

Finding Agency through Art:
A Digital Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

This digital portfolio comprises documents and media that represent the culmination of three years of graduate study at the University of Virginia Department of Drama. The portfolio and supplemental materials showcase a direct application of the author's learning in the classroom to onstage performances, teaching, and building agency through the creation of original work as she transitions into the professional world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY	1
ARTIST’S JOURNAL.....	3
PERSONAL STATEMENT	5
PORTFOLIO MATERIAL.....	6
<i>THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM</i>	6
<i>THE CROSSWALK</i>	7
<i>JULIUS CAESAR</i> , ACT 2, SCENE 1	8
PRODUCTION PHOTOS	9
APPENDIX.....	11
HEADSHOT	11
RESUME.....	12
ACTOR BIOGRAPHIES.....	13

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Finding agency through art: this is my guiding principle as a teaching artist. In my experience, I have observed that students' fears and inhibitions can get in the way of learning. Many of the students I encounter have never acted, although they want to acquire this skill and some even aspire to master it. My goal with all students is to help them discover the artist in them so they can be agents of change in their lives, communities and the world at large.

In my pursuit of effective teaching, I have learned that I need to jump into the puddle first and be willing to play. I find that being approachable, letting students know I am on their side, and wanting them to succeed goes a long way in their willingness to invest in the process. I incorporate a series of ensemble-building exercises into my lesson plans. I have found that this makes students more receptive to learning and helps them develop greater empathy for one another. They realize they are in this together and have similar fears and struggles. This levels the playing field.

I urge my students to develop greater empathy for the characters they play. I guide them to always go beyond their first impressions of what the role is and identify specific objectives and motivations that drive characters to behave a certain way. I encourage them to go beyond the surface of the dialogue, look for hints in the text that reveal traits and relationships, and use their imagination to flesh out fully developed characters with specific hopes and dreams.

My philosophy of finding agency through art is especially relevant to students from different cultural backgrounds. As an international student, I find it is essential that students from diverse backgrounds feel welcome and know that they have something unique to bring to the table. While working on a devised piece in the 'Introduction to Theatre' class, I asked students about skills they could employ in the creation of the play. We incorporated their native languages and art forms, such as Peking Opera to Poi performance art, in the works they created. They taught these skills to other students who were exposed to new ideas and styles of performance. My original work *The Elephant in the Room* inspired students to devise their own creative work; they wrote and performed their original monologues in class and were amazed by their artistic ability and scope.

After allowing students to observe feedback given in the classroom for the first few weeks, I encourage them to be the agents of change by providing feedback to their peers through peer reviews. We then talk about whether the inputs given were useful to the recipients of the feedback. If not, we work on rewording the notes to communicate their observations better. Through this process, I can gauge their ability to identify specific elements of performance and articulate them effectively. By exploring the craft of acting in the classroom, taking things apart, and analyzing them with students, I can assess student learning as well as my own learning as an artist-educator.

I have observed that, through my acting class, students develop the ability to clearly articulate their goals. A validation of the impact of my teaching comes from students who share their progress with me. One student who took acting classes to satisfy a requirement ended up majoring in Drama, another went on to direct an award-winning student film for the Adrenaline Film Project at the Virginia Film Festival, and another applied the techniques he learned in class to a job interview and landed his dream job. My responsibility towards students goes beyond the course requirements. Several students reach out for monologue coaching even after the course ends, which opens up more opportunities for them. One of my students sought help with his audition and was accepted into the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York. Acting gives them agency and lets them assert themselves without apology because they let go of their fears in the classroom.

Theatre cannot exist in isolation, and I enjoy the process of sharing it both on stage and in the classroom. I learn from students as much as they learn from me. They ask the most profound questions, and in answering them, I make incredible discoveries about the craft. My students and I inspire each other to be better artists. It is humbling to know that by helping students find agency, we can be better artists ourselves.

ARTIST'S JOURNAL

The discoveries I have made during my three years of graduate study have prepared me to be a multi-faceted artist and an agent of change in my own life as well as in the lives of others. I did not always think of myself as multi-dimensional. I used to limit myself to an identity that was projected by the world around me. My experiences in graduate school helped break down that false perception and give me the strength to grow into the artist I always wanted to be. I found the freedom to combine my individual talents not just as an actor but also a writer, director, artist-educator and a creator of original work.

I found this to be true for my range as an actor as well; I was capable of a lot more than I gave myself credit for, and graduate school had an essential role to play in this realization. I made my most profound discovery when we were working on character masks during our second semester. We were tasked with uncovering the personalities of these masks and letting them emerge through us rather than forcing our ideas onto them. We struggled with them for weeks, and I initially hated the process because it left me physically and mentally exhausted at the end of every class. I finally made the breakthrough when I realized I created characters who had personalities that were diametrically opposite to mine. When the masks came off, I did not need to physically put them on to transform. I realized how beautifully complex we are as human beings and that I had access to a multitude of different characters who were subconsciously hidden away in me. The characters that emerged from the two masks I worked with were both original, one funny and the other tragic. When I combined the personalities of both masks, the most fascinating thing happened: the character that emerged spoke only in heightened language. The selection of monologues for my thesis is a combination of three beautiful qualities that manifested from the characters that I created during mask work: originality, humor and heightened language.

I have found agency as an actor, particularly as a female actor of color, by writing the work that I want to see on stage. I was not content with being cast in stereotypical roles over and over again. I could not limit myself to the myopic view others had of me and the parts I could play, especially after I knew the possibilities existing within me through mask work. As an actor-playwright, I have taken the reins in my hands, and I can now steer in the direction I want to go. When actor Leslie Odom Jr. visited UVA, he mentioned that you cannot play the truth on stage if you are not playing characters that are from your cultural background. That stuck with me, and I asked myself, what does originality mean to me? What is my truth? Is it possible to find this truth when I am continually playing characters from cultural backgrounds that are different from mine? This led me to write my one-woman show *The Elephant in the Room*, and it has been the most liberating and creatively fulfilling experience so far. It was important to me to include a monologue from this play in my thesis because, not only is it original, but it also represents my new journey as an actor-playwright that emerged throughout this MFA program.

The creation of original work and acting in new works by other playwrights genuinely excite me. Denise Stewart, a lecturer at UVA Drama, has been a constant source of inspiration. She is a female playwright, has written and performed her own one-woman show, and is an incredibly gifted comedic writer and performer. I approached her for monologues from her plays, and she shared the ones she thought I would be an excellent fit for. I found a comedic piece that would highlight my quirky, comedic side. This monologue would be a great fit to showcase a different side to my personality not immediately apparent in the way I carry myself in the world.

I love classical theatre deeply, especially Shakespeare. I consider it one of my strengths and would be remiss to not include a Shakespeare monologue in my digital portfolio. Since my other selections are from new works, I wanted to seek the other extreme and find nuance and freshness in a monologue from a well-known Shakespeare play. This led to my decision to include Portia's powerful monologue from *Julius Caesar* in my portfolio.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

I am Priyanka Shetty, I am a final-year MFA in Acting candidate at the University of Virginia. Theatre to me is about authenticity and truthfulness, and that includes being truthful about the world that we currently live in. I love to be a part of the creation process of the projects that I am involved in. I find agency in being able to create and act in plays that address issues that are directly relevant to us.

As an art form, I believe theatre has a deeper purpose: to invite new ways of thinking, offer new perspectives, and effect positive change. I think it is crucial to create new work that is timely and relevant to our current world. During my time here at UVA, I wrote two original plays. The first play titled *The Elephant in the Room* is a one-woman show about the highs and lows of my transition from India to America. It also highlights the struggles of international students in an academic environment.

My second play *#Charlottesville* is a devised play. I interviewed around a hundred local residents who spoke about Charlottesville in the context of the Unite the Right rally and the events of August 11-12, 2017 and its aftermath. I constructed this play verbatim from these interviews and also directed it. I had the pleasure of working with a cross-generational, multi-ethnic ensemble that brought the play to life.

We performed both these plays together at Live Arts and The Jefferson School, and it was really great to see the community come together and the interesting conversations we had after the performances. I am currently on tour with *The Elephant in the Room* and will be covering multiple cities as part of this tour.

I really do think that art is a powerful medium, and as artists, I believe it is our responsibility to ask the right questions. And that's what I want to do with the kind of art that I make.

PORTFOLIO MATERIAL***The Elephant in the Room***

Priyanka Shetty

Priyanka: I'm in the in-between zone. Neither here, nor there. Neither black, nor white. Neither this, nor that. But I have to be something. I'm in the in-between zone. I don't fit in to their idea of who I should be. I don't need to be who they want me to be. But I'm losing parts of myself every day, parts of me are being stolen, ripped away like the tusks of an elephant. When it suits them, they like my otherness. When it suits them, they will *use* my otherness. What's the buzzword – diversity?

I'm in the in-between zone. Stop it. Stop it before I start believing you as you say it over and over again that I am not enough. When will I be enough for you? When will I be *white* enough for you? Your little white elephant. Your troublesome and useless possession. The power that you have people like me continue to give you. But don't you think for a moment I'll give you that power over *me*. Don't you think for a moment that I'll forget. What did they tell you about an elephant's memory? An elephant never forgets.

The Crosswalk

Denise Stewart

Helen: I never got a driver's license. I thought I'd kill someone. Actually, my mother thought I'd kill someone. I'm easily distracted. We'd go out in the country...taking all the back roads. She'd smoke, put her feet up on the dash, and I'd drive. It was pleasant. She enjoyed me speeding a little. I could tell...she'd roll the window down, exhale...but then I'd see a hawk or want to change the radio, or get mad about a tree getting cut down. I'd swerve, run us into a ditch. One time I was messing with the rearview mirror, and I crossed the center line. Almost hit a family coming the other way. I saw the driver — the dad's eyes — heard my mother scream — I pulled us back just in time. She sort-of tilted up from her seat and looked down, both of us seeing the wetness. She said, "I hope you're happy. I pissed myself." I never got a license.

Julius Caesar, Act 2, Scene 1

Shakespeare

Portia: Y' have ungently, Brutus,
Stole from my bed. And yesternight, at supper,
You suddenly arose and walked about,
Musing and sighing, with your arms across,
And when I asked you what the matter was,
You stared upon me with ungentle looks.
I urged you further, then you scratched your head
And too impatiently stamped with your foot.
Yet I insisted; yet you answered not,
But with an angry wafture of your hand
Gave sign for me to leave you. So I did,
Fearing to strengthen that impatience
Which seemed too much enkindled, and withal
Hoping it was but an effect of humor,
Which sometime hath his hour with every man.
It will not let you eat nor talk nor sleep,
I should not know you, Brutus. Dear my lord,
Make me acquainted with your cause of grief.

PRODUCTION PHOTOS

The Elephant in the Room, February 2019, Helms Theatre, UVA Drama, PC: Martyn Kyle



Middletown, June 2017, Ruth Caplin Theatre, UVA Drama, PC: Michael Bailey



Tartuffe, November 2018, Ruth Caplin Theatre, UVA Drama, PC: Michael Bailey



Shipwrecked!, March 2017, Ruth Caplin Theatre, UVA Drama, PC: Michael Bailey



APPENDIX**HEADSHOT**

RESUME

PRIYANKA SHETTY

Union Membership: AEA

Email: priyanka.nyx@gmail.com

Phone: (614) 370-2609

Hair, Eyes: Dark Brown

Height: 5'6" Weight: 160 lbs

Range: Soprano (Lyric)

www.priyankashetty.com

REGIONAL THEATRE

The Elephant in the Room*	One Woman Show	Yale, CATCO (Equity) Joe Bishara
#Charlottesville*	Narrator	Live Arts Priyanka Shetty
Middletown	Mary Swanson	Heritage Theatre Festival Colleen Kelly
The Kabuki Sleeping Beauty	Okaasama	CATCO Joe Bishara
Sticks and Stones	Kendall Grey	CATCO Joe Bishara
Skylight	Kyra Hollis	Columbus Civic Theater Bo Rabby
The Comedy of Errors	Luciana	Columbus Civic Theater Richard Albert

UNIVERSITY THEATRE

Tartuffe	Dorine	University of Virginia Sabin Epstein
We Are Pussy Riot	Lieutenant/Devout Woman	University of Virginia Marianne Kubik
The Winter's Tale	Hermione/Old Shepherd	University of Virginia Colleen Kelly
Shipwrecked!	Yamba	University of Virginia Marianne Kubik
Urinetown	Dr. Billeaux	University of Virginia Bob Chapel

INTERNATIONAL THEATRE

Chokher Bali	Binodini	Kyra Theatre Priyanka Shetty
Fiddler on The Roof	Fruma Sarah	The C.A.U.S.E. Foundation Leila Alvares
My Fair Lady	Eliza Doolittle	Antardwand Priyanka Shetty
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Hermia	Presidency Theatre Marie Gordon

FILM/TV

TV Host	News Anchor	InfyTV Infosys Limited
Missing	Supporting	Film Makers Society UVA
Rose	Lead	LabShorts Virginia Players
Four	Supporting	Virginia Film Festival Adrenaline

EDUCATION/TRAINING

MFA in Acting Candidate	University of Virginia Colleen Kelly, Kate Burke, Marianne Kubik
Certified Voice Practitioner	Lessac Research and Training Institute Nancy Krebs, Crystal Robbins

SPECIAL SKILLS

Voice Trainer, Dialects (RP, Cockney, Russian, Italian), Multilingual, Stage Combat (Unarmed, Rapier & Dagger), Dance (Kathak), Dialect Acquisition, Driver's License, Passport, Teleprompter Proficient.

* Original Works by Priyanka Shetty.

ACTOR BIOGRAPHIES

BIO 1

Priyanka Shetty is an actor, director and playwright. She is an MFA Acting candidate at the University of Virginia. She recently premiered her full-length one woman play *The Elephant in the Room* at Columbus OH, produced by Evolution Theatre in association with CATCO, and is excited for its upcoming multi-city *The Elephant on the Road* tour.

Priyanka is currently working on her second play titled *#Charlottesville*, a documentary-style play constructed verbatim from interviews with local residents who speak about the city in the context of the Unite the Right rally and the events of August 11-12 2017 in Charlottesville, VA.

Her repertoire of roles includes Dorine (*Tartuffe*), Kyra Hollis (*Skylight*), Mary Swanson (*Middletown*), Yamba (*Shipwrecked!*), Hermione (*A Winter's Tale*), Luciana (*A Comedy of Errors*), Hermia (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), Eliza Doolittle (*My Fair Lady*), Fruma Sarah (*Fiddler on the Roof*) among others. **www.priyankashetty.com**

BIO 2

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