The Clearing: An Actor's Pathways

Amy Kate Barrick
Arlington, Texas

Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Evansville, 2000

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Chapter One: Thoughts on Acting

Discipline and Play

As I began to consider topics of discussion for the various specialty chapters of this thesis on acting, a common theme arose in each area: that of the symbiotic relationship between discipline and play. They function, in one sense, as opposing concepts. Discipline is the practice or exercise of technique, and in its purest form, it is characterized by rigor, restraint and control. Play involves the investigation of possibility, and in its purest form, it is characterized by curiosity, vulnerability and a willingness to fail. In another sense, discipline and play function as a partnership, or even as components of each other. I have chosen to discuss these concepts throughout this thesis, because it is clear from personal reflection that discovering the relationship between discipline and play has been the most comprehensive breakthrough of my training, and exploring the ever-changing balance between them will be the continuing education of my career.

Why are both discipline and play essential components of acting? Because acting is an art, and art is the marriage of craft and expression. Craft without expression is a void; expression without craft is chaos. Only together do they make art. Vsevolod Meyerhold was a Russian director who founded the principles of Biomechanics, a system of actor training blending psycho-physiological elements, and his philosophy of the balance between discipline and play can be described thus:

Too much playfulness is self-indulgent. Too little and you never ignite your creativity. Too little discipline is unsafe and unproductive. Too much and it's no longer fun.

To illustrate this balance, Meyerhold developed a series of physical exercises he called *études*. No doubt he borrowed the concept from the world of music, which was the art he practiced before his transition to acting. (So did I, in fact, which is perhaps why the concept speaks to me.)

Étude is the French word for “study,” and in music it is meant primarily as practice material for perfecting a given technique, such as the trill, or arpeggio fingering, or crossing strings without lifting the bow. Each *étude* is written with a particular exercise in mind, and the idea is that the player drills this exercise for the duration of the *étude*. It requires a great deal of discipline to focus on the technique desired, striving for precision, consistency and clarity, even when – perhaps especially when – some kind of shortcut would seem to be easier. The theory is that insistence on following technique deepens and matures a player's abilities, so that when the only way forward is the hard way, the technique is there.

But why is it necessary to practice a composition featuring elements that require a certain technique? Couldn't a player simply practice the technique itself? Certainly she could. But the value of an *étude* is that it still functions as a piece of music. Themes are incorporated into the exercise that, when passed through the filter of interpretation by the artist, make it enjoyable to hear and play. Once the technique itself is perfected, the player may begin to “play” with the notes and phrasing, finding ways to express herself, whereby the *étude* transcends mere technique and becomes the practice of art.

Meyerhold's *études* for acting function in much the same way. At first glance, or at first practice, they seem overwhelmingly technical: *otkas*, *posyl*, *stoika* (preparation, action, stance). Every movement requires the whole body, and each movement strives for economy and precision. No room for error and, it would seem, no room for interpretation. And yet, watching a demonstration of one of these *études* by an actor accomplished in Meyerhold's principles of Biomechanics can be quite captivating. Stories, even humor, are to be found in them, which would not be possible if the actor were not both technically agile and also in play.

Some may argue that it is necessary to fully learn and master technique before allowing oneself the freedom to play with it – the philosophy that one can only break the rules effectively

if one knows them intimately. There is merit in that; however, I would argue that, by then, it may be too late to play. Habits, even good ones, are hard to break, and if one has not included an element of play along with learning technique, it may be difficult to release oneself from the obligation to do things “correctly.” This is a self-imposed obligation with which I've struggled throughout my training and career. My teacher introduces a new game, or my director launches the first rehearsal, and my habit is to ask questions designed to make sure I'll get it right from the beginning. I want to eliminate the mistakes before I make them, possibly from a desire to impress, possibly from a fear of wasting time. This is discipline misplaced, because mastery is not simply the acquisition of skills, but rather the ability to put them in context. I forget that learning a technique (or developing a character) through exploration is a lot more fun than choking off creative possibilities and pre-judging something as a dead end. In fact, allowing myself the freedom to make “mistakes” or “bad” choices is actually a creative testing of boundaries that gives me a greater understanding of what does and doesn't work. It is only through play, through trying new approaches to following the rules, that we can learn the most effective ways to move forward.

It is worth mentioning the difference between “play” and “playfulness,” which are related but not identical concepts. “Play” is the action of taking chances, of knowing the rules and finding both standard and creative ways of performing within them. “Playfulness” is the state of mind necessary to do that. It is the quality of practice or performance that allows for discovery, and therefore deeper, more nuanced actions. It is also a willingness not to be bound by a singular technique, but rather an agile exploration of character through multiple approaches to find which one (or which combination) tells the story most effectively.

In one sense, playfulness is a way of working that boils down to listening with the entire body and responding honestly to actual stimulus. I have a tendency to try to make my character

too efficient – her intentions too clear or her tactics too effective right off the bat – which can sometimes cause me to miss opportunities to be affected by what my partner is offering or what is happening around me; not to mention, it robs the audience of the experience of watching a character struggle, which is what they're here to do.

In working with character masks, I spent some time with a mask I called Valerie. She was young and simple with no authority or responsibility, and she was one of the first examples of my willingness to be open without searching for correctness or obligating myself to be good at anything. When something happened, Valerie reacted without considering whether it was the smart thing to do, the right thing to do, or even the logical thing to do. It was a very freeing experience to release myself from accountability to anything approaching correctness, and as a result, Valerie was completely organic and unguarded. During an exercise inspired by Richard Schechner's rasaboxes – in which I was surrounded in space by quadrants representing various emotions or states of being and experimented with moving between them – I experienced some of the most profoundly honest vulnerability of any performance of my life. Valerie and I explored varying degrees of “bashful passion,” “brave safety” and “public solitude,” including what it was like to be on the edge between two (or all three) of them, and this created an intensely high-stakes situation for Valerie that left no room for second-guessing or planning her reactions to anything. This may be the closest I've ever come to pure play, and it was monumentally illustrative for me to experience it so that I know the extent of its potential. As I move forward, my challenge will be to learn to allow the same potential for organic vulnerability in characters who are “smarter” than Valerie.

Structure provides support. The purity of play I found in working with Valerie was made possible by trust in and commitment to the structure of the rasaboxes exercise and to the rules and limitations of being in mask. It was then the addition of creative play that allowed me to test

those boundaries and limitations, making discoveries about Valerie that could then become ingredients in a story or relationship. Full commitment to both the discipline and play of this exercise reinforced my understanding of Meyerhold's observation about the harmony between them: discipline makes play possible, and play makes discipline worth it.

Learning the truth is our greatest joy, to freely paraphrase Aristotle. So, if art is the marriage of craft and expression, and if part of our purpose as actors is to seek truth and bring it to an audience, then discipline is the development of craft, and play is the path to truth. However, truth is subjective, and because an actor is an artist, truth is revealed through craft. This is why the same role is different in the hands of every actor who plays it, and even why, to a degree, the same actor may find a different truth from one rehearsal or performance to the next. Many actors, myself included, have found ourselves making discoveries about character or relationship or motivation or intention even in the last week of a month-long run. This is only possible when we remain in play, illustrating that the journey is a never-ending one. There is an adage in theatre that, as we explore through the rehearsal process, we either eventually get it right, or we get to opening night. That may be true in the practical sense of letting things go and allowing good enough to be good enough, but for the actor who trusts her discipline and stays in play, more truth is around every corner. And that brings me joy.

Chapter Two: Voice and Speech

Aloud and Again, or Once More, With Feeling

In voice and speech training, these sister concepts of discipline and play work independently, and in conjunction, to deepen and specify verbal communication, expand artistic choices, and make communication and choice possible in the face of potentially debilitating obstacles.

Say It Like You Mean It (Even When It Doesn't Mean Anything)

The key to deepening and specifying verbal communication is incorporating a level of play into the discipline. For instance, perhaps one is able to find a measure of success with the desired effect in a training exercise – say, improved resonance brought about by forward placement in the repetition of Arthur Lessac's y-buzz (“eee” sound). My lips are rounded and forward in a horizontal almond shape, and as I release an “eee,” I experiment with resonance placement: different areas of the head or zones of the palate where I feel the most prominent vocal vibration. It is when this placement is most forward – that is, to me, the imaginary space in front of my teeth – that resonance travels farthest and penetrates deepest with the least effort.

Early in my journey, with focused repetition of this content-less exercise, I reached a point at which I was able to produce a consistently good quality of sound. However, when I was presented with contextual speech to speak to another person with intention, my new technique seemed to disappear. In a journal entry, I compared this disconnect between studio success and real-world failure to a relationship that starts out with promise and devolves as soon as it is tested: “[My lips] like to put on a good show at the bar with their soft sweet nothings, but once you get them home and try to have meaningful dialogue with them, they fall back into old habits, pack up and leave town. Oh sure, they'll make all the right shapes when it's just "beeeeee" all

day, but when you ask them to communicate actual words, they shrivel up, flatten out and escape through the side doors.”

How, then, does one transfer success in a training exercise to contextual speech? I learned to treat the exercise not as an exercise, but as an opportunity to communicate. If I practice the y-buzz with direction, as though it conveys meaning and carries its own intention and cost, it does not feel so different when I switch to actual words. In this way, *playing* upon the discipline puts it in context, deepening the connection between the technique and the art so that they do not separate when I need them both at the same time.

Try Something Else

There is also the discipline of *continual* play, wherein the play becomes its own kind of discipline. One might arrive at an interpretation, a line reading, a way of expressing an idea that one likes and stick with it, effectively cementing an inflection choice while still in the rehearsal process. It can be like pulling teeth to force oneself not to do this and instead to continue to explore and mine for different possibilities. This determination requires us to increase our awareness of habitual speech patterns – even the ones that seem inextricably linked to meaning – so that we know the difference between expression that is truly dependent on inflection, and expression that could possibly branch out with different colors, offering the speaker more choices she didn't know she had.

How does one increase this self-awareness? By changing one thing at a time – for example, tempo – and noticing the difference. In a rehearsal for *Vinegar Tom* in the spring of my first year, we ran through the play twice: once at what had become our “normal” pace, and once as fast as we could without skipping any beats. The speed-through was most instructive in illuminating areas where we were so married to our phrasing choices that they had ceased to be choices and had become mere muscle memory. It became clear that we needed more discipline of

play in order for the performance to continue to grow.

Freedom to Play

It was also the rehearsal and performance process for *Vinegar Tom* that illustrated for me in the most practical way how discipline is a freedom fighter: it makes play possible. During the latter third of the rehearsal process, through technical rehearsals, and continuing into the first week of performances, I was very sick with flu. Congestion abounded through my chest and sinuses, my throat was on fire, and I had lost much of the upper half of my pitch range. As a result of this illness, I found myself without many of the tools I rely on for expression.

Sickness tends to pull one's voice farther into the throat, which, for the purposes of quality resonance, is the last place one wants it to be, and especially not when the throat is a place of pain. Relying on forward placement is astronomically helpful. Not only does the focus of vibration in the front of the teeth dramatically improve resonant possibility, it's also simply healthier. That's not something I could fully embrace until my vocal health was compromised and I could feel the difference between, frankly, pain and not pain. In this case, the discipline of habitualizing forward placement made it possible to do the work at all.

Illness also exacerbates exhaustion, so in addition to the loss of many of my tools I was also sapped of energy. On opening night, my sinuses and vocal cords still compromised, I warmed up, focusing on the healthy forward placement techniques that had been saving me so far, and I discovered a miracle: resonance actually gives more energy than it takes. My teacher, Kate Burke, had used the word “effortless” many times in class to describe the desired effect of forward placement once an actor develops “instinctive deployment,” as she called it – but it never really hit me until that night. In my first scene, I was working harder than I had to, concentrating on my obstacle rather than on communicating with my scene partner, not trusting my new discipline to get me through this. But the first time the audience laughed, I forgot about

myself for a moment; suddenly the resonance came without much effort at all, and then these *choices* started coming out of nowhere for the rest of the play, new thoughts I'd never had before, new line deliveries that made certain moments make sense to me for the first time. I became a better listener, because I wasn't so focused on myself. Simply allowing the resonance to do its job, without forcing it, freed up my energy for the things I should be thinking about – listening, communicating, playing intention.

Engaging the physical core from the lower abdomen allows for more freedom and range of movement choices with less effort. When I connect this to my voice, placing the vocal core just in front of the teeth allows each sound to flow and soar without force or strain. I was suddenly able to access a greater playfulness with my vocal choices and inflection, all because I was producing sound with my vocal core, flooding myself with aggravated, resonant, bone tone energy, which I could then turn into my need to communicate. *Poof* – exhaustion gone, and play possible.

Aloud and Again

I mentioned in the introduction that the interaction of discipline and play expands the scope of artistic possibility then demonstrated with *Vinegar Tom* how discipline actually provided an opening for discoveries about character. This is true of both voice *and* speech as separate, though intrinsically related, concepts – voice being primarily the verbal production of sound connected to meaning, and speech being primarily the fluency of expression connected to meaning.

Andrew Wade, former long-time Head of Voice for the Royal Shakespeare Company, offers a surprising lesson, which is that Shakespeare has provided everything needed to speak as the character: the *what* and the *how*. Shakespeare has a special vocabulary – a code, if you will – with which he communicates to actors about character through the text, and we internalize this

code so that when he cues us, we know precisely *what* to do and *how* to do it. What Shakespeare does not include is the *why* – not because it is unimportant, Andrew says, but because it is not something to be sought; it is, rather, something that reveals itself through repetition of the what and the how. This can be quite an astonishing revelation to an actor trained in the Stanislavski tradition, an actor who is always in search of the why as a crucial part of her process. To be told that the why will reveal itself through focused and varied repetition of the text, rather than through an analytical character profile informed by psychological realism, is somewhat of a curveball. But if it's true that plays are meant to be spoken and heard, not read, it only makes sense that the language is richest, most expressive and most *informative* when examined and explored in its journey from mouth to ear, rather than page to eye. I use this, then, as my imperative to begin speaking it aloud immediately, and to remove myself from the page as quickly as possible. It is a different kind of “homework” based on speaking, rather than thinking about speaking. In support of his lesson, Andrew quoted Oscar Wilde: “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?” I submit an addendum: “How do I know what I think until I hear what I say...over and over and over?”

As a result of Andrew's lesson, and from focused exploration with Kate and my classmates, I have built an arsenal of textual exercises designed to draw out meaning, starting with the marking of different sounds. Are there a lot of Lessac's structure vowels, which create specific shapes with the lips and sizes with the cavern of the mouth? Are some more prevalent than others? How do those shapes and sounds make me feel? What about consonants and how they connect each word to the next? I take note of trends. Does the character use a lot of sustainable consonants like “m” or “v”? If so, are they voiced or unvoiced? Is there alliteration? Maybe there are “s” sounds everywhere. What kind of person (or state of mind, or intention) communicates by pushing air through her teeth? Even small instances of alliteration (“his hand”

or “to tell”), can help heighten something.

Another exercise is to speak verse lines one at a time, paying particular attention to the meter. *De-dum-de-dum-de-dum-de-dum-de-dum*. One might sound like an Elizabethan robot, but the point is to get a measure of time so that one can then improvise within it, like learning to play Mozart before you mess around with Louis Armstrong. Look for different caesuras, new places to breathe, alternate ways of honoring rhythm. “Stressing” a syllable does not have to mean pressing down on it, but could mean lifting it, lengthening it, pitching it up or down. This is also an opportunity to play with scansion choices, working within the measure of time Shakespeare has provided. What happens to the meaning if a character goes off-meter on purpose?

Andrew asserts that memorizing an acting text before or very early in the rehearsal process does not fix its interpretation, despite what some actors fear. Rather, if one has done the many layers of textual groundwork that are possible, and if one can then remove herself from the page, that is when true, character-based spontaneity can be loosed upon a performance. Will I manage to connect every consonant link with every repetition of the piece? Probably not. Will I luxuriate in every structure vowel every time? Doubtful. Will my rhythm consistently lock in within a verse line's measure of time? Unlikely.

Is that bad? No.

Rather, spontaneity arises from whichever bit of alliteration, structure, or syllabic geography comes to the surface in a given performance. This is why, even though Shakespeare has provided the same what and how to us all, no two performances by any two people, or even one person, must necessarily be alike.

Once More, With Feeling

As I move forward, I continue to remind myself that discipline (technique, cultivation, exercise) makes play (experimentation, trial, discovery) possible, and more importantly, play

must then become its own discipline. My tendency to separate them – that is, to abstract the why from the how and the what, or to reserve meaningful communication only for context – has not gone away, meaning that I have not yet achieved the coveted “instinctive deployment.” But I’m closer, and I will continue to get closer as I speak the text aloud and again, once more, with feeling.

Chapter Three: Movement

Bodythought: From the Core

The text of a play is fixed, and the words themselves may not be changed; yet as I discussed in Chapter 2, an actor has a great deal of freedom, or play, in the way she speaks the text, allowing for a wealth of possibility and nuance in meaning, emotion, and character history and relationship. Physical expression offers the same store of play within the framework of prescribed movement set forth by a director or choreographer: it is the *how* that tells the story, often even more so than the *what*. The various *hows* we choose from come from the core of a story, the core of a character, the core of a relationship.

The core is the clearing in the woods from which every path leads. We start from the core because it is the beginning of everything, and the best reason to start at the beginning is its potential to go in any direction, from which any choice can be made. Just as her words do, the *how* of a character's physical expression comes from this core. This is possible through cultivation of what I call the actor's *bodythought*: the ability to behave and respond honestly with the body according to the given circumstances of character and situation.

Bodythought

The irony of bodythought is that it is quite natural and therefore difficult to manifest intentionally. We all have our own bodythought, developed over the course of our lives, comprised of nature, nurture, everything that has ever happened to us and every choice we've ever made. The body is very smart, and it responds honestly to every stimulus based on previous experience. Therefore, it is much more difficult to lie with one's body than to lie with one's words. Gesture, heart rate, unconscious tics in the face or hands, body position or attitude in relation to that of someone else – all of these things can reveal truth against one's will, because the natural behavior of the body is not burdened by conscience or complexity. The body responds

to desire, hunger, pain and fear, and that's about it. It does not know that it should not be attracted to such-and-such person because he is married. It does not know that a glass floor forty stories up is safe to step on. When the body feels a certain way, it behaves accordingly, regardless of what the mind tells it.

In acting, one must recapture this honesty of movement by teaching the body a new bodythought: creating a man-made approximation of a natural phenomenon and internalizing it so that it becomes instinctual. In essence, one attempts to go from natural to artificial and back to natural. This is one of the biggest challenges an actor faces in the pursuit of an honest performance, and I will talk about strategies for taking it on.

Initiating Connection to the Core

To move from the core is to move as a result of need. Not all of our movement as everyday people comes from the core, but as actors we play characters who are not having an ordinary day. These people need something, and they need it beyond want, and the audience has come to watch and hear them strive for that thing. That strife must come from the mind and the heart, which direct intellect and desire; from the soul, which directs purpose; and from the gut, which directs drive. The core is in the gut.

How can we develop this core, so that it serves both as a strong place of initiation and as a fountain of possibility? Through discipline and play. The first (and continuous) stage of discipline is the strengthening of the body's literal core through physical conditioning: abdominal exercises and stretching, including not only the frontal side, but also dorsal and lateral. The key here for me is remembering that every rep of every exercise (even non-abdominal exercises) must begin with the core engaged. This serves the dual purpose of strengthening the abdominals while habitualizing a conscious, intentional connection to the core.

The second stage of discipline is the drill, or as Meyerhold might call it, the *étude*. This

applies to all movement, but the easiest example to illustrate is in my stage combat training. Every training session begins by tracking the space while drilling proper fight stance: sustaining a low center of gravity with bent knees, keeping the body upright and centered over the core, preserving turnout from the hips and a wide stance in both the lateral plane and the fronto-dorsal plane. Each of these elements contributes to the body's ability to move in any direction at any time, which is what allows play to be introduced. I begin tracking the space with focused variety, practicing with a sense of imagination, as though I am responding to an opponent. This deepens the discipline by adding a layer of complexity and spontaneity to the drill, and also begins to connect initiation to intention.

Laban & Given Circumstances

Further developing that connection now becomes the focus. Having built a physical foundation that is both strong and adaptable, I begin to play with the physical implications of a character's given circumstances. This is the process of creating her bodythought, which provides the store from which physical choices organic, natural and instinctive to her may flow. Laban Movement Analysis, a method originating from the work of Rudolf Laban for describing and labeling different modes or qualities of movement, has provided my most instrumental tools of play in this endeavor. The categories of analysis, called effort factors, are Space, Weight, Time and Flow, and each factor has two polarities: respectively, direct/indirect, strong/light, sudden/sustained, and bound/free. When factors are combined, they form action drives such as Wring, which is comprised of indirect space, strong weight and sustained time, or its opposite, Dab, which is comprised of direct space, light weight, and sudden time. The effort factors and the spectrum of possibility available between polarities can be extrapolated directly from script analysis and interpreted as needed. I explore the character's effort factors by sourcing them to strategic action in the Stanislavski sense. It all comes back to need, objective, and given

circumstance, and this is how a character's movement vocabulary, or bodythought, becomes specific to her. Movement that proceeds from a character's bodythought, whether large or small, quotidian or abstract, is like a piece of elastic. The extreme ends of her spectrum of movement are connected along a tensile path; it is from the core of that path that each end extends, and it is to the core that each end feels called to return, even as it reaches for what it needs.

The roles I played as the various adult women in *Spring Awakening*, in the fall of my second year, best illustrates my experience with the ramifications of effective bodythought. It was my responsibility to distinguish these women vocally and physically. Because they all basically looked the same and had very little stage time to establish themselves, it became essential for me to isolate a strong need at the core of each character and then let that need flow through her body.

In the case of Fraulein Knuppledick, an aged spinster and hardened schoolmistress whose only access to power or respect was through oppression of those weaker than herself, her body became a wall of immobility. I chose to exhibit her hardness literally: where there might be chinks in someone else's armor – at the neck, armpits, knees – she sealed herself off. Her shoulders came up so that her neck disappeared. She walked with her arms straight at her sides and her knees quite stiff. If she needed to turn her head, she had to turn her entire body. Fraulein Knuppledick's only outlet for expression – her “tell,” as it were – was an unconscious tick in which her fingers wiggled when she was especially stimulated. One might ask how the movement of only the fingers could possibly initiate from the core. I would argue that the energy initiated in the core, but Knuppledick's conscious repression of core impulses – and unconscious, through a lifetime of repressive bodythought – left them no outlet other than the farthest extremities.

Farthest afield from Fraulein Knuppledick was Frau Bessell, Martha's mother. As Frau

Bessell, I had only two lines and fifteen seconds of stage time to establish myself as a wife who looks the other way when her husband abuses their daughter. The original text gives the barest hint that Frau Bessell turns to some kind of substance in order to escape the guilt of abandoning her daughter, and because that's all I had to work with, that became her core for me. Laban action drives became useful here: Frau Bessell's body had a slow looseness brought on by the habitual use of laudanum and a lightness derived from cheerful ignorance, so I spoke and moved with a sense of Float (indirect, light, sustained).

Laban's effort factors and action drives, beyond providing me with a vocabulary with which to discuss and describe movement, and even beyond furnishing a system of discovery, serve as continual reminders of the movement options available, especially the ones I do not habitually draw upon. They serve as keys to unlock someone else's bodythought and begin the process of applying it to my body and allowing me to live through it, which in turn shines a light on which paths to truth are available to a particular character.

Chapter Four: Lessons from the Classroom

Get It Wrong

One of the ways in which I have found a connection to my students, particularly at the University of Virginia, is that a great number of them share a need I have had most of my life: a need to excel academically. Many of the students here are hyper-focused on GPA, and they are less concerned with internalizing the concepts I am teaching – which often boil down to listening and responding in the moment according to the given circumstances of the character – and more concerned with saying all the words in the correct order and playing the “correct emotion” of their character.

While I as a student have never gone so far as to de-value the internalization of a lesson, I can understand their thinking: if they can somehow hit on the right answer, that should earn them an “A” in my class. The trouble with that, of course, is that as a *teacher* of acting I am much less interested in the right answer and, in fact, believe it doesn't exist. The closest an actor can get to a “right answer” in performing a role is to be totally open and honest, to listen and react in the moment according to given circumstances, and to play intention, not emotion.

Unfortunately, for the academically focused, there is nothing objectively “correct” about any of that, any more than there is a correct way to be a human being. I have observed in the classroom a couple of different ways in which, as actors, we must strive to get it wrong.

The first way is allowing there to be a difference between the actor and the character. For example, the final unit in my class is devoted to scene work from Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*. One of my students was assigned the role of Chris in the scene where he and Ann finally declare their love for each other, and Chris's scene intention is to ask Ann to marry him. My student understood this, and he had previously demonstrated in our open scene unit that he was capable of listening and reacting to his partner in the moment. The problem was that his tactics as Chris

were, frankly, too good.

That sounds counter-intuitive, right? Isn't it our job as actors to find the most successful way of attaining our character's objective? Actually, not quite. It's our job to find what the *character* thinks would be the most successful tactic, and then try to execute that tactic according to the given circumstances of the character's history, personality, relationship, and obstacles. The problem here was that my student, as a person, was quite the charmer, perfectly comfortable with women, and at no loss to know how to behave with them. Chris, on the other hand, is not only rubbish at women, but his stakes here are extremely high, which makes him nervous and even less suave than he might otherwise be.

Time and again I stopped the scene.

“Student!” I exclaimed. (Not really. I used his name.) “Stop being so good at this. Chris is crap at it. He's been in love with this girl for years, but only from a distance. He thinks she might love him back, but he's far from certain. On top of that, he has no skills: his father says earlier that Chris hasn't dated much, and his dialogue in this scene is full of false starts and lame attempts to be romantic. You need to embrace your inner dork and approach this with Chris's skill set, Chris's self-judgment, Chris's naïveté. His given circumstances demand that he be bad at this. Be bad at it.”

As a student, I recognize myself in his struggle with the difficult concept that a character might not have the same skill set or imagination that the actor has. As mentioned in Chapter One, one of my acting teachers, Colleen Kelly, once said to me that I must have “less obligation for the character to be good at what she's doing.” I'm quite certain this self-imposed obligation comes from the same place as the need to excel, which has the effect of twisting the wires a bit. My need to get it right can therefore interfere with the character's ability to get it wrong.

The second way a student can hobble herself creatively in the pursuit of a “right” answer

is the premature elimination of “wrong” answers. In a world of negative reinforcement for taking the path less traveled by, most of us always look before we leap. We decide before we do anything which course of action is most likely to succeed, or at the very least not make us look stupid. We choose, in effect, the safest and straightest path from Point A to Point B.

The problem with that, of course, is that actors are in the business of drama, and nothing is less dramatic than safe and straight. In life, it is unpleasant to make mistakes because we are punished for them in one way or another, so even though there is often a side effect of learning valuable lessons from mistakes, no one would choose to make them on purpose. In theatre, it is this very side effect we are after, and so we must go off the beaten path. Go too far. Take a leap. Be curious. Do something stupid. Everything our mothers told us not to do, in effect, because it is only in this spirit of wonder and play that we can make discoveries that take us closer to the truth of a character, or a relationship, or a story.

In another, earlier scene from *All My Sons*, I had two students playing Chris and his father Joe. Chris needs Joe's help convincing his mother to support his proposal of marriage to Ann. Joe is reluctant to help because it would mean destroying his wife's hope that their elder son Larry – Ann's erstwhile paramour, whose plane went down in battle – is still alive. Chris, on the other hand, is unwilling to continue to put his own happiness on the back burner, and he threatens to marry Ann and move away if he doesn't get his parents' support. The stakes are high for both of them, and at their first presentation in class, my two students had invested so much in their stakes that by the end of the scene, one of them threw a punch at the other and they started grappling with each other on the ground.

I was a little shocked, because a physical fight was not an appropriate choice for the scene. At first I suspected they had done it for laughs, as these two particular students were wont to do, and in fact, several of their classmates did laugh. But then it became clear that the actors

were serious, so I asked them why they had taken it so far. It turned out that they weren't quite sure what to do with the dated language of the scene, so they took it in a physical direction instead, trying to justify the arc each character takes. Their classmates' laughter had come, I think, from their utter surprise at seeing commitment and emotional investment beyond that with which most people are comfortable, especially in front of other people. So instead, I was proud of them for being willing to risk failure and embarrassment – quite a feat for any actor, let alone a beginning-level one – in order to explore just how angry these characters were. Even though the fight was perhaps an inappropriate choice for performance, it was entirely appropriate for the purposes of character exploration in rehearsal. The benefit was that when we took out the physical fight, the students were still able to channel that energy into their language and other behavior, because they had “gone there” emotionally before.

The lesson here is to get out of one's own way. If my students hadn't gone too far with their characters' anger, they might never have understood the underlying conflict. Knowing me, I would have talked myself out of going too far in the first place because it was inappropriate for the end result. And that's the key: I tend not to allow myself the luxury of “mistakes.” There are any number of choices to make in rehearsing a scene. Some of them seem right, others seem downright wrong, others seem good for stakes but bad for given circumstances, and still others are just little buzzing ideas that we won't know are good or bad until we try them. I tend only to bring forward the choices in the first category, and that limits my potential and the potential of any character I play. In this case, the desire to “get it right” interferes with the seeking of truth.

Anytime I teach a game in class and explain the rules, I will invariably have some students who are so concerned with playing it correctly that they forget it's a game. Games are *played*. People who are good at certain games develop ways to strategize and adapt to whatever might happen within them. Sometimes this means zigging instead of zagging. Sometimes it

means employing different strategies for different opponents. Sometimes it means cheating, as long as you don't get caught. But the value of most acting games is in training ourselves to listen, be responsive, and embrace stakes, if we have the discipline to experience them through the lens of the work rather than just having fun. As my classmate, Sandi Carroll, likes to say, "Acting is serious fun."

And as another of my classmates once wrote, anonymously, "Truth is the only territory worth exploring." You never know where truth will be found. Yes, sometimes you can find it by heading straight for it, but then you haven't learned anything except what you already knew. As students of behavior, actors know that truth is rarely uncomplicated if a person or character is grounded in reality.

What is important for me as I continue to grow as an actor is to challenge myself to tread unexplored truths. Even if the truth seems straightforward, it will be a more engaging truth if I get there via the scenic route. And so I must dare to throw away the map, take some wrong turns, and go where the dragons are. I must dare to get it wrong.

Appendix: Video Supplement

Part One: The Actor

The attached supplemental videos are intended primarily for the demonstration of my abilities as an actor to connect to an (imagined) other, listen and respond, embrace stakes and environment, and strive for something. They are audition monologues representing my interests and range as an actor, demonstrating my skills in the use of verse and in modern contemporary speech. Permission to use excerpts from the works of Charles Mee is given here:

<http://charlesmee.com/about.shtml>.

- 1) Dionyza, from Shakespeare's *Pericles*. Public domain.
- 2) Cressida, from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. Public domain.
- 3) Lydia, from Charles Mee's *Big Love*. Free use by permission of the playwright.
- 4) Yvette, from Charles Mee's *Fire Island*. Free use by permission of the playwright.

Part Two: The Fighter

These videos are intended for the demonstration of my skills as a performer of stage combat. They are recordings of my testing for recognition by the Society of American Fight Directors in Rapier & Dagger and Unarmed stage combat, and I include them because of my interest in combat as a secondary pursuit. My partners are, respectively, Brad Fraizer and Amaree Cluff, who have granted permission for the use of their images.

- 5) Skills Proficiency Test: Rapier & Dagger. Scene from the film *Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides*, by Ted Elliott & Terry Rossio. Fight choreography by Marianne Kubik. I received a Recommended Pass from Fight Master Dale Girard.
- 6) Skills Proficiency Test: Unarmed. Scene from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, by Tom Stoppard. Fight choreography by Marianne Kubik. I received a Basic Pass from Fight Master Dale Girard.