The Alley Theatre’s Interim Artistic Director James Black has been working at the Alley for over thirty years as a member of the Resident Acting Company and a frequent director. During the season he curated as Interim Artistic Director, we are delighted to present a series of essays from him about his career and his memories of the Alley.

The Alley Theatre’s 72nd season begins here in the Neuhaus Theatre, a space that resonates with memory for me. A space of beginnings. My debut as an Alley actor occurred in this room in Self Defense in 1987. This is where I played my first lead role, in Other People’s Money in 1991 and directed my first play, As Bees In Honey Drown in 2000.

Here officially begins my season as Interim Artistic Director.

And since we’re talking about beginnings, I’ll share mine.

It starts in Dayton, Ohio in the late sixties. My family visits the grandparents’ home every Saturday morning for breakfast. When the meal is finished, the adults stay at the dining room table, smoking Camels and drinking coffee while I go to the big console TV in the living room and tune in a local UHF channel. Saturdays at 11 a.m., the station broadcasts classic horror films. This morning’s offering is “The Wolfman,” the 1941 thriller starring Lon Chaney Jr. This would be no ordinary viewing.

For the first time, I’m conscience of “performance.” For the first time, I’m able to separate the actor from the character he’s playing and recognize that there is craft involved. I’m breathless with awe and envy. Not only does Chaney get to enact the teary and tormented Larry Talbot, cursed to become a wolf when the moon is full, but he gets to play the Wolfman as well, transforming in front of our eyes from a state of weakness to a creature that is feared. Talbot’s grief and pain is absorbed and absolved by him becoming something else. Transformation. Reinvention.

Unbeknownst to the bespectacled, chubby, and painfully shy me, this has been the big bang. This is Genesis.
Several nights later, I sneak a plastic tray of water colors into my bath. I paint a mustache on my round pre-pubescent face. Then I fashion a black eye. A bloody nose. Soon I’m smuggling an Elmer’s glue bottle into the bathroom to create wrinkles and scars. An attempt at old age makeup with paste and cotton balls, under the guise of taking a midday weekend bath, results in a seriously clogged drain that requires a plumber and an apology.

I discover other transformational performers – Alec Guinness, Laurence Olivier, Paul Muni. I take joy in the anticipation of watching a Peter Sellers movie for the first time, not knowing how he is going to look or sound. Henry Fonda and Jimmy Stewart are good, but they are always Henry and Jimmy. I want the chameleons. I want the shapeshifters.

Several years later I would put what I so admired to a real world test.

Like most actors, my childhood was a knot of inferiority and shyness. My alpha male father wanted his first born to be a warrior. I wore glasses and had man boobs at the age of ten. By not meeting his standards of masculinity, I was convinced I came up short in the eyes of others as well.

That real world test came in the early 70s when we moved from Dayton to La Porte, Texas. For timid sixth grade me, the prospect of walking through the doors of a new school was horrifying. In late June, we drove to La Porte, where we stayed temporarily with an aunt and uncle. At the end of their block sat the junior high I would attend—an omnipresent reminder that in six weeks I would face that ultimate dread: being the new kid.

But during that summer I fell upon an obvious solution. I’ll transform. I’ll conquer my anxiety by becoming someone else. I’m new. Who will know?

Placid James Black, the observer who stood outside the chaos avoiding bullies and girls would stay in Ohio. In Texas, I would be the Wolfman. Strong. Confident. Respected.

I let my faint but darkening mustache and goatee grow. Sideburns were coming in. I managed to avoid the barber all summer. I laid off the mint chocolate chip ice cream. Reinvention.
On that first day I nervously strode to school wearing tight paisley jeans and my even more uncomfortable faux confidence. I snuck a pair of sunglasses as well, waiting to put them on until I was a safe distance from the house. When I arrived on the school grounds, I was surprised at how conservative everyone looked with their short hair and white belts with matching shoes. Wait a minute. Was I hip? Boys were nodding their heads as I passed by, girls were smiling or looking away disapprovingly. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but it felt fantastic!

I sat down in class buzzing from this newfound self-assurance. The students were introducing themselves but just before my turn, a woman entered the classroom and asked me to follow her to the gymnasium. There, a weathered man with a whistle around his neck steered me toward the sink in the shower area. On it sat a razor and a can of shaving cream. “Let’s clean it up,” he said, pointing to my mustache and sapling goatee.

Whatever humiliation I felt walking back to my classroom was soon overwhelmed by what happened next. In under an hour, the anxious celebrity of being the new kid was replaced with a teenage notoriety. I had become an inadvertent rebel hero of my class. Never again would I eat alone in the cafeteria. I had achieved, for the first time in my life, “cool kid” status.

Those two years of junior high were epic. I had evolved from a timid student who rarely spoke to class clown, entertaining my friends with jokes and a new talent for doing impersonations.

This fresh confidence allowed for a seamless and crisis free transition into LaPorte High School where, toward the end of my sophomore year, someone said:

“You know, you should really try this drama class.”

New beginnings. The beginning of a life in the theatre. And the beginning of a path that would bring me all the way to today. This season, I hope, will be the first step in the Alley’s transformation.

James Black in Other People’s Money, 1991
Photo by Jim Caldwell