

It's Not About Me: An Acting Portfolio, Artist Statement, and Teaching Statement

Ralph Randy Risher, Jr.

Charlottesville, VA

Bachelor of Arts, College of Charleston, 2016

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Department of Drama

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Colleen Kelly, Primary Advisor

Marianne Kubik, Committee Member

Lauren Elens, Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This document seeks to provide a culminating record of three years of graduate study, teaching, and performance in the University of Virginia's Masters of Fine Arts in Acting program. Its aim is to emphasize the value of ensemble work in theatre. It contains three chapters comprised of artist and teaching statements, a journal of portfolio creation, transcripts of digital submissions, a head shot and current resume, two biographies, and recent production photographs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One

Artist Statement.....	1
Teaching Statement.....	3

Chapter Two

Journal of Portfolio Creation.....	5
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Chapter Three

Copies of Portfolio Material.....	7
Personal Statement Transcript.....	8

Supplemental Materials

Head Shot.....	9
Resume.....	10
Biographies.....	11
Production Photographs.....	12
Permissions.....	16

ARTIST STATEMENT

Dreams change. Discovering the truth of that on a stage eleven years ago was a revelation and an opportunity for growth, not only as an artist but also as a human being. Until that auspicious moment, the shows I worked on had always been an insular experience; they were about me. I was incapable of acknowledging the true significance of other artists, even while trying to impart some kind of empathy to audiences. To paraphrase Confucius, I couldn't know what I didn't know.

In December of 2008, new wisdom didn't just quietly present itself, it roared, forever altering my artistic and world perspectives. I was playing Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. It was tech week, and we were running a cue-to-cue. I wasn't very well memorized with my lines. The process was slow and I could sense that the Technical Director was getting frustrated. I had no idea I was an obstacle. After many false starts, the TD's voice finally came over the god mic and asked me to say my lines as they were written so that he could set the cues for lights, sound, fog, flying systems, etc. Standing center stage in that moment, I was flooded with an awareness of responsibility I had not previously considered. All the people involved in building and running the show filed through my brain. I realized that, in order for all of those artists to do their jobs well, I had to do my job well. Not for me, but for all involved, for the story, and ultimately, for the audience.

It wasn't about me.

Never before had I felt a more profound understanding of dramatic function, of my purpose as an actor within the context of any ensemble work. And it's all ensemble work. It's about everyone—onstage, backstage, audience, house workers, and even those who are never seen or heard from. Without the whole there is no whole.

It's not about me.

I sensed that theatre could help others and started looking for ways in which I could learn more, so that I could have a better understanding—an education—of the powerful art form in which I had been working and how I could participate in more fulfilling and useful ways. I went back to the College of Charleston to finish the BA in Acting Performance I had abandoned fifteen years prior. I took elective courses, in addition to my major's core curriculum, that would help me to broaden my perspectives. I enrolled in theatre history classes, dramaturgy, dramatic theory and criticism, and African-American theatre. I started to grasp the magnitude of how much there was to learn about theatre and realized I had only just begun.

Wanting more, I sought out and found a place in the University of Virginia's MFA professional actor training program. Through classes with my cohort in acting, movement, and voice, my understanding of the importance of ensemble expanded. I came to believe that theatre is truly about the study of human behavior and how theatre artists can transform that knowledge into empathy, not only for audiences but also for each other. Guiding my Acting 1 classes through the building of ensemble each semester furthered my resolutions as I watched my students discover empathy for each other and themselves.

I discovered a more hands-on approach in roleplay simulation work. While working as an actor with students and practitioners in UVA's School of Medicine, I found my dramatic function is primarily as a learning resource. In any given Standardized Patient or Compassionate Care session, my job is to support the individual participant, not myself.

Again, it's not about me.

It's not going to be about me. And I don't want it to.

Acting is a powerful discipline in which I can better understand human behavior, mine and yours. It shows me what it means to have empathy and gives me opportunities to feel compassion for others. It also allows me to share that empathy and compassion with audiences and fellow artists. Our world is often prone to division. Theatre shows me opportunities for inclusion. It demands that I see how our human behaviors make us alike rather than different. And it gives me the tools to offer that to others.

It's not about me.

Theatre is about all of us.

TEACHING STATEMENT

The work of an actor is a deep analysis of human behavior. It is an examination of both the character portrayed and the actor themselves. This can be frightening. Acting is, at its essence, a vulnerable activity. It is an actor's job not only to investigate all of the intricacies of their characters but to also present those characters—in all of their glorious dramatic function—to an audience. Learning is challenging for students who are new to this sort of vulnerability. A student who is not inhibited by fear is open to learning. Fear can come in many forms: “Will I look stupid?” “Will I fail?” “Will I get hurt?” When students are unencumbered with such distresses, they are more capable of engagement, presence, and courage.

To this end, I have found success in creating an encouraging space for students to feel free to explore the basic elements of acting. I strive to create and maintain a malleable and open space for my students to explore, to be themselves, to dare, to fail, and to grow. Especially in a classroom environment, an actor has to find a way to accept that they are going to be judged, by me and by their peers. But this judgement can be offered in a constructive and compassionate manner.

“Will I remember my lines?” “Did I make the right choices?” “Have I committed deeply enough to those choices?” These are challenges I have heard students express. I utilize significant methods that can help students confront their anxieties and focus on the work.

Ensemble building is the foundation of my classes. This structure in the first few weeks of class ensures that the semester does not become disjointed and ineffective. With exercises based in theatrical and human presence, I gently offer students opportunities to find compassion and empathy for each other and courage and willingness in themselves. All of my ensemble work fosters inclusivity, authenticity, and presence. I remind the ensemble of their shared humanity and their likenesses and ask them to remain respectful and open. These exercises help students find these ideals as a group of people who are increasingly trusting of and comfortable with one another.

Being present and aware myself challenges me to remain flexible and attentive to the needs of each student and the ensemble as a whole. I start each semester with a conversation about presence. Using presence authority Patsy Rodenburg's Three Circles of Energy begins the conversation and exploration of presence. The discussion is an open forum for what presence means, and what it could mean, on and off stage. The exploration is performed through interactive, guided group exercises of kinesthetic movement and awareness, vocal work, and Meisner repetition and reaction. Rodenburg says in *American Theatre Magazine*,

In Second Circle, your energy is focused. It moves out toward the object of your attention, touches it and then receives energy back from it. You are living in a two-way street—you give to and are responsive with that energy, reacting and communicating freely. You are in the moment—in the so-called ‘zone’—and moment to moment you give and take.¹

¹ Gener, Randy. “The Naked Voice.” *American Theatre*, 1 Jan. 2010.

These practices are crucial for open and honest group work. There is certainly individual work to be done, but my class is also an ensemble effort of mutual support and trust.

With a detailed syllabus, I am still able to find room for adapting to the students' best interests. I was once challenged with teaching the intricacies of power exchange between characters while my students were working on two-person scenes. My instincts, experience, and education allowed me to instantly create an obstacle course (tug of war, ball tossing, block work, etc.) so they could physicalize their scenes and understand character objectives and obstacles. Another recent epiphany occurred while my students were playing a theatricalized version of tag and I was able to make clear what has previously been a challenging concept to impart: Character Objective: I don't want to be it. Character Obstacle: Neither does anyone else. Character Tactics: How will I change my physical and vocal actions to get what I want? Run? Hide? Freeze?

Many students have written of their personal breakthrough experiences in my class, discovering they are capable of more than they imagined. And I get to watch that happen. Recently, I saw and heard a student discover his breakthrough during a performance. He was completely committed to, and focused on, his character, his scene partner, the story he was telling, and the moment. I could see his surprise at his own newfound ability to suspend our entire class in the tautness of what he and his scene partner were creating. I watched him decide to trust the moment. What happened after that was one of the most provocative interactions I have ever seen between two actors. All observers—myself and the other students—were held in thrall. This same student actor later commented,

I completely zoned out of any other thoughts and feelings not pertaining to my partner and the scene. I for the first time felt completely focused on someone else, waiting to hear what they had to say and letting my response come naturally. I knew this was the breakthrough because I was so consumed, so dialed in, and so engaged in something that everything else went dark. I felt that performance. I enjoyed that performance because I knew I gave everything I had, hit every line, and showed my emotion and not the emotion I perceived [my character] would show. I learned in class that the most important thing I can do is be present in mind, body, and voice.²

Learning of such breakthroughs for my students is when I know teaching acting is a valuable and noble endeavor that can encourage not only compelling theatrical techniques but also focus, mindfulness, and confidence.

² Student journal assignment, DRAM 2020-004, Acting 1, Spring 2019.

JOURNAL OF PORTFOLIO CREATION

In the process of choosing monologues to record for my thesis, I've sought works that require acting techniques prevalent in my theatrical, graduate school, and personal life experiences. Human behavior is often (if not always) complex, elastic, and ambiguous, and acting is a dynamic medium in which those characteristics can be revealed. Such theatricalized revelations happen in simultaneous time and space with an audience, evoking empathy and compassion and shared human experience. There are some emotional turmoils and wonders that our species are just not capable of communicating with words. As an actor, I can use my voice and body to attempt to replicate these would-be mysteries, to show our similarities, remove shame, and prove that none of us are really completely alone in our thoughts and feelings.

I'm interested in working on various styles, as well. My training at UVA has included theatre genres from many eras, and I want my thesis to reflect that. My search led me to monologues from George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, and Mark Medoff's *The Wager*.

This final semester's acting class began with a George Bernard Shaw workshop led by voice trainer and Shaw guru, Jan Gist. With exposure to—and work on—several Shaw plays, I finally gravitated to a work I'd already known most of my life: *Pygmalion*. I knew the character of Henry Higgins because of a heavy musical theatre background and a long affinity for *My Fair Lady*, a musical adaptation of *Pygmalion*. I repeatedly borrowed the VHS recording from the library as a teenager. But I'd never actually considered I might be appropriate for the role of Higgins. I suppose my age-appropriateness kind of snuck up on me. When I realized that not only was I now age appropriate for the role but also that it would give me the opportunity to display some of the techniques I've learned, I knew I had to include it in my thesis.

Higgins is a human being conflicted with the vulnerability of loving another and a tradition of pragmatic self-reliance. In the monologue, he is desperately (but with control, cuz Shaw) trying to make sense of his deepening feelings for Eliza Doolittle. But love isn't something that makes sense, and Higgins equivocates between his newly found undeniable feelings and his need to control the world around him in the fashion he's accustomed to—the fashion he devised, really. He is protective of himself and his rituals and finds it seemingly impossible to fathom what another person in his life could do to that self-stability. He is trying to be vulnerable to Eliza but doesn't know how to remain so and isn't entirely sure he wants to.

Fluctuating between two dichotomous states of being and trying to stay in the middle are things we've worked on in acting classes. I attempt to demonstrate this back-and-forth in my filming, while remaining true to Shaw's somewhat Chekhovian, Teflon character trope.

The *Troilus and Cressida* monologue is one I've worked on for the past four years. In fact, it's the monologue that helped get me into the UVA Acting MFA program. Here, Troilus secretly witnesses his betrothed, Cressida, promise her love to Diomedes. Something snaps in Troilus, and in his trauma he frantically clutches at logic in order to disprove what he sees with his own eyes. Since logic can't discredit the physical proof of Cressida's infidelity, Troilus splits his

entire world into two parallel universes. He builds a case throughout the monologue, searching for any kind of calming of his inner storm before accepting his cruel reality.

Like Tevye in *Fiddler on the Roof*, Troilus struggles with the dialectics of his reality; “On the one hand...” Cressida is cheating on me before my eyes. And “On the other hand...” that obviously isn’t Cressida; it’s Diomed’s Cressida. My Cressida would never betray me.

The “If this...then that” of Troilus’ logic is another technique I’ve practiced in acting classes. How do I portray a character whose logical mind can’t deny his illogical reality, and vice versa? I aim to make Troilus’ bi-fold argument clear in my filming.

Finally, my contemporary monologue from *The Wager* was a no-brainer. I’ve been looking for a monologue with this theme for years and knew I had to do it before I even got to the end. Medoff’s character Ron has finally been pushed to the limit and can no longer maintain his awkward attempts at composure. Ron blames Leeds for provoking Honor, Ron’s wife, to cheat on him with Ward, Leeds’ roommate. It’s complicated.

But what really drew me to this piece was the laughing. And the crying. And the in between. Laughing hysterically, Ron insists that Leeds ask him what he finds so funny. The humor is purely ironic to Ron, but he must laugh or he’ll cry. Most people would prefer to do the former; Laughter is fun, crying sucks. Laughing and crying are incredibly close sensations in human emotion. They are both cathartic, and they can both physically convulse the human body.

When does laughter become tears? When do tears become laughter? One of many things I’ve learned in acting classes is how to incorporate Newton’s Laws of Motion into my characters’ objectives. The first law states, “Every object in a state of uniform motion will remain in that state of motion unless an external force acts on it.” I plan to search for the tension between laughing and crying, test and stretch the boundaries, and find the external force of change.

COPIES OF PORTFOLIO MATERIAL

Monologues

***The Wager* by Mark Medoff**

You're supposed to ask me what's so funny. Ask me what's so funny. There's a great deal of humor here. Go ahead, give yourself a treat—ask me about the humor here. What's so funny, Stevens? What's so funny, you ask. What's so funny is how funny this isn't. That's what's so funny. God, that's funny. Listen to this, Leeds, this is funny. You see, we didn't really love each other when we got married. Funny, huh? I don't know what we did do if we didn't love each other, but I know we didn't. You know how I know? My mother told me. She said, You don't really love each other. She was right. Now, tell the truth ... that's funny! But the funniest part of all, Leeds—maybe forty times funnier than that is that I grew to really love her and she didn't grow to really love me. God, that's funny. (Permission for use in appendix.)

***Troilus and Cressida* by William Shakespeare**

This, she? no, this is Diomed's Cressida:
 If beauty have a soul, this is not she;
 If souls guide vows, if vows be sanctimonies,
 If sanctimony be the gods' delight,
 If there be rule in unity itself,
 This is not she. O madness of discourse,
 That cause sets up with and against itself!
 Bi-fold authority! where reason can revolt
 Without perdition, and loss assume all reason
 Without revolt: this is, and is not, Cressid.
 Instance, O instance! strong as Pluto's gates;
 Cressid is mine, tied with the bonds of heaven:
 Instance, O instance! strong as heaven itself;
 The bonds of heaven are slipp'd, dissolved, and loosed;
 And with another knot, five-finger-tied,
 The fractions of her faith, orts of her love,
 The fragments, scraps, the bits and greasy relics
 Of her o'er-eaten faith, are given to Diomed.

***Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw**

Now, I haven't said I wanted you back at all. But we are talking about you, not about me. If you come back I shall treat you just as I have always treated you. I can't change my nature; and I don't intend to change my manners. The question is not whether I treat you rudely, but whether you ever heard me treat anyone else better. You never asked yourself, I suppose, whether I could do without you. I can do without anybody. I have my own soul; my own spark of divine fire. But I shall miss you, Eliza. I have learnt something from your idiotic notions: I confess that humbly and gratefully. And I have grown accustomed to your voice and appearance. I like them, rather. Leave me those feelings; and you can take away the voice and the face. They are not you.

PERSONAL STATEMENT TRANSCRIPT

Hi, my name is Randy Risher. I'm an actor. My perceptions of what it can mean to be an actor have changed a lot since I started here at UVA. I came here thinking—again—that I'd give it a go in the professional stage arena. But I struggle with making my passion an obligation. The stage actor's ideal—working eight shows a week on Broadway for as long as possible—while great for some people— isn't what I want anymore. I want to help people. And I'm finding a lot of ways here that I can do that off of a stage. I love role playing work—whether as a standardized patient, or as an actor in a study that seeks to measure compassion, or even simulating a disgruntled professor so college deans can practice difficult conversations. Like a lot of people, I struggle with selfishness, and this kind of work—for other people—helps me to be less selfish, a better person. And a better actor.

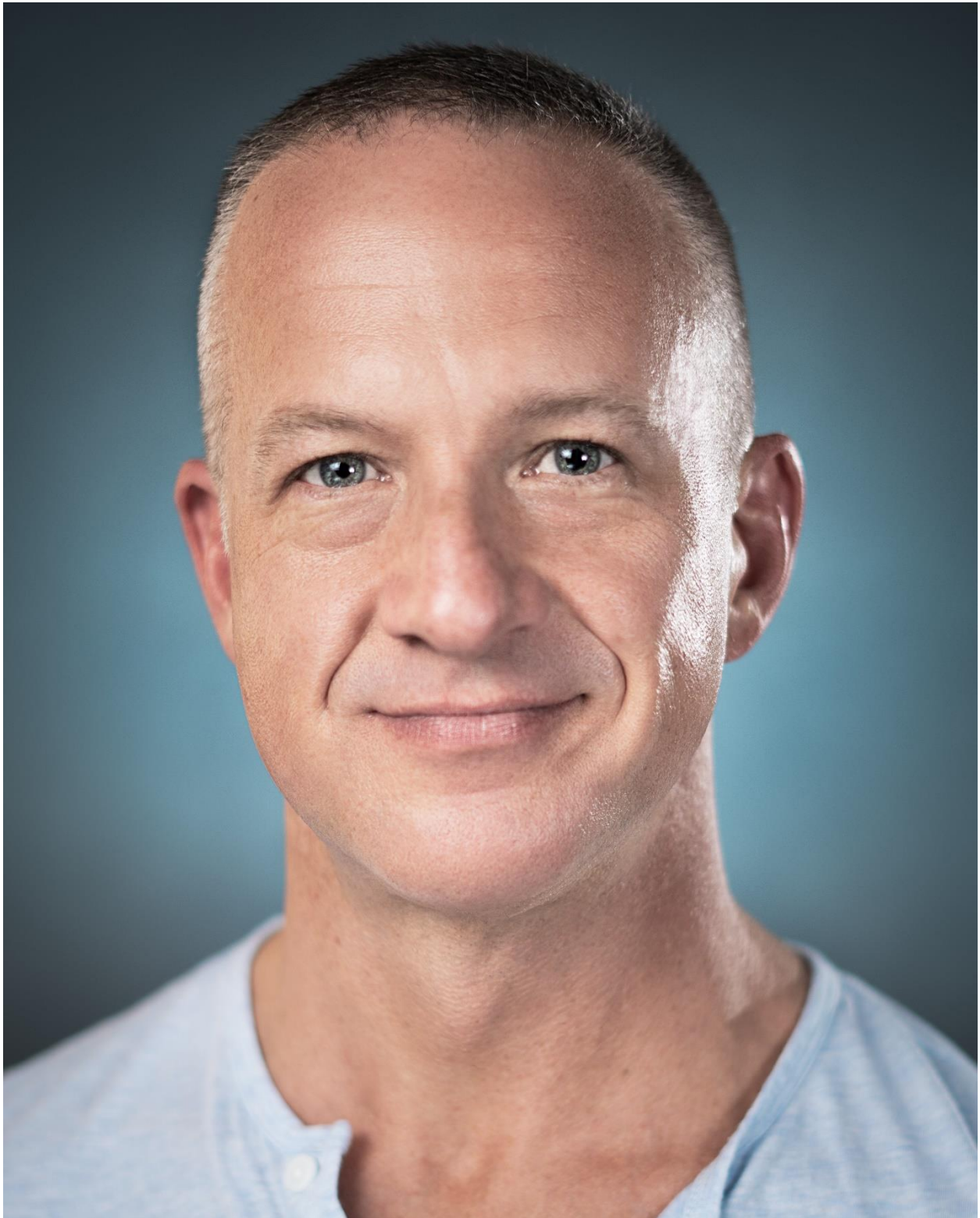
HEADSHOT

Photo Credit: Brynne Levy

RANDY RISHER EMC

randyrisher@yahoo.com 843-870-9422 HEIGHT: 5'7 EYES: Green HAIR: Brown/Gray

REGIONAL THEATRE

Virginia Repertory Company

Shakespeare in Love

Tilney/Peter

Jen Wineman

Heritage Theatre Festival

Company

David

Robert Chapel

Middletown

Tourist/Astronaut

Colleen Kelly

Village Repertory Company

Rock of Ages

Jakeith/Mayor

Keely Enright

Spamalot

Patsy

Keely Enright

Xanadu

Terpsichore/Hermes/Centaur

Keely Enright

Souvenir

Cosme McMoon

Keely Enright

The Little Dog Laughed

Mitchell Green

Keely Enright

PURE Theatre

Low Country Boil

Phillip

R.W. Smith

Threshold Repertory Theatre

Bent

Horst

Jay Danner

Footlight Players

A Streetcar Named Desire

Stanley Kowalski

Jo Ellen Aspinwall

Red Light Winter

Davis

J.C. Conway

The Full Monty

Malcolm MacGregor

Robert Ivey

Charleston Stage Company

Annie

Rooster

Marybeth Clark

A Christmas Carol

Ebenezer Scrooge

Marybeth Clark

West Side Story

Diesel

Marybeth Clark

Ragtime

Tateh

Julian Wiles

What If Productions

Kate and Sam Are Not Breaking Up

Bill

Kyle Barnette

The Practice Child

Bill

Darryl LaPlante

Midtown Productions

Reefer Madness

Jack/Jesus

Ryan Ahlert

Little City Musical Theatre Company

Rocky Horror Show Live

Brad

Ralph Daniel

ACADEMIC THEATRE

University of Virginia Department of Drama

Tartuffe

Orgon

Sabin Epstein

Urinetown

Caldwell B. Cladwell

Robert Chapel

The Winter's Tale

Camillo

Colleen Kelly

Shipwrecked! An Entertainment

Louis de Rougemont

Marianne Kubick

College of Charleston Department of Theatre and Dance

Waiting for Godot

Pozzo

Fadi Magdi

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Bottom

Mark Landis

Assassins

Guiteau

Brent Laing

TRAINING

University of Virginia Professional Actor Training Program, MFA

Colleen Kelly, Kate Burke, Marianne Kubick, Sabin Epstein

College of Charleston Theatre Performance Program, BA

Janine McCabe, Joy Vandervort-Cobb, Susan Kattwinkel, Evan Parry, Todd McNerney

BIOGRAPHIES

Randy Risher is an actor, professional role player, and teaching artist in Charlottesville, VA. He holds an MFA in Acting from the University of Virginia and a BA in Theatre Performance from College of Charleston. Randy is currently working in the Simulated Patient field and always looking for new ways to apply his theatre skills in ways that effect positive change. Randy can also often be found working in regional theatres and film.

Randy Risher is an actor from Charleston, SC, where he earned a BA in Theatre Performance from the College of Charleston and acted in a thriving theatre community for over twenty years. With an Acting MFA from UVA, Randy has also taught theatre to all age groups at some point in both Charleston and Virginia. Acting credits in Virginia include *This Cake is Dry*, *Tartuffe*, *Urinetown*, and *Shipwrecked!* with UVA Department of Drama and *Shakespeare in Love* with Virginia Repertory Company.

PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS

Tartuffe @ UVA Department of Drama 2018



Urinetown @ UVA Department of Drama 2018



Company @ Heritage Theatre Festival 2017



Middletown @ Heritage Theatre Festival 2017





Shipwrecked! The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont (as told by himself) @ UVA Department of Drama 2017

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PERMISSIONS

THESIS RIGHTS REQUEST

THE WAGER

Emailed: www.markmedoff.com/contact

2/25/2019

Dear Mr. Medoff,

I write to ask permission to use a monologue from your play, The Wager. I am an Acting Graduate Student at UVA, and part of my thesis requires videoed monologues to be kept on record with the UVA Library. I'm particularly interested in Ron's "What's-so-funny" plea to Leeds. I'm happy to pay for the right, if you'll let me know where to send the money. And if there's anything else you might need from me, I'll gladly supply that, too. Thanks so much for your time. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

Randy Risher

randyrisher@yahoo.com

843-870-9422

EMAIL REPLY THREAD:

Jessica Medoff jessicamedoff@yahoo.com

To: randyrisher@yahoo.com

Mar 30, 2019 at 6:13 PM

You are on! Video away!

Feb 27, 2019 at 7:52 PM

Hi Randy,

My name is Jessica Medoff, I am Mark's daughter. I am in charge of his business dealings, etcetera, and I received your inquiry. I have forwarded it to him and will let you know what he says. I am certain he will say yes, and thank you! I just didn't want to keep you waiting!

Warmly,

Jessica

*Original emails available on request