Serious Play:
The Discipline and Art of The Game in Theater, Higher Education and Beyond

Sandi L. Carroll
Charlottesville, VA

BFA, Boston University, 1995

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Drama Department

University of Virginia
May 2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Journey of a Voice

I suffered from debilitating, painful vocal tension throughout my acting career. My first memory of it is from my undergraduate conservatory training during an intense rehearsal of *Richard III* in which a guest director was yelling at me about my voice as I spoke my lines. I became so flustered that I began coughing and couldn't speak at all. I literally choked. After my undergraduate studies, I continued searching for ways to release the tension. I worked with various vocal coaches, but the more attention I paid to it, the worse it became. It wasn't until I took a Viewpoints/Suzuki workshop with SITI Company, a theater company founded by Anne Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki, that I found the first key to unlocking my voice: moving and speaking from my core. There was no attention paid directly to the voice, but the voice was integrated into the work as one of its essential elements. Focusing on the physical forms we were learning, practicing kinesthetic response, and the level of intensity required by the course, demanded so much of me that there was no time to worry about vocal tension, and for one of the first times in my life I experienced what it felt like to have a free and resonant voice. However, I wasn't always able to rely on this method to achieve that freedom. I had suspected my problem had its roots in my mind, and this experience supported that theory. However knowing that it was in my mind often made it worse.

In the world of baseball, there is what is known as the "Steve Blass Disease." As Ira Glass reported on his radio show, *This American Life*, Steve Blass was a legendary major league pitcher who pitched over 100 games, winning 60, until one day his mind betrayed him, and he

began throwing wild pitches, unable to achieve a single strike. Sports psychologists, Stephen M. Weiss, and Arthur S. Reber reported in the *Journal of Sports Psychology in Action* that when professional athletes were told to think about their technique, to focus more on the mechanics, they often became unable to perform; they "choked." The more attention they paid to whatever technique wasn't working, the worse their performance became. Focusing on something other than their technique helped to restore their performance (5).

I hadn't yet heard of Steve Blass Disease when I first began studying the work of Arthur Lessac as part of my MFA studies at the University of Virginia. All I knew is that as soon as I walked into the voice classroom, the cramp of tension seized my throat like a clamp. I used every trick I could think of, such as telling myself I wasn't in a voice class or practicing meditation while in class. But I knew I needed technique; I knew I needed to develop and deepen the skills for vocal production. My mental tricks could only take me so far: I *had* to think about my voice.

Ultimately, I discovered that I needed to do two apparently contradictory things: first, I had to pay close attention to acquiring the skills I lacked for strong vocal production, and then I had to completely forget about them and focus on playing the game in order to perform well. In the case of Steve Blass, he already had the skills to be an outstanding baseball player; he had trained and practiced his craft until he reached a level of consistent top-level performance. It was then that something went wrong. In my case, I didn't have the skills yet, *and* something had gone wrong, getting in my way of acquiring those skills. Psychologists found that athletes suffering from Steve Blass Disease have for some reason activated their autonomic fight-or-flight response and are biologically unable to access their motor memory. Their bodies freeze with the hope that the "threat" will go away (Wilson, Smith, Holmes 412). Ironically, this reaction in a performance situation does the exact opposite of its intended goal: not only does freezing *not* make the

"threat" go away, the "threat" *is* freezing up, so the body does exactly what the performer is afraid of, and the situation feeds on itself.

Sports psychologists have worked with athletes to overcome this paralysis by teaching them to think positive thoughts instead of negative ones. In the case of Steve Blass, many years after retiring from professional baseball, this approach ultimately allowed him to find the joy in playing the game again (Glass). For me, the approach that eventually led to success was flipping back and forth between finding the joy in playing the game and focusing on skills acquisition until I had the knowledge, strength and flexibility to produce strong vocal work as well as the joyful freedom to access those skills.

Skills acquisition occurred in several phases. First, I had to discipline myself to check my artistic impulses at the door and focus only on form. I had to wipe clean what I thought I knew; I had to forget about kinesthetic response, imagery, action and intention and think only about the mechanics of sound. Embracing pure focus on fulfilling form is like learning the choreography of a dance: first you learn the steps, and only then can you *dance* it. To take the dance metaphor one step further (pun intended), before you learn the steps, you must stretch, strengthen, and train. Likewise, before you can speak the truth of a story, you must learn the form of sound, the form of intonation and pitch, the form of delivery. This focus on technique can leave me feeling as if words have tumbled from my mouth without me being responsible for their meaning, or how they fit together to form thought or presentation of story or character. The words become like the architectural support, the bricks and boards and nails of sound upon which some larger structure is resting. I am the carpenter piecing these building materials together without a complete understanding of how the architect (or the writer, in this case) is using them to create space and meaning. But it is this embrace of pure form that builds strength and stamina.

Once I was able to let go of applying any artistic intention, then I had to do extensive rehearsal focusing *only* on technique to create the muscle memory upon which I could rely onstage. Through "Experience 14," a series of exercises done in sequence, I began to feel how the repetition of language using various pitches, inflections and volume makes the language and the technique feel as if it is originating from my artistic impulse. Experience 14 – an adaptation of Arthur Lessac's Exercise 14 – is a sequence of exercises that begins with holding a cork between the teeth, chanting text up the pitch scale, and then down again. The actor then turns the cork on its side and begins intoning the text using only specific vowel sounds (no consonants), varying the pitch and the length of those vowels. Then the actor slowly adds in additional vowel sounds, then sustainable and tappable consonants, regulating pitch and length of sounds until she is speaking the text so that all the words are clearly understood. This exploration manifested in a surprising way in a final voice recording. I had rehearsed two pieces of text starting with the "technique only" approach and then moved to speaking it to my imaginary "other" using imagery. But when it came time to perform, I was surprised by the intentions that came out through the language. Experience 14 – especially the chanting - revealed new rhythms, and thus meaning in one of Shakespeare's sonnets. In Sonnet 27, I found new subtext in the line, "Presents thy shadow to my sightless view." The iambic pentameter allows stress to fall on the first syllable of "shadow," revealing that perhaps the speaker is sad that *only* the shadow is seen and not the full form of her love. "Shadow" is now set in opposition to the actual person.

Experience 14 works on the voice in the same way that yoga works on the body. The more I do the same yoga poses again and again, the further the body can reach each time, which increases the body's understanding of the pose's purpose and potential. The body learns how to release into the exercise, and the mind gains a new focus and appreciation for deeper and deeper

muscles that were previously imperceptible. Images associated with each pose begin to develop and deepen until I find I can move through a series of poses as easily as breathing. I find myself using this new flexibility and balance easily in other settings as it becomes integral to the way I move. Likewise, the resonance, articulation and pitch variety discovered in Experience 14 seeps into my daily conversation and scene work. Using the cork between the teeth creates new muscle memory for how to allow greater room in the mouth for resonance. Moving up and down the scale of pitch throughout Experience 14 breaks old patterns of pitch and enlivens the whole range of possibility for pitch in speaking. Exploring the length of vowel sounds and consonants reveals all the possibilities for linking and sustaining sounds.

Another phase in my skills acquisition was the shift from feeling and making sound to analyzing and notating sound on the page. Several weeks after we shifted our attention to learning how to notate vowels, I realized I hadn't experienced any tension attacks for quite some time. The shift in emphasis from vocal production to sound analysis through vowel notation shifted my mind from thinking about technique to thinking about sound as something independent from me, as a range of "primary sounds" (like primary colors) that exists, waiting for me to intone or give voice to it. This realization is very akin to the creative writing process that I've experienced on rare occasions, when the story is revealing itself to me, when I have ceased creating it and have begun simply uncovering it. It is also akin to the blissful pure (also rare) state of clown, when I've ceased thinking and am simply being and doing, almost as if I'm receiving the funny instead of creating it. I liken this state to what sculptors often talk about when working with stone or marble: the statue reveals itself in the stone. The shapes already exist there; the sculptor is simply uncovering them. Likewise, I've begun to think of shapes that exist within the "marble" of sound, and I am uncovering them, serving them, giving them

expression. This image takes the pressure off of me to create the sound, and allows me merely to be the channel. This concept may seem semantic, but in the world of Steve Blass Disease, semantics can be incredibly helpful. Looking at the exact same process through a new optic releases the debilitating tension.

Having found a new resonance and release through the Lessac discipline and notation system, my next step was to use this discipline to create the muscle memory, then forget about it and play. Of course the actor can't play *without* discipline. Play without skill or discipline is children playing pretend. But discipline without play is a pianist playing scales. Neither is worthy of being on a stage. And learning to move from discipline to play is a technique one must master in and of itself. Letting go of all the judges in your own head that say "that sound, that shape, that pitch, that emphasis, that rhythm isn't quite right" is an exercise in silencing the howler monkeys of the mind. Those judges can be (sometimes) useful in the rehearsal room, but never on the stage. This is the moment in which finding the game becomes essential. Finding the game can take many forms, and it is when I let my artist back into the room with all her kinesthetic response and image work. Now is the time relationship becomes essential: listening and responding, and allowing the other actors to change me.

I am still expanding my ability to command the vocal tools I've acquired in my MFA training to support me in performance, but I can feel my old limitations and habits being broken down by the rigorous attention to practicing technique. As I've been working on the text for Jon Robin Baitz' *Other Desert Cities* at Virginia Repertory Theater applying all these tools while simultaneously dealing with the sudden decline and loss of my father, I've made another discovery: something about the physical reality of loss creates resonance. Driving myself to the airport after seeing my father for the last time, I intoned my lines for *Other Desert Cities* as a

way of holding it together until I could find the safe space to fall apart. I moved up and down the pitch scale, exploring linking sounds and sustaining vowels. Whenever I came to an “m” or “n” sound, my face was vibrating just above my sinuses in a way that I had never experienced before. “Oh” and “Oo” sounds felt fuller, and as if they had more depth and complexity. Through all these experiences – Experience 14, application of technique in performance, and even loss – I have begun shedding concepts that I have about what my voice *is*, and begun thinking about what it can be. I no longer think of my voice as being in a static state, but in a state of flux and change. Recently, I have been studying actors who do comedic impressions. Some impressionists hit their mark so perfectly that it impresses upon me (again, pun intended!) that anyone can do anything with their voice if only they have the imagination to believe in it and the tenacity to pursue it. As my father always said, “Anything is possible.”

Chapter 2

Movement and the Relationship between Discipline and Play

In my studies of movement at UVa, regardless of whether we were exploring Biomechanics, Laban, ensemble devising, stage combat or period movement, I continually found myself arriving at the discovery that I access every tool most successfully through the lens of play. Each of these areas of study is a discipline that requires the acquisition of specific skills, training and practice to master, but it wasn't until I applied the layer of play that any of these tools came to life. This discovery led me to question the relationship between discipline and play. Are they opposites? Is one a subset of the other? Or are they parts of a whole, sister components required for the act of creation?

First we must define exactly what we mean by the terms "discipline" and "play." "Discipline," as applied to theater and movement training, includes the pursuit of skills as led by a master practitioner, the ritual established for the structure of that pursuit, and the achievement of a common language understood by a larger community. Like "discipline," the definition of "play" *also* includes the requisite acquisition of skills. It also requires rituals to be established in order to pursue the "game," and there is a common language of play understood by a larger (theatrical) community. Therefore is play is a type of discipline? Or does play encompass discipline? Perhaps you cannot achieve "playing" without discipline? The definition of discipline exists within the definition of play, but play – as employed by the actor – is also something much larger than discipline.

I already had a BFA in Acting and was a working actor long before I discovered the true

meaning of what it meant to really "play" onstage. I was introduced to the concept of *le jeu* in my first clown class with master teacher, Jane Nichols. Jacques LeCoq developed the idea of *le jeu* at *L'École Internationale de Théâtre,* his school of physical theatre, in Paris. Coarsely translated, it simply means, "the game." His student, Giovanni Fusetti, now a master teacher in his own right with whom I have since studied, describes *le jeu* as consisting of two equally important elements. The first element is the ability of the actor to respond to everything in his environment, to be in relation to, or "in play with" everything in his environment. The second element is pleasure: the actor must be having fun; otherwise the piece lacks the twinkle in the eye, the spark in the heart, the catch of the breath that makes theater magical. In an interview with Suzy Wilson published as part of the volume "*The Paris Jigsaw: Internationalism and the City's Stages,"* Fusetti says "…this close connection between the relation and the pleasure is extremely important and brings us to a very vital vision of [the] stage, as a micro-cosmos where life can be represented and therefore celebrated in a process based on pleasure and playing." (2)

Within this definition of *le jeu* we find both discipline *and* play. A student must not only learn the discipline of how to be in relationship to everything in her environment (using efficiency of movement and voice, understanding of spatial relationship, kinesthetic response, rhythm, and shape, AND accepting the limitations of her own physical capabilities), she must also learn the discipline of pleasure. Pleasure need not take the form of comedy, nor be self-indulgent (in fact, in this context, it must *not* be the latter). For example in a production of *Vinegar Tom* at the University of Virginia in March 2012, in one of the climactic scenes, my character Alice confronts the witch hunter and demands her child be returned to her. In one rehearsal, I found the pleasure in throwing a stool across the stage in desperate anger, and that explosion became a defining moment for the character. Pleasure may include the pleasure of

expressing true rage or sorrow, and the "fun" comes in the surprise of discovery one can find in that expression. Pleasure can be fierce. This concept was the most difficult for me to learn in my initial clown training, and I came up against this challenge again as I dealt with injury in the face of learning new movement disciplines in my graduate studies. .

When I began my study of movement at UVa, I knew that, in order to learn a new discipline, I had to train, push myself beyond previous limitations, and keep my mind a blank slate, ready to receive new information and experiences. Very quickly though, my approach was challenged by injury. In some ways, this injury was a gift because it pushed me out of my comfort zone and forced me to find other routes for achieving success. When I was physically unable to do something, I had to contend with my own stress, anger and frustration, find a way to let it go and still do SOMETHING. This pattern revealed to me an underlying tension I had around success. I needed to succeed. I know from my clown training that failure is essential and must be embraced on the path to success, and yet I couldn't find a way to apply this concept to biomechanics, ballet or stage combat. I wanted to be right! Not broken! I slowly talked myself into letting go of my pointless and unhelpful desire to execute every move with perfection, and found my solution and creative solace in play. I found if I could let go of my self-criticism, I could play the essence of someone who was leaping on and off a box in a biomechanics exercise (even though in reality I was hobbling on and off), and I could play the air of 18th century grace (even though I couldn't do the proper pliés and jumps). I had to find the game of doing a *punto reverso* even though my whole body argued against the sanity of this move. I began to experience play AS discipline. It was through the discipline of play that I was able to turn my limitations into art.

I carried this lesson with me into *God's Ear*. I had expected to be fully recovered by the

time we began rehearsals for this production at the University of Virginia in January 2013 but was dismayed to find how much ankle surgery had decreased my ability to ground my movement. I couldn't quite connect to the floor with as much energy as I needed, and so I had to find play through language and my relationships to the other actors. The rhythm, repetition and sounds of the language provided a strong foundation to play with, and even though the story was about disconnection, finding the moments of the play in which I connected with the other actors gave my performance the physical grounding I needed.

If play is a discipline, then like any discipline, very specific parameters must be created in order to achieve the environment in which play can happen. We need an articulated common vision, a common creative language, trust, respect, elimination of ego, and the skills needed to play in relationship to the environment in its entirety. In the context of training and rehearsal, we also need a strong leader to guide the exploration because it is a combination of failure and success that will guide us to understanding what real play is. Too much failure and we give up; too much success and we haven't yet pushed ourselves close enough to the edges of our capabilities; real risks aren't being taken. If real risks aren't being taken, the high stakes of honest play will not be found. True play is anything but "safe," and so we need to create an environment in which failure is celebrated on our way to success, and we can allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to make surprising discoveries. However, this doesn't mean we need a casual environment. I have often observed what I perceive to be a very American need to be "casual" and "nice" in rehearsal and training environments. On the contrary, the best work results from environments with a certain level of formality that facilitates the transition from the outside world to this world of imagination and creativity. Social niceties can be distracting. The approach towards the space needs to be, if not sacred, then special; attention must be paid to

dress and preparedness, to a respect for time and breaks, and to a focus on the work, leaving other concerns for before and after leaving the space. There must also be a structure established and an attitude of joy and respect that gives the actors the permission to play. Too much seriousness and the play is squelched. Not enough structure and the play has no boundaries within which to grow. The worst scenario is a perfect storm of no discipline, no play, and no joy.

The most exciting work I saw and was a part of in in my three years completing my MFA had the magic combination of discipline, play and joy built into the rehearsal process. In the development of *Hawk's Shadow* (University of Virginia, April 2013), a fellow graduate student, Mike Long, and I used a blend of discipline and play by incorporating the acro-yoga skills we had acquired with an exploration of shadow play to create a movement-theater piece. The creation and execution of the piece required a high level of skills-based discipline and collaboration using the tools of push and pull, balance, and weight-sharing but it was through play that we discovered the possibilities of the shadows. In contrast, the process for creating our music-based piece, *Joe's Joe*, lacked many of the important parameters needed to create true play. To begin with, we did not have a shared discipline that we employed. Also, the environment we created for devising was too casual, and we didn't employ any of the skills we had at our disposal. As a result, we achieved a certain level of play during the performance of the piece, but it remained more of an intellectual exercise than a work of art. This result was primarily caused by lack of common artistic language and vision. The creators in this piece all have different aesthetics, and so we ended up compromising down to the lowest common denominator, and any sense of play was lost.

If Play is so delicate and difficult to achieve, why not just use discipline? Without play, discipline is technique without the essential ingredient of the unique actor's spirit infusing the

story with magic. Play is required for every genre or discipline the actor might encounter. The actor must always be bringing themselves to the game of the story, the game of pretend that is *Hamlet*, that is *Mission Impossible*, that is *Angels in America*, that is a Robert Wilson piece, that is biomechanics, that is ballet. They bring their unique sense of play and experience to reveal something new. When I worked at the Public Theater in New York City, I heard our Artistic Producer at the time, George C. Wolf say in a Shakespeare Lab class, "You will only ever be a mediocre version of someone else, but you are the best version of you there is." The idea of becoming the character through twists and turns of the soul denies the game and ignores the true craft of acting: playing pretend. The audience knows the actor onstage is not Hamlet. If the game ever becomes real – if we ever think the actor playing Hamlet is really going mad or really injured – we are pulled out of the story and into reality and we worry for the actor's safety.

On the other side of the same coin, however, is truth. Even though the actor is playing the game of pretend, she must be playing this game completely honestly, and she must be actually having fun. If she is faking it, if she isn't playing with rigorous truth, we are pulled out of the story. We begin to see the surface of the actor's craft; we see only technique (I am reminded of certain Broadway actors who can make the audience laugh every night in exactly the same place, but their work lacks truth or surprise; it is pure technique). We must tap into the truth of the game; we must actually be having fun. Otherwise, we might be satisfactorily fulfilling a form, moving our bodies in exactly the right way, using our voices with perfect efficiency, and maybe the audience will leave the theater with a safe, comfortable satisfaction, but they won't be inspired, enthralled, transported, or changed unless we are really playing as if our lives depended on it. Playing with this level of commitment allows the actor to play the *truth* of, for example, the game of being on the edge of sanity, without actually having to be on the edge of sanity.

This exploration of discipline and play has led me to the conclusion that play and discipline *are* sister components in the act of creating, that play *is* a discipline, that play cannot exist *without* discipline, and discipline without play is like a paint-by-numbers Mona Lisa. Much of the challenge of the art of play is being able to rediscover the element of surprise every time. When we are on our 50th, 100th, 150th performance we can capture the truth of not knowing what is going to happen next by honestly playing the game and taking in our ensemble's reaction. Finding the game behind the text is essential to keeping the stakes high in the game of the play. It is here that the art of play reflects and reminds us of the truth of our lives: the ground beneath our feet is never permanent. We *never* truly know what is going to happen next. Just because we've set our alarm clock for 7am as we do every day, does not mean this day will bring us anything that we expect. The art of play is the art of living. If we can respond to life with as much vigor, enthusiasm, skill, joy, ferocity and play as we bring to a game of tag with tag-backs, then it might just be that we will come to the end of our lives and find that we have truly lived.

Chapter 3

Lessons from the Classroom

Teaching while studying and performing has proven to be one of the most fertile grounds for my own learning. As I discovered what worked for me as an actor, I would figure out how to put that into practice in my classroom. These experiments served to validate my own theories.

I organized my syllabus into three units: (1) "Play," i.e. finding the game, accessing honest impulses, acting without thinking, and complicité; (2) "Learning to use Time & Space," through Viewpoints; and (3) "Text Analysis," using Stanislavksi, status, subtext, and imagery to ask yourself interesting questions. As I discovered how essential the concept of play is to my own work, I began exploring how to translate the lessons my students learn in the unit on play into the entire semester, because so often the freedom they find in this unit disappears when we add text. One day as I was leading a warm-up, responding to my own instincts in the moment about how to get them listening to each other physically, I spontaneously asked them to "play the game" of exploring tempo. This simple cue engaged my students in a more immediate way, keeping them out of their heads and in relationship to their space and their classmates. Suddenly they weren't twelve individuals moving through space, but a cohesive group working within the same reality. It was this moment that revealed to me that with every tool we use, we must find the game of that tool. We must ask ourselves, what is the game of playing an action, an intention, status, or subtext? This discovery then inspired me to ask myself how I can play the "game" of such tools as Laban, vocal technique, and biomechanics. *Every* tool should inspire play, so that the actor remains open to the possibilities of the moment and listening to their fellow players. Filtering my exploration of all these tools through the lens of play has given me a new gateway

through which to engage each of these tools in a way that feels more productive and honest. Finding the game of technique helps translate technique to performance; it bridges the gap between training and performance. For example in the closing scene in *Vinegar Tom*, I had to walk around the edge of our three-quarter thrust stage during the climactic finish. After applying my vocal technique to find the fullness of the vowels and extension of consonants and investigating intention and action, I ultimately found that playing the "game" of the Laban energy "glide" filled the moment with the necessary sense of suspension that the scene required.

I also discovered that making the correlation between athletics and theater is very effective for explaining "the game" to my students. Most of my students have some personal experience of team sports, so they understand the concept of having rules you have to follow, while having the freedom to play within those rules in response to your teammates. I point out that in the arena of the theater the "rules" are the text of the play, the blocking, and the design elements, but how they play those rules each time can change. They also clearly understand the concept of playing to win, which helps me to explain how to "raise the stakes" in a scene. The more I work with the metaphor in relationship to my students the more I embrace it myself as a performer. When playing Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* (University of Virginia, October 2012), I found investing in the game of "giving and taking the food" provided an infinite realm of possibility each night in searching for the right moment to take my lines out to the audience and when to give them to my scene partner.

One of the most interesting observations I've made is how well my students use space and time when given the simple instructions on the second day of class to sit back to back with their partner, listen to a track of music and imagine the beautiful dance they have been working on with their partner for years, and then, without any rehearsal, to get up and perform that dance

for the audience with the complete conviction that everything that happens is meant to be. In this potentially terror-inducing situation, they respond to the music and to their partner with what appears to be expert use of space, level, shape, architecture, and tempo. However, several weeks later, when they are given the assignment to stage blank text (text in which the given circumstances are not defined), using Viewpoints, they stand (or worse, sit) across from each other with no recognition of these elements. This disconnect gave me the idea of layering text onto the dance exercise. After teaching them Viewpoints and asking them to memorize their blank text, I repeated the dance exercise, and added the simple instruction to speak their text at some point during the dance. This exercise had the effect of getting them to play viewpoints without even thinking about it. Then when I asked them to stage their scenes, the reverberations of this dance exercise were evident in the inventiveness they brought to their use of space and time.

I've brought this experience into my own work by incorporating music into my personal rehearsals to see how it influences my interpretation of the text and how the character moves. "Dancing" the text reveals an infinite number of surprising choices in vocal rhythms, intentions and gestural work that I would never have thought of otherwise. When I "danced" the text of *Enemy of the People* (University of Virginia, November 2013), I discovered a vulnerability in my character that helped me to see that she makes an honest mistake in reaching out to Petra, and how it strikes terror into the center of her being, resulting in her lashing out at Stockmann later in the play.

As a teacher, I practice asking my students questions instead of answering them, and I encourage them to use all the tools we are exploring to ask *themselves* interesting questions. This practice is reinforcing how important it is to relentlessly look for another angle from which to

explore the text and the moment. When I run into the roadblocks my students have, it reflects back to me the places where I also get stuck. This practice is expanding my ability to see where I am getting stuck with more objectivity. It reminds me of the infinite possibilities that exist for how to find the questions that will inspire play. For example, recently in the class I teach on Improvisation, my students consistently wanted to use plot instead of escalation and relationship to look for "the funny" in a scene. This problem is exactly the same one I am facing in creating my thesis performance, *Mission: Implausible!* My show was entirely too plot heavy, and it was bogging down the pace and confusing the audience. About four hours before we opened the first show (March 2014), I cut a major subplot out of the play, and the result was I could focus more on the relationship with my audience member-partner onstage.

As an actor, I have found one of the most important questions to answer is, how can I play by myself yet in relationship to other actors onstage? For the most part, the environments of our rehearsal studios at the University of Virginia were not concerned with this concept of play (as I have defined it in Chapter 2), and my fellow actors weren't either, so playing *with* them wasn't an option. I had to find a game to engage in that I could play by myself, yet which connected me to the other players on stage. This challenge proved to be one that confronted me in every production I did at UVa. When I was alone onstage, such as in the final scene of *Vinegar Tom*, playing "glide" worked because I wasn't in relationship to anyone else, so I could invest in that game by myself. But walking onstage in *Romeo & Juliet* (University of Virginia, April 2012), with a rifle and intimidating everyone into silence and acquiescence required that I connect with my fellow actors and that they actually respond to me. I tried playing the game of various Laban energies, and I tried to get my fellow actors to respond to me kinesthetically, but nothing worked. One of the most satisfying games I found was channeling John Malkovitch's

overdone enunciation. I played with seeing if I could get any of my fellow actors to look at me askance with this method. This engaged me in trying to get a rise out of the actors I was on stage with in a way that seemed to serve the story.

Whether teaching Improvisation, Acting, Introduction to Theater or Senior Seminar, I have found that the core principles with which I approach the classroom are the same. I instill in all my students the importance of taking risks and failing and the importance of committing to your choices wholeheartedly: imaginatively, physically and vocally. I always begin with a warm-up and a game to instill in them the importance of presence, readiness and the power of positive energy, as well as to get them laughing and playing together so that their imaginations are ignited and creativity can flow. I encourage them to seek learning in their own successes and failures more than from any wisdom I might provide. I create a rigorous yet playful environment: my students know I won't take flimsy excuses, but they have confidence that I will embrace their mistakes and their humanity with empathy. I also teach much more by example than I would have predicted. I have found that modeling the level of participation and energy I am looking for from them leads them toward the type of engagement they need to be successful. When we warm-up and play games, I play at the top of my own intelligence and ability so that they can see, hear and feel what that level of engagement requires. It also makes me more vulnerable to my students and models what failure and success *through* failure looks like. Team-teaching Improvisation makes modeling exceedingly easy and useful, as one teacher can teach, while the other can play with the students and provide an example of the level at which they should be playing. We also can call out each other's successes and failures so that they can see that risk-taking and failure is a never-ending process in the artist's development.

Through this program, I have found that teaching and being a working artist are perfect

complements to each other. Each fuels the other. I take the lessons I learn from my audiences in the evening into the classroom the next day, and I take the lessons I learn in the classroom right back onstage with me that night. Continuously having to be as fearless and vulnerable in front of audiences as my students have to be in the classroom keeps me in touch with the wide range of challenges they face. Because I create, I am a better teacher; because I teach, I am a better artist.

Chapter 4

Five Guiding Principles for the Actor

The ways of approaching acting are many and varied, and I found it helpful during my MFA studies to come up with a few pithy guiding principles to simplify my way into each creative process.

Fake it 'till you make it.

Yes, it's an old adage, but I have come to appreciate this cliché in a new way. Truth is essential onstage, but can sometimes be arrived at in surprising ways. When looking for the truth in a scene by David Mamet in an acting class, instead of delving into sense-memory emotional truths, I played with rhythm to establish the shifting status and relationship in the scene. Instead of playing, "you're making me nervous," I increased my pace and internal rhythm. This technique had the effect of making me feel (and seem) more nervous from the outside in. Sometimes, finding the truth means responding honestly to external stimuli that have very little to do with the character's internal emotional landscape or her objectives. This way of working from the outside in helps me to first find the physical truth of the character which then inspires the honest emotions of the character.

Find the accents.

Another "outside in" method that works surprisingly well (given its silliness) is to run the scene in many different accents to uncover surprising rhythms and character relationships. It started as a game to loosen my scene partner and me up when working on a Mamet scene, but it revealed something to us about the potential relationship of our characters. My scene partner was more of a cockney character, and I was more posh. This element ultimately

influenced how we played with status and intention by giving us a subtextual class relationship. I tried the tactic again when playing a scene from Shaw (again in acting class). My scene partner and I tried a southern accent, then British, and Spanish, and what we liked to call the "Soap Opera Accent." While *Arms and the Man* is a comedy, it's Shaw, and it's easy to fall into a stilted sort of rhythm with his text that does not do service to his comedy. Because his characters are larger than life, fully embodying the cliché versions of these accents helped us to find the size required of the comedy. It also helped us to shed our own habitual vocal rhythms that reverberate into and effect our physical rhythms.

Repetition, Repetition, Repetition…but never the same way twice.

It's easy to settle into the first good choice I stumble across. But rigorous attention to never repeating the same choice twice in the early stages of rehearsal is essential. There are many ways to find variation. Using Lessac's method of vocal exploration of text helps uncover the size and shape of vowel and consonant sounds, as well as identify and explore resonance. Using Laban's physical exploration of space, time and weight reveals how various energies change the story. Changing my intention and playing the opposite of what I think the character wants reveals new tactics for pursuing an objective. And once I've arrived at something that can be repeated with nuanced consistency, nothing can replace the value of repetition in front of an audience. Looking for as many ways to put work in front of an audience as possible is essential because listening to each new audience, breathing them in and allowing their presence to influence my choices reveals new depth and possibility every night. With the short runs in a university setting, I usually found my stride by the last two shows.

Play a man like a woman.

Here at UVa, I played either male characters or characters who were originally written as male more often than I played female characters. In this situation, it's tempting to tap into the male energy of a text, but that way leads to frustration. Instead, it is more helpful to embrace my own femininity in these portrayals. I fell into the trap of "playing a man like a man" in our staged reading of *Gross Indecency* (American Shakespeare Center, December 2011), and could feel that it led to a subtle tint of caricature. I played the lawyer Carson with a heavy percussive rhythm that felt layered on top of who I actually am. "Becoming a character" is a mistake. Uncovering a character's humanity in ourselves is the job. Every possibility there is for humanity exists within us already, it just may be we haven't accessed it yet. So playing a man like a man is to deny my own humanity as a woman and to assume that I don't already have the capacity for this character's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

In *Romeo & Juliet*, I struggled with this challenge again in the role of the Prince. I did extensive research into historical female figures on whom I could base my portrayal, as well as collage work with music and imagery. I also analyzed the text in terms of objectives and actions. I worked physically and vocally exploring the possibilities revealed to me by Laban and Lessac, but I couldn't let go of the idea of this character as a man. As a result, I felt a shallowness in my performance that let me know I wasn't tapping into my own humanity for this role.

When we arrived at *Love's Labour's Lost*, (University of Virginia, December 2012), the style of the piece was conducive to the concept of gender switching and, so, I could clown my interpretation of Costard. However, the sexual innuendos at times still felt forced through a male optic. I observe this dilemma in my own female students when doing comedy.

Comedy is still a male-dominated field. While the examples of funny women are growing in number, there are many more examples of funny men. When women try to be funny like men it fails, especially in the realm of bawdy humor. Women have their own unique way to be funny around the topic of sex, but too often we play it the same way men do. I'm still looking for the narrow ledge to walk that works, but it's hard to find that ledge when playing specifically male-centric bawdy text.

In *Rhinoceros*, I was cast in the role of Dudard. Dudard was originally written as a man, but we made the decision to change the character to a woman. Dudard is involved in a love triangle with Daisy and Berenger, which at first brought up questions about her sexuality. But the love triangle was malleable enough that we could change the subtext from jealousy over Daisy to jealousy over Berenger. In this adaptation, the gender switch allowed my character's story to be one of a career woman rising in the workplace and the pressures she felt to "be one of the boys." In this context, a hint of male energy worked for the character and, with a solid male love interest, it grounded me in playing Dudard with all my humanity, sans a "male mask."

Enemy of the People provided the greatest challenge in this context because the choice to make Hofstad a woman felt forced onto the play. Here the plot depended on Hofstad falling in love with the main character's daughter, and so we had to make her a lesbian. If it had been set in today's world, or even as early as the 70's, perhaps having a character who is outed during the course of the play wouldn't feel like a main event. But in the 1950's being outed in a small conservative town would have spelled certain scandal, and seems like it easily could have been the main topic of a play set in that time period. Here, it had to be a subplot, and, because it was never dealt with, felt dramaturgically awkward. Try as I might I

could not find a way to create a through line for the character that made sense to me. Ultimately, I decided that the reason she turns on Stockmann is because she is trying to create a scandal for him much larger than her scandal of being outed. But as that choice wasn't supported by the text, it became an exercise in imposed subtext that probably no one but me knew existed. Secret subtext can be a useful and effective technique, however in this situation it never felt well suited to the text or relationships. I also felt a self-imposed socio-political responsibility not to make the lesbian character a one-dimensional lecherous snake. She wasn't the only flawed character in the play but, nonetheless, I tried to make her as human, vulnerable and empathetic as possible. Her advance on the young Petra needed to be a genuine misunderstanding, and her turn on Stockmann needed to be out of great need, rather than out of self-centered, petty retribution.

In contrast, in *Vinegar Tom* and *God's Ear* I played roles that were written for a woman, and so this question never arose. I was able to focus on the author's intent and discover within myself the humanity of these stories and how to best avail all of myself in their telling.

These experiences reveal that there is something fundamental about gender that cannot be ignored. If the play isn't in some way ABOUT gender, then the actor has an uphill battle when cast in a role that was written for the opposite gender. The best way to confront the challenge is to find a dramaturgical justification for the switch as we did in *Rhinoceros*, and play a man like a woman.

Build the house then forget about it, and enjoy living inside it.

Building the story of a play can be likened to the construction of a building. First the actor lays the foundation with text work, exploring the imagery and ideas and structure of the text. Then the framing goes up with voice and Laban work: building the feel of the sounds of

the language in the body, and exploring the rhythms and patterns of movement suggested by those sounds. Then the wiring can be installed with rigorous application of Stanislavski-esque objective and action work. Window frames can be cut in the framing of the building with image work: investigating the emotional landscape of the story and creating sensorial touchstones for that emotional landscape. Plaster and paint can be applied by exploring status relationships between characters, and trying out various hidden and revealed games. But then the actor has to move into the house she has built and forget about the 2x4's, the nails, the wiring, the plaster and paint. She has to love, laugh, mourn, dream, strive, hope, and despair here in this space that she has created.

I achieved the freedom to live inside my "house" in various moments onstage at UVa, the most successful being in *God's Ear*. I came into the first rehearsal off-book and having done a deep exploration of the sounds and rhythms embedded in the text. I also already had a deep connection to the story and its imagery and humor. Through slowly scaffolding each layer of my "house" and finding the rhythm of the show in response to an audience, we achieved an incredibly satisfying show by the final weekend. I was finally able to forget about the process of building, and just live onstage. As I begin work on *Other Desert Cities*, I can already feel the benefit of beginning my journey with strong attention to vocal work as a foundation, allowing that exploration to feed me information about the character, her intentions, her needs and her tactics. When rehearsals commence, I can begin to layer in my physical work with Laban in relationship to the other actors onstage. I have also begun exploring the idea of certain "hidden games" I can utilize. In the first scene, my character has a huge secret that she is waiting to reveal, and, so, I have been playing with the idea that I am an emotional terrorist with a bomb in my bag that I am reluctant to use, but which I know I

must deploy eventually. As I continue to explore the text and to bring my work in relationship to the other actors, I will look for more games that I can use onstage to keep it active and in the present. This play is literally a living room drama, so “building my house and then forgetting about it so that I can live there” is becoming an incredibly apt metaphor.

Works Cited

Fusetti, Giovanni. "The Pedagogy of the Poetic Body" *The Paris Jigsaw: Internationalism and the City's Stages."* Ed. by David Bradby, Maria M. Delgado. Manchester: Manchester University Press, February 2002. *Giovannifusetti.com* Web. 16 Mar. 2013.

Glass, Ira, producer. *This American Life: Episode 462, "*Own Worst Enemy.*"* Chicago Public Media, April 13, 2012. Radio.

Weiss, Stephen M., and Arthur S. Reber. "Curing the Dreaded Steve Blass Disease." *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action* 3.3 (2012): 171-181. Print.

Wilson, Mark, Nickolas C. Smith, and Paul S. Holmes. "The Role of Effort in Influencing the Effect of Anxiety on Performance: Testing the Conflicting Predictions of Processing Efficiency Theory and the Conscious Processing Hypothesis." *British Journal of Psychology* 98 (2007): 411–28. Print.

Appendix: Video Supplement

DVD notes for *Mission: Implausible!*

This promotional video captures the essence of *Mission: Implausible!* in which Top Secret Agent Karen has a mission (to save the world, of course). But this mission takes two, so she will need to find a new partner.

An interactive solo comedy show, *Mission: Implausible!* utilizes Facebook, Twitter, and Skype to engage the audience in our heroine's effort to save the world. Audience members contribute their intelligence to help save the day, and one lucky man is chosen to be our heroine's hero and spends most of the show onstage with Agent Karen having his courage and humanity proven in surprising and hilarious ways.

A roller coaster ride of audience interaction, *Mission: Implausible!* launches our audience member on a hero's journey, and he becomes the star of the show. The entire audience is at times enlisted as agents, interacting with the show via the Facebook and Twitter apps on their smart phones, contributing ideas for how to save the world and helping to train Karen's new partner. "Headquarters" calls in via Skype to give Karen instructions. HQ is played by an actor calling in live from any location in the world that has an internet connection, giving the show endless opportunities for cameo appearances. For the UVa premiere, Chris Arruda, a New York-based actor, joined the show live from NYC.

By the end of the show, not only has Karen's Audience-member-partner emerged a hero, but the newly-enlisted Audience-Agents are sent out into the world to help complete the mission and report back via social media channels, taking audience interaction to a new level that engages the audience beyond the confines of the performance space, inspiring positive action for

change and community-building.

Related social media:

Follow Top Secret Agent Karen:

- On Facebook
    - facebook.com/karen.bobaren.7
    - facebook.com/MissionImplausible
- On Twitter
    - @KarenBoBaren2
    - #MissionImplausible