puny body, so they're right for me. I take the hat, and am never parted from it. *(Music fades out.)*

#### **I'm used to people looking**

*(LOVER enters the stage. He makes his way confidently to the chair, where he sits, preening. He eyes MARGUERITE openly.)*

#### MARGUERITE

Inside the limousine there's a very elegant man looking at me. He's not a white man. He's wearing European clothes—the light tussore suit of the Saigon bankers. He's looking at me. I'm used to people looking at me. People do look at white women in the colonies; at twelve-year-old white girls too. For the past three years white men, too, have been looking at me in the streets, and my mother's men friends have been kindly asking me to have tea with them while their wives are out playing tennis at the Sporting Club.

Fifteen and a half. The body is thin, undersized almost, childish breasts still, red and pale-pink make-up. And then the clothes, the clothes that might make people laugh, but don't. I can see it's all there. All there, but nothing yet done.

I already know a thing or two. I know it's not clothes that make women beautiful, nor beauty care, nor expensive creams, nor the distinction or costliness of their finery. You didn't have to attract desire. Either it was in the woman who aroused it, or it didn't exist. It was instant knowledge of sexual relationship or it was nothing. That too I knew before I experienced it.

#### **First Meeting with Lover**

*(MARGUERITE leans against the foot of the head board as though at a ship's rail. LOVER leaves the chair to approach her.)*

#### OLD MARGUERITE

An elegant man gets out of the limousine, smoking an English cigarette. He looks at the girl in the man's fedora and the gold shoes. He slowly comes over to her. He's obviously nervous. He doesn't smile to begin with. To begin with he offers her a cigarette.



LOVER

Cigarette? *(His hand is trembling.)*

MARGUERITE

I don't smoke. No thanks. *(She doesn't look at him.)*

LOVER

I must be dreaming. *(Long pause. After a while, she invites him to share the rail with her.)* I said, I must be dreaming. *(She smiles, doesn't look at him.)* But where did you spring from?

MARGUERITE

I'm the daughter of the headmistress of the girls' school in Sadeç.

LOVER

I've heard of the lady. Your mother, I mean. She's had all the bad luck with the land they say she's bought in Cambodia, is that right?

MARGUERITE

Yes, that's right.

LOVER

It's strange to see you on this ferry. So early in the morning, a pretty girl like that, you don't realize, it's very surprising, a white girl on a native bus.

MARGUERITE

How else should I travel?

LOVER

Well, yes. But still, it's strange. *(Pause.)* That hat. It suits you, suits you extremely well. It's very...original... a man's hat, and why not? You're so pretty, you can do anything you like.

MARGUERITE

Who are you?

LOVER

I'm a student. Well, I was a—I'm just back from Paris, where I studied. I live in Sadeç, too, on this same river. The big house with the big terraces with blue-tiled balustrades.

MARGUERITE

*(She turns to look at him for the first time. This visibly relaxes him.)* What are you?

LOVER

I'm Chinese, my family's from North China, from Fushun. Will you allow me to drive you where you want to go in Saigon? *(He offers his arm.)*

MARGUERITE

Yes. I will.

*(MARGUERITE addresses the audience.)*

MARGUERITE

Never again shall I travel in a native bus. From now on I'll have a limousine to take me to the high school and back from there to the boarding school. I shall dine in the most elegant places in town. And I'll always have regrets for everything I do, everything I've gained, everything I've lost, good and bad, the bus, the bus driver I used to laugh with, the old women chewing betel in the back seats, the children on the luggage racks, the family in Sadec, the awfulness of the family in Sadec, its inspired silence.

Inside the limousine, he talks. *(OLD MARGUERITE removes the shoes and hat, puts on the glasses.)*

LOVER

I miss Paris. Marvelous girls there. I miss the riotous living, the binges, ooh la la, the Coupole, the Rotonde, personally I prefer the Rotonde, the nightclubs. It was a wonderful life, the best two years.

OLD MARGUERITE

She listens, watching out for anything to do with his wealth, for indications as to how many millions he has.

LOVER

My own mother is dead, I'm an only child. All I have left now is my father. He owns the money. But you know how it is, for the last ten years he's been sitting staring at the river, glued to his opium pipe, he manages his money, his entire life, from his little iron cot.

OLD MARGUERITE

She says she sees. He won't let his son marry the little white whore from Sadec. *(Lights out. Music: "Guilty" by Richard Whiting.)*

## Scene 2

### Permission

OLD MARGUERITE

My mother emerges from her despair, and she spies the man's hat and the gold lamé shoes.

MOTHER

*(Removing the glasses.)* What's all this about?

MARGUERITE

Nothing. Nothing.

MOTHER

*(Examines MARGUERITE, then smiles.)* Not bad. They quite suit you, make a change. So, I bought these for you, eh?

MARGUERITE

Don't worry, they weren't expensive. Marked-down markdowns.

MOTHER

*(Smiling again; she begins to make the bed. MARGUERITE does not help.)* They quite suit you. So imaginative, this buffoonery. Money well spent. It's got to be brought in somehow, I don't know how. All around me, wildernesses, wastes. It's all over, the sons, the salt lands. And you. You're all that's left. You're growing up. Perhaps one day you'll find a way to bring in some money, hmm? One day you'll pay for yourself. *(MOTHER gets into bed.)*

OLD MARGUERITE

And there it is: the link with poverty, there, in the man's hat. Money has got to be brought in somehow. That's why, though she doesn't know it, that's why the mother lets the girl go out dressed like a child prostitute. And that's why the child already knows how to divert the interest people take in her to the interest she takes in money. That makes her mother smile.

I can see it in the eyes, all there already in the eyes. I tell my mother.

MARGUERITE

I want to write. That's what I want to do—write.

MOTHER

Write what?

MARGUERITE

Books. Novels.

MOTHER

When you've got your math degree you can write if you like, it won't be anything to do with me then. It's not real work, it's nonsense. *(Pause.)* A childish idea.

MARGUERITE

What I want, more than anything else in the world, is to write, nothing else but that, nothing.

## OLD MARGUERITE

No answer, just a quick glance immediately averted, a slight shrug, unforgettable. Jealous. She's jealous. I'll be the first to leave. There are still a few years to wait before she loses me... But this one, she knows, one day she'll go, she'll manage to escape.

## MARGUERITE

My mother, my love, her incredible ungainliness, with her dreadful shapeless dresses, thinks you ought to wear everything till it's worn out, that you have to be deserving, her shoes, her shoes are down-at-heel, she walks awkwardly, her hair's drawn back into a bun like a Chinese woman's, we're ashamed of her, I'm ashamed of her. When she drives up to school everyone looks, but she, she doesn't notice anything, ever, she ought to be locked up, beaten, killed. She looks at me.

## MOTHER

Perhaps you'll escape. Day and night, this obsession. It's not that you have to achieve anything, it's that you have to get away from where you are. (*Blackout. Music for Ritual Dance Song from "Mother Mountain and Father Sea"*)

## Scene 3

**First love**

(*Lights up on OLD MARGUERITE in bed.*)

## OLD MARGUERITE

It happened very quickly that day, a Thursday. He'd come every day to pick her up at the high school and drive her back to the boarding school. Then one Thursday afternoon, the weekly half-holiday, he came to the boarding school and drove off with her in the black car. (*OLD MARGUERITE gets out of bed, putting on the fedora and the shoes.*)

It's in Cholon. It's a native housing estate to the south of the city. His place is modern, hastily furnished by the look of it, with furniture supposed to be ultra-modern. It's early in the afternoon.

## LOVER

I didn't choose the furniture. (*He pours two drinks, offers one to Marguerite.*)

## MARGUERITE

It's dark in the studio, but I don't ask him to open the shutters. I don't feel anything in particular, no hate, no repugnance either, so it's probably already desire. I agreed to come as soon as he asked me the previous evening. I'm where I have to be, placed here. There is a tinge of fear. It's as if this must be not only what I expect, but also what had to happen, especially to me. I pay close attention to externals, to the light, to the noise of the city in which the room is immersed. He's trembling. (*LOVER downs his drink.*) At first he looks at me as though he expects me to speak, but I don't. So he doesn't do anything either, doesn't undress me. Just watches and trembles.

## LOVER

*(Softly)* I love you madly. *(Opens his mouth to continue, cannot. MARGUERITE stares at him.)*

MARGUERITE

I could say I don't love him. I say nothing. Suddenly, all at once, I know, know that he doesn't understand me, that he never will, that he lacks the power to understand such perverseness. And that he can never move fast enough to catch me. It's up to me to know. And I do. Because of his ignorance I suddenly know: I was attracted to him already on the ferry. I was attracted to him. It depended on me alone. *(She speaks to him.)* I'd rather you didn't love me. But if you do, I'd like you to do as you usually do with women.

LOVER

*(Horriſied)* Is that what you want?

MARGUERITE

Yes. Of course.

LOVER

I know already you don't—that you could never—about me, I mean, that you couldn't—

MARGUERITE

I don't know.

LOVER

No. I know you'll never love me. *(MARGUERITE shrugs.)* It's just that I'm lonely, so horribly lonely. This love, it isolates me, and I—I love you so much.

MARGUERITE

I'm lonely too.

LOVER

You've come here with me as you might have gone anywhere, with anyone...

MARGUERITE

I don't know. So far, I've never gone into a bedroom with anyone.

LOVER

But you're young, and so beautiful, and—

MARGUERITE

I don't want you to talk. What I want is for you to do as you usually do with the women you bring to your flat. Please. Please, with me. Please.

#### Scene 4

#### Lovemaking and Pillow Talk

## MARGUERITE

*(MARGUERITE undresses LOVER, removing his shirt and vest until he is bare-chested.)*  
 He's torn off the dress, he throws it down. He's torn off her little white cotton panties and carries her over like that, naked, to the bed. And there he turns away and weeps. And she, slow, patient, draws him to her and starts to undress him. With her eyes shut. Slowly. He makes as if to help her. She tells him to keep still. Let me do it. She says she wants to do it. And she does. Undresses him. When she tells him to, he moves his body in the bed, but carefully, gently, as if not to wake her.

The skin is sumptuously soft. The body. The body is thin, lacking in strength, in muscle, he's hairless, nothing masculine about him but his sex, he's weak, probably a helpless prey to insult, vulnerable. She doesn't look him in the face. Doesn't look at him at all. She touches him. Touches the softness of his sex, his skin, caresses his goldenness, the strange novelty. He moans, weeps. In dreadful love.

And weeping, he makes love. At first, pain. And then the pain is possessed in its turn, changed, slowly drawn away, borne toward pleasure, clasped to it.

The sea, formless, simply beyond compare.

*(LOVER lies in the bed, looking at MARGUERITE, standing at the foot of the bed.)*

## LOVER

I didn't know you bled. Do you hurt?

## MARGUERITE

No.

## LOVER

I'm glad.

## MARGUERITE

He wipes the blood away, washes me. I watch him. I wonder how I had the strength to go against my mother's prohibition. So calmly, with such determination.

## LOVER

Why did you come here?

## MARGUERITE

I had to. It was a sort of... obligation. *(Pause.)* We haven't any money. It's all gone. And there's two brothers, too, and me, and my mother.

## LOVER

I know. I know your elder brother, from the opium dens.

## MARGUERITE

He steals to go there. He steals from my mother, from the servants, even, and sometimes the keepers of the dens come and demand money from my mother. My mother will die, it can't go on like this. My mother will die, and even that has to do with what's happened to me today—

LOVER

*(Gently)* What's happened to you today?

MARGUERITE

I want you.

LOVER

I feel sorry for you.

MARGUERITE

*(She pushes him away.)* No. I'm not to be pitied. No one is. No one, except for my mother.

LOVER

You only came because I'm rich.

MARGUERITE

That's how I desire you, with your money. When I first saw you, you were already in your car, in your money, so I can't say what I'd have done if you'd been different.

LOVER

I wish I could take you away, go away with you.

MARGUERITE

I couldn't leave my mother yet without dying of grief.

LOVER

I certainly haven't been lucky with you, but I'll give you some money anyway, don't worry.

### **The force of desire**

MARGUERITE

I'm very lucky, obviously. His hands are expert, marvelous, perfect. This is his occupation in life, love, nothing else; it's as if unwittingly he knew exactly what to do and what to say. He calls me a whore, a slut, he says I'm his only love, and that's what he ought to say, and what you do say when you just let things say themselves, when you let the body alone, to seek and find and take what it likes, and then everything is right, and nothing's wasted, the waste is covered over and all is swept away in the torrent, in the force of desire.

## OLD MARGUERITE

The sound of the city is so near, so close, you can hear it brushing against the wood of the shutters. It sounds as if they're all going through this room. I caress his body amid the sound, the passers-by. The sea, the immensity, gathering, receding, returning.

I asked him to do it again and again. Do it to me. And he did, did it in the unctuousness of blood. And it really was unto death. It has been unto death.

*(OLD MARGUERITE grabs a pillow and lays across the bed, hugging the pillow.)*

He lit a cigarette and gave it to me. And very quietly, close to my lips, he talked to me.

And I talked to him too, very quietly.

Because he doesn't know for himself, I say it for him, in his stead. Because he doesn't know he carries within him a supreme elegance, I say it for him. *(Blackout. Music for Ritual Dance Song from "Mother Mountain and Father Sea")*

## Scene 5

**I say I've always been sad**

*(MARGUERITE lies on the bed, hugging the pillow. LOVER sits up in bed, smoking.)*

## LOVER

You are so beautiful. I'll remember this afternoon all my life, the way you look and feel and smell... you'll remember it too, forever, even after you've forgotten my face and my name.

## MARGUERITE

I wonder if I'll remember the house, too.

## LOVER

Take a good look at it.

## MARGUERITE

It's a place of distress. I feel... shipwrecked. It's like everywhere else.

## LOVER

Yes. Yes, it's always the same. *(MARGUERITE motions for the cigarette.)* But you don't smoke? *(MARGUERITE shrugs. He gives her the cigarette. She likes it, and she keeps it.)*

## LOVER

What are you thinking about?

## MARGUERITE

I'm thinking about my mother. She'll kill me if she finds out the truth.

## LOVER



*(Makes an effort to speak.)* I understand what your mother means. This... dishonor? I couldn't bear it if it were a question of marriage. *(MARGUERITE looks at him sharply. He returns her gaze evenly, proudly.)* I'm Chinese.

MARGUERITE

*(Smiling.)* I understand. *(LOVER lights another cigarette, which they share.)* Is it usual to be sad, as we are?

LOVER

It's because we've made love in the daytime, with the heat at its height. It's always terrible after. *(Smiling)* Whether people love each other or not, it's always terrible. It will pass as soon as it gets dark.

MARGUERITE

No. It's not the daytime. I feel a sadness I expected, one that comes only from myself. I've always been sad. *(She sits up, still hugging the pillow.)* I see the same sadness in me in photos of myself when I was small. It's a sadness I've always had, I could almost call it by my own name, it's so like me. Today, it's a comfort, my sadness, a comfort to have fallen at last into a misfortune my mother has always predicted for me when she shrieks in the desert of her life. I don't ever quite understand what she says, but I know this room, you, are what I was expecting. You are what she was expecting. She shouts out what she believes like the messengers of God. She shouts that you shouldn't expect anything, ever, either from anybody else or from any government or from any God. My present misfortune isn't a personal matter. It was just so difficult to get food and clothes, to live, on nothing but my mother's salary.

LOVER

How did you all manage?

MARGUERITE

We lived out of doors, poverty had knocked down the walls of the family and we were all left outside, each one fending for himself. Shameless, that's what we were. That's how I came to be here with you. Shameless. *(She throws the pillow to the foot of the bed, and props her leg up in front of him.)*

LOVER

Shameless? *(He throws himself down on her.)*

MARGUERITE

*(Spoken upside down from the foot of the bed.)* He is on me, engulfed again. We stay like that, riveted, moaning amid the din of the still external city. We can still hear it. And then we don't hear it anymore. *(Blackout. Music for Ritual Dance Song from "Mother Mountain and Father Sea")*

Scene 6

**My dreams were of my mother**

MARGUERITE

*(MARGUERITE lies across the bed as LOVER gently kisses her all over her body)* Your kisses make me cry. They console me. At home, I never cry, not even during beatings. One day I'll leave them, I'll leave my mother, one day even for my mother I'll have no love left.

LOVER

You'll get away. Don't cry—you'll get away from there.

MARGUERITE

When I was a child, my mother's unhappiness took the place of dreams. My dreams were of my mother, never of Christmas trees, always just her, a mother either flayed by poverty or distraught and muttering in the wilderness, either searching for food or endlessly telling what's happened to her, Marie Legrand from Roubaix, telling of her innocence, her savings, her hopes.

LOVER

It's not your fault that you were poor. You didn't kill your mother. It's not your fault that she's dying.

MARGUERITE

But that's our fate, my brothers and I. My mother's misery is the heart of our common fate, all three of us are our mother's children, the children of a candid creature murdered by society. We're on the side of the society which has reduced her to despair. Because of what's been done to our mother, our amiable, trusting mother, we hate life, we hate ourselves.

OLD MARGUERITE

*(Direct address)* I can still see the face, and I do remember the name. I see the whitewashed walls still, the canvas blind between us and the oven outside, the other door, arched, leading to the other room and an open garden—the plants are dead from the heat—surrounded by blue balustrades like those at the big villa in Sadec with its tiers of terraces overlooking the Mekong. I remember. *(Blackout. Music: Chopin's Etude #3 in E, "Tristesse")*

### Scene 7

#### Nothing to show

*(Lights up on MARGUERITE lying at the foot of the bed, doing homework. LOVER is drinking and smoking.)*

MARGUERITE

Your visit to France was fatal.

LOVER

Yes. I can't look at anything anymore without seeing a price on it. I bought everything in Paris, my women, my acquaintances, my ideas.

MARGUERITE

What ideas?

LOVER

My ideas on love, of course. But those came with the women I bought—a package deal. This love, our love, goes against all my ideas.

MARGUERITE

Why?

LOVER

I'm twelve years older than you. You're a child.

MARGUERITE

And you're Chinese.

LOVER

And I am Chinese. And you are French.

MARGUERITE

Just think of me as one of your bought French women, one with her own ideas about love.

LOVER

And the scandal? And my father? And the authorities? I could be arrested, you're young enough. And what of your own family? Your brothers, your elder brother—

MARGUERITE

Meet them. I'm going to introduce you to them.

LOVER

*(Terrified)* No. It's a mistake. They will expect a proposal, if they ask for one I'm done for, we're done for, I'll have lost you. I'm already lost to them, I'll only become more lost, and then lose you, too—

MARGUERITE

Coward.

LOVER

*(Recoiling)* You know it's true. Your mother—

MARGUERITE

You coward! You love me conveniently, when it won't upset your father or my mother or the authorities or God. (*She stands up on the bed.*) You have no strength to love me outside of your fear. I am your heroism, but it's polluted by your cowardice and your father's money. Leaving France just to sniff around your father for a little more money, even with your business degree, you beg from your father.

LOVER

I have no degree. My father made me come home. I didn't do any work at the business school, and my father stopped my allowance, sent me a return ticket, forced me to come home. I didn't finish the course. I don't have anything to show from my time in France. I don't have anything at all. I need him. And so do you.

MARGUERITE

Maybe you can finish the course here by correspondence.

LOVER

Maybe.

OLD MARGUERITE

(*Wearing the glasses.*) I listen to the way he speaks, makes mistakes, makes love even—with a sort of theatricality at once contrived and sincere.

He can only express his feelings through parody. He hasn't the strength to love me in opposition to his father, to possess me, take me away. He often weeps because he can't find the strength to love beyond fear. And I weep with him.

### **The truth of how they talk**

OLD MARGUERITE

We never spoke as candidly as we did on that first day. Throughout the rest of our affair, for a year and a half, we'd talk distantly, never about ourselves. From the first we knew we couldn't possibly have any future in common, so we'd never speak of the future, we'd talk about day-to-day events, evenly, hitting the ball back and forth.

## **Scene 8**

### **Family's First Meeting**

OLD MARGUERITE

The meetings with the family began with the big meals in Cholon. When my mother and brothers come to Saigon, I tell him he has to invite them to the expensive Chinese restaurants they don't know.

MARGUERITE

These evenings are all the same. (*Puts on hat and shoes, removes glasses.*) My brothers gorge themselves without saying a word to him. They don't look at him either. During these meals, my mother's the only one who speaks, just a few comments about

the dishes as they arrive, the exorbitant price, then silence. He, the first couple of times, plunges in and tries to tell the story of his adventures in Paris, but in vain. It's as if he hadn't spoken, as if nobody had heard. His attempt founders in silence. My brothers go on gorging.

He pays. He counts out the money. Puts it in the saucer. Everyone watches. The first time, I remember, he lays out seventy-seven piastres. My mother nearly shrieks with laughter. We get up to leave. No one says thank you. No one ever says thank you for the elegant dinner, or hello, or goodbye, or how are you, no one ever says anything to anyone.

My brothers never will say a word to him, it's as if he were invisible to them. This is because he adores me, but it's taken for granted I don't love him, that I'm with him for the money, because he's not a white man. The way my elder brother treats my lover, ignoring him, stems from such absolute conviction it acts as a model. I never speak to him in their presence. Except to give him a message. For example, after dinner, when my brothers tell me they want to go to the Fountain to dance and drink, I'm the one who has to tell him. Quietly, as if between ourselves, he says

LOVER

*(He addresses MARGUERITE, and she looks at him. When she speaks, it is in direct address to the audience.)* I'd like to be alone with you for a while. *(Silence from MARGUERITE.)* Your mother's tired, look at her.

OLD MARGUERITE

It's then I hear my brother's voice. He says something short, sharp, and final. Everything comes to a halt. I recognize my lover's fear, it's the same as my younger brother's. He gives in. We go to the Fountain. My mother too. At the Fountain she goes to sleep.

The Chinese from Cholon speaks to me, he's on the brink of tears, he says,

LOVER

*(Grabbing MARGUERITE'S wrist.)* What have I done to them?

OLD MARGUERITE

I tell him not to worry, it's always like that. I explain that my elder brother's cold, insulting violence is there whatever happens to us. His first impulse is always to kill, to wipe out, to hold sway over life, to scorn, to hunt, to make suffer.

LOVER

I'm afraid.

OLD MARGUERITE

He's got nothing to be afraid of. Because the only person my elder brother's afraid of, who, strangely, makes him nervous, is me.

**Scene 9**

**My mother attacks me for my lover**

OLD MARGUERITE

At that time, the time of Cholon, of the image, of the lover, my mother has an access of madness. She knows nothing of what's happened in Cholon. (*Removes hat and shoes and rises.*) But I can see she's watching me, she suspects something.

MOTHER

I know my daughter, my child, and hovering around that child, for some time, there's been an air of strangeness, quite recent, that catches the eye. The girl speaks even more slowly than usual, she's absent-minded, she who's usually so interested in everything, she's become a spectator even of her mother, of my unhappiness, it's as if she were witnessing its outcome. There's a sudden terror in my life. My daughter's in the direst danger, the danger of never getting married, never having a place in society, of being defenseless against it, lost, alone. (*MOTHER smells the sheets.*) I can smell him, I can smell that Chinese's scent... you, you, my daughter, you're a prostitute! My daughter's a little whore, I'm going to throw you out. I wish you'd die! No one will ever have anything to do with you now, foolish slut, you're disgraced, worse than a bitch. (*Shakes the chair.*) What can I do? What else can I do, except drive you out of the house? You stink up the place. Get out, get out, you filthy creature. (*MOTHER throws the chair.*) Filthy slut! What have you done? What have you done? What have I done? What have I done to you? My life, it's a disaster, and my child, my poor disgraced child... (*MOTHER weeps into the seat of the chair. MARGUERITE materializes in the chair, also weeping.*)

MARGUERITE

I swear, Mother. I swear by my own life, nothing has happened to me. How could I, with a Chinese, how could I do that with a Chinese, so ugly, a weakling? I swear to you, Mother. I swear it.

Scene 10

**My family leads to my writings**

OLD MARGUERITE

I'm still part of the family, it's there I live. It's in its aridity, its terrible harshness, its malignance, that I'm most deeply sure of myself, at the heart of my essential certainty, the certainty that later on I'll be a writer.

We said nothing about the family outside, one of the first things we learned was to keep quiet about the ruling principle of our life, poverty. And then about everything else. (*She pours a drink.*)

Our first confidants are our lovers, the people we meet away from our various homes, first in the streets of Saigon and then on ocean liners and trains, and then all over the place.

Now I see that when I was very young, eighteen, fifteen, I already had a face that foretold the one I acquired through drink in middle age. Drink accomplished what God did not.

It also served to kill me; to kill. *(She downs her drink.)* I acquired that drinker's face before I drank. Drink only confirmed it. The space for it existed in me. Just as the space existed in me for desire. At the age of fifteen I had the face of pleasure, and yet I had no knowledge of pleasure. There was no mistaking that face. That was how everything started for me—with that flagrant, exhausted face, those rings around the eyes, in advance of time and experience.

### **We can't stop loving each other**

#### OLD MARGUERITE

We go back to the apartment. We are lovers. We can't stop loving each other.

#### MARGUERITE

At night we go and have dinner in town. He gives me my shower, washes me, rinses me, he adores that, he puts my make-up on and dresses me, he adores me. I'm the darling of his life. *(LOVER gets in bed with MARGUERITE. He wakes suddenly and puts a diamond on her finger. Not romantically, on one knee, but distractedly, while they are lying in bed. MARGUERITE examines the ring.)* Soon I'll have a diamond on my engagement finger. Then the teachers will stop making remarks. People will guess I'm not engaged, but the diamond's very valuable, no one will doubt it's genuine, and no one will say anything more, because of the value of the diamond that's been given to this very young girl. *(Lights slowly fade to black as MARGUERITE, facing us but facing away from LOVER, moves her hand back and forth to let the ring catch the light.)*

### **Scene 11**

#### **News spreads fast in Sadec**

#### MARGUERITE

*(MARGUERITE leans against the bed, isolated, looking out at the audience.)* Fifteen and a half. The news spreads fast in Sadec. During recess she looks toward the street, all on her own, leaning against a post in the schoolyard. She doesn't say anything about her isolation to her mother. She goes on coming to school in the black limousine belonging to the Chinese in Cholon. She watches it go. No one will break the rule. None of the girls will speak to her...She is isolated. Alone, queenlike. Her disgrace is a matter of course. She is doomed to discredit because of the kind of body she has, caressed by a lover, kissed by his lips, consigned to the infamy of a pleasure unto death... unto the mysterious death of lovers without love. *(Music: "Body and Soul" by Benny Goodman.)*

### **Scene 12**

#### **Mother's drunk with delight over children**

*(MARGUERITE turns into MOTHER during this sentence. She takes off the hat and shoes.)* My mother speaks with the head of the boarding school.

*(MOTHER sits across a desk from the head of the boarding school.)*

## MOTHER

Let the girl do as she likes in the evenings. Don't check the time she comes in, don't force her to go out with the other girls on Sunday excursions. She's a child who's always been free, otherwise she'd run away, even I, her own mother, can't do anything about it, if I want to keep her I have to let her be free. It doesn't matter, all that's of no importance. Haven't you noticed how they suit her, those little old frocks, that pink hat, and the gold shoes? (*MOTHER is delighted, speaking as though to a large crowd.*) All of them, they all hang around her, all the men in the place, married or single, they hang around, hanker after the girl, after something not really definite yet, look, she's still a child. Do people talk of disgrace? I say, how can innocence be disgraced? You want to talk of blatant prostitution? (*Laughs*) You say scandal, I say, buffoonery! Just look at the funny hat, the sublime elegance of the child, my beautiful child, who crossed the river. This is just irresistible here in the French colonies; you and your scandal. I mean, this little white tart, this child hidden in outposts upcountry, suddenly emerges into the daylight and shacks up in front of everyone with this millionaire Chinese scum, with a diamond on her finger just as if she were a banker's wife. (*She weeps. Lights out. Music: "Guilty" by Richard Whiting.*)

## Scene 13

**It's only for the money I see him**

## OLD MARGUERITE

(*Lights up on OLD MARGUERITE in chair with her feet propped up on the bed.*) It was one day during the vacation in Sadec. She was resting in a rocking chair with her feet up on another chair, she'd made a draft between the door of the sitting room and the door of the dining room. She was peaceful, not aggressive. She'd suddenly noticed her daughter, wanted to talk to her.

## MOTHER

It reminds me of the little solitaire I had when I was engaged to my first husband. Mr. Dark. (*MOTHER and MARGUERITE laugh.*) That was his name, it really was.

## OLD MARGUERITE

(*Direct address.*) We looked at each other for some time, then she gave a sweet, slightly mocking smile, full of so deep a knowledge of her children and what awaited them later on that I almost told her about Cholon. But I didn't. I never did.

## MOTHER

(*Lovingly.*) You do know it's all over, don't you? That you'll never be able, now, to get married here in the colony.

## MARGUERITE

I can get married anywhere, when I want to.

## MOTHER



No. Here everything gets known, here you can't, now. *(Pause.)* They find you attractive?

MARGUERITE

Yes; they find me attractive in spite of everything.

MOTHER

And also because of what you are yourself. Is it only for the money you see him?

MARGUERITE

Yes. It is only for the money.

MOTHER

Liar. *(Pause)* I wasn't like you, I found school much harder and I was very serious, I stayed like that too long, too late, I lost the taste for my own pleasure.

OLD MARGUERITE

It happened not long before the end... not long before we went back to France. I watched her fall asleep. *(OLD MARGUERITE falls asleep in the chair, and wakes up coughing.)*

#### Scene 14

#### Lover's Father Doesn't Die

OLD MARGUERITE/ MARGUERITE

*(OLD MARGUERITE moves the chair back to its place.)* One day my lover is not there outside the high school. The driver's alone in the black car. He says the father's ill and the young master's gone back to Sadec. The young master came back after a few days. *(She turns into MARGUERITE.)* Again he was there in the back of the black car, his face averted so as not to see people looking at him, still afraid. *(The lovers kiss. LOVER breaks away, trying not to cry. MARGUERITE clings to him.)* We kissed, without a word, we'd forgotten.

LOVER

My father is going to live. Our last hope is vanishing. *(MARGUERITE, stunned, sinks into the chair.)* I tried. I told him he must understand, must have known a passion like this himself at least once in his long life. I begged him, actually begged him, to let me have my turn at living, just once, this passion, this madness, this infatuation, whatever it is that we have. I asked him to give me time to love you a while longer because it wasn't possible for me to give up this love yet, it was too new, too strong still, too much in its first violence, it was too terrible for me to part from your body, especially since, as he well knows, it can never happen again. My father said he'd sooner see me dead.

MARGUERITE

You shouldn't have any regrets. Remember what you said, that I'm not responsible for what I've done here? Neither are you. You said when this was all over, I'd go away from everywhere, and it would really be over. You yourself told me that.

LOVER

I don't mind any of that now. Nothing counts anymore.

MARGUERITE

I agree with your father. I refuse to stay with you. My mother wants to take me back to France, and I'm going to go. (*LOVER will not look at her; reacts as though hit.*)

OLD MARGUERITE

I didn't give him a reason for my leaving. I couldn't. We bathed together in the cool water from the jars, we kissed, we wept, and again it was unto death, but this time, already, the pleasure it gave was inconsolable. A pleasure unto death.

When I went away, when I left him, I didn't go near another man for two years. But that mysterious fidelity must have been to myself.

### Scene 15

#### He can't make love to me anymore

(*MARGUERITE and LOVER sit on opposite sides of the room after a failed love-making session.*)

OLD MARGUERITE

We still went every day to the flat in Cholon. For a while he behaved as usual, giving me a shower with the water from the jars, carrying me over to the bed. He'd come over to me, lie down too, but now he had no strength, no potency. Once the date of my departure was fixed, distant though it still was, he could do nothing with my body anymore. His body wanted nothing more to do with the body that was about to go away, to betray.

LOVER

I can't make love to you anymore, I thought I could, but I can't. I'm dead. Perhaps it will never come back.

MARGUERITE

Is that what you want?

LOVER

I don't know, at this moment perhaps yes. (*He quivers, closes his eyes, clenches his teeth.*)

MARGUERITE

(*She sits on the bed.*) What do you see when you close your eyes?

## LOVER

Pain. Your face. I love your face as much as I love the pain, intensely, unto death. I prefer the pain to you, now. Now that you are leaving. I think we shouldn't see each other anymore.

## MARGUERITE

If that's what you want.

## LOVER

No. No, it's impossible, isn't it? I could send you back to the boarding school this minute, but tomorrow night I'd be there in my black car, just like always, with my face averted, as always, waiting. It's impossible. It's a good thing the boat from France is coming soon to take you away and separate us. This journey is a piece of good luck for us. *(Pause)* I'd like to caress you. I know you want it, and I want to watch your face as the pleasure comes. *(LOVER strokes MARGUERITE gently as she closes her eyes.)*

## OLD MARGUERITE

They are silent all evening long. Afterwards, he puts his arm around her. When it is time for her to leave, he wakes her with kisses. He says good-bye with great finality. *(Blackout. Music: "Luu Thuy Truong—Running Water")*

## Scene 16

**She weeps for her lover**

## OLD MARGUERITE

When it was due to sail the boat bade farewell, uttering its terrible, mysteriously sad wails that made everyone weep.

For her too it was when the boat uttered its first farewell that she had wept. She'd wept without letting anyone see her tears, because he was Chinese and one oughtn't to weep for that kind of lover. His big car was there, long and black with the white-liveried driver in front. It was a little way away from the other cars, on its own. That was how she'd recognized it. That was him in the back, that scarcely visible shape, motionless, overcome. She was leaning on the rails, like the first time, on the ferry. She knew he was watching her. She was watching him too, she couldn't see him anymore but she still looked toward the shape of the black car. And then at last she couldn't see it anymore. The harbor faded away, and then the land.

*(Music: Chopin's Etude #3 in E, "Tristesse")*

Once, during the crossing of the ocean, night had begun as before and in the lounge on the main deck there was a sudden burst of music, a Chopin waltz which she knew secretly, bursting under a sky lit up with brilliancies. There wasn't a breath of wind and the music spread all over the dark boat, like a heavenly injunction whose import was unknown. And the girl started up as if to go and kill herself, throw herself into the sea, and afterwards she wept because she thought of the man from Cholon and suddenly she

wasn't sure she hadn't loved him with the love she hadn't seen because it had lost itself in the affair like water in sand and she rediscovered it only now, through this moment of music flung across the sea.

Around her, people slept, enveloped but not awakened by the music, peaceful. The girl thought she'd just seen the calmest night there had ever been in the Indian Ocean.

### Scene 17

#### Old at 18

OLD MARGUERITE

Very early in my life it was too late. It was already too late when I was eighteen. I grew old at eighteen. I have a face laid waste.

### Scene 18

#### The lover marries

OLD MARGUERITE

She doesn't know how long it was after the white girl left that he obeyed his father's orders, married as he was told to do the girl the families had chosen ten years ago, a girl dripping with gold, diamonds, jade. She too was Chinese from the north.

It must have been a long time before he was able to be with her, to give her the heir to their fortunes. The memory of the little white girl must have been there, lying there, the body, across the bed. For a long time she must have remained the queen of his desire, his personal link with emotion, with the immensity of tenderness, the dark and terrible depths of the flesh. Then the day must have come when it was possible. The day when desire for the little white girl was so strong, so unbearable that he could find her whole image again as in a great and raging fever, and penetrate the other woman with his desire for her, the white child. Through a lie he must have found himself inside the other woman, through a lie providing what their families, Heaven, and the northern ancestors expected of him, an heir to their name.

But she, the white girl, never knew any of this.

### Scene 19

#### It's me, hello

*(OLD MARGUERITE sits upright in bed, eyeglasses on, working, writing. LOVER appears behind her. When he speaks, she does not look at him.)*

LOVER

Years after the war, after marriages, children, divorces, books, he came to Paris with his wife. He phoned her. It's me.

OLD MARGUERITE

*(OLD MARGUERITE looks up sharply.)* She recognized him at once from the voice.

LOVER

He said, I just wanted to hear your voice.

OLD MARGUERITE

She said, It's me, hello.

LOVER

He was nervous, afraid, as before. His voice suddenly trembled.

OLD MARGUERITE

With the trembling, suddenly, she heard again the voice of China.

LOVER

He knew she'd begun writing books, he'd heard about it through her mother whom he'd met again in Saigon. And about her younger brother, and his death, and he'd been grieved for her. Then he didn't know what to say. And then he told her. Told her that it was as before, that he still loved her, he could never stop loving her, that he'd love her until death.

OLD MARGUERITE

It's me, hello.

*(They smile. Fade to black. Music: "Body and Soul" by Benny Goodman.)*

## Appendix B

### Adaptation Exercises<sup>31</sup>

#### Building Block One: Theme

- ◆ Discovering passion is like learning to breathe for Duras.
- ◆ **Naming my theme:** growing—expanding—discovering—choosing—fucking—loving.
- ◆ **What is my compelling reason for telling this story onstage? (The language, a character, a place, a relationship?)**
- ◆ **Who is my intended audience?** Me. My audience. Who are we? How did we become that way?
- ◆ **How can I pare down my original material to fit the stage?** The set is just a bed, I have cut all characters but the mother, the lover, and the girl. I am prepared for a small cast working in a black box space. I am doing my own sound design.
- ◆ **Copyright restrictions?** No, not for a free, educational performance.
- ◆ **Involving storyline:**
  - Ravaged/ Image of M on ferry (setting the scene).
  - First meeting.
  - Mother gives permission.
  - Loss of virginity.
  - Lover and M grow close.

---

<sup>31</sup> All exercises are from Vinnie Murphy's manuscript *Adapting New Works*.

- Lover meets family.
- Mother attacks M.
- Mother and M bond about marriage options.
- M leaves for France and weeps for Lover.
- It's me, hello.

### **Building Block 1 Exercises:**

1. My first impressions of the story were of identification; identification with her sexual awakening, her artistic ambitions, her childish way of handling important matters, even her oppressive relationship with her mother (and how she was always ignored in favor of the elder sibling). I looked at this novel and said, 'This character is me.'
  - a. This story is important to tell now because it a story of choices, of enormous choices that impact the rest of this girl's life (the choice to love, the choice to write); what better story for a college girl who is headed out into the unknown in 9 months to tell?
  - b. **Naming my theme:** growing—expanding—discovering—fucking—loving.
  - c. **Name theme in a question:** What makes passion like breathing? How do our lovers and the choices we make about our lovers change us forever? Why do they leave such a lasting mark?
2. Characters (Unforgettable characters/ relationships):

- a. **Young Marguerite:** ambitious, overflowing with suppressed sexual energy, childish.
  - b. **Old Marguerite:** tired, sexual energy converted to passion for writing, nostalgic.
  - c. **Mother:** broken, worn out, cast off, furious, helpless, has the best of intentions.
  - d. **Lover:** spoiled, insecure, experienced in the art of sexual arousal, manipulative, rich from “Daddy’s” money.
  - e. Mother ignores Marguerite in favor of Elder Brother; Marguerite loses her virginity at a very early age to an inappropriate suitor.
  - f. Lover offers Marguerite a ride in his limousine; Marguerite falls in love with his wealth and his sexuality, and later with him.
  - g. Through her writing, Old Marguerite reflects on Mother’s causal and jealous dismissal of her childhood ambition to become a writer.
  - h. Mother teaches Marguerite to see her relationship with Lover only in terms of financial gain; Marguerite falls in love with Lover.
  - i. Mother tells Marguerite to earn her keep, and allows her freedom to do as she wishes; Mother beats Marguerite concerning her involvement with Lover. Later, Mother connects with Marguerite around this relationship, as well.
  - j. **How do the relationships change throughout the story?**
3. Evocative stage images: Bathing in cool water from jars after hot love making, hot apartment (lazy ceiling fan or hand-held fans), noise of the street, catty girls



whispering in the dormitory, mosquito nets, sound of money clinking into a bowl, cool dark interior of the big black car, physical beatings, dusty roads.

4. Storyline needs work. **What makes this a compelling story to watch onstage, what is exciting and raw and powerful about this work?**
5. **What are some stageable actions?** Besides lovemaking? Well, what else do the lovers do in their apartment together? Marguerite does homework, they dance, they play games, they talk and talk and talk (on the first day, at least).
6. Theme is most important. This story is *'the story'* of Marguerite's life, the story she is compelled to tell over and over and over again. What will be the story of my life? What will be yours? How do the people, places, and things that we love (mothers, brothers, lovers, our childhood homes, our dreams/ ambitions, etc.) change us? How do the choices that we make continue to impact us? This is a play about choices, about growing into who you will become, and about learning to love.
7. Building Blocks in order of importance to me:
  - a. **Characters/ relationships**—how is this story similar to my own relationships with my lovers, my family, my artistic ambition to become an actor? When I look back on my life when I am an old woman, what will I be compelled to say about it?
  - b. **Evocative stage images**—what makes this story beautiful? The story is in a world foreign to us, and two complete strangers (both not native to this foreign world) manage to find a special and unforgettable connection that

changes them both forever. How can the audience actively experience the mystery and power of this story?

- c. **Dialogue/ narrative passages**
- d. **Playable actions**
- e. **Storyline**

### **Building Block Three: Principal Characters and Primary Relationships**

- “Personality is impossible to define. It is at the crossroads of nature and nurture—of genetics, environment, and unexpected experiences—and we can never fully understand another person’s... character is definable. It is a discernible array of traits fixed by time, place, gender, class, and psychology... character is a lens that focuses on selected aspects of personality and allows us to comprehend a person’s actions.”
- “Objectives and intentions involve defining what characters want, and what they would do to get it... It is crucial that you find words that lead to playable actions.”
- “Character work requires knowing a person’s strategy for living, for staying alive.”
- “Character and conflict dominate our idea of theater... relationships come with definable expectations—the actions between people define the relationship and let us know what they want, need, demand, or can accept from each other. Most

relationships have discernible patterns of behavior that reveal what holds the two people together.”

### **Construction Exercises:**

- Young Marguerite is **my central character**. What she needs most is love in any form; as the youngest child, and a girl, always ignored by her mother in favor of her cruel elder brother, Marguerite needs love, and she’ll accept it from any source. Through her relationship with Lover, she gets a perverted version of the love and attention she craves; she has a sexual relationship with him that turns into love, and Mother pays attention to her because of this relationship. This need changed dramatically in rehearsal, as we determined that what Marguerite needed, at any cost, was to survive.
- **What is Marguerite’s journey?** Marguerite grows from being a love-starved, ignored, lonely girl into a desirable, somewhat cruel, strong young woman through her illicit relationship with her Lover. She discovers her sexuality, and uses it to get money and love from Lover, and attention from Mother.
- **Marguerite’s 4 main actions/ decisions:**
  - She decides she wants to write.
  - She goes home with Lover when he asks her.
  - She introduces Lover to her family.
  - She leaves Lover and goes to France.
- **Essential character traits for my 3 principle characters:**
  - Marguerite:

- Sexy
- Strong-willed
- Loving
- Immature
- Cruel
- Desperate
- Lover:
  - Generous
  - Experienced
  - Down to earth
  - Needy
  - Clumsy, awkward
  - Foolish; has foolish expectations and desires
- Mother:
  - Good intentions
  - Would give her life for her children
  - Desires closeness
  - Close-minded
  - Self-pitying
  - Helpless; ignores reality
- **Who is Marguerite?**

- She wears baggy old silk dresses, gold lamé shoes, bright red lipstick, pale pink make-up, and a man's fedora. She is described often as looking like a child prostitute.
- **Physical objects she uses?**
- She is thin, too thin, and her body is described as undersized, child-like. Her breasts are barely developed, and she has an unusual style of movement (fueled by her strange clothing) that men find very attractive.
- Her voice is soft, from a lifetime of being overlooked in favor of her brothers, but insistent because of her strong will. Something about her voice makes it possible for her to get what she wants.
- Though she is 15, the words she uses are those of an old woman. Her advanced sentence structure, vocabulary, and archaic phrasing implies a maturity that she does not actually possess.
- She is afraid of becoming like her mother, completely vulnerable to the world and its cruelty, an utter failure. She fears losing the taste for her own pleasure. Her most present emotions are desire and ambition.
- **Logic for tripling character portrayals** (aside from the obvious cost issues): there is continuity between who Marguerite is as a young girl, who she fears she will become (her mother), and who she is as an old woman. These three characters are linked in a twisted way, and it is interesting to me to see one actress portray these three different women in different stages of life.
- **The most important relationship** is that of Marguerite and Lover. It is the relationship that changes the most, the relationship that influences Marguerite

most heavily during her childhood, and is the relationship that gives her the push she needs to become a writer.

- **Three important actions that involve them both:**
  - Marguerite losing her virginity to him.
  - Marguerite ignoring him in the presence of her family.
  - Marguerite choosing to leave him for France.
- **What is the relationship analogous to?** Their relationship is like two people fencing, always searching for the advantage over the other. It's like a black widow killing her mate after they have sex, and it's like two best friends fucking each other just because they're bored. It's also like a pair of wolves mating for life.
- **Who is struggling with whom? Where is the greatest tension?** The greatest struggle is their perpetual power struggle.

#### **Building Block Four: Choosing an Evocative Stage Image**

- “The theme is the floor of the adaptation you are constructing... your intellectual and artistic challenge is to imagine how to fuse what the story is about—the theme—with where it happens—your setting.”
- “In order to work, staging needs a resonant sense of place, of where.”
- “A metaphoric space is suggestive, evocative, and detailed enough to suggest the larger world that encompasses the play. Balancing what the play is about—the theme—with its practical needs of staging actors and objects on a stage will

uncover the idea for such a space. Find literal details in the novel to create a stageable image.”

### **Construction Exercises:**

- **My stated theme:** This is a play about choices, about growing into who you will become, and about learning to love. This story is ‘*the story*’ of Marguerite’s life, the story she is compelled to tell over and over and over again. What will be the story of my life? What will be yours?
- **Examples of language that leave sensory impressions:**
  - “It’s on a ferry crossing the Mekong river. The image lasts all the way across. I’m fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that part of the world, we have just the one season, hot, monotonous, we’re in the long hot girdle of the earth, with no spring, no renewal.”
  - “I’ll always have regrets for everything I do, everything I’ve gained, everything I’ve lost, good and bad, the bus, the bus driver I used to laugh with, the old women chewing betel in the back seats, the children on the luggage racks, the family in Sadec, the awfulness of the family in Sadec, its inspired silence.”
  - “It’s in Cholon. Opposite the boulevards linking the Chinese part of the city to the center of Saigon, the great American-style streets full of streetcars, rickshaws, and buses... It’s a native housing estate to the south of the city. His place is modern, hastily furnished by the look of it, with furniture supposed to be ultra-modern.”

- “It was one day during the vacation in Sadec. She was resting in a rocking chair with her feet up on another chair, she’d made a draft between the door of the sitting room and the door of the dining room.”

- **Places that are powerful to Marguerite:**

- Lover’s apartment; the place where she first surrenders to passion, and later to love.
- The boarding school; the place where she re-defines herself in relationship to the half-caste girls (and fully French Helene Langonelle).
- Her mother’s house; a place of physical and emotional trauma, a place where she is invisible and wounded.
- Later in her life (not discussed in *The Lover*), the apartment on Rue Saint-Benoit that she shares with Robert Antelme during the French occupation. She writes her first novel there.
- The ferry; she meets the Lover here, while crossing her beloved Mekong River.

- **Essential furniture and props:**

- A bed.
  - Potentially a desk, or an equivalent “place for writing.”
  - Some kind of fan (ceiling fan would be perfect).
  - Jars for bathing.
- The idea of the bed gives the most to work with. It can be representative of all three major locations (excluding the ferry, which is a transitory location), and is particularly symbolic in light of Marguerite’s introduction into the world of



passion. In this location, specific actions my character plays: love making, bathing with Lover, sleeping with him in the hot afternoons, late night chats with Helene Langonelle (not included in the adaptation), having a moment of connection with Mother as they laugh over the engagement ring, a terrifying encounter with the elder brother in which he beats her (not included in the adaptation), etc.

### **Building Block Five: Storyline**

- **Distill the story down to one declarative sentence:**
- **3 important ideas to address:** 1) main conflicts in the major relationships, 2) identify the central event of the story and of key scenes, 3) determine what prior circumstances are essential to understanding your characters story.
- **I need to focus my efforts on heightening the conflict to sustain the tension.**
- **Central events** are actions, turning points in the lives of characters, which change them; it's the most revealing thing that happens to that happens involving that character, the telling point of no return. **Question: If my central event is her losing her virginity, should I rearrange the piece so that it comes later on?**
  - Theme is the idea, the impetus that drives the story. The central event is the actual physical event that reveals the decisive turning point around that idea.
  - Don't forget to identify the central event around each scene, not just the central event of the play... my adaptation needs more dramatic action at

this point. A scenic central event is an action, physical or vocal, that changes the relationship or character in the scene. Good scene = a build to the central event, the moment of no going back. The aftermath provides new obstacles for the characters to overcome.

- Don't forget about prior circumstance, or 'the past that shapes the future' (not likely in this book!).

### Construction Exercises

- **Needs/ Obstacles of my principle:** Marguerite needs people's love and attention. Her elder brother gets in the way (Mother devotes all her attention to him, ignoring Marguerite). Lover's father gets in the way (forbidding their relationship), Lover himself gets in the way (his dependency on his father means his inability to commit to the love she needs).
- **What does she want that she does not get?** She wants true love (maybe even marriage) and positive attention, but instead she gets a twisted version of the love she so desperately craves. She gets negative attention from her mother about her lover, and she has a sexually based relationship with a man who society deems inappropriate, and therefore there is no future to be had with him. **What does the lover need from her that he does not get?** He wants a dependent, someone who will cling to him and worship him and be desperately sad with him. Marguerite does not pity herself, ever, and so cannot be this person for him.
- **What are 5 major actions that change Marguerite's story? The Lover's?**
  - Marguerite:

- Meeting the Lover on the ferry.
  - Telling her mother she wants to write.
  - Going home with the lover that Thursday afternoon.
  - Getting the diamond ring.
  - Deciding to leave him after he cannot marry her.
- Lover:
- Seeing Marguerite on the ferry.
  - Making love to her, weeping, for the first time.
  - Meeting Marguerite's family.
  - The father not dying.
  - Marguerite leaving, and marrying someone else.

## Appendix C

### Rehearsal Exercises

#### Facts about Marguerite:

- She is fifteen and a half.
- She has gold shoes and a man's brown fedora, and wears red lipstick and pink makeup.
- She is French. People look at her in the colonies because she is white.
- Her body is thin, undersized, and childish.
- She is the daughter of the headmistress of the girls' school in Sadec.
- More than anything else in the world, she wants to write.
- She is perverse. The lover will never understand her perverseness.
- She is very, very poor.
- She desires the lover.
- She desires the lover's money.
- She blames herself for her mother's misfortune.

**She wants:** to survive at all costs.

#### Marguerite's story:

My family is poor. I meet a rich Chinese. We seduce each other. He won't marry me. I return to France, discovering I love him.

- I want to include her perverseness, but it doesn't fit. Originally, I wrote: "...a rich Chinese. I desire him. We become lovers..." But on further reflection, I remembered that she doesn't even realize that she desires him until she has already gone with him to his apartment (i.e. she has already made the decision to sleep with him). There is something hugely perverse about that sequence of events, but I can't make it fit into 25 words or less.

### **Facts about Mother:**

- She is the headmistress of a girls' school in Sadec.
- She bought land in Cambodia from the French government with her life savings that turned out to be worthless, and now the family is horribly poor.
- She frequently plunges into intervals of deep despair, and when she emerges, she often has no memory of what transpired.
- She feels that everything around her is wilderness and waste, including her sons.
- She prefers her elder son to both her daughter and her younger son.
- The mother's desperation for money leads her to allow her daughter to dress like a child prostitute.
- She wears shapeless dresses, her shoes are down-at-heel, she walks awkwardly, and her hair is drawn back into a bun like a Chinese woman's.
- She is mad.
- She is terrified that Marguerite will never have a place in society, and will be poor forever.

- She walks with a shuffling step, unaware of her own body, head down, rarely smiles.
- She lost the taste for her own pleasure at an early age.

**She wants:** Marguerite to make money for the family.

**Mother's story:**

I bought worthless land with my life savings. Waste surrounds me. My daughter should earn her keep. She dishonors the family. I take her back to France.

**True things about Old Marguerite:**

- She has a ravaged face.
- She is an alcoholic.
- She loves the lover.
- She still clearly remembers the lover's face and his name, and the place where they made love.
- She regrets everything about her life.
- She smokes all the time. She has a deep, raspy, ruined voice from years of smoking and hard drinking.
- She is a famous writer. She lives in Paris, Neauphle, and Trouville.
- She wears big glasses and the "M.D. Uniform"—"black cardigan, straight skirt, polo-neck sweater and short boots in winter. I said I didn't care about clothes, but

that's wrong. A uniform is an attempt to reconcile form and content, to match what you think you look like with what you'd like to look like... you find this match without really looking for it... and eventually it comes to define you" (Duras, *Practicalities* 65). (This self-definition by clothing is also true of Young Marguerite.)

- She still has the diamond that the lover gave her, and she still wears it.
- She can't stop writing this story—it dominates her oeuvre.

**She wants:** the lover to come hold her. She wants him to know that she loved him.

**Old Marguerite:**

Someone told me I am beautifully ravaged. I relive my childhood love affair. I realize I loved the Chinese. He calls me; we still love each other.

**Whose story is the most important?**

Marguerite's story is the most important, both because it is the most active, and because it is the most important story to Old Marguerite; it is Marguerite's story (the childhood love affair) that drives Old Marguerite's story and grounds Old Marguerite in the play.

**The combined story for my three characters:**

My mother is desperate for money. I meet a rich Chinese. We seduce each other. We cannot marry. I return to France, discovering I loved him. Now I am ravaged, but I still love him.

### Old Marguerite's Story:

- I'm ravaged.
- I remember the day we met, what I was wearing, the way you approached me, me wondering about your money and knowing from the start we'd never marry.
- My mother first gives me grief about my clothes, but she encourages our relationship because of my family's poverty. I realize my mother was jealous of me, even back then.
- I remember every detail about the day we first made love; it was like the sea. I remember it unto death—all this time.
- I remember every detail about your flat—it's because I love you so much that I haven't forgotten these details.
- I think you were a coward. Why couldn't you have taken me away? That first day together was the best day of my life. Why did you let that slip away?
  - I have to take some of the blame, actually. I treated you badly.  
Remember those family dinner?
- You were afraid of my elder brother. You gave in to him. I'm stronger than you were. That's why my brother was afraid of me.
- I never managed to leave the family. I still write about them. They made me a writer. You were the first person I ever told about my family and our desperation and my despair. The despair that led me to drink. Even when I was with you, the space for destructive alcoholism and unbridled desire was there inside me.



- We can't stop loving each other. I never have.
  - My mother knew I never would. She knew I'd write. Knew everything.  
My mother's and my last good day together was the day we talked about  
the diamond you gave me.
- I wanted to marry you. I wanted your father to die. I left because that crushed hope was too much to bear.
- I was faithful to you.
- I wish I'd said good-bye. Wish I'd said, 'I love you.' I'm glad I didn't kill myself, because then I'd never have experienced the sweetness of your phone call all those years later.
- I still love you.

## Appendix D

### Lighting Design Dramaturgy

The way Marguerite Duras described her childhood home of Vinh Long—the location of the mother’s salt lands and the site of her novel, *The Sea Wall*— in an interview following the publication of *The Lover*:

“Vinh Long is a river of lagoons like the oxbows in Conflans. Endless sea deltas. Countless villages. Hundreds of sleepy creeks all around Vinh Long. It was so very beautiful. Gardens and parks that led down to the river, just like in *The Vice-Consul*<sup>32</sup>. The teacher’s house<sup>33</sup> was on the fringes of the white town in the less fashionable area. Vinh Long is surrounded by alluvial plains and surgically unfinished areas” (Adler 37).

The way Marguerite Duras described Cholon—the site of the lover’s bachelor flat—in her war notebooks, which were later published in a volume called *Wartime Writings*:

“Cholon is life itself, a constant crush, a riot of colors sensations, smells, movement; a shifting, intense beauty.

A plain once separated Saigon and Cholon. When the early white colonizers arrived, they found it was a vast graveyard. Today tarmac covers the cemetery, and streets busy with rickshaws and mopeds lead to Cholon. Everything leads to Cholon. It has one of the biggest markets in Indo-China. No one sleeps in

---

<sup>32</sup> Another of Duras’ novels that takes place in French Indochina, published in 1965.

<sup>33</sup> Her mother’s home.

Cholon... Cholon smells of mud and *nuoc-mam*, of spices and aromatic teas. People tear around and knock you flying; everyone's always in a hurry, except for the small children. In the midst of all this hurly-burly, in a neat hand they conscientiously copy into pretty exercise books the Chinese characters a grandmother has drawn for them. In Cholon, nothing has changed since the thirties. The rue de Paris is still decorated with multicolored bunting and the restaurants are still guarded by portly Buddhas... the restaurants are just as they were described in *The Lover*, huge steamships overflowing with food, light and noise, waiters bellowing out orders. The to-ing and fro-ing is enough to make you giddy. It's a city without inhibitions, a city of traffic, of scum, of prostitution. Everything is for sale. Nowhere compares with Cholon" Adler 63).

The way that Laure Adler—a biographer but also a friend of Duras'—described Number 5 rue Saint-Benoît, the setting of the Paris scenes of the adaptation:

“Number 5 rue Saint-Benoît became a place to meet, to talk; where they could discuss Stendhal, Nietzsche or Saint-Just. Marguerite had turned the apartment into a permanent forum, a raft of freedom and friendship. During the war it was a bolthole, a place to hide members of the Resistance. After the war it became home to a group of mind that attracted a fair number of French intellectuals... rue Saint-Benoît was a space shared, the home of the group, a place for exchanges—culinary, ideological and literary” (Adler 94).

This description is especially important to note because in 1984, the time of the Paris portion of the play, the rue Saint-Benoît is no longer an open place for intellectual

congregation, and Duras lives there alone when Andréa is not with her. The apartment becomes itself a reflection of Duras' isolation and despair. Later, her apartment becomes her entire world:

“The apartment at 5 rue Saint-Benoît was Marguerite's universe, filled with her family photos, her bunches of dried flowers, her beautiful shining furniture, her shawls draped over the backs of shabby armchairs, loose parquet, the smell of rose petals” (Adler 193).

## Bibliography

- Adler, Laure. *Marguerite Duras: A Life*. Trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Beauclair, Michelle. *Albert Camus, Marguerite Duras, and the Legacy of Mourning*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1998.
- Bogaert, Sophie, Alette Armel, Jerome Beaujour, Christiane Blot-Labarrère, Michelle Porte, and Edgar Morin. *Duras: L'Oeuvre Matérielle*. Mercuès, France: Les Presses de France Quercy, 2006.
- Cismaru, Alfred. *Marguerite Duras*. New York, NY : Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1971.
- Cordier, Stephane. *Marguerite Duras: L'Arc*. Paris, France: Duponchelle, 1989.
- Cranston, Mechthild. *In Language and Love: Marguerite Duras: The Unspeakable: Essays for Marguerite Duras*. Potomac, Maryland: SCRIPTA HUMANISTICA, 1992.
- Criso, Rachel. "Elle Est Une Autre: The Duplicity of Self in L'Amant." *In Language and Love: Marguerite Duras: The Unspeakable: Essays for Marguerite Duras*. Ed. Mechthild Cranston. Potomac, Maryland: SCRIPTA HUMANISTICA, 1992.
- Denes, Dominique. *Etude sur Marguerite Duras: L'Amant*. Paris, France: ellipses Edition Marketing S.A., 1997.
- Duras, Marguerite. *L'Amant*. Paris, France: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984.
- Duras, Marguerite. *Marguerite Duras*. San Francisco, CA: City Light Books, 1987.
- Duras, Marguerite. *The North China Lover*. New York, NY : The New Press, 1992.
- Duras, Marguerite. *The Lover*. New York, NY: The New Press, 1992.
- Duras, Marguerite. *Wartime Writings: 1943-1949*. Bogaert, Sophie and Olivier Corpet,

- ed. New York, NY: The New Press, 2006.
- Duras, Marguerite. *Four Plays: La Musica Deuxieme / India Song / Eden Cinema / Savannah Bay*. London, England: Oberon Books, Ltd, 1997.
- Ennis, Thomas E. *French Policy and Developments in Indochina*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1936.
- Glassman, Deborah N. *Marguerite Duras: Fascinating Vision and Narrative Cure*. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1991.
- Günther, Renate. *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein and L'Amant*. London, England: Grant & Cutler Ltd, 1993.
- Hewitt, Leah D. *Autobiographical Tighotropes: Simone de Beauvoir, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Monique Wittig, and Maryse Condé*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.
- Hofmann, Carol. *Forgetting and Marguerite Duras*. Niwot, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 1991.
- Knapp, Bettina, ed. *Critical Essays on Marguerite Duras*. New York, NY : G. K. Hall, 1998.
- "New Novel." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 25 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/28282/New-Novel>>.
- O'Neil, Mary Anne, ed. "Marguerite Duras." *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Twentieth-Century French Dramatists*. 321. Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2006.
- Osborne, Milton. *The Mekong*. New York, NY : Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000.
- Pagès-Pindon, Joëlle. *Marguerite Duras*. Paris, France: ellipses Edition Marketing S.A.,

- 2001.
- Polet, Jean-Claude, ed.. *Marguerite Duras, Michel Tournier, Albert Cohen*. Paris, France: Didier Hatier, 1986.
- Ricouart, Janine. *Marguerite Duras Lives On*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1998.
- Ricouart, Janine. *Ecriture Feminine et Violence: Une Etude de Marguerite Duras*. Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications, Inc., 1991.
- Robequain, Charles. *Photographic Impressions of French Indochina: Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 1930*. Paris, France: White Lotus Press, 2001.
- Signori, Lisa F. *The Feminization of Surrealism: The Road to Surreal Silence in Selected Works of Marguerite Duras* New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2001.
- “Surrealism.” (2010). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved January 25, 2010, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online:  
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/575336/Surrealism>
- Vickroy, Laurie. “‘Coming into Being’: mourning, adolescence, and creativity in Duras’s *The Lover*.” *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* (2003): 92. Web. 7 Dec 2009.
- Vircondelet, Alain. *Duras*. Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994.  
 Translator: Thomas Buckley.
- White, Edmund. ""In Love with Duras"." *New York Review of Books* 55.11 (2008): n. pag. Web. 11 Feb 2010. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/21556>>.
- Willis, Sharon. *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body*. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987.