

Finding the Intersection: An Actor's Philosophy and Digital Portfolio

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to provide a culminating record of actor experience and training through written text and digital media. Included is a journal of the actor process, a teaching philosophy, and filmed performances of the original piece *It Just Might Be* by Lauren Elens and a monologue taken and adapted from *Ferret Envy* by Tara Meddaugh. The digital portion of this thesis, which includes a filmed personal interview of Lauren Elens, was directed, filmed and edited by Michael Duni. The portfolio and its supplemental materials showcase direct application of graduate actor study to professional performance.

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THESIS JOURNAL

This semester I was officially diagnosed with a chronic illness called Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) that has been part of my life for over a decade, but only recently has become debilitating. As an actor, I have been afraid to tell colleagues and friends about my symptoms because I worried that people would see me as uncastable or, to be blunt, a “liability issue.” I never brought it up unless I thought it would affect my work or performance. Luckily, it never did. I think maybe the adrenaline is so high that I can somehow push my way through to the end. I am not sure how the mind over matter works, but luckily it has. For the past year, however, within about thirty minutes after a curtain call, my body often shuts down, causing me to become loopy, overly-sensitive to feel and sound, and sometimes completely immobile. To be safe I have always had one person in a cast know my symptoms so that they can keep an extra set of eyes on me. One person and not one more. The last thing I want is for people to worry about me, feel sorry for me, or doubt my abilities. I see value in this way of thinking. It has made a career in theatre possible for me. But I have come to realize that hiding my illness is a mask. I wear a mask every day of my life.

My first step in becoming reconciled with POTS came ironically in a mask workshop in January of 2015. I created a character that was me when symptomatic, a version of myself that none of my colleagues had even seen before. I wore this mask. Billy-Ann was off-balance, she stuttered, and when she did form sentences they sounded like those of a small child. Like me she was over-stimulated by textures and sounds, yet, unlike me, she was stimulated in a positive way. I allowed the character to grow from something I saw as negative into something beautiful and joyous. I started with a version of myself that, frankly, I hated- that person whose blood does not reach her brain properly, that silly person who loses the typical ambulatory and speech functions of an adult, a person I would be extremely embarrassed for others to see. I ended with Billy-Ann, a character who actually revels in the not knowing, who exists because of the freedom from thought and maturity, not in spite of it. I learned from Billy-Ann that the person I become with this illness could be beautiful, freeing, and loveable. As an actor, through both Billy-Ann and my other mask character Jacob, I found what it feels like to truly exist, listen, and respond within the world of a three-dimensional character. Because I tapped into the vulnerability within myself and let my imagination and surroundings inspire my choices, I found the roots of character and emotional depth that I have been missing in my acting. This was my first step in becoming content with who I am as a person and as an artist. I discovered that my best art comes from that intersection of recognition, courage, and inspiration. This has become my motto by which to create, by which to teach, and by which to live.

My thesis process thus stemmed from this idea: that if I can find monologues that embrace who I am as an artist, celebrate that in some way, and at the same time inspire me to test my limitations or, better yet, break those limitations apart, then I will be able to showcase what I have worked towards these past two years in the best way possible. Finding 15-30 second monologue snippets to accomplish this proved quite difficult.

After a search process that included a day in the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library and countless hours reading plays throughout the month of January, one night I felt compelled to write my own story, to write what I wished these characters were saying. I started writing without any angle. I wrote what I was feeling at that moment, what I did not understand, and what I would want to say if I ever had the guts to do so. In no way do I consider myself a writer, but if my aim for my thesis is to be content with my true self and to allow that self to be vulnerable and open, maybe speaking my own words, my own truth, was the start. Performing this original piece, *It Just Might Be*, allowed me as the character to reveal my sickness and fears, but also push past them and make a real actor discovery of what I have and want. As for my second piece, *Ferret Envy*, I was first attracted to the simplicity and silliness of the text as that freedom pushed me to explore with character - is she slow? Is she manipulative? Did she actually mean to murder the ferret? I experimented with many versions and with many scenarios. I had fun. As the first piece encouraged me to confront who I am, *Ferret Envy* inspired me to play, to get out of my head and jump into puddles.

Do I believe that all of this training and work effectively translated through the camera lens? It is hard to say. I see the footage and each time a million critiques go through my mind. I cannot help but be frustrated to see habits on screen that I have worked so diligently to correct. But I see honesty. And I see courage. And most importantly, I see me. All I could do is tell my truth as best I could. At this culminating stage in my training here at the University of Virginia, what I do believe is that this thesis process and my continual practice of finding the intersection have made me a stronger, more self-aware actor. These two years have given me a multitude of tools to put into my actor tool belt. Now the next step, an inevitable and exhilarating next step, is finding out what exactly with these tools I am meant to build.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Theatre is best created at the intersection of recognition and inspiration. It is at that intersection that I constantly aim to exist as a teacher and what I wish for my students. With this intention I guide each student to embrace who they already are, to stretch their expectations of who they can be, and I hope that after our time together they are able to see the world more openly and more inquisitively through the eyes of an actor.

I gear my students towards thinking freely and abstractly. For art there is no right or wrong answer; it is not as simple as black and white. With students having grown in a society that pushes multiple-choice tests as a measure of achievement, I have observed that using open-ended questions such as “What did you think about it? How did it make you feel?” reveal new pathways of thinking for them and bring to light the societal importance of having and cultivating a personal point of view. It is important to me that my students recognize that who they are and what they think are not only valid and beautiful, but that their specific uniqueness is essential to their acting craft. In order to create, we must find power in what we have to offer. In the classroom, we collaborate as a group to establish and maintain a supportive, open environment where each person feels comfortable asking difficult questions and taking risks, both of which are critical steps towards self-discovery.

While I do believe that there are foundational skills that every actor must understand and develop in the areas of voice, movement, and textual analysis, an actor’s tool belt is inevitably their own and must be personalized to their individual needs and processes. I offer them my experiences, but together we work to find which pathways and methodologies might best assist them on their own journey towards finding truth. My acting process is rooted in Stanislavski, but other practitioners and techniques I introduce in my courses include, but are not limited to, LeCoq, Anne Bogart, Uta Hagen, and Lessac voice work.

When first familiarizing my students to acting, my class exercises are geared towards expanding their self-expression and their ability to play, imagine, communicate, and collaborate within an ensemble. By engaging them early in methods such as Lecoq’s *7 Levels of Tension*, they develop a clearer comprehension of their physical and emotional energies at a given moment. This kind of self-recognition enables students to identify their habitual tendencies and also informs them of the great expanse they harbor for sound, energy, and emotional life.

The human voice is my gateway into acting and self-discovery. The voice provides us with differing notes of expression: to sing, to cry, to shout, to love; however, it is a singular, well-coordinated instrument that should be able to respond healthily to dramatic experience and situation. I believe that the singing voice and the grounded spoken word are often separated to such an extent that actors are occasionally lost as to how to combine the two in performance. Identifying and exploring the musicality of Shakespeare and the dramatic immediacy of Sondheim are two examples of how I

approach a unified voice through textual analysis and vocal expression. I plan to continue researching and cultivating optimal teaching methods that unify these two vocal disciplines of speech and song, so my students do not feel the confusion I felt for so long and they are better prepared for a career in the theatre no matter the genre.

Learning and teaching are integral parts of my artistic and intellectual life. I am able to grow because I am constantly challenged by the journeys of my students and the ever-evolving creativity of my colleagues. This coalescence of inspiration is what has driven me to pursue what I consider the greatest life imaginable: theatre practitioner and educator, actor and communicator. It is through my students that I find my intersection; it is through my students that I find my art.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

Monologue Selections/Transcripts

***It Just Might Be* by Lauren Elens**

No, I don't believe there's one person out there for us, seriously a "soul mate?" I mean, come on, I've been in love before, so have you, and I honestly believe that I could have been happy with either of them, just a different kind of happy. But ... well...what would you do if I told you that you might be that for me? My one? I'm sick and scared and so fucking lost because apparently I can't do anything right anymore but love you....apparently. And it's not just a different kind of love, is it? No. It's a love that consumes and enflames, that shows me that I don't have to apologize anymore for being who I am and for wanting what I want. Call it a soul mate, call it "the one," call it whatever you want, but it just might be you. It is you.

***Ferret Envy* by Tara Meddaugh**

I didn't murder your ferret, Julia, he ran away. He did. I know you don't want to believe me, but I know this, because...well, I saw him. And I was wearing my glasses, so I had 20/20. Or 20/30. I need a new prescription. And, I don't think we should go after him. That Payless box just wasn't big enough.

NB: Permission for use of *Ferret Envy* given via email. Transcript is below:

Hi, Lauren. Thanks for your interest in my monologue. You're welcome to use it for your video. You don't need to fill out a royalty form for this, but just be sure to include proper writing credit. Let me know if you have any questions and enjoy the rest of your MFA program! Best, Tara Meddaugh

Transcript of Interview

My name is Lauren Elens. I was such a history geek, and I still am. So I kept going back and forth between history, do I really want to do history, but I really love to do theatre. And then after undergrad I realized "What better way to do history and relive history than to do theatre." To actually be able to put yourself in these shoes and make those choices-what better way to combine everything I love than to act. UVA offered a very vast amount of different approaches to theatre. I did a lot of musical theatre growing up and in undergrad. I didn't want to stop singing, but I didn't want that to be my only outlet. And the fact that at UVA you could study, I mean we're doing mask work, we're doing musical theatre, we're doing Shakespeare, and we're in one of the leading research institutions. Acting really forces, it forces everyone, but it forces me in particular to start taking off those layers and see what else is there. I feel most at home when I sing. It's when words aren't enough to express how you're feeling. They only go so far. I can say this, I can speak the words, but yet I still haven't made that connection that I wanna make. And then through music, that underscore, it gives you the energy and the courage to say things you wouldn't say or to make a stance when you really want to make it. Thank you for watching.

Selected Images for B-Roll *images were ultimately not included into interview footage*











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Resume

LAUREN ELENS

EMC

Lauren.elens@gmail.com 850.206.4393
 Hair: Reddish-Brown Eyes: Green Height: 5'6"

THEATRE *selected*

Virginia Repertory Theatre

SATURDAY, SUNDAY, MONDAY	Maria	Carl Forsman, dir.
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Heritage Theatre Festival

I LOVE A PIANO	Eileen	Renee Dodson, dir.
PIRATES OF PENZANCE <i>upcoming</i>	Kate	Colleen Kelly, dir.

True Repertory Theatre

HAMLET	Ophelia	Donald Sheehan, dir.
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The NOLA Project

ASSASSINS	Squeaky Fromme	A.J. Allegra, dir.
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New Orleans Summer Lyric Theatre

COMPANY	Kathy	B. Michael Howard, dir.
BYE BYE BIRDIE	Deborah Sue	Ed Kresley, dir.
SHOWBOAT	Mother Superior	B. Michael Howard, dir.

The Patchwork Players

SNOW WHITE	Snow White	Buzz Podewell, dir.
PECOS BILL	Narrator	Buzz Podewell, dir.

University of Virginia

WONDERFUL TOWN	Ruth	Robert Chapel, dir.
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM	Hermia/Snout/Moth	Colleen Kelly, dir.
THE SWEETEST SWING IN BASEBALL	Dr. Gilbert/Rhonda	Betsy Rudelich Tucker, dir.
THE PROPOSAL	Natalya	Marianne Kubik, dir.

TRAINING

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA- Professional Acting Training Program, M.F.A Candidate 2016

TULANE UNIVERSITY- B.F.A in Musical Theatre, B.A. in Classics

BADA Midsummer at Oxford University Classical Acting Intensive (in assoc. with Yale School of Drama and UCLA)

NYU/Tisch School of the Arts, CAP 21 Summer Professional Training Program

Acting: Colleen Kelly, Ian Wooldridge, Paola Dionisotti (RSC), Richard Warner, Antony Sandoval
 Voice: Kate Burke, Amy Pfrimmer, Michael Hayden, Shad Willingham
 Physical/Dance: Mick Barnfather, Marianne Kubik, Beverly Trask, Alice Paschel-Escher
 Masterclasses: John Barton (RSC), Fiona Shaw, Andrew Wade (RSC), Greg Hicks (RSC), Ed Stern, Brendan Fox

SPECIAL SKILLS

Musicology (Classically Trained Soprano with belt; Intermediate Piano and Alto Saxophone)

Stage Combat (Rapier and Dagger, Unarmed)

Period Movement, Gesture and Dance (Galliard, Pavant, Minuet, Waltz, Polka)

Dialects: (RP, Cockney, Russian, Southern, Scottish, Irish)

Looks good in any hair color/ Expertise in ancient warfare

Headshot



Lauren Elens

Photo Credit: Les Rorick