

The Actor in the Social Media Age:
Acting Philosophy and Digital Portfolio

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ABSTRACT:

A document containing Alisa Ledyard's Masters of Fine Arts thesis created for the Professional Actor Training Program at the University of Virginia. It contains a digital portfolio including performances of the monologues, *Misalliance* by George Bernard Shaw, *Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, and *Othello* by William Shakespeare; a performance of "Everybody Loves Louis" from *Sunday in the Park with George* recorded at the "don't tell mama" cabaret space in New York City; and an on-camera acting reel; as well as an acting philosophy statement and journal about the process of selecting and creating marketing material. This thesis is aimed at providing material to be used in the transition from educational to professional theatre.

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THESIS JOURNAL

An Actor Prepares... to Market Herself (*"Advancing art is easy; financing it is not"*)

I wish choosing material for my thesis could be a *reflection of a higher purpose*. It would be so wonderful to choose material based only on what I love and *need* to perform. I wish I could write about how I discovered a piece that spoke to me and I just felt compelled to record it for prosperity.

Unfortunately, I cannot do that because the business of acting keeps changing. Sometimes getting cast in something in New York depends on how many Instagram followers you have, or your social media engagement on other platforms. Producers want to make money, and if they know an actor has fans who engage with them online, those fans may come to see that actor's work, which will help the producer make money.

Living in New York for seven years made me a realist. A lot of people would also call this a pessimist, but it's very different. I absolutely have goals and dreams and I want, and think they CAN, happen. I also know what this business is actually like.

We all have limited time and limited money. In a live audition you have, say, 3 minutes in the room. In that time you have to be yourself, and most importantly, be yourself in a way that shows the casting director exactly who you are in their project. If you're right for more than one role, you have to do the work to narrow it down.

In a video audition you have maybe 3 seconds to get a casting director's attention, because a video can be turned off. This works similarly with a headshot. What makes you stand out (in a good way); what draws them in.

When it comes to actually *doing* your work, you need to throw all of that out the window and live as truthfully and presently as possible, because you can never become what you *think* someone is looking for. You either are or you aren't, and it will change depending on every person you meet.

One of the main reasons I decided to apply to grad schools was to help make myself more marketable for non-musical "straight plays" and dip my toes into the world of film/tv to see if it was something I could do. Marketing oneself is what this all comes down to. I've unfortunately been told different things about my "type" by mainly different people, which in some ways is good, because I've been a real person and no real person is just one thing, but being *everything* is not helpful in our world of limited time. Which side of this real person do I need to market myself as, for each specific project, based on what I am most likely to get cast as? I need to know myself and my abilities.

I started the process of finding my headshot photographer over a year before getting my photos taken. I did my research: I took recommendations, followed their work online and weighed my options of what was included. The photographer I chose, Jason Moody, sent me a project to do, based on my type, which helped him help me

pick outfits to wear and looks I wanted to achieve. For me, these looks included Quirky, Leading Lady and Contemporary. As we were finishing up the shoot I asked him if there was anything we had taken that had a darker edge to it. This is not something I normally see in myself, but I frequently get feedback that is there. When I met casting director Erica Arvold for the first time, some film types she mentioned for me were cop, drug addict, and hard-edged waitress. This is very different than where I normally trend in theatre, but I knew I had to get the shots. The Realist in me cannot hide in film, and I can see that side of myself when I am working in that medium. My photographer Jason was really glad I spoke up, as it was so completely different than everything we had been going for thus far, but nonetheless valid.

Choosing material for scenes and monologues to be filmed for the thesis has essentially been going on for years. I am always in pursuit of new monologues, and finding options that work for each project, work for YOU, and that you love performing is a tricky business. It also changes based on your age and the ages of the characters. Some schools of thought suggest having 20 monologues ready to go at any point. This gives you an opportunity to find character types that work for you, showing what you can do in a variety of ways, and a lot of your own creativity. I am certainly not in a position where I feel like I have 20 ready-to-go monologues, but I have a start.

The first monologue I've chosen is Hypatia from George Bernard Shaw's *Misalliance*. When I started reading this play, I really understood the character. This is a great piece for me because it's funny (and a little neurotic), and it's written in contemporary, but heightened, language. I am able to have a clear objective and use several different tactics to try to achieve it. I can use this for many modern adaptations of classics (Kate Hamill's *Pride and Prejudice*, for example), Shaw or Noël Coward plays, and the Restoration and "high comedy" from the late 1600s-mid 1800s.

The second monologue I'm performing is Olivia from Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Olivia doesn't have a lot of long speeches in this play, which is one of the reasons I chose this. There are so few female characters in Shakespeare that all of the monologues are overdone. My take on this monologue is very contemporary, and this was a conscious choice. Shakespeare will most likely always be the most produced playwright, but modern adaptations and settings are becoming more and more popular. I wanted to show that I can bring something original to my take, while still retaining the language. It is a very short piece of text, but could be used in an audition for almost any of the women in his comedies.

I am also doing Emilia from Shakespeare's *Othello*. This is an incredibly overdone monologue, but for good reason. Emilia is speaking privately about the nature of husbands and wives with Desdemona. This is a monologue that the first time I read it several years ago, I knew I had to speak it, but it is also a useful piece for me to include, as it shows a darker or sadder, more serious side, and could be used in auditions for many of the women in his tragedies. I use a more traditional approach to this piece of text. It is also a piece I can use for a very long time and not have to worry if I have "aged out" of playing the role, as Emilia could be anywhere from 20-60 years old.

I am including a cabaret performance I did a few years ago of the song "Everybody Loves Louis" from the musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. This is my

favorite song to sing and I have rarely been prouder of a performance I have done. If I were to chose a song to sing for a new recording, it would still be this song. This is the number one role I want to play in my life, in my favorite musical, and I am able to show comedy and vulnerability, as well as a strong sense of musicality and difficult vocals.

My on-camera acting reel includes scene work from our semester of Acting for the Camera with Richard Warner and Erica Arvold, as well as the student film *Martin!* by Josh Palmer.

A link to my website is the last article included. Having an internet presence is no longer just an option, it is a requirement. I, of course, have links to my Instagram and Twitter profiles on my website, also. Although I have had a website in one form or another since the late 90's, I have been very selective in the images I chose and content I provide in the current iteration. As I feel as though I am returning to the business after graduate school, for the time being I have an introduction to who I am and what I do, as well as select recorded performances and theatrical images.

In the business world (whether it be performing arts or otherwise) getting a leg up is all about promoting yourself and how you choose to do so. I feel as though I have taken large strides in the last few years to refine my marketing materials to be a reflection of who I am, and what types of roles I could get cast in right now.

ARTIST STATEMENT

An actor is often looked upon as a prop – someone who can serve in place of something else. To some designers, we are there to make their clothing look good, or to walk on their set, or stand in their light. To some playwrights, we are there to say their words. To some directors, we are there to represent their vision. All of this is true, and yet, without an actor, literally and figuratively breathing life into the character, there would be no heart or humanity; nothing for an audience to relate to.

An audience sees themselves in the characters embodied by actors. Their struggles, happiness, love, and mistakes are all the same as ours. An actor is charged with, above all else, telling the truth of the character in the situation. If an actor were to copy another performer's every action and intonation, but without the impetus inside them to start those actions, it would be technically "correct," but lacking in depth and life to a viewer. An actor must find those impetuses and impulses inside of them to make an action or say a word. This is how an actor can take the words on a page and create a human with them.

With the exception of a few natural-born performers, almost all of us need training. The training I have received at The University of Virginia has not only helped me to become a better actor, it has helped me understand who I am as an actor and artist. Studying Arthur Lessac's Voice method with Kate Burke helped me discover an entirely new sound to my voice that both intrigued and challenged me, and, after some time, I have come to appreciate. It has allowed me to find new ways to bring myself into characters that I didn't understand before. For example, in our 2018 production of *Urinetown* (by Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann), I primarily used a vocal register I had never used on stage before. It was a richer, lower register than I was used to, which gave my performance of Penelope Pennywise strength and uncovered a sensual side to her that was unexpected. However, this new vocal technique did not come without its challenges. As an actor who is also an accomplished singer, I found that speaking in my lower range was affecting my ability to sing in my higher range. I spent the majority of my third year re-training my voice to sing in my soprano range (while still being able to speak in the lower register), both on my own and with the help of my singing voice teacher, Pamela Beasley. I was fortunate to be able to combine both of these registers in my final production of graduate school, performing as Rona in *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*.

My movement training with Marianne Kubik, in Vsevolod Meyerhold's Biomechanics, stage combat, neutral mask, clowning, and especially Rudolf Laban's movement analysis, has given me greater bodily ease, strength, flexibility, confidence, and specificity. It has made me more natural in my movement, so I am not second guessing my actions. I found Laban training especially useful. When preparing to play "crazy Amy" in Stephen Sondheim's *Company* at The Heritage Theatre Festival in the summer after my first year, I used the Laban method extensively. Throughout the performance I needed to show what Amy was like when she wasn't having a nervous

breakdown, so that it was very clear that she was acting out of character when she was. I employed the Dab Effort Shape (which is direct, light and quick) for her “regular” scenes and changed to Punch (direct, strong and quick), Slash (indirect, strong, quick) and Wring (indirect, strong, slow) for the scene before her wedding when she has a nervous breakdown. This kind of switch made the differences in the character more noticeable and gave me a road map of action to perform it.

In my Acting training with Colleen Kelly, I faced several challenges and watched myself fail repeatedly before inviting myself to open up creatively and honestly. Through this work I became a better listener with my scene partners and more active participant, not only in my own choices, but the choices of the direction of a scene or play. Colleen helped me discover more of myself in my characters, which in turn let me trust myself more. When I think back to my first semester’s class performance of *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter, versus my final semester’s performance of *Misalliance* by George Bernard Shaw, I do not see the same actor. The first semester featured a woman afraid of vulnerability who didn’t know how to articulate anything she wanted out of a character or scene, who was so afraid of getting things “wrong” that she didn’t make a lot of choices. What I see now is a woman who understands who she is and what she can do, who can connect more deeply with her scene partner(s), who is willing to play and live in the scene to understand a moment or an action. It has made scene work more exciting and, honestly, fun.

We are capable of so much as humans, and it is the privilege and responsibility of an actor to bring all of those qualities to life. Through exploration, training, experience and a willingness to play over the past three years, I have been able to step outside myself while staying honest and present, giving the characters I have played a heart. An actor brings *life* to art, and I am proud that the training I have received has helped me become an artist.

MONOLOGUE TRANSCRIPTS

MISALLIANCE – GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

HYPATIA: If parents would only realize how they bore their children! Three or four times in the last half hour I've been on the point of screaming. You see, I'm young; and I do so want something to happen. My mother tells me that when I'm her age, I shall be only too glad that nothing's happened; but I'm not her age; so what good is that to me? There's my father in the garden, meditating on his destiny. All very well for him: he's had a destiny to meditate on; but I haven't had any destiny yet. Everything's happened to him: nothing's happened to me. That's why this unending talk is so maddeningly uninteresting to me. If you all sat in silence, as if you were waiting for something to happen, then there would be hope even if nothing did happen. But this eternal cackle, cackle, cackle about things in general is only fit for old, old, OLD people. I suppose it means something to them: they've had their fling. All I listen for is some sign of it ending in something; but just when it seems to be coming to a point, it begins over again; and I realize that it's never going to lead anywhere and never going to stop. That's when I want to scream.

TWELFTH NIGHT – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

OLIVIA: 'What is your parentage?'
 'Above my fortunes, yet my state is well:
 I am a gentleman.' I'll be sworn thou art;
 Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit,
 Do give thee five-fold blazon: not too fast:
 soft, soft!
 Unless the master were the man. How now!
 Even so quickly may one catch the plague?
 Methinks I feel this youth's perfections
 With an invisible and subtle stealth
 To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be.

OTHELLO – WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

EMILIA: But I do think it is their husbands' faults
If wives do fall: say that they slack their duties,
And pour our treasures into foreign laps,
Or else break out in peevish jealousies,
Throwing restraint upon us; or say they strike us,
Or scant our former having in despite;
Why, we have galls, and though we have some grace,
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell
And have their palates both for sweet and sour,
As husbands have. What is it that they do
When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is: and doth affection breed it?
I think it doth: is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too: and have not we affections,
Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so.

BIOGRAPHY

Alisa Ledyard is an Actor, Singer, Improviser originally from Akron, Ohio. She is a 2007 graduate of Kent State University's Bachelors of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre, and is completing her Masters of Fine Arts in Acting from the University of Virginia in Spring 2019. She has been seen recently in *Sister Act* at Virginia Repertory Theatre; Amy in *Company*, Woman in *Woody Guthrie's American Song*, and Coco in *The Cocoanuts* at Heritage Repertory Theatre; and development of the new musical, *The Water Dream* as part of the New York Musical Theatre Festival.



“Viewing Pleasure” by Nancy-Wren Bradshaw, Department of Drama New Works Festival 2017

Photos by Michael Bailey



“Woody Guthrie’s American Song” by Peter Glazer, Heritage Theatre Festival, 2017
Photos by Michael Bailey



"Company" by George Furth and Stephen Sondheim, Heritage Theatre Festival 2017
Photos by Michael Bailey



"Urinetown" by Greg Kotis, Department of Drama, 2018
Photos by Michael Bailey



ALISA LEDYARD

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Voice: Soprano (F3-D6, with high belt to G#) | Height: 5'6" | Size: 4 | Eyes: Green

NEW YORK theatre and comedy

The Water Dream

With Anthony Rapp, J. Robert Spencer

The Water Dream (reading)

12 Dates of Christmas

World premiere, with Ginna Hoben

The Made-Up Musical

Musical Improv House Team

Ensemble/Narrator

Ensemble

The Voice

Ensemble

Kid Detectives

NYMF, Signature Theatre/Jim True-Frost

Peter J. Sharp Theater/Thomas Caruso

Manhattan Rep. Theatre/Kelley McKinnon

Magnet Theater

Magnet Theater

MUSICAL THEATRE (selected)

Company

Woody Guthrie's American Song

A Chorus Line

The Cocoanuts

Amy

Woman (lead)

Vicki

Coco

Heritage Theatre Festival/Bob Chapel

Heritage Theatre Festival/Bryan Garey

Heritage Theatre Festival/Matthew Steffans

Heritage Theatre Festival/Frank Ferrante

HTF Artistic Director, Jenny Wales

Sister Act

Fiddler on the Roof

Jesus Christ Superstar

25th Annual... Spelling Bee

Urinetown

Mary Martin-of-Tours

Fruma-Sarah

Ensemble, u/s Mary

Rona

Penny

Virginia Repertory Theatre/Robin Arthur

Weathervane Playhouse/James Stuart

Porthouse Theater/Terri Kent

University of Virginia/Dave Dalton

University of Virginia/Bob Chapel

THEATRE (selected)

The Merchant of Venice

Henry V

The Taming of the Shrew

A Christmas Carol

The Winter's Tale

We are Pussy Riot

Jessica

Montjoy, Queen Isabel

Widow, Pedant, Curtis

Fan, Belinda, Mrs. Fezziwig

Paulina/Mopsa

Defense/British Feminist

American Shakespeare Center/PJ Paparelli

American Shakespeare Center/Giles Block

American Shakespeare Center/Jim Warren

American Shakespeare Center/Jim Warren

University of Virginia/Colleen Kelly

University of Virginia/Marianne Kubik

FILM

She's Counting on You, Martin

Room 206

Quality Control

Community of Trust

Lead

Principal

Supporting

Supporting

Josh Palmer

Overcranked Productions/Savannah Hard

Overcranked Productions/Alazar Aklilu

Overcranked Productions/Savannah Edwards

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

MFA Professional Actor Training Program, University of Virginia

BFA Musical Theatre, Kent State University

Upright Citizens Brigade: Diploma – improv core curriculum (all levels)

Magnet Theater: Improv (Armando Diaz); Musical Improv (Frank Spitznagel)

SKILLS Rhythm guitar (own); auxiliary percussion; Stage combat: Pass in Rapier/Dagger, Unarmed by SAFD (2018); improv; musical improv; puppetry; can talk with mouth closed; licensed driver (automatic); Dialects: Russian, Southern, British, French



