Freeing the Voice, Thinking with the Body, and Applying Theory:
An Actor's Approach

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

Department of Drama

University of Virginia
May 2014

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Chapter 1
Thoughts on Acting

Actors are frequently asked about their "process," and I have often puzzled over what that word means. Before I embarked on the adventure of three years of graduate study and training, I found myself woefully inarticulate when directors or fellow actors raised the question—my grasp of methodology was tenuous (as I will explain at length in a later chapter), and my vocabulary for the craft I practiced with such enthusiasm was painfully limited. My desire to discover and articulate my own process was a significant factor in my decision to pursue further training, and, during my time at the University of Virginia, I have spent many hundreds of hours, alone or with my colleagues, interrogating and trying to define and refine my idea of an actor's process—how much is instinct, and what, if anything, can be taught? In so doing, and through applying on the stage my theories and the principles of training from the classroom, I have, indeed, learned much about an actor's process—or at least, *my* process.

I have identified for myself a triad of "leading energies," to borrow a term from the great voice teacher Arthur Lessac, that come into play in varying dominance as I prepare and play a role: the actor's voice and interpretation of text, the actor's body and its expressive movement, and the actor's imagination, or internal life. In my mind, these leading energies form an equilateral triangle in which the three are connected—voice, movement, and internal life—but each presents a different angle of attack, if you will, which offers me a specific "way in" to the role at hand. In almost any given role, all three leading energies will be present to some degree, but it is my experience that usually one will be of primary importance, while the others take secondary and tertiary significance.

For example, when I began work on Lady Capulet under Brantley Dunaway's direction in *Romeo and Juliet,* my first mainstage role at the University, the text was primary. Shakespeare's language is so dense and rich that it generally requires little embellishment, and I took my cues from the text as I strove to speak it clearly and to shape it with all of the text-working skills that were becoming available to me as I progressed in my training. Of secondary, yet considerable, significance was imagining the inner life of this woman, who was by rapid turns ambitious, cold, protective, elated, raging, and resigned. Discovering a suitable physicality mattered, but it followed from my exploration of the text, which revealed the character's inner battles.

Later, when I played Daisy in Ionesco's absurdist fable *Rhinoceros* (also at UVa), I found my physical choices taking the lead. Our director, Marianne Kubik, envisioned a highly stylized production that capitalized on the physical comedy of the play, and, as I rehearsed, it was definitively my exploration of movement that dominated my process. Voice and text work followed closely as I strove to develop the quality of 1930s repartee that would complement the stylized physical work I was doing, but in this instance, the internal life of the character was of comparatively little importance. The illogical nature of absurdism made the process of imagining a rich background of internal motivations virtually irrelevant, as my character leapt arbitrarily from one caprice to another.

Similarly, my work as Mariane in *Tartuffe* at Virginia Repertory Theater was led by the text—the witty couplets of Richard Wilbur's virtuosic translation are a gymnasium for text work—and was followed closely by the broad physicality of Moliere's Commedia dell'Arte heritage, which was part of the aesthetic that the director, Bruce Miller, sought to create. Developing her internal life, however, was something I hardly

thought about. As I explained in a talkback to students who had seen the production, the story of how Mariane and Valère (her lover) met and fell in love was of no use to me or to my graduate colleague Brad Fraizer, who played Valère; these characters existed wholly—explosively—in their present moment. The past and the future, provinces of a character's internal life, were of almost no consequence to the characters, and could be of little consequence to us as we portrayed them.

By contrast, when I played Katherine Stockmann in the University's production of *Enemy of the People*, adapted by Doug Grissom and directed by Richard Warner, the internal life of Katherine was far and away the dominant leading energy of my process. Ibsen's naturalistic portrayal of family and community relationships was preserved in Doug's adaptation, and there was much for me to explore and wrestle with as I sought to understand the motivations of my character. Unlike Daisy and Mariane, who existed so completely in the present, all of Katherine's choices needed to come from her past experiences, her present pressures, and her hopes and fears for the future, and I had to understand and justify her love for and solidarity with a man who was deeply flawed and often, in her eyes, wrong. As I filled her out in my imagination, I found that various little details of my costume and props were important to me—a frilly apron, for example, seemed out of place on practical Katherine; as I saw her, she would wear something crisp and clean, but never something fussy. I was fortunate that both the director and the costume designer, Lindsay Hinz, were sensitive and responsive to this part of my process, and we worked together to create the world Katherine inhabited. My secondary angle was the physicality and movement of the character; playing a woman some years older than my actual age demanded that I discover nuanced and appropriate ways to express

externally the rich interior life I had worked to develop. Voice and text work remained essential to the process—neither interior life nor physicality is of much use if the lines can't be understood—but it was the least dominant of the triad.

These leading energies, which form the foundation of my acting process, are not a deep, new discovery—they are probably obvious to most actors; indeed, they are the primary pillars of many actor training programs (including the one I am about to finish at the University of Virginia). What *has* been a discovery, for me, is to find that my process, rather than being a defined and repeatable approach, has turned out to be very fluid—it can fluctuate even over the course of a single play. While some actors may identify with a certain approach or methodology that serves them for all of their work, I have found that I prefer to shift between the three energies I've described, supplementing my process each time with relevant tools from my actor's toolbox—tools such as using healthy, efficient vocal resonance, moving from my core, and identifying objectives. Many of these tools, like those I've just mentioned, are tried-and-true, and I return to them again and again. Others, though, are curiosities that I've learned, or even been merely exposed to, that rattle around in the bottom of the toolbox until the role comes along that suddenly calls for their use and further development. I value being exposed to many techniques and methodologies for this reason—an actor never knows when something will come in handy.

The three leading energies, key elements of an actor's training, are often trained separately. In the course of my graduate studies, I generally attended classes in voice, movement, and acting each semester. As I conditioned my body and my voice and exercised and stimulated my imagination, I found my control over my instrument

increasing as my range of expression expanded. The effects can best be described as *gestalt* (another term used often by Lessac): each component of my training amplified and informed the other components, and my three leading energies have continued to work the same way in my acting process. One does not necessarily dominate at the expense of the others; instead, they strengthen one another, even as I shift between them.

A great part of the challenge and artistry of acting comes, for me, from the changeability of my process. Though I shift between my three leading energies and apply a hodge-podge of various tools, the effect must ultimately be seamless. To do all of the preparatory work well and to execute flawless technique in performance is of little satisfaction to me or to the audience if the hard work is showing. Achieving virtuosity in this regard—to be able to subsume my process in its expression and to fully integrate my technique so that it appears effortless—is a stimulating object; every true artist, I suppose, is a perfectionist, and I have found that my "divine dissatisfaction" with my work, as the great choreographer Martha Graham would have said, is the very thing that keeps me constantly and deeply engaged in my artistic process (de Mille 264). There is always more to hunt for and there is always something to be more clearly expressed, and there are always more stories that need to be told.

Chapter 2
Freeing the Voice: Applying Technique and Text Work

Approaching Text

I have always had a love of language, both the written and the spoken word: I'm a voracious reader of everything from cereal boxes to hefty novels to poetry, my parents were dedicated to reading out loud to me while I was growing up, and no family gathering is ever complete without somebody reciting "Jabberwocky." It seemed to me before my vocal training that I had a satisfying relationship with text, and I looked forward to learning techniques that would help me speak text more clearly—as it turned out, however, I had vastly underestimated the total transformation of not just my speaking voice, but of my attitudes toward and relationship with words themselves.

My study of voice work has also been a deepening journey into text. I will, ironically, always remember the first time I shared a poem in class because it was so thoroughly *un*memorable that I had to step back and ask myself why. Though I appreciated the lyricism of the words, the arrangement of sounds, and the sentiments of the poet, my reading was impersonal; I presented the poem like an artifact for analysis, rather than as a deeply human expression that without those particular words would have remained inexpressible. Eventually I came to the realization that my very reverence for language was at times a stumbling block to me, because it kept the words at a safe and deferential distance. When I embraced a mantra of "I don't serve the words; the words serve me," my interpretation of text took a leap forward. As I grew more confident as a speaker, I also allowed myself to experience text more personally. One of the best tools that I have learned in my vocal training for speaking a piece with power and personal conviction is to create for myself a "devil's advocate" to respond to. Often this takes the

form of an imagined statement from someone in opposition to me, which I respond to through the text; the resistance heightens presence, focus, and intention. This simple tool changed my approach to text and even to performing: never make it easy on yourself, I learned; never assume that your scene partner or the audience believes you. Fight to be heard, fight to be understood, push back against an opposing force. It's *drama*, after all, so even the sweetest lyrical poem has to somehow be in conflict in order to burst forth with the full power of its beauty.

Another useful tool in approaching text has been to explore its terrain—are there words that are inherently dark or bright? Where does the arrangement of syllables seem to suggest an intellectual process, or where do the words, steady as a drumbeat, come in single syllable "heart lines," as Stanislavski called them? In verse, which words are in the "power positions:" first and last words in lines, rhyming words, words broken by a caesura? What is the sense of scale—do ideas broaden and expand, or does the language build systematically to a precise and logical conclusion? All of these questions have helped me to take a text off the page and give it life through the increasingly flexible expressiveness of my speaking voice, which leads me to the most satisfying part of interpreting a text: giving it away.

It seems to me that, ultimately, the satisfaction for any artist in creating any kind of art is to move beyond self-expression and to share what has been created, so that it can be appreciated, experienced, and interpreted through the lens of other minds and hearts. I began to experience text more personally when I began to take ownership of words, when I realized that the words could serve me. The maturation of that discovery has been to find that the next step, after making the words my own and giving them everything I

have—all my passion and all my technique—is to give them away; to get out of the way and let the words take on a life of their own that surpasses me and my own experience. At first it doesn't seem to make sense—how can I make the words my own and get out of the way at the same time? It seems to me that this is exactly what art is about, and gets at the essence of what it means to be an artist: to be the mirror, the conduit, or the vessel through which words, ideas, and stories are given back to the world.

It's a beautiful experience and a privilege to take that journey with words—to take them on as a personal challenge to an opposing force, to investigate their possibilities and inherent expressivity, and then to let them go. While I thought I had a good working relationship with text before my graduate vocal training, I now see how much deeper it is possible to go, and how much more I can express through words—it's a discovery that has changed me tremendously as an actor, from having an appreciation of the language in a script, to being a thoroughly invested *speaker* of that language, and giving it away.

Technique

For some reason, among many artists the word "technique" is suspect; it's loaded with ideas about rigid rules, or somehow it seems like it's something put-on and fake. We're artists because we want to express ourselves, not because we want to be technicians! We want emotion! We want something *authentic*! What so many amateur actors fail to appreciate but every seasoned pro knows (and what becomes evident in several semesters of graduate training) is that technique and expression are inseparable—technique isn't a mask over or a replacement for expression, rather, it enables *greater* expression.

As a speaker and an actor, I have been frustrated to find that my ability to express myself and tell a story has often been hampered by ingrained, unproductive habits. Naturally, then, I have sought to rid myself of those habits to strengthen and focus my work; but, as anyone who has ever tried to break a bad habit knows, it's virtually impossible to lose one habit without replacing it with a different one. Enter technique. The study of technique makes it possible for an artist not just to overcome creative obstacles, but to consciously rely on tools that fuel creativity and propel expression. This has been borne out by my own experience as I have grappled with not just learning technique but implementing and acquiring it as part of my process, as related in this excerpt from my voice work journal:

> In acting class, I had the opportunity to perform a monologue on film as part of a short on workshop acting for the camera. The chance to observe myself closely on camera when I was not specifically focused on vocal work was a major moment in my development because I was able to finally see how I spoke in a relatively "unguarded" moment (as opposed to my vocal practice with a mirror, when I consciously employed techniques). I finally saw what other people see: smiles that turn into a frozen lateral position, nearly closed teeth, and the dreadful, distracting habit of nodding my head for emphasis. It was terribly disappointing to see that I hadn't progressed as much as I thought, but it was a great impetus for committing myself passionately to technique, determined to overcome limiting habits that so obviously interfered with my ability to convey the story of my monologue.

Bearing this lesson in mind, I launched myself into text with a reading in voice

> class from Oscar Wilde's heartbreaking and beautiful letter-diary *De Profundis*. With a partially marked-up copy—that is, one that is not too cluttered to read fluently, but which included reminders of the techniques I was striving to incorporate in the reading, I committed myself to technique-at-all-costs. It was a breakthrough; I finally used vowel shaping successfully, I gave my consonants and vowels their full value and employed consonant linking, I resonated...and I wondered, did I actually communicate something meaningful, with my head so crammed full of all that technical stuff?

The answer to the question, "Did I communicate meaningfully while I lashed myself to the figurative mast of technique?" was an absolute "Yes!" According to the feedback I received, it was the best, most technically astute and emotionally powerful work I had yet done in voice class. I was astonished to learn that I had given a deeply stirring performance while my mind had been largely occupied with lip-shaping and elongated vowels. As I considered this, I continued to muse in my journal:

> Perhaps what I didn't count on was my preexisting connection to the material. I was moved by that passage years ago when I first read it, and have returned to it many times as one of the most exquisite and poignant pieces of writing I've ever known. All of that was there; my relationship to the text was long established, and when I gave technique the reins, all of that unconscious preparation didn't disappear or even just manage to glimmer faintly through technique; the technique made the mirror brighter, the conduit clearer, and the passage shone. The lesson here is to trust that if the spiritual connection is there—if I've done my preparation work properly, wrestling with and investigating the text—it can only

> be helped by an equal commitment to technique. The emotive side and the technical side of speech are not mutually exclusive; I have found this semester that theirs is instead a mutualistic symbiosis in which both are benefited by the preparation and presence of the other.

Thus converted, after my experience with *De Profundis*, to the techniques described, it became easier to adopt them as a natural part of my work; as once-foreign ideas and sensations became familiar and eventually habitual, they also lent their power to my performance without my having to focus on them exclusively, at the cost of all else. Certainly it remains essential to practice—respect for technique requires a continual quest for refinement—but as any technique, vocal or otherwise, becomes a fully integrated, organic part of an actor's process, it becomes increasingly possible to lean on different leading energies as they are needed, creating a performance that is layered, textured, and deeply felt, and is also refined and amplified by beautiful and effective technique.

Indeed, the word "technique" is no longer suspect—it is a word that holds in it the promise of excellence, of expression that is thoroughly free because it is thoroughly mastered; indeed, it is what launches an artist from the realm of amateur to the realm of master. There is great beauty in the precision of well-executed technique; it is no coincidence, certainly, that our greatest artists have most often been geniuses of it: a Bach fugue explodes with emotion, but it also explodes with exquisite technique; every note is arranged for maximum effect as a piece of a whole that is much greater than the sum of its parts. My study of voice work has ultimately taken me across a threshold of sorts, as I now seek to implement technique not simply because I ought to, but because I have felt for myself the difference it makes. I practice techniques because I want the

resonance, I want the clarity, I want all the benefits. Once you've tasted the thrill of technique, there's no going back, and there's no way I'd care to go on without it.

Approaching Shakespeare

Most actors who pursue a professional career on the stage will at some point find themselves playing a role from Shakespeare, and a surprising number of them will feel ill-equipped to tackle the language of the foremost dramatist in Western theatre. I am drawn to Shakespeare's language, and as I have acquired tools for delving into text and speaking it well, I have also considered at some length the actor's privilege and responsibility to bring words off of the page and breathe life into them. The following is both a discussion of text-work techniques and of the rather metaphysical process of bringing language to life, written in the form of informal advice to an actor who is approaching Shakespeare for the first time.

A Shakespeare Manifesto

Shakespeare's language is not to be feared; it is to be enjoyed! If you are one of the many people who think that you don't "get" Shakespeare, or if you've ever referred to his language as "old English," let's set the record straight right now. *Anybody* can get Shakespeare, and Shakespeare's language is *our* language—it's called "Modern English," and is just about as different from "Old English" as it is different from Portuguese. In fact, you almost daily use phrases, figures of speech, and even individual words that Shakespeare gave to our language. So, before you even begin, set aside your anxiety about how difficult and foreign the Bard's language is; instead, gather your wits and prepare to enter language that is elegantly crafted but eminently approachable. Know that exposure to the text, repetition of the text, and persistence will be your friends on the

journey.

As you begin, it will be helpful to know that a key to interpreting Shakespeare is recognizing the "indivisibilty of means from meaning" (Burton). Structure is not a brick wall to helplessly, hopelessly dash your brains against; it is a map to orient yourself within dense language, it is a blueprint that will help you to envision the big picture, and it is even a part of the language itself, in the way that walls are part of a house—they create the shape that defines the rest of the space. How would you go about placing furniture or hanging pictures in a house that had no walls? If it had no walls, you might point out, you probably wouldn't consider it a house at all. In that sense, when you approach verse, look at the structure of the verse as the walls which not only contain all the words, but which organize and give shape and form to the words. Thinking of it this way, can you see how the structure is inherently connected to the meaning of the words?

Once you've embraced the structure of the verse as a part of your interpretation, consider how you can let the structure help you to convey meaning. After all, if Shakespeare wrote it in verse and we intend to do justice to his language, it would be "churlish" of us to pay no mind to it, as Andrew Wade, a former text coach for the Royal Shakespeare Company, said in his workshop with the acting graduate students at UVa. Look at the progression of a chunk of text; how does the character develop his or her argument? Sonnets are a great place to start for this kind of analysis: look at how the first quatrain almost always introduces a question or problem, the next two quatrains develop the theme or the progression of the argument, and the final couplet is almost always a bold, concise, closing statement. In a monologue, identify the primary subjects and verbs—what's active and most important in this piece? Are there phrases that are

parenthetical byroads, which you must travel before returning to your main argument? You may notice as you explore structure that your monologue is like a very short play within itself—your character goes on a journey, encounters obstacles, employs tactics, and arrives at a destination. Let your understanding of structure help you to play that journey for all it's worth; in this way, you will bring yourself and the audience along for a ride that is always fresh and always new—we will listen to "To be or not to be" on the edge of our seats a thousand times as long as the actor isn't playing "and lose the name of action" from the very first line.

When you've considered the structural argument or journey of a piece of text, have a look at what you might have previously considered the "technical" side of verse work. What can you learn about a character's state of mind by the breaks in the verse lines? Are they at regular, comfortable intervals, or is every line enjambed, with caesuras scattered through the middles of lines? What happens if, instead of taking a breath or a pause at these caesuras *within* lines, you instead breathe or suspend *around* the lines? You may find, to your surprise, that, rather than muddying the meaning, you discover a kind of internal logic that will invite you into the mind of the character and fuel your ability to uncover the animating impulse which is the soul within the lines and the very life of your performance.

Then, with the insights you've gained about the character's state of mind, have a look at scansion—wait! Don't stop reading! Scansion sounds like a nasty word, but it's not such a big deal as your ninth grade English teacher may have made you think. It's simply the heartbeat of the language, and it is completely on your side. In a way that is mysterious as it is wonderful, the rhythm of spoken language penetrates the human ear

and the human heart, and for an actor that's an incredible tool to have at your fingertips. Let the rhythm pulse through the language gently and measure out each line like a measure of music, giving each syllable equal time. Then, let the music of the language naturally fall into that space and time and discover the syncopated musicality of each line. Most of the time you will know instinctively where each stressed syllable ought to fall, but sometimes you can make great discoveries by experimentation—a line might seem at first speaking irregular, for example, but what would happen if you stuck to your iambic guns and tried to make it regular? In some cases you will realize it's got to remain irregular, but in other cases you may discover a bit of word play or even a completely new meaning in the line.

As you investigate structure and form, make sure to remember that those walls are there not to box you in, but to make *play* exciting—even to make play possible. Remember that form engages your skill, yes, but it's also the very thing that makes the game exciting to play.

So much for the walls of the house—what about all that stuff inside?

When you explore form, keep your ears, your eyes, your mind, and your heart open to the content—the possibilities that every single word offers you. Take it slowly, and consider what each word means of itself—not just the *word*, though, but the *idea* or the feeling or impulse that is clothed by that word. Think of a word like a glove: it has a recognizable shape, it may be beautifully embellished and well-crafted, but until a hand slips inside it, the glove is limp and inanimate and useless. Your mind and heart and soul *must* fill each word like a hand inside a glove, or there's no life in it; it's lifeless and mute as the paper it's written on. (Interesting that Shakespeare's father is supposed to have

been a glove-maker...but I digress.) One fruitful strategy is to use different colored pens or highlighters to mark the text and visually define your character's stance on each word as positive or negative (or light or dark). Fully visualize the images in the language, and paint them vigorously on the fourth wall.

Repetition is your friend. Leave the footnotes behind, and with an unmarked copy of the text, go over and over and over and over the lines, actively exploring them, weighing them, playing with them and in them. Like an archaeologist gradually brushing away millenia-old layers of dust, or a sculptor chipping away at a shapeless block of marble, you will find your persistence rewarded—imagery and meaning emerge almost miraculously, slowly, and it grows organically out of and between you and the text. In performance, then, you will find yourself saying those words like someone who brought them up out of your own heart and out of your own need to speak, instead of sounding like a Norton Critical Edition on tape.

One of the best ways to explore a text is to explore it with a group. Taking pieces of the text individually and laying them in place like the pieces of a puzzle, you will find yourselves hearing things spoken in new ways and understanding things in a sense that you never did on your own, and then as your experience of the text shifts and grows, you will speak it in new ways, responding to the fresh influence of other speakers and other consciousnesses. Again, it is virtually impossible to place too much value on repetition as part of this process.

As you investigate form, content, imagery, rhythm, and every endless possibility of language (and they really are endless), you will find yourself internalizing and taking ownership of the text in a way that makes "memorization" seem like a very shallow

exercise by comparison. Your work on the text will help you to retain it not just in your memory, but in your soul, so that in performance you will be more capable than ever of a fresh, truthful, spontaneous performance that grows out of a dynamic relationship with the language. Don't believe that sophistry about over-exposure to text deadening your impulses or making it "less fresh"—the greater your exposure and the deeper your investigation, the more easily your impulses will slip into the language like a hand in a glove and bring it vividly, brilliantly to life.

Finally, believe in the power of the language you are performing. When people discuss Shakespeare's enduring popularity, you'll often hear remarks about his universal themes and complex, interesting characters—I think I've made such remarks often enough, myself. But if you stop to think about it, we can get universal themes and great characters from sources that take a lot less effort if that's what we're really after; there are plenty of books, plays, and films—many very good, artistic ones, even—that offer these. And they're good reasons to speak and perform Shakespeare, but in my opinion, they aren't the primary reasons the Bard is still going strong. Shakespeare endures because he takes great themes and vivid characters and he clothes their thoughts and their impulses in *language* that is brilliantly crafted, that is exciting and artistic and compelling enough to be absolutely worth the effort. Trust the richness of Shakespeare's text. It's been around for almost half a millenium, and it hasn't gotten old yet.

Chapter 3
Thinking With the Body: Physical Acting Practices

Tuning the Instrument

Vsevolod Meyerhold held that the actor is divided into two parts, or selves: the player of an instrument and the instrument itself (Kubik 4-5). There are many applications of player/instrument construction, but one aspect that has been particularly relevant to my training is that it reminds the artist that one's expressiveness is largely dependent on the condition of one's instrument. A Chopin etude, for example, though played by a master musician, will sound very different on a piano that has sat neglected and out of tune than it will on a tuned, maintained concert piano. By the same token, the actor's conscious self makes choices in rehearsal which are executed by the physical self, but in performance it is the physical self that will ultimately limit or allow the conscious self to come through; that is to say, whatever the pianist has rehearsed and whatever he wishes to express through his music, it is the perfectly-tuned piano that allows and is the conduit for the pianist's performance (Kubik 5).

To tune one's instrument is the goal of movement studies for the actor, and it requires both conditioning and training: conditioning to maximize her range and the possibilities of her physical self for expressiveness, and training to learn a kinesthetic vocabulary and to develop self-awareness and aesthetic judgment. These processes necessarily take time and the rigor of discipline.

Discipline and Play

Discipline is perhaps not a word that we associate easily with creativity—we probably prefer to think of the artist at play—but every serious artist, from the slapstick clown to the tragic poet, will recognize the value of discipline and its necessity for

effective expression. The question that arises is in gauging the proper balance between discipline and play in an artist's craft—in its most obvious iteration, it is a question of balance between hard work and playful exploration, but it is also found in the tension between following rules and breaking them, and in a wonderful and mysterious "space between" set parameters, a notion which has become a key part of my approach to acting.

Meyerhold held that "Too much playfulness is self-indulgent. Too little and you never ignite your creativity. Too little discipline is unsafe and unproductive. Too much and it's no longer fun" (Kubik Assignment). One day at the beginning of an Acting I class (a course I've taught regularly during my time at the University), I invited my students to play a familiar ball-tossing game. I got them started, then stood back to watch. What I saw was a little discouraging: though it was a simple game and one they knew well, they were sloppy, unfocused, and under energized. After waiting some time to see if they would improve on their own (they didn't), I intervened and instructed them to imagine they were playing the game on national television and a huge sum of money was at stake. Almost immediately, their focus intensified and their ability to play the game perceptibly improved. Brows were furrowed and jaws were set with concentration, and although they were performing well, none of them seemed to enjoy it, and watching them was about as interesting as watching the second hand of a clock.

Deciding to try a different approach, I instructed them to pretend they were first-graders, playing this game on the playground simply for the fun of it. The energy in the room exploded—there was gleeful laughter and balls were bouncing off of the walls and ceiling. The students' focus, though, had almost completely disappeared, and their accuracy was as bad—if not worse— than when they first started to play. Eventually I

had them start the game one more time with the instruction to imagine themselves as first-graders playing the game on national television and competing for an enormous prize.

As if by magic, their "performance" became neither rigid nor messy, but dynamic. Energy was engaged but focused, the ball tosses were beautifully free but sufficiently controlled, and it was easy to see that they were enjoying the game even more than they had when they were goofing off, because there was a thrill to it that had been missing before. The engaging challenge became to play the game with focus and accuracy, but to make it appear as effortless and natural as children on a playground. And unlike the first three times they played the game, the longer they played this way, having found a balance between discipline and play, the better and more interesting it became.

Consider next this example from the world of visual art: Pablo Picasso is best known for his abstract pieces, and his work has been often caricatured as a chaotic, unplanned, nonsensical collision of elements. What makes Picasso a genius, though, is that before he started breaking all the rules, he thoroughly mastered them. One might make the mistake of assuming that Picasso did not paint realistic portraits because he did not know how, but to do so would be to completely fail to appreciate his artistry. A look at the painter's sketchbooks and early work shows an exquisite mastery of form, and some of his gestural drawings look like pieces of perfection that were tossed off in half a minute. When these early pieces are considered, it makes sense that having mastered his art so completely, Picasso would continue to fuel his creativity by pushing the boundaries of it. His early discipline in learning to draw accurately then served and informed the freedom and play of his abstract work.

Even paintings that appear to be so many splashes of paint can succeed as fine art when they are undergirded with the discipline that comes from understanding and utilizing the "rules" and breaking them intentionally. By the same token, a painting that may be technically well-rendered will fail as art if the artist has surrendered all of his passion and play to mere formalism, creating a painting that tells only of the rules of composition, perspective, and proportion.

Similarly, when a great deal of thoughtful preparation goes into an actor's work—analyzing form and function, learning lines and blocking precisely, the actor has laid the foundations upon which to play; he or she has learned the "rules" and can intentionally play within them or break them, making choices and acting on impulses that are informed by study and preparation. Working on the play *Rhinoceros* while at the University was in many ways a study of this principle. Like Picasso the painter, Ionesco the playwright pushed the boundaries of his form and gave us a play that demanded an extra measure of discipline from the actors in order to adopt the stylized physicality the script seemed to call for (and which the director explicitly asked for) and to execute the often-illogical but artistically precise lines. In the first scene of the play, lines from a diverse array of characters overlap in carefully orchestrated chaos. Several actors in the ensemble lacked the discipline to work in such a precise way; failing to recognize that others were listening carefully for particular cues, they preferred improvisation and were often not listening when their own cues came. It was frustrating and genuinely distressing for the rest of the ensemble. By contrast, in other scenes in which I worked closely with several of my graduate colleagues, we found that when we had worked deliberately to establish a sturdy and reliable framework of lines and blocking, we had the freedom to play within

that work and bring fresh and lively choices to every performance. Here, again, it is the combination of discipline and play and *the constant tension between them* that makes an actor's work, like a painter's masterpiece, compelling.

Now, "the constant tension between them" is, for me, ultimately, the most interesting and illuminating aspect of the relationship between discipline and play in an artist's work. First, in a concrete sense, discipline does not always simply balance play; very often, the tension that exists between them arises because it is discipline that *enables* play, as with Picasso's art and the actors' work in *Rhinoceros*, and also in Meyerhold's model of the physical self permitting the expression of the conscious self; the discipline of tuning one's instrument is what enables the music to pour out unobstructed. Taken in a more metaphysical sense, though, discipline is found in the set parameters of form.

The poet Robert Frost, who wrote verse in traditional forms, famously scoffed that writing free verse was like playing tennis with the net down (Frost 314). What Frost knew from experience was that poetic forms are not merely word puzzles to challenge or limit a poet's creativity, but that the constraints, or discipline, if you will, of a form, far from limiting a poet's creativity, actually *fuel* the poet's creativity. The net is what makes the game worth playing and makes it interesting to watch, and the form of a poem is likewise what engages both a poet's skill and creativity. In this sense, the "constraints" of lines, of blocking, of any kind of discipline for an actor in performance are like the containing walls of a racquetball court, which ricochet balls like impulses of artistic energy. Without a net or without walls, the ball or the energy or the impulse has nothing to do and nowhere to go.

My experience with stage combat is an excellent example of this dynamic tension,

because both sides of the dichotomy are so essential to a good stage fight: it is essential to practice a fight with a tremendous amount of discipline and to follow the planned fight choreography in performance in order to ensure the safety of the actors, but within the necessarily strict walls of this particular form, the actors must also in every performance exercise their sense of play to "sell" a fight that looks dangerous and exciting to the audience.

How an actor harnesses this tension between discipline and play is one of the mysteries of the art, but as I try to explain it to my own students in layman's terms, the conversation goes something like this:

> ME: 'Have you ever watched or read something you enjoyed even though you already knew the ending?'
>
> STUDENT: 'Well, yes...'
>
> ME: 'So what was the point, if you already knew the ending?'
>
> STUDENT: 'I liked the story.'
>
> ME: 'So you liked knowing how we got to the ending—the journey.'
>
> STUDENT: 'Right, I mean, I didn't know everything that was going to happen, just how it ended.'
>
> ME: 'That's kind of what acting is like. You know the lines and the blocking and all of that, but every single time you perform, you have to go on that journey.'
>
> STUDENT: 'But isn't the journey the same every time?'
>
> ME: 'Nope! That's what makes live theatre so exciting—like the expression about reading between the lines? It's about...wiggle room. Some things are set down in black and white and you're in big trouble with the director and your

> fellow actors when you mess with them. But around every single one of those things, there is a kind of *space between*, and that's where the magic happens.'

It seems to me that the "illusion of the first time," the emotion, and all the indefinable magic of a compelling performance can be found in the "space between." Walls, tennis nets, poetic forms, actors' lines and every other conceivable kind of constraint are the necessary boundaries that make a "space between" possible. The mastery of our art is in discipline that frees and fuels play, in the honing our instincts so that there is an uninterrupted flow from impulse to action, so that we as actors can, through dedicated training, arrive at a creative state in which, without having to stop and think about it, we instinctively jam, dance, ripple, romp, and caper on each point of possibility in a scene or a...well, it is, after all, called a *play.*

Working on Your Feet

I conclude this chapter by discussing a seismic shift in my process, which was brought about by my experiences in the devised theater class I took midway through my training.

Tasked with creating new devised works with different teams approximately every two weeks, I was plunged into an atmosphere of hectic creative collaboration and found, to my surprise, how much I thrived on it. Every piece brought new discoveries, but two in particular stand out as valuable examples of working in this way.

For one project, our task was to create a piece that was developed around a piece of music. My collaborators and I chose an up-tempo piece that we found rich with possibility, and our approach began with playing the music and taking turns improvising to it while one team member recorded the improv with a cell phone camera. Some of our

improvisations were downright silly, others were epic, a few were disturbingly bizarre, and one of them, the one we ultimately chose to develop, was grounded in the ordinariness of strangers sitting beside one another at a bus stop. As we continued to develop the piece, we focused intensely on the tiniest details of timing, tempo, costuming, and gesture to refine and continue to clarify our storytelling. The project was one of the most studied and technical scenes I have ever done, and it was entirely developed by trying new things. Little was pre-planned; much was improvised—but when we found something we liked, we kept it and refined it. There was never a written script—it was entirely created "on its feet," as we say in theater parlance. The result was a finely-crafted whimsical scene, eminently repeatable (down to the finest details), which left the audience smiling by gently and humorously reminding them of the extraordinariness of ordinary encounters.

Another piece that stood out was created around a series of props chosen by our classmates. My graduate colleague Mike Long and I worked long hours before finally hitting upon a style we both enjoyed, but when the idea came, we swiftly found our piece coming together. We used a character Mike had already created in a previous UVa class—a detective/adventurer by the name of Martin Buchanan—and developed my role as Margaret Henkel, Martin's plucky sidekick and eventual love interest. Many of our devising decisions were driven by architecture; we staged our piece in a classroom that features a wall-mounted ladder up to an open storage loft. Because our scenario involved Martin and Margaret having been tied to the Eiffel Tower by their arch-nemesis and using their combined intelligence and resourcefulness to escape, the architectural environment was perfect for a theatrical sense of comic peril. After practical

experimentation with this unique space, we decided that Martin and Margaret's escape would center on descending the wall-mounted ladder. Much of our development of the scene involved playing on this ladder, which, at an actual height of 10 feet in the room, we imagined as a 200-foot high scaffolding attached to the tower. Working on our feet, we discovered the best part of our scene, a lazzo (or comic bit) in which Martin and Margaret, tied to opposite ends of the rope, find themselves ascending and descending rapidly as the wind throws off Martin's "complex system of counterweights." It was a delight for us and for our audience—they were in stitches!—and I never forgot that the best part of the piece had been developed not while we sat in front of a screen and wrote a script, but on its feet, as we actively engaged with each other and the space.

Because I enjoy reading, writing, and analysis, I think my acting process has often leaned on these cerebral processes. I don't discount their value, but I have found that they work best when they are in conjunction, or perhaps even in dialogue, with the work I do on my feet. If a choice presents itself, I am now less inclined to ponder its significance before I have tried it, just for the sake of letting it out into the air, to see where it takes me. As both an actor and a teacher, I now hear myself saying, "Don't think—just do!" The thinking matters, but it is a part of my process that I increasingly feel belongs outside the studio; it belongs to preparatory work and post-analysis. As my formal training concludes, I find myself relying more and more on what my body can tell me when I'm working on my feet—when I am, in effect, letting my body do the thinking for me.

Chapter 4
Lessons from the Classroom: A Method to My Madness

My Acting I classroom serves as a laboratory of sorts for my experiments in methodology, and, in tracing that journey, I think it may be useful to describe what my attitudes and experiences were before I began teaching:

As an undergraduate, I began taking acting classes from two teachers, neither of whom explicitly taught a specific methodology, though their teaching drew from the work of Viola Spolin, Stella Adler, Anne Bogart, and others. At the time, though, when I considered their respective approaches, I simply thought of my first teacher as the internally focused one—she emphasized thinking and feeling as the character would, and wanting what the character wanted; and I thought of my second teacher as the externally focused one—he strove to teach expressive physicality and taught us the importance of vocal inflection. Many of my fellow students strongly preferred one teacher and his or her approach over the other, but my instincts said that taking classes from both would get me the best training overall—and the best results on stage—because I would have learned multiple "ways in."

It was a bit of an accident that I got through three acting classes without reading any methodological texts—the department was in transition, classes were being restructured, and I slipped by. For a long time it didn't trouble me that I had no clear methodology; I knew an objective was what you wanted and a tactic was how you got it, and the rest was a mysterious combination of imagination and technique. My process then (as now, really) was "do whatever works," and I actually found myself a bit suspicious of methodologies, feeling they were probably more restrictive than creatively stimulating. Mostly I wondered if Wordsworth was right that "we murder to dissect"

(Wordsworth 481). Why did it matter how art was achieved? The artistic process remains ultimately mysterious, and prying too far into the mystery of my own imagination seemed like risky business—I might start second-guessing myself and ruin whatever it was I was getting right. As Lady Bracknell says, "Ignorance is a delicate, exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone" (Wilde 33).

Nevertheless, my curiosity and my passion for books got the better of me, and I read Uta Hagen and *An Actor Prepares* one summer, and then read Sonia Moore's *The Stanislavski System* as I prepared for a role in Arthur Miller's beloved play *The Crucible*. I took these books very seriously, and resolved to adopt the techniques I read about. I interrogated my character's inner life, I observed every detail of color and texture in my surroundings, I attached an objective to every action, and I became intensely aware of my spine...and I was abysmally bad. The director was baffled by me—what was wrong? Why couldn't I just *act*, the way I used to? I was baffled, myself. After all, I was only trying to do it *right*! But all my work had only succeeded in trapping me inside my own head, and my performance only became tolerable again when I abandoned the effort and went back to "the way I used to do it," which was to rely on instincts instead of intellectual processes.

Despite that nearly disastrous solo experiment, I continued to be curious about approaches to acting, and I read Stella Adler and others' books, but I was warier than ever of trying to implement the methods I read about. In my work after college, I found I got better results from observing other actors and asking them questions, from paying close attention to directors' notes, and from continuing to nurture my imagination, and it was from this decidedly unmethodical primordial soup that I began to teach Acting I in

the fall of 2011, armed with Robert Benedetti's slim textbook *The Actor In You*—my life raft, since I realized that, while I might get by as a performer with a philosophy of "do whatever works," it wasn't a very practicable approach to teaching. I needed methodology.

One of the greatest struggles I had when I was first teaching from Benedetti's Stanislavski-based text was that I still felt uncertain of my own grasp of various concepts and terms, and didn't dare delve into them too deeply in the classroom; as an inexperienced teacher, I feared finding myself in uncharted waters in front of my students, afraid I'd lose whatever credibility I had. We stuck with the basics: identify your objectives, your obstacles, and your tactics. I built games and exercises on these concepts and required my students to do some modest written analysis of their scene work, but when it came time to perform their scenes, it seemed that almost never were their performances connected to their analysis. What I saw in front of me were self-conscious students making unimaginative choices, with stakes so low it was hard to suppress a yawn. I watched in frustration and disbelief: *We just talked about this! Why don't they get it?*

I patiently questioned them about their objectives and tactics, and even when they were giving me good answers, their performances remained inhibited, as though there were a threshold they couldn't or wouldn't cross, or even a glass ceiling they couldn't perceive, but which dampened everything they did. So as I coached them, I went with my instincts: I'd ask for a change of staging, a different tempo, a new emphasis on a line—and suddenly, it would *work*. To my students I seemed like a kind of magician as I coached their scenes: I could identify a problem, suggest an adjustment, and *voilà!* My

students were amazed, which was great for my ego, but not great for their ability to solve problems and repeat the results on their own, within a system they understood.

Moreover, I found that in virtually every case an external adjustment, even a completely arbitrary one, got *results* when an interrogation of the internal process didn't, and this was when I began to seriously wonder whether Stanislavski was really the most useful approach for beginning actors[1]. Seeking answers, I thought back to some of the things I knew of Viola Spolin's theater games and improvisations, and more particularly I thought about a Viewpoints workshop I had taken when I was a high school student, before I'd had a single acting class. Interested in these approaches, I did what I always do—I hit the books.

After spending some time reading up on Viola Spolin's imaginative and action-focused improvisations and Anne Bogart's externally focused nine Viewpoints, I took a look at my teaching plans and evaluated how I might implement a second, more externally driven methodology, since I wasn't willing (or permitted, in any case) to discard the Stanislavski-based text altogether. In the fall of 2012, I structured the class to focus for almost the first half of the semester on explorative play, which I based largely on Spolin's and Bogart's ideas, though I did not expound a methodology to my students. My focus was on helping them to become less self-conscious while being more self-aware, a seeming paradox that is best achieved, from my observation, when students are intensely focused not just on *doing* a task, but on *how* they are doing it, with an awareness of tempo, spatial relationship, topography, etcetera. In tandem with games and exercises which were derived largely from Viewpoints, I taught the core Stanislavski

[1]By which I mean the version of Stanislavski's methods popularized in the 20th century United States, which focuses on internal motivations without emphasizing his later work on the method of physical actions.

principles of using tactics to overcome obstacles in order to achieve objectives, behaving truthfully within the given circumstances.

Then, when we began scene work, I introduced the terminology of the nine Viewpoints and suggested them as a complementary way of looking at scenes, "from the outside in." Students in both sections I taught that semester seemed to accept both methodologies and to shift easily between them in their scene work. For one scene, I might ask the students to raise the stakes (in a sense, to intensify their objectives), and in another scene, I might ask the students to find ways to explore architecture. In both cases, they understood what was meant and they understood why it worked—a vast improvement from the haphazard coaching of my first semester.

Concurrent with my new approach to teaching in the Fall 2012 semester was my own study of methodology in the graduate acting curriculum. As we wrestled with Stanislavski's theories, and especially the terminology that has developed for them, I became increasingly frustrated with the Method, or the System, or whatever anybody wanted to call it. It seemed to me an entirely flawed methodology, which over-intellectualized the work of acting. If I want to intimidate my scene partner, for example, so that I can get the power back in the relationship so he won't hit me again, is my objective "to intimidate," or "to regain power," or are these tactics serving the objective of avoiding getting hit? And does getting the terminology right really matter, so long as I convincingly play the scene? More than that, I remained puzzled by the usefulness of "scoring a script" in the cold, dispassionate solitude of my living room, making choices about my acting alone and in advance, instead of discovering those choices on my feet in rehearsal, in the heat of the moment, as an instinctive reaction to my scene partners and

other stimuli in the space. At the time I concluded that scoring a script is an intellectual exercise that trains the brain to be able to make stronger choices on stage, but that the exercise is not useful in itself, in the same way that learning algebra makes one a better critical thinker, though one may never use the quadratic equation to solve life's problems. I also felt that Stanislavski's theories were developed with a linear narrative in mind, in which one action always leads to another. How does that work in a play like *Rhinoceros*, or *God's Ear*? If the Method were a religion, I noted, I'd be having a major crisis of faith.

Nevertheless, I had to admit to myself that the internal process is important, and that nobody I know of has yet articulated it *better* than Stanislavski. I have come to believe that Stanislavski's approach is an excellent frame for an actor to analyze a script—it *is* useful in itself, because it offers an actor the tools and the vocabulary to identify and trace dramatic action. It helps ground an actor in relationship, and—far from trapping an actor inside her head—should also help an actor to direct her energy outward, because objectives are (or should be) always focused on having an effect on someone or something outside the actor. The analysis that one does in "cold, dispassionate solitude" *does* carry into one's performance on stage. When I played Katharine Stockmann in *An Enemy of the People*, for instance, I didn't necessarily focus "in the moment" on my super-objective to hold my family together at any cost, but having once identified that super-objective, it became was the foundation of every choice I made in performance. Moreover, while I have doubted the relevance of Stanislavski's work to non-linear theatre, I have since considered that the fundamentals of objective, obstacle, tactics, and *relationship* remain paramount, whether actions and consequences proceed logically or illogically, and in this sense, Stanislavski's theories and vocabulary will always be

relevant.

It seems to me that my early supposition as an undergrad was correct—the best approach to acting, or teaching acting, is to combine an awareness of the internal process with an awareness of the external, kinesthetic manifestation of that process. The two are actually inseparable, but while an internal change *can* change what's going on outside, I have found that changing something external is almost guaranteed to change the internal process. It's simply a clearer, more concrete "way in" for a teacher to shape a student's performance, and it seems to me that it stimulates creativity, bypassing the intellectual processes of the mind and accessing the actor's instincts.

My mantra to my students has often been "What you *do* changes how you *feel.*" I have seen this borne out by my students' work and my own work, and in my exposure to the work of Meyerhold and Michael Chekhov, and as I consider how my process as an actor and my approach as a teacher has developed and will continue to develop, I have found myself coming almost inevitably full circle, back to Stanislavski, who (according to Sonia Moore) said, "The first fact is that the elements of the human soul and the particles of a human body are indivisible" (Moore 17).

Being a teacher has made me no longer suspicious of methodology, but committed to rigorously investigating it. I continue to be interested in the work of Michael Chekhov, and find myself revisiting Sonia Moore's book *The Stanislavski System*, which emphasizes that great teacher's later work developing the method of physical actions. I will continue to teach complementary "inside-out" and "outside-in" methodologies, but I anticipate that I will continue to lean heavily on external adjustments as I coach and direct students. After all, it's difficult to coach a student on

what she's thinking, but I can certainly coach her on what she's *doing*. And an actor, as my students learn on the first day of class, is someone who acts—who *does.*

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Appendix:
Video Supplement

This video supplement contains three contrasting monologues which will be used for video auditions and on my professional website: Nina from Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, Portia from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, and Anne from Arthur Miller's *All My Sons.* I have also included a video that I created as a resource for the cast of *A Flea in Her Ear* in the spring of 2014, for which I served as the production's voice coach.