

From the Stage to the Internet: A Study in New Media

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy or Master of Arts or Master of Science or Master of Fine Arts

Department of Drama

University of Virginia
May 2016

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ABSTRACT

This document contains Roger Ainslie's thesis for completion of a Masters in Fine Arts degree in Acting at the University of Virginia. It includes a digital portfolio of the performance of two original monologues, a journal of my process, a statement of teaching philosophy, my headshot, my resume, and my bio. Through this work, I seek to integrate all the stage training I've received at this university and translate it to an on-camera performance without losing theatricality.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Statement of Teaching Philosophy.....	1
Chapter 2: Journal of the Process.....	3
Chapter 3: Copies of Portfolio Material.....	9
Supplemental Materials.....	10

CHAPTER 1: STATEMENT OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Before I taught, I acted. Early in my career, straight out of Northwestern's theatre program, the allure of attention and praise consumed me. I didn't find fulfillment as an artist until I discovered that the true joy of acting for me came from a powerful connection to other people. It is no coincidence that my love for teaching began at the same time.

My approach to teaching acting reflects this parallel even further. I focus on dialogue, listening, and responding in the moment to the individual in front of me. After all, both teaching and acting require a great deal of empathy. More than any other subject, the ways that students learn acting are different for each individual. To teach effectively, I need to put myself in the shoes of each student as I might a character in a play. How do they, as characters, interact with and process the world? What is their mental posture? I have a strong background in improvisation that helps me adjust on the fly if the day, the class's energy, or an individual seems to call for it. Acting can't be taught in a linear fashion. In addition, when the students see my willingness to try something new and possibly fail, they feel safe enough to do it themselves. The more creative and daring I am as a teacher, the more they seem to reciprocate as acting students. They relax, respond, and learn.

Furthermore, I encourage my students to linger over the questions. I have found that most undergraduate students feel compelled—by our society and our educational system—to rush to find the “right” answer. One of my main goals, beyond the obvious one of simply teaching them how to act, is to help them learn a more rewarding way of thinking. As they search for answers, reveling in the journey yields so many more discoveries than arriving at a destination does.

My teaching does not adhere religiously to any one acting technique. It substantially incorporates techniques developed by Stanislavski, but I also infuse a great deal of improvisation, Meisner, Viewpoints, text work, and even some Laban and neutral-mask work. I find that improv—especially combined with Meisner chairwork—not only helps students to listen and respond with immediacy, but also trains their brains to find the game in a scene. Beyond this, however, I'm trying to teach them that everything that happens—on stage and in life—tells a story. Viewpoints, Laban and neutral-mask work help them understand physical storytelling, while text work, strongly influenced by a workshop I did with Andrew Wade (former head of speech at the Royal Shakespeare Company), helps them discover how the voice tells a story.

I create an environment where risks are rewarded and encouraged. Artistic growth occurs when hard work meets risk. Early in a semester, my curriculum usually includes acting exercises that don't involve a contextual scene from a play. A big test of how much they've learned in these early abstract exercises lies in how well they apply them to the contextual scenes later on. One of my greatest joys as a teacher is to witness a moment

where a student does apply the work in this way and the rest of the class recognizes an impactful, genuine, and real moment. That powerful connection to others that I only find in acting or in teaching becomes all the more potent when I've combined the two.

CHAPTER 2: JOURNAL OF THE PROCESS

December 10, 2015

Today we had our thesis meeting with many of the drama faculty as well as Michael Duni (the casting associate who works with *House of Cards* casting director Erica Arvold) who will be filming our monologues next semester. It was somewhat difficult for everyone to get on the same page. There is a great difference between the theatre world—especially the *academic* theatre world—and the commercial on-camera world from which Michael Duni hails. But even within the faculty, there seemed to be some disagreement about what we should be focusing on for these monologues. I got the impression that at least some of the faculty don't believe that any of the techniques for theatre in which they are so well versed apply to on-camera acting. I have to admit I am somewhat skeptical myself. Having spent some years in Los Angeles mired in the on-camera world, I know how small an impact theatrical voice and movement training has on American television and film. However, the basics of acting are still the same regardless of the medium.

January 25, 2016

We had another thesis meeting today. Some more specifics of the shoot were determined. It seems like we will have a choice as to how tight the shots are on us, but the general consensus seemed to be that a medium shot, showing us from the waist up, was ideal. I'm curious as to how the framing of the shot might affect how well a theatrical monologue translates to the screen.

In any case, we also talked about how our in-class rehearsals for the monologues will occur. We are working on this thesis very closely with our voice professor, Kate Burke, who decided that the best use of our time was going to be putting all rehearsed versions of the work on tape. This makes sense to me. There wouldn't be much point to practicing these monologues for a while without a camera only to discover that once we bring in the camera none of the progress reads on the screen.

January 28, 2016

In class, we discussed the choice of monologues for the thesis. I'm a little unclear about how these filmed monologues will be used or how much we will really need permission for copyrighted works. My impression is that for educational purposes we don't need to obtain the rights, but if we want to publish these pieces outside the context of the university to help market ourselves in our careers, then we do need to get permission. This is a big issue off the bat because it greatly determines what monologues I choose.

Of course, there are so many other factors in choosing them. I need to think about which pieces will be conducive to being on camera and will translate well in performance. I have seen many plays on videotape, both that I originally saw in person and that I performed in myself, and they hardly ever translate well on to the screen. There is something ephemeral—a feeling of “you had to be there”—about live theatre

that gets completely lost when viewed on a television or the big screen. I'm not sure, however, how much of that general truth is an absolute or how much of it is simply that the taped performances I've seen were not rehearsed and performed with the camera in mind. Naturally, when we see television or film, we are seeing this kind of screen-oriented performance from the actors. Yet while this work functions much better on screen than taped versions of live theatre, the immediacy of receiving the actor's performance is still lost. The main question to deal with in this thesis really is this: can one create an on camera performance that duplicates the visceral thrill of theatre? Any attempt to accomplish this must start with the writing. Picking the right monologue is key to success.

February 2, 2016

Today I learned that I was mistaken about the copyright issues for our monologues. Apparently, we absolutely need permission—or we need to choose non-copyrighted materials. Everyone else seems to have made some solid choices for their monologues, but I brought in three or four that I found on the internet listed as free domain. They're all okay, but none of them are very good. It feels like they're placeholders for now. Something for me to work on and get feedback on in class until I find the right monologue. Certainly this copyright issue is going to greatly inhibit my ability to find a monologue that I not only connect with, but that works well in front of a camera.

To that end, everyone else's monologues seem to be an even mix of success and failure, many of them far too wordy and over-the-top to survive the transition to the camera.

We're not yet working the acting of any of these. We're still in the choice phase. I need to find something soon. Perhaps I will instead write my own!

February 4, 2016

I haven't mentioned before now the other restriction on our monologues that is giving me fits: each of them has to be only about 30 seconds long. This is another reason I should probably write my own. Finding a monologue that I can cut to 30 seconds that will still have an arc (beginning, middle, and end) to it, not be copyrighted, and work well on camera seems like an impossible task.

On the other hand, writing my own monologues has many advantages. I can create something in my own voice that has no copyright issues. I can also write it with the camera in mind and give it an arc that fits the time constraints.

I had better get started if I'm going to do this. We need to have our monologues chosen by this coming week.

February 7, 2016

I wrote a couple of monologues today, but I'm not very happy with them. Both are probably too close to home for me to use. The first one was a thinly veiled attack on a woman who broke my heart this past fall. It might have been good therapy, but it is not

art. It is instead a whiny, self-pitying piece that isn't terribly active. I realize more and more how active a monologue needs to be. This is certainly true for theatre, but it's even more true for on-camera acting. This monologue is the kind of thing that's going to pop on screen no matter how well I act it.

The second monologue is better. It's funny too. However, it's just self-plagiarized from my life as well. It's me telling a funny story about auditioning for a commercial. There is no room for character in it—I'm really just myself (which I've always understood to be what is needed for on-camera work: personality, not character, but this is more true from an acting standpoint than from a writing one). It's also fairly inactive, just like the first one I wrote today. I told a story and then I tacked on a justification for the story at the end. But that's just how it feels: tacked on.

I'll present these two in class on Tuesday because you never know how others will receive things. We are sometimes the worst judge of our own work. However, I'm not optimistic.

February 9, 2016

The monologues went over like lead balloons. In a way I felt good about my own ability to sense the quality of my work. It was validating to have my own doubts about the monologues borne out in others' reactions.

So back to the drawing board. I need to find a different creative approach to writing these things.

February 10, 2016

Success! I was very productive today. I wrote five monologues, all short enough, and all much better than the first two I wrote. My process, of all things, was to rely for my inspiration on a random word generator online. This seemed to stretch my imagination beyond my own immediate life circumstances. They all still feel like my voice, but not necessarily my life. I wanted to focus on writing monologues that fit too different "types" that I know, from my time in Hollywood, I can be cast as: the "lovable loser" and the "power-hungry jerk." Three of the monologues seem to fit the former in various ways; two of them fit the latter. I think I'm giving up the idea of trying to make the performance work on camera but still be theatrical. Instead I'm focusing on how one can create one's own content to market oneself—a very relevant question these days. At any rate, I'm very much looking forward to hearing my classmates reactions to the work tomorrow.

February 11, 2016

Very positive feedback! A couple of the monologues were similar to each other in tone, though not in circumstance, so I got a general opinion from the group on which of those two was better. I'm a little concerned that four of the five monologues are comedic—and the serious one is not as good as the others. I'd like to have two contrasting monologues just like in theatre—one comedic, one serious—but then again these days everything, on

screen and stage, is a blend of the two. So go most of my monologues: seriocomic. Still, I'd say they're probably all more on the comic side of that equation. That's okay though. I am more of a comedic actor so if my goal is to market myself then the fact that these monologues are funny means they will represent me well.

I'm fairly certain now which two of the five I will use for the thesis. Michael Duni needs to know soon so I need to just go for it. I will probably use one where I am a cynical, jaded businessman and another where I'm a quirky "lovable loser" in love with an artist who doesn't love me back. It may depend, however, on how they come across on camera. I plan on self-taping all five monologues this weekend and seeing which work best on screen.

February 13, 2016

Taped all five monologues and watched them on my own. No surprises really. It only confirmed my choices from Thursday. I'm definitely using the businessman and the loser in the art gallery. I will show them to the class for performance feedback this week.

As for the taping itself, the hard part was actually finding a space in which to do them. I wanted to have good lighting that would do my performance justice. Both monologues are set indoors, but fluorescent lights look terrible on camera. Even some of the LED or incandescent lights I tried didn't look great. Too harsh and either too many shadows or, when I tried to correct this, too few—my face was washed out. I finally found a couple of spaces in the drama building near large windows so I had wonderful, indirect, natural lighting.

The actual performance of my monologues was interesting. In theatre, when you over-rehearse a scene, it comes across as planned and stilted. The on-camera process is apparently even more sensitive to this. Especially because I wrote my own monologues I needed to trust that I was enough. I didn't need to blend my own personality with the character on the page as much as I do in theatre because really they were already blended—one and the same. When I threw out all my carefully thought-out choices and just "listened" to my imaginary partner in the moment, my work popped much more on the screen. The camera catches every thought so the most interesting thing you can do as an actor is listen and have thoughts. This self-taping was very instructive and I think it will give me a good calibration for how to act on my actual taping day.

February 16, 2016

Watched four of my colleagues' self-taped monologues today. Everyone seems to be doing really solid work, though I wonder how much of that is a function of self-taping outside of class. We can watch ourselves, delete takes we don't like, and only bring in to class our best work. It might have been more instructive to have people do their taping in class so we can see the mistakes and talk together about how to correct them and what works best. Still, everyone must be learning this on their own because the work being shown is good. The camera itself is perhaps the best teacher.

February 18, 2016

I performed my monologues in class today. Or rather, I played for everyone the taping I did over the weekend. Overall, very positive response. I felt good about them too. I got laughs where I thought laughs should be. People seemed genuinely drawn in. One thing that strikes me now that didn't when I watched my monologues earlier is that my eyeline for my "lovable loser" monologue could be better. Les gave me some feedback that, based on my eyeline, it looked like the painting I was inspecting was way across the room. However, if I look up more, so that it appears the painting is hanging right in front of me, then the camera loses many of my thoughts. As much work goes into stage performances to communicate externally what is happening internally—gesture, expression, voice—all that is really needed on camera is a good eyeline. This seems to be a skill in itself however. I think I'm getting better at knowing where to look to let the camera read my thoughts. It is not instinctual. You have to cheat it just like you "cheat out" on stage to let the audience in.

February 25, 2016

I'm fairly satisfied with my practice takes of my monologues and the biggest challenge this past week has been resisting the urge to rehearse the monologues more. As I noted earlier, this on-camera work is even more sensitive to over-rehearsing so I'm trying to leave the monologues alone. Checking in on them occasionally to make sure they're still intact in my brain but not working them very hard—or sometimes not at all. It feels like I'm taking care of a delicate plant—I don't want to overwater my monologues.

March 4, 2016

MY TAPING DAY! It went very well. I felt I got a good solid take early in the process for both monologues. This enabled me to be freer to take some chances and play with the later takes. This was especially true because of the presence of Richard Warner, who gave feedback and adjustments as we went. I improvised some at the end of the "lovable loser" monologue and it went well. However, what I learned about improvising on camera is that it's much more difficult because of the constraints of the camera frame. I have to stay relatively still while doing or saying spontaneous things. If that spontaneity gives me an impulse to move in any large manner, I have to stifle that impulse. This is again perhaps a matter of getting used to the medium so that I have "on-camera impulses" rather than "theatre impulses." As for today, I had to fight a lot of the latter.

Overall, this process taught me a lot about the adjustments that need to be made in today's internet-driven world. Some of these needed adjustments have been difficult, but some of them actually made things easier. The feedback loop of watching yourself on tape and giving yourself notes is especially helpful. The learning curve for on-camera acting is probably a lot shorter than it used to be when you had to wait for film to develop before you could see what you might have done wrong. I also think that on-camera acting requires a lot more mind-intelligence and a lot less body-intelligence than stage acting does. This is an advantage for me since movement on stage has never been a

strong suit of mine. My voice and my intelligence have always been what I've relied upon. Vocally, you still need command and range to really give a good performance on-camera, but the degree to which you employ these things is much more subtle. I'm only beginning to discover the nuances of performing for an internet audience.

CHAPTER 3: COPIES OF PORTFOLIO MATERIAL

Original Monologue #1 by Roger Ainslie

You're a goddamned addict, Steve, and we are not in the habit of employing addicts. Featherstone himself—who helped *found* this goddamned firm—was an addict and when Lunt found out, he made damn sure the board got rid of him. Yes, everyone here drinks. Yes, everyone here smokes. And yes, that includes me. Hell, I drink and smoke like a burning fish, but it doesn't affect my work, Steve. *I'm* not an addict.

Original Monologue #2 by Roger Ainslie

I like them all. The whole gallery is filled with you, Rach, so of course I like everything. But the only one I love is this one here. I know I know. It's strange. But there's something about the way the hawk is eating the brain that gets to me. It reminds me of us. No, the hawk is neither of us. The hawk is like love. And the brain is like... my brain.

Interview Transcript

Me: I'm Roger Ainslie. I'm one of the MFA students here at UVA. I grew up outside Philly and made my through Chicago, L.A., and New York, all the major cities... there was an intangible about the vibe of the people here, certainly. It was hard to put my finger on, but I just got along and hit it off really well, both in New York when I auditioned and also when I visited the campus. It was going to give me a chance to teach. It was going to give me a chance to, of course, go back over fundamentals and reinforce and master some things, places where I had holes in technique, et cetera. But beyond that it also gave me a lot of chances to teach undergraduates, which is one of the things I want to do with this degree. I've been asked the question of "why do I act?" so many times and I feel like over the years it's changed. I think it comes, honestly, from a need I have, a drive I have to connect to people—I'm an extreme extrovert. Being connected to people en masse in the theatre—to connect with people on that deep a level, on that large a scale, just seems like—taking my desire to connect with people to the nth degree. Thanks so much for watching.

**Credit: Still photos used in digital portfolio by Michael Bailey*

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Headshot



Resume

ROGER AINSLIE

SAG/AFTRA/AEA
Height: 5'9 1/2"

(773)802-1974
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THEATRE

Peter & The Starcatcher
Bush is Bad
Violet
Fur Beethoven
Don't Drink the Water
The Skin of Our Teeth
Barrel of Monkeys
The (W)hole Thing
Incident at Vichy
Othello
The Dumb Waiter
The Search for Odysseus
Virgin's Vows
Center Ring Circus

Captain Scott
Bush (LA Weekly Award winner)
Preacher
Beethoven
Chef/Kasnar/Burns
Ensemble
Ensemble/Musical Dir.
Cowboy
Monceau
Senator/Gentleman
Gus
Telemachus
Gustave
Gunther

Virginia Repertory Theatre
Open at the Top (L.A.)
Heritage Theatre Festival
The Journeymen (Chicago)
Noble Fool (Chicago)
American Theatre Co. (Chi.)
Roadworks (Chicago)
Stage Left (Chicago)
Steep Theatre (Chicago)
Shakespeare on the Green
Breakdown Theatre (Chi.)
Simple Theatre (Chicago)
Out-of-the-Box Theatre (Chi)
Chicago Children's Theatre

FILM/TELEVISION

House of Cards
iCarly
House M.D.
What About Brian?
American Zombie
The Red Machine
A Person Known to Me
An Abandoned and Malignant Heart
Decaf

Co-Star
Guest Star
Co-Star
Co-Star
Featured
Starring
Starring
Starring
Starring

Netflix
Nickelodeon
Fox
ABC
Lee Lee Films
Mental Slapstick
Mental Slapstick
Mental Slapstick
Printer's Row Productions

RADIO/VOICE OVER

Freeform Radio

D.J. and voiceovers

89.3 FM, WNUR (2 years)

TRAINING

Acting
Acting
Improvisational Comedy

David Downs
Lesly Kahn
Mick Napier

Northwestern U. (3 years)
Lesly Kahn & Co.
Second City Conservatory

EDUCATION

Northwestern University, BSSP Theatre

SPECIAL SKILLS and ACTIVITIES

Impersonations, Stand-up, Playwriting, Piano, Baseball, Football, Basketball, Rollerblading, Juggling, Songwriting
Dialects: Scottish, RP, Cockney, Irish, New England, Southern American, Midwest American, German, Russian, Iraqi
*expert at singing 80's love ballads in the voice of Tom Waits

Bio

Roger has worked professionally all over the country. After graduating from Northwestern University with his Theatre degree, he appeared on numerous Chicago stages, including American Theatre Company, Noble Fool, The Journeymen, and Stage Left. He also was a founding member of Barrel of Monkeys, a critically-acclaimed sketch comedy group that's still going strong. He then moved to Los Angeles, where he starred in several independent films and made co-star and guest-star appearances on such television shows as "House, MD", "iCarly", and "What About Brian?" He also won an LA Weekly Award for his portrayal of George W Bush in "Bush is Bad" at the NoHo Arts Center. After moving to New York City, he returned to his roots in improvisational and sketch comedy, performing on the Magnet Theatre's house team "Baby Shoes". Favorite roles in his career include Dubya in "Bush is Bad", Beethoven in "Fur Beethoven" (Journeymen), getting to act opposite Hugh Laurie on "House, MD" and, more recently, opposite Kevin Spacey on "House of Cards."