A Piece of My Heart begins and ends at the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. on Dedication Day (Nov. 13, 1982). The six female characters, through their description of events, take the audience back approximately 20 years to the Vietnam War. In Act I they tell the audience why they volunteered and describe the major events in their recruitment, training, flight to and from Vietnam and the often harrowing experiences during the war. In Act II the six characters describe what happened to them when they return to an indifferent and/or hostile United States with their own difficult war memories and ailments.

2. You have described the style of the play as presentational realism. What is that?

“Most realistic plays (movies, TV shows) are ‘representational’. With realistic sets and costumes the characters appear to be actually living the events in a realistic world and the audience views the show through an invisible ‘fourth wall’. The characters do not recognize the audience. In ‘Presentational’ Theatre the actors acknowledge the audience and often talk directly to them. In our presentation of ‘A Piece of My Heart’ we will be using a nearly bare stage with minimal costumes and props. Visually, our performance will not be realistic. Yet, the dialogue is often brutally honest and most, if not all, scenes will feel very realistic.”

3. What is the theme of A Piece of My Heart?

“I have struggled with finding a one sentence theme for ‘A Piece of My Heart’. Maybe this will be the adventure that we (the cast and I) will be on during our rehearsals. The Vietnam War was ‘Theatre of The Absurd’ at its core. How a decent, caring, sensitive individual survives and functions on an extremely high level in total chaos is what ‘A Piece of My Heart’ is about. I see the play as being about individuals. The war was absurd — the people that fought it were not.”

4. How is the actor’s body position and distance key to getting the themes across to the audience?

“Through blocking I hope to show that our female characters, although considered to be part of a group or team, are really quite alone in a terrifying world. All female characters are on stage at all times. When not in actual scenes, characters will often be placed away from other actors and sitting at angles or with their backs to a scene. Even within scenes, actors may have more than the customary distance between actors. This ‘aloneness’ wasn’t just true in Vietnam. When our characters come home they found NO safety-net, no support groups. I find an interesting statistic to be that even today the US military has no idea of how many women served in Vietnam. Of course, we want the play to have energy, conflict and power. This is often achieved on stage by actors being physically tight. So, this is another area that the actors and I will be working on during rehearsals.”

5. What is the significance of “The Wall”?

“The Vietnam War Memorial (The Wall) is the location of the start and end of the play. It is the unifying character that was not there during the war, particularly for the women. It is a place where the war becomes real and stops with a sense of finality. It is also a starting place for the remainder of the women’s lives. I think it is significant that The Wall is not a heroic monument to the war. It does not celebrate the war or a great national victory. It is a ‘wall’ with the names of 58,000 dead and missing of the Vietnam War. The Wall acknowledges the individuals of that war and the sacrifices they made.

Our set will represent The Wall by an obvious black line on the floor down stage of the acting area. It will be in roughly the same angled shape as the real wall in Washington D.C. “The Wall” will be visited by the female
characters at the start of the play and the play’s conclusion. It will also be visually present, by the audience, throughout the play. I hope this visual line will show The Wall’s unifying and emotionally satisfying power on the female characters.

6. How does A Piece of My Heart lend itself to reader’s theatre?

“A Piece of My Heart” changes scenes, characters and time constantly throughout the play and frequently at a fast pace. Each actor has a main character, but all the actors play multiple other characters with only dialogue to indicate the change. Once the audience has bought into the convention of reader’s theatre, the actors can change time and place with minimal movement and changes in dialogue. The joy of Reader’s Theatre is that the audience is a participant. They must be focused and internalize the action and dialogue for the play to be successful.

7. Would you briefly describe the characters in the play?

“A Piece of My Heart” has 6 female characters and 2 male characters (one on stage – one voiceover). All female characters must be able to sing. One character must be a fairly accomplished singer and guitarist. One character must be African-American. Ideally, one character could be Asian-American (although not necessary).

MARYJO: Country singer and guitarist – outgoing, bubbly, funny
MARTHA: Nurse – strong – aura of self-discipline – military baring
SISSY: Nurse – sweet feminine, outgoing – fun
LEEANN: Nurse – (possible Asian-American) strong determined – urban
WHITNEY: Red Cross – Vassar graduate – refined – withdrawn – aristocratic
STEELE: Army Intelligence – (female) Must be African-American – strong – military – intelligent – outgoing

8. At auditions what will you be looking for from the volunteers?

“In all theatre, but particularly reader’s theatre, actors must be heard and understood. Projection and articulation are always my first concerns at auditions. For this particular show the actors must be able to sing (at least carry a tune). This play also contains strong, profane language and those that audition must feel comfortable with using profanity on stage. Beyond these requirements, I am always looking for actors that are not afraid to be big, vocally and physically, with audition scenes. As a director it is easier for me to tone down an actor rather than make them bigger. I like actors that try to interpret lines and take risks. I often give auditioning actors direction during auditions just to see if they can take direction and make changes. Lastly, I do not expect polished performances at auditions. Rehearsals are used to grow and evolve into characters.”

9. What is your directing style/philosophy?

“I am a very detailed director. I feel it is my obligation to come to rehearsal fully prepared with precise blocking. I almost always tell actors exactly how many steps I want to take when making a cross and what body position I want them to have. I think this is particularly necessary when directing a play that is basically performed on an empty stage with continuously changing locations. I believe that my being fully prepared with detailed blocking saves a lot of rehearsal time and allows the actor to work on building a character. During rehearsal I often change the blocking based on the actual look on the stage or actor comfort, etc. But again, I believe it is helpful to an actor to make changes from something specific to something new that is equally specific. I am also a very mobile director who moves around the audience area during rehearsals. I often on stage while actors are in the middle of scenes making minor changes to gestures or body positions. I believe this also help actors to maintain concentration and focus.

Being prepared with blocking, which can be done outside of rehearsal, allows rehearsal time to discuss line interpretation, pace, meaning groups (beats), transitions, etc. To put it simply, I am a hands-on director.”

10. Why do you want to direct this play?

“A Piece of My Heart” is an absolutely beautiful and moving piece of literature. I cannot imagine any director not wanting to direct ‘A Piece of My Heart’. All of the characters in this play have incredible depth and sensitivity. I sincerely feel like being able to tell their stories is an honor. I think our actors will feel the same. On the other hand, I think we can do them justice and I can’t wait to get started. This is also an era that I lived through. While these young women were performing their often heroic duties in Vietnam I was a Western Michigan Theatre student. A few of us actually wrote and performed a reader’s theatre dealing with that time titled, ‘I Sit and Look Out’. We were highly filled with our own importance, regarding issues that we barely understood. But, on our own level we were participants and it is gratifying to me to come somewhat full circle with directing ‘A Piece of My Heart’. I am deeply grateful to The Civic for giving me this opportunity.”

11. How will you measure the production’s success?

“If my cast takes ownership of this show and feels like they have presented these characters with honesty, craftsmanship and love, I will feel we have been a success. If we end up loving this show, so will the audience.”