

Dana Colagiovanni: Teaching Philosophy and Digital Portfolio

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Abstract

This document contains Dana Colagiovanni's Masters of Fine Arts Thesis produced for the completion of the 2016 Professional Actor Training Program at the University of Virginia. The thesis serves as a personal reflection of the acting process developed and knowledge gained over the course of the two-year program. It includes a digital portfolio of the following performances: "No Second Date" by Dana Colagiovanni, "White Crayon" from *Common Ground* by Brendon Votipka, and "Breathe" from *In the Heights* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegria Hudes, along with a Teaching Philosophy Statement and Journal of the creation process.

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CHAPTER 1 – Philosophy Statement

Teaching Philosophy

Acting is telling the truth. Telling *your* truth, through the character's perspective. It is an art many have neatly summed up, broken down into teachable parts, and written numerous books about. But it remains an art difficult to execute, because it is so immediate, as fleeting and unique as each breath you take. Whether in the audience or onstage, you grow from a theatrical experience; you are changed by interacting with the story. Transformation is of paramount importance in the classroom as well. Teachers must shepherd and support the transformation that takes place within each student as she embodies concepts and begins to interact with the world in new ways. I perform for the same reason I teach; my goal is to access a deeper awareness of myself and the world around me. In doing so, I provide a model through which my students can do the same, discovering new parts of themselves they can share with the world.

In order for my students and I to meet this goal, I create a classroom environment built on trust and collaboration. Students often view acting classes as fun, yet unpredictable courses that sit outside the boundaries of traditional academics, and, while this is exciting to many, it is often just as nerve-wracking. I focus on team-building immediately, to remove fear while encouraging risk. I refrain from the terms “classroom,” “class,” and “students” when I teach, and instead refer to us as an *ensemble*. I declare our time together as judgment-free, and verbally reward bold actions and “mistakes.” I find it crucial to rewire students' thinking, so “mistakes” become celebrations, or opportunities for growth. To encourage this trend of thinking, I assign a Lip Sync within the first two weeks of class. Even though students anxiously count down to the performance date, they quickly bond over shared nerves, musical tastes, and the triumph of actually performing. This low stakes exercise not only serves as an icebreaker, but also a diagnostic tool. I can very quickly assess a student's individual strengths and weakness, and help guide her journey for the rest of the semester.

One of my first students at UVA, Isabel, was a painfully shy ESL student who shook through her entire Lip Sync; eyes closed, barely moving, it was clear merely standing in front of the class was an accomplishment for her. Throughout the semester I paired her with confident, outgoing, yet gentle partners. For the final exam, I assigned her the role of Catherine in the final scene from David Auburn's *Proof*. This scene required her to stand her ground. I wanted her to dominate the scene and her partner. Isabel was admittedly scared, but rose to the challenge. To prepare, I guided her to through an intense eye contact and breath exercise. Afterward, Isabel declared she was “a new person.” Making eye contact while breathing in the image of her partner, something she was previously terrified of, opened her up, allowing her to “feel like Catherine.” Isabel told me she breathed and held eye contact with her partner before *every* rehearsal and performance. The hard work paid off. Isabel's final performance was powerful, a strong woman standing her ground and honestly connecting with another person. It was a tangible moment of transformation. Isabel continues to spend time in the Drama Department, working in the Box Office. Every time I hear her answering phones with a

confident voice, or see her looking patrons in the eye, I lose my breath for a moment. Isabel is applying what she learned in class, and actively sharing her true self with the world.

Isabel is one of many students who transformed over the course of my class. I require my students to keep a journal so they can track their own mind-body transformations. Through this process, they become more confident about observing the world, and forming opinions about these observations. They include notes thanking me for the time, effort, and attention I have given to their specific needs, detailing how their lives outside of my class have changed. “I did a relaxation exercise before my presentation,” “I am not afraid to raise my hand in discussions,” “I make eye contact with strangers who pass me on the sidewalk,” “I can’t watch television without identifying the character’s objective,” and hundreds of other simple, yet important changes are recognized in our communication.

These affirmations fuel my ever-growing teaching and performance process. I will never forget Isabel’s break-through with eye contact; as she stared down her scene partner, I became Catherine with her. Her vulnerability and risk-taking inspire me as I rehearse characters of my own. Seeing the world through my students’ eyes helps me to uncover the true depths of myself, my characters, and my surroundings in ways I never thought possible.

CHAPTER 2 - Journal

A Peek into Process: Synthesizing Two Years of Work into Two (or More) Minutes of Performance

At first thought, creating a digital portfolio may seem strange for someone who has spent two years delving deep into theatrical stage techniques, but in truth, it is actually a perfect representation of what I have discovered during my time in the University of Virginia's Professional Actor Training Program. This portfolio has forced me to answer all of the questions I've been asking myself the past two years. Or, I have at least attempted to answer these questions. Because when it comes down to it, surviving as an artist means knowing who you are and what you believe at any given moment, regardless of the medium you are performing in. You and your beliefs change over time, of course, but accepting the truth *in the moment* makes you not only a good actor, but also a sane artist. Making a digital portfolio is more lasting than a live audition. The material is subject to pauses, rewinds, and fast-forwards. It does not disappear. You must be certain you can live with the material, and your performance of it, for a long time. You cannot make decisions about your portfolio lightly. So I began preparations for this project as I would any other audition.

First, I asked myself, "Who am I?" "What am I good at?" "How am I perceived/cast?" "What do I enjoy performing?" "What am I trying to say about myself/the character/the play?" This self-inquiry helps center me and direct how I choose my material. This portfolio has a more general purpose and wider reach, so I allowed myself to be a little broader than usual with my answers, which looked like this:

"Who am I?" I am an old soul with a youthful energy. I am very open and emotionally vulnerable. I am a hard worker who loves to have fun. I feel a responsibility and duty to my art, my family, and my friends. I love pondering serious life questions and laughing. I enjoy teaching, cooking, yoga, and animals. I am maternal. I enjoy connecting with others.

"What am I good at?" I am good at comedy and creating characters. I am a good singer. I am good at navigating emotionally complex moments. I am a good listener. I am good at text analysis. I am good at writing. I am good at reacting in the moment, making changes on the fly, and staying flexible.

"How am I perceived/cast?" I am often used in comedies or musical comedies. I am cast as the leading lady, or comedic supporting roles. I have recently been considered for, or cast, as ingénues. I am often considered for emotionally complex roles. I have been referred to as a strong mover, physically aware, and a physical actress. I have been called a chameleon, slipping into many different characters. I often play mature or confident women. I am trusted to navigate the timing of a scene, comedic or dramatic. I am known as a good, supportive partner.

"What do I enjoy performing?" I love singing ballads. I prefer contemporary dramatic monologues. I enjoy witty comedy. I love bold characters. I enjoy finding the specific way a character moves or speaks. I most enjoy

material I feel a personal connection to; something I can relate to, either in my current life or from past events.

“What am I trying to say about myself?” I want people to know I am strong, funny, loving, complex, honest, and yet, vulnerable. I am resilient. I am original. I can laugh at myself. I am a comedian. I am a dramatic actress. I am a singer.

Based on this self-reflection, I began to gather monologues and songs that I not only enjoy performing, but would also contribute to both my public and personal perception as a performer. The quickest decision I made was in regards to my song choice. “Breathe” from Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical *In the Heights* is a song I’ve long admired, and first began working on in Professor Bob Chapel’s Musical Theatre course in the spring semester of 2015. It is a ballad that sits comfortably within my vocal range, allows for emotional vulnerability, an essence of youth, and also an ethnic flavor. There is only a slim chance I would be cast as a Hispanic woman, but Spanish lyrics and specific background made the character more real and allowed me to slip into a specific persona. I also personally relate to Nina’s struggles: perfectionism, fear of failure, and the sense of responsibility she feels towards her family and community. This song clearly incorporated many of the answers to my reflective questions into a performance, so I knew I would include it as part of my portfolio.

I settled on my dramatic monologue rather quickly, as well. I wanted a piece to showcase my emotional vulnerability, hint at my maternal side, and offer a quiet honesty that was not often seen in the roles I played during my time at UVa. This lead me to revisit a monologue I first discovered during my undergraduate years, a selection titled “White Crayon” from Brendon Votipka’s *Common Ground*. When I presented the monologue as an option for this portfolio to my classmates, Professor Kate Burke, and casting director Michael Duni, there was a resounding “Yes!” from the group. I was excited to explore this piece again from a more mature perspective.

Choosing a comedic monologue was much harder. Even though I am often cast in comedic roles, I do not have many comedic or light monologues in my repertoire. I find most comedic monologues are poorly written, joke-based snippets of stand-up with no real character behind them. The ones that are well written are overdone. So, I followed my classmates’ lead and decided to write my own. This forced me to find confidence in my writing skills, and create something original, tailored specifically to my strengths. I wrote several monologues, but I chose to record for “No Second Date” for my portfolio based on the feedback I received from my cohort and professors. This piece is really a heightened version of myself, which is the goal for film work. I decided this monologue would help me experiment with being natural in front of the camera, while also finding the boundaries of “big” comedy onscreen.

Once my pieces were chosen, I entered the research phase of my process. When working on a show, I immediately begin to research the world of the play: customs, clothing, food, arts, religion, etc. I look at reviews and photos from previous productions (if possible) for inspiration. I create a background for the character; I daydream about her inner life. For the pieces in this portfolio, research translated to finding locations. I needed to be clear about the place my character lived, *where* she was and *why*, during the delivery of my monologues. In a theatrical production, these settings would be dictated

by some combination of the playwright, designer, and director; I was excited to have creative control over the world of my character. As a starting point, I did a Google image search of cafés (for “No Second Date”) and living rooms (for “White Crayon”). I wanted to find a feeling for each character and situation through color, furniture, space, and lighting. The images helped me to imagine my surroundings and delve further into the inner life of the character. For example, “No Second Date” did not feel as personal as I wanted it when set in a large Starbucks-type coffee shop. I felt my character would share more with her date if they were in a small, local, quiet location. Initially, I imagined “White Crayon” in a living room, a confession or revelation given to a close friend. However, after working the piece with Michael Duni, he suggested I consider it set in a playroom, a mother alone cleaning up toys. Once I found images to correlate with his idea, a new layer of my character was revealed. Suddenly the monologue was much more contemplative, a discovery for myself, and even a bit more mature.

For “Breathe,” I took less of a character approach with the setting. I decided to keep the feel more loose and rehearsal-like: stand behind the piano, commune with the accompanist, and mostly ignore the camera. This follows a current trend seen in promotional videos for Broadway and New York cabaret shows. My goal with this performance was to portray myself as a seasoned singer-actor who could easily be cast in a high-caliber musical.

With my research and inspiration images gathered, I was able to enter the rehearsal phase of the process. Rehearsal is my favorite step of performing. In theatre, this is where the true collaboration among actors, director, and designers begins to gel. I love discussing my character with others, playing the same scene in various ways, and experimenting with how props, furniture, and costumes affect my character. Though I read-through my pieces for my classmates, and received feedback from self-tapings, I discovered that much of the rehearsal process for film is solitary. Aside from the character preparation I do for the theatre, I also began to consider what the best angles were for camera positioning, how certain facial expressions were augmented or diminished by the camera, and how to adjust my vocal training for maximum storytelling without over articulating. I quickly became aware that film offers the audience only one perspective, a specific view of the position, the character, and the story. The technical aspect of film is so important because the audience only sees one angle of one shot at a time. The three-dimensionality of theatre is lost, and therefore the preparation must be very singular and specific.

Collaboration occurred when filming day arrived. I was able to shoot “White Crayon” in a house belonging to my classmate, Les Rorick, but instead of the living room, Michael and I decided it would be best to film at the dining room table. Just like in theatre, we had a plan, but were flexible enough to change and respond to the environment, making confident decisions about how to create the best final product. For costuming, I chose to wear a blue button down to create a more mature, conservative look while also ‘popping’ on camera. Michael helped me to dress the set with children’s toys and coloring books and find the best angles for clean storytelling. Michael assumed the role of director, and along with my classmates, gave me feedback after each take to help shape my performance. Through small, mostly technical notes, such as “keep your sight line here,” or “discover the crayon on this line,” I was able to find nuances of

character just as I would in a working rehearsal. But, because the monologue was so short, the entire process was condensed, and after about seven takes, we moved on to the next shot.

The next performance I recorded was “Breathe.” For this, I chose to wear an orange romper, another bright hue that would pop on film, but also give a small nod to the colorful Hispanic background of my character, Nina. After checking sound levels and rehearsing the song once through with our accompanist, Greg Harris, I was able to record the song in one take. Knowing a song would be harder to edit, I wanted to do as few takes as possible, and so I entered this filming session with more of a ‘theatre mindset.’ I decided to perform the song without stops, just as I would onstage. Accept any mistakes or flubs, and move on. Thankfully, I was able to do just that. Greg, Michael, Richard Warner, and I all agreed my first take would be more than sufficient for this song.

The last performance I recorded was “No Second Date.” For this piece I chose to wear a dark teal sweater with a rabbit print. This blue-green also looks good on camera, while the print on my sweater was a reinforcement of my character’s love of animals. This environment ended up being even simpler than Michael or I originally envisioned. For this, we created the illusion of a café in the lobby of the Drama Education Building by using a table and chair from the greenroom and a plant from a rehearsal room. This simplicity really helped me get into character. The lobby was empty and rather quiet, which added to the small, local, and personal feel I originally envisioned. Michael set up two cameras, one as my “imaginary other” or scene partner, and the other camera was more akin to the ‘audience’ point of view. Transitioning from one camera to the other during the comical high point of the monologue helped me to define the boundary I was looking to explore with this piece. Michael directed me to take my actions and voice in a slightly bigger direction as I shifted away from the “other” and towards the ‘audience’ camera. After a take or two, I realized this was the film version of breaking the fourth wall. Pulling out of reality in film allowed me to be slightly bigger and sillier, while still keeping within the piece. Once I was able to shift this theatre technique to a more cinematic focus, I only needed a few more takes to complete the shoot. As the day came to a close, I couldn’t help but feel exhilarated by all of the subtle discoveries and the connection I felt from Michael, Richard, Greg, and my peers. The work I had put into understanding these pieces on my own really expanded under the collaborative influence I experienced the day of the shoot. For me, filming felt like an extremely productive day that included both a rehearsal and opening night all at once.

After opening night in the theatre, I reflect on how the audience received the show, how I connected to my scene partners, and what new discoveries were made. As a result, my next performance is slightly different: more informed, perhaps more nuanced. By closing night, my character and show have grown or expanded. This is not the case with film. Immediacy is lost. Viewing my edited monologues and songs can only inform performances much further in the future. Film may not be immediate, but it does give us one thing theatre can never do: it allows the actor to view a performance through the same lens as the audience. I finally was able to see myself as someone else might see me. And ultimately, I believe I achieved what I set out to do with these three pieces.

CHAPTER 3 – Copies of Portfolio Materials

Monologue Text and Song Lyrics

“No Second Date” by Dana Colagiovanni

I’m great at first dates. It’s the second date that eludes me. I guess I’m maybe *too much* of myself on a first date. A lot of guys are weirded out that I’m a yoga teacher. And it’s hard to hide the fact that I’m a vegan, because all first dates involve food. And it’s really hard to hide my cute aggression, because men know that women love puppies, and kittens, and piglets in rain boots, so they inevitable show you a video of a sloth cuddling a teddy bear! And I get so excited I start clenching my fists, and talking in this weird voice, declaring I want to smooch that sloth with all my love! But that’s enough to keep you from a second date, right?

“White Crayon” from *Uncommon Ground* by Brendon Votipka

I’ve been trying very hard to put into words the way I’m feeling right now. But I’m drawing a blank. I feel blank. I feel like... a white crayon. It just sits in the box. I mean, does it matter if you have a white crayon? The other colors get so much more action. You use red for an apple, or a heart, or lips. Purple can be grapes, or flowers, or a sunset. Yellow, blue, black, brown, pink, any color---you use every crayon in the box. Except white. No one ever picks up the white crayon. It just sits in its box, completely sharpened and ready to go, but it’s destined to remain in the stupid box.

“Breathe” from *In the Heights* by Lin-Manuel Miranda and Quiara Alegria Hudes

Breathe
This is my street
I smile at the faces
I’ve known all my life
They regard me with pride
And everyone’s sweet
They say, “You’re going places!”
So how can I say, that while I was away
I have so much to hide?
Hey guys, it’s me
The biggest disappointment you know
The kid couldn’t hack it
She’s back and she’s walking real slow
Welcome home
Just breathe
Just breathe
As the radio plays
Old forgotten Boleros
I think of the days

When this city was mine
I remember the praise
“Ay te adoro, Te quiero”
The neighborhood waved, and said
“Nina, be brave, and you’re gonna be fine!”
And maybe it’s me, but
That all seems like lifetimes ago
So what do I say to these faces
That I used to know?
“Hey, I’m home”
Hey
They’re not worried about me
They are all counting on me to succeed
I am the one who made it out
The one who always made the grade
Well maybe I should have just stayed home
When I was a child I stayed wide awake
Climbed to the highest place
On every fire escape, restless to climb

I got every scholarship
Saved every dollar
The first to go to college
How do I tell them why
I'm coming back home?
With my eyes on the horizon
Just me and the GWB
Asking, "Gee, Nina, What'll you be?"
Straighten the spine
Smile for the neighbors

Everything's fine
Everything's cool
Standard reply:
"Lots of tests, lots of papers"
Smile, wave goodbye then pray to the sky
Oh God
What will my parents say?
Can I go in there and say:
"I know I'm letting you down"?
Just breathe

Interview Text

Hi, I'm Dana Colagiovanni. Thinking back about my time at UVa, I think one of the best things for me has been the performance opportunities. Not only have I had a chance to play a bunch of different roles, different character types, in a bunch of different styles, but I've done them in different venues. It amazes me that we have a thrust, a black box, and proscenium theater all in one building. Learning how to navigate a performance in each different type of space has been, not only really fun, but very valuable to me as an actor. I really enjoy teaching. I do enjoy connecting, and sharing theatre. My cohort, they have become like family to me. Since I was five years old, I would declare, "I going to be an actor when I grow up." Never entertained the idea of anything else. For me, acting is about human connection. Every show you do, you gain a family. Your actors, your fellow actors, your director, your crew, your designers. Everybody is a part of this beautiful, but difficult, process of creation. It's the great connector. It's the great global connector. And then you get to share it with an audience. And that to me is gold. Thank you so much for watching, and I'm glad I got to share and connect with you.

Interview Images

The following pictures were submitted for use as B-roll images for an interview with Michael Duni. They are from productions produced by Heritage Theatre Festival and The University of Virginia. All photographs were taken by Michael Bailey.









CHAPTER 4 – Supplemental Materials

Actor Biography

Dana Colagiovanni is a native Floridian who received a BFA in Musical Theatre from the University of Mississippi and an MFA in Acting from the University of Virginia. She has toured and worked in regional theatres across the country. Favorite roles include: Nellie/Mrs. Bassett (*Summer and Smoke*), Dana (*The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*), Lady of the Lake (*Spamalot*), Hope/Glory/Gayle (*Almost, Maine*), Christine Patterson (*One Man, Two Guvnors*), Gabriella (*Boeing Boeing*), Katerina (*The Taming of the Shrew*), and Mrs. Cratchit (*A Christmas Carol*). A Mellon Graduate Teaching Seminar participant, Dana is a passionate teacher who enjoys working with students of all ages and levels. She is also a certified yoga teacher, novice cook, and avid animal lover.

Headshot

A thumbnail image is shown below. A larger headshot will be hosted on the UVa Drama Department website.



DANA COLAGIOVANNI

AEA

dmcolagiovanni@gmail.com

Height: 5'6"

954-612-2954

Dress: 2/4

NATIONAL TOUR

Mrs. Cratchit

A Christmas Carol '08-'13

Nebraska Theatre Caravan

REGIONAL (SELECTED)

Nellie Ewell/Mrs. Bassett

Summer and Smoke

Virginia Repertory Theatre

Hope/Glory/Ginette/Gayle

Almost, Maine

Heritage Theatre Festival

Lady of the Lake

Spamalot

Heritage Theatre Festival

Christine Patterson (plant)

One Man, Two Guvnors

Heritage Theatre Festival

Gabriella (Italian)

Boeing Boeing

Pagosa Springs Center for Arts

Vicki

The Full Monty

Pagosa Springs Center for Arts

Ensemble/Lady of Lake (u/s)

Spamalot

Pagosa Springs Center for Arts

Laura

Drift: A New Rock Musical

Ensemble Theatre Chattanooga

Katherina

The Taming of the Shrew

Wayside Theatre

M'Lynn Eatenton

Steel Magnolias

Wayside Theatre

Tansy McGinnis

The Nerd

Wayside Theatre

Cordelia Hopewell

Reunion: A Musical Epic

Wayside Theatre

Young Esme/Alice

Rock 'N' Roll

Mosaic Theatre

Neely/Maria/Whiting

A Woman Called Truth

Ensemble Theatre Chattanooga

Nerissa

The Merchant of Venice

Oxford Shakespeare Festival

Julie (a Sister)

HMS Pinafore

Oxford Shakespeare Festival

Harper Pitt

Angels in America

Ensemble Theatre Chattanooga

CB's Sister

Dog Sees God

Ensemble Theatre Chattanooga

Sheep/Chicken

Babe: The Sheep Pig

Oxford Shakespeare Festival

Caroline Neville

Titanic

Mosaic Theatre

EDUCATIONAL (SELECTED)

Dana Fielding

The Sweetest Swing in Baseball

University of Virginia

Helena/Peter Quince

A Midsummer Night's Dream

University of Virginia

Popova/Merchutkina/Nastya

Vodka Variations

University of Virginia

Violet/Ensemble

Wonderful Town

University of Virginia

Lysistrata

Lysistrata

University of Mississippi

Amy

Company

University of Mississippi

Dotty/Mrs. Clackett

Noises Off!

University of Mississippi

Eunice/Stella (u/s)

A Streetcar Named Desire

University of Mississippi

TRAINING

University of Virginia MFA Acting

University of Mississippi BFA Acting & Musical Theatre; Summa Cum Laude

Wayside Theatre Acting Intern '11-'12 Artistic Director-Warner Crocker

Broadway Theatre Project 2004 (Ann Reinking, Debra McWaters, & Dave Clemmons)

SPECIAL SKILLS

Soprano with belt; Read music; Good with Dialects, including: RP, Cockney, Southern (Rural & Gulf), Russian, Italian, Irish, German; Strong mover; Sewing (hand/machine); Teaching experience (PK-College); Registered Yoga Instructor; Licensed driver; Chicken noises; Looks good with any hair color