

Metamorphosis: My Journey from Actor to Artist

Christopher James Murray  
Houston, Texas

Bachelor of Science, Lamar University, 2009

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## Chapter 1

### The Need to Speak and be Heard

The history of our nation is filled with moments that defined generations and set us apart as a people destined to be great. Each of these moments shares one common trait; they began with someone who appealed to the people by calling them to action. To inspire us as young Americans we are asked to remember our forefathers, such as Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln, by memorizing and reciting ideas such as “all men are created equal.” These great men understood the need to appeal to the consciousness of the masses, and they did so by speaking the truth. I now approach my voice work as a speaking of the truth in rehearsal and on stage. I understand that the characters I create will have failed themselves if they do not speak the truth.

I begin text work with analysis. Analyzing the play allows me to identify the character’s education level, moral standards, and social status within the world of the play. I then start mining the text for clues and immersing myself in the language, which generates a strong emotional connection to the text. In order to understand what my character is saying I use an exercise that allows me to hear every word of the text. I start by vocalizing every word individually. This lets me hear each word, and causes me to question why my character is saying that word. I then put the phrases together one word at a time. The language is a road map to the soul of a character, and I find that my discoveries are most potent when I build the text word by word. This journey through the text gives each word its own identity. This process also helps to develop a firm understanding of the play itself.

There was a time when I thought that the character’s emotion was the key to creating a character. I figured that, as long as I found the character through emotion, the rest would just

construct itself. It's astonishing to think of now, but there was a time when I thought the text was secondary. How can you know what the character is experiencing unless you understand what they're saying? My focus on the emotions of a character may be to blame, because I felt emotion was the most important thing. The language is just as important as relationship or emotion, if not more so, because language is the way the audience experiences the story. They may see an actor emoting, and they may feel empathy, but it is the language that they grasp in order to understand and follow the plot. Language is the foundation upon which the world of the play stands.

Applying this ideology on stage is hard work. When the script lands in my hands it's time to get started. There is no time to waste when completing text work. In the irreverent words of Kate Burke, "you must become a text worker, like a sex worker." Meaning that one must undertake the task of dissecting a script, no matter how daunting, in order to find a character's truth. I get to work the moment I have the words, because there are roadblocks along the way. This past fall of 2013, I was in a production of *Crazy for You* at the University of Virginia, where I played the character of Lank, I had trouble speaking truthfully through the character of Lank. Lank's dialogue was simple enough, but I had to find a personal connection that made it real to me.

*Crazy For You*, being a comedy, led me to believe that it was something very lighthearted. It was a struggle to find out why Lank needs to be heard. Lank is a very satirical character and the butt of many jokes in the show, but there has to be some gravity to his character to justify his choices in the play. I knew there was a weight in the things he says; I just had to mine the script for evidence. While completing my text work, I discovered that his anger is not born of rage, but of fear. Lank needs to speak in the show to prevent what he feels is his inevitable end, that he will die alone. His love for Polly, the ingenue, is not something real. My job is to find Lank's truth.

Lank simply needs a companion. For instance, Lank states his reason for wanting Polly when he says “There is nobody else. You’re the only woman for fifty miles.” He wants to love and be loved. The “who” is of no importance. Lank’s humor is found in his pain, which resonates with me. Many find me to be a lighthearted, funny guy. I can always make a person laugh. I have come to realize that this is where I find my need to speak. Like many actors, I have the need to be loved. This is what I search for when I am on stage. My goal now is to make that need in life my goal on stage. My need to speak through a character is to connect with an audience. To people with whom I have no prior relationship, I offer the chance to escape, a laugh, or even a forum where they are allowed to cry without fear of judgment or shame. That is my purpose as an actor.

I also find my necessity to speak as an actor through ideas I want to convey personally but have never had the courage to convey. “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night,” is a poem that affects me deeply and is also a text that helped me to find that courage. This poem’s message is one that I have wanted to say to my own father but could never say. Knowing that this poem is deeply meaningful to him makes it that much harder. What Dylan Thomas has provided is a road map toward a connection with my father that I have never experienced, but a connection that I yearn for every time I perform it. Thomas’s poem was one of the first pieces of text that made me commit to the language in the piece. I was victorious in forming a connection with the text that every actor yearns for.

Arthur Lessac’s Experience 14, as taught in class by Professor Kate Burke, takes a speaker through a piece of text step-by-step in order to develop a rich vocal tone, while establishing a strong emotional connection to what you’re saying. Experience 14 allowed me to find this

connection by allowing the text to flow through my bones all the way to my body's core. One of these steps required me to place a piece of cork between my teeth near the back of my jaw. The process of placing the cork in my mouth forced me to connect with each vowel sound which in turn forced my mind and body to find the need to speak. The cork was there to help me focus and create full vowel sounds which led to rich, full words. It compelled me to fight the urge to fall apart when speaking the text without obstruction. When I do speak the text free of obstruction, there is no tension and the purpose of every word is clear. Though I still become overwhelmed by this piece of literature, my voice and words are complete. The sounds coming from me are full of resonance, and each clear consonant conjures the desired reaction from my audience. I also achieve the catharsis I seek when I speak the following lines from Thomas's poem:

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,  
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,  
Do not go gentle into that good night. (Thomas 122)

I can communicate in spirit to my father my understanding that life is about mistakes, but those mistakes do not devalue a man's existence.

I now crave the vocal heights I've found through Experience 14. I know that I'm on the right track because I've had vocal epiphanies along the way. I recall in particular the day three years ago when I went for a brisk walk immediately following an Experience 14. Usually on those hilly walks I would get taxed pretty quickly. This time, however, I was amazed to be able to control my breathing as I spoke long, multi-clause thoughts. I was able to recite lines from The Gettysburg Address effortlessly while making this journey, whereas, in the early stages of Experience 14 I found myself repeatedly short of breath.

When it came time to demonstrate in the class the in-studio vocal epiphanies I had experienced, I was always found lacking. When I practiced at home, I felt close to something profound, but I just could not quite reach it in class. I was anxiously waiting for the integration and the culmination of the Experience 14 sequence similar to those of my colleagues, especially one in particular. She performed The Gettysburg Address during our introduction to the exercise, and she shook my world with her work. I saw in her a new strength that I had never seen before that moment. Her vocal quality was like a breath of life. That is what I wanted to achieve so badly. Every day I felt so close to my goal. The last time I worked through The Gettysburg Address for the class, I became overcome with nerves, flying through the text so fast, and not basking in those words, not taking each one in and allowing myself to linger in those sounds. I should have revelled in each word; each one is that important. To become a master actor and a true artist, I have to fall in love with the written word. This active love affair will open doors to an understanding that will not only transform my work, but help me to find a true relationship with my audience.

The need to speak is unique for every human being, and for every theatrical character. I move forward in my career knowing that as every human being must find a voice, so too must every character. I refer to one of the great speakers of history who appealed to the humanity in all of us. When Dr. King spoke to the congregation of the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama he said, "There comes a time when times must change, and that time has arrived in Montgomery" (King 9). He tore into the conscience of his audience, which forced them into action. He said what needed to be said in order to advance our nation's destiny and improve its citizens' civil liberties. Words as important as these display the need for me to understand express text in

the way intended by the author. Here is where I find my need to speak.



## Chapter 2

### The Birth of Character:

#### A Quest for Character Through Kinesthetic Awareness and Relationship

In the hunt for creating vibrant, empathetic, and truthful characters, it is imperative that I find the character's physical life. The character's physical state of being becomes my ally when searching for communion with my partners on stage. I no longer look at my body as some simple machine that performs menial tasks, but as an instrument, not unlike a cello, that completes my repertoire of refined skills that make me a master of this craft. My body is worth more to me than I could have ever imagined. Through kinesthetic experience with acting partners and practical use on stage, I can build a rapport with my fellow actors that leads to vivid moments of character discovery and compelling storytelling.

When I began my tenure at UVa, I quickly discovered that I needed to become fully aware of my body. I did this by establishing a connection with my body, which led to an understanding of everything that my body is doing at all times. I had to learn its habits, the good and the bad, and start to rebuild my instrument in a way that would not only be advantageous toward its longevity, but conducive to creating characters. Through this process, I discovered that I had poor alignment. I slouched my shoulders, my pelvis was pushed outward, forcing my stomach forward making me appear larger than I am. These habitual inconsistencies in my body went unnoticed because this had become a comfortable habit for me. During rehearsals for *Romeo and Juliet*, at The University of Virginia, I was informed of just how awkward I looked on stage. It was clear that I had no awareness of my physical presence, and this was a disservice to my character. I had to become kinesthetically aware of my instrument. In the beginning, I mistook my

spine as the element of my body that controlled posture. I started by using the shoulder roll exercise that I learned to be sure that my back is aligned, in order to generate a release around each vertebra. I quickly found out this was a temporary fix. I found there was more pain in my back from trying to use my spine to stand upright, because I was not engaging my body's core. The core is the centerpiece of the human form. It is the place where all of the body's power is generated. The core of my body was incredibly weak when I began my training here at UVa. In order to strengthen my core, I began a routine of exercises, which including sit-ups, pelvic thrusts from a lying position, and placing a tennis ball between my knees while holding my legs at a ninety degree angle for as long as possible. Though physically daunting, these exercises have helped to build the strength of my core. I now know that a strong core is an essential building block of true kinesthetic self awareness. Once I established this understanding of myself, I was able to utilize this knowledge through practical use on stage and in the classroom, and there is still a long road ahead.

In the musical *Crazy For You* there was a moment where my character and his love interest, Irene, kiss for the first time. Robert Chapel, the show's director, desired a reaction to this kiss that was as big as the moment itself. I came up with the idea that I would do a barrel roll backwards after the kiss. When I attempted this for Professor Chapel, he found it to be very funny but felt that I could get more mileage out of the shtick if it ended in a standing position. I was able to achieve this, but not in a manner that looked effortless. My colleagues and fellow cast members, observed that the roll looked strained and worried for my safety. I tirelessly worked this moment everyday until our first tech but was still unable to complete the task. With all the core work I had done, I could not achieve this moment, and it was subsequently cut from the show. This was

only more evidence to support my belief in the core's importance to developing physical character. This moment in my career has only strengthened my resolve to transform my body into the instrument that I know it must become in order to explore every avenue of expression that my character may need. Doing so will help strengthen the connection between myself, the story, and my partners on stage.

When building kinesthetic connections with my stage partners, I learned that I must be open to receiving non-verbal cues from them so as to help build the world in which our characters reside. I believe that I have developed a better connection with some partners more than others. I find that, when I work with certain partners, there is a definite kinesthetic connection. We are able to have a physical relationship that allows us to communicate non-verbally, allowing our relationship and our work to flourish, which leads to masterful storytelling. For instance, while preparing for my SAFD Skills Proficiency Test in stage combat I was assigned two partners. I had a partner for the Unarmed portion of the test, and another for the Rapier and Dagger section. From the beginning, my unarmed partner and I had an unspoken vocabulary that made the work painless. We did not spend much time in our heads trying to piece together our routine. We simply took the phrases given and put them on their feet right away. During the first day of rehearsal, we both felt comfortable with the direction we were heading and spent our subsequent rehearsals tweaking and refining the routine. On the other hand, my R&D partner and I ran into problems every time we met. I believe this was due to our lack of the kinesthetic connection. We were never in complete communion with one another, and this affected our trust, which in turn hindered our performance. Our spacing was harsh throughout, which effected our movement through the phrases and caused our routine to look jarring. During our Skills Proficiency Test we

had to repeat a phrase when we found ourselves adrift in the routine. It is also interesting to note that we had this same hiccup throughout the rehearsal process. There were moments when my partner would forget a move and I would touch her with the blade, which is an automatic fail during testing, so I could not trust her to protect herself. This made me guarded and afraid to work openly with her. This fear was reflected in my work, which I'm sure made my end of the phrases uncomfortable for her as well. Dealing with swords is a very delicate art and can be dangerous if there is no trust between the two actors. We lacked trust, and we never found it because we were never completely connected kinesthetically.

Building these relationships with my acting partners is essential to creating story. There are ways to improve this relationship by utilizing the element of play. Take for example, the game of Twister. The goal is to get as many people tangled up in one another until you find someone's limit, and it all falls apart. I was looking for the same form of play but at a heightened state of intellectual understanding. During a Viewpoints workshop, which "is a technique for building ensemble by utilizing a set of terms given to certain principles of movement through time and space that develop a performers awareness while working on stage" (Bogart 14-15), my fellow grads and I were tasked with building a piece using music none of us had ever heard but that clearly inspired the group as a whole. The one rule was that no one could communicate verbally. I was surprised at the discoveries that came out of this exercise. I was amazed at how a character was bestowed upon me just through this seven-minute experiment. We built the piece one moment after the other, using different words like fear and surprise as catalysts every time we went through the piece. Once the piece was complete, all except one of us stepped out to watch the individual journeys of our colleagues. One by one, I could see the story unfold in front

of me in relation to what I had done to discover that we had seamlessly created solid relationships to one another. It was wonderful. Later, as I digested every element of this experience, it became clear how simple it all was. Movement, being the most primitive form of communication, unveils relationship to the audience that the text may fail to do. The exercise also created communion among the participants, who found it to be essential toward the development of a character. It was in this intense study where I found a connection with each one of my peers. It gave me chills to watch a piece come into existence with complete non-verbal communication. Still, the most important part of this process is to transition this relationship from the rehearsal space to the stage.

Developing a kinesthetic awareness of myself and framing a character's physical life is a major step in my journey to create a character. I do this because I want the character's physical life to be unique. The character must fit the period of the play. It is essential that the ensemble share this unspoken language in the show. Working on *A Flea in Her Ear*, a period farce directed by Colleen Kelly, has strengthened my belief in this idea. In the early stages of rehearsal our ensemble started working together with Viewpoints exercises in an effort to build our kinesthetic relationship. These exercises are meant to build a common physical language that can then be transferred to the world of the play. I especially valued the Viewpoints vocabulary when working on scenes with my graduate colleague who was playing the role of my wife. Because we both had previous experience exploring Viewpoints, we were able to explore our scenes with a shared vocabulary. In the past, I had felt that she and I were not fully connected when we did projects together. It was always a competition of topping one another, which always led our scene work to levels of escalation that was never intended by the author, nor by us as actors. During *Flea*, we

have found an unspoken vocabulary that allows us to explore many different elements of our journey together. There is a scene in the show where we communicate entirely in Spanish. When we were cast as lovers, I was frightened by how this might go. Not only do we have to communicate the ideas to one another, but we must also communicate the tone to our audience. In the past, I would have relied on repetition, but during this process we developed a strong kinesthetic connection which led to a strengthened level of trust, and the scene has played well every night.

As an actor, I must understand that movement from my core not only allows me to find the physical strength of my character, but it allows me to find the emotional base that the character stands upon. In our society, we have been taught the theory that the brain sends a signal to a certain part of the body in order for that part to move. This is true, but an addition needs to be made to this theory. It should be explained that the impulse from the brain must coincide with connective power generated from the body's core. For the human body, the core is the most vital element of human movement. It is where the power of human life exists. It is not by chance that the womb resides here, the place where new life is created and nurtured until birth. As I mentioned before, developing my core has given me a better kinesthetic understanding of myself. Taking this knowledge and incorporating it into performance has opened a world of possibilities to be shared onstage. Ensemble is that final building block that every actor must master. Whether it is devised theater or an Ibsen play, a group of actors must be cohesive in their approach. It is obvious that the potential for a great ensemble exists among any group of artists who are willing to explore and discover new ideas together through play. There will always be bridges to encounter and cross together. One that I believe to be important will be reactions to the troubles that will arise, as they always do, when working so closely for so long in a collaborative envi-

ronment. I combat this by maintaining a strong kinesthetic relationship with my acting partners, which can only lead to wonderful moments together onstage.

## Chapter 3

### Lessons from the Classroom: Building an Ensemble Through Play

Reaching a student can be a daunting task. I have discovered that I must continue to find unique ways to engage the student in an effort to maximize their potential to the fullest. Working with students who are approaching the work for the first time is a difficult roadblock that can hinder the process. It is imperative that I maintain an atmosphere that is conducive to learning, so that the students are fully engaged.

There always seems to be a barrier between the students and myself at the beginning of our journey together. It is understandable because there is always the feeling of the unknown. Most students who take the class do so because they believe that it will be a fun experience. In most cases, a class of twelve may only contain two or three students who plan to pursue performance outside of this classroom. A student who is essentially a lay person has no idea of what the class may consist so they tend to be somewhat guarded in the beginning. The quickest way to get them to open up to the work is to engage their inner child through play. Something as simple as playing “The Name Game” can be fun, and it has a profound effect on them. Once they start having fun, they quickly begin to trust me, and it allows us to develop a rapport that strengthens throughout the semester. Games like “Wahoo Wa” are not only a teaching tactic to create positive energy; they also allow me to get a feeler for who the students are as individuals. Having a firm idea of who they are helps me understand how to teach them.

During a game like “Zip-Zap-Zop,” I quickly discern which students are willing to let go and allow themselves to dive into the work, and which need to be coaxed. They do their best to approach the work with a professional mindset, but they cling to ideas that hinder the end prod-



uct of their work. These students tend to hold back because they feel uncomfortable once they are in front of their peers. Throughout the semester, these students maintain this identity in the classroom. It is most telling when I work with the students privately. During a private rehearsal, I can see the classwork having a positive impact on their performance. Unfortunately, once they perform for the class, it all seems to be tossed by the wayside, and they revert to the same tendencies that failed them in the first place. I believe this is due to stage fright. Breaking this fear of performance is something that must be attacked from Day One.

The first performance I require of my students is to take a poem that is deeply personal to them and perform that poem onstage at the UVa Amphitheater. The idea behind this is that the student will be challenged to perform for complete strangers while handling a text that is deeply emotional. For some, this exercise opens them up completely, and they begin to approach the work with a dedicated seriousness. For others, it can be an overwhelming task. During the discussion that follows the assignment, I try to discover what it is that keeps certain students from opening up completely. Most of them admit that it's simply stage fright that takes them to such a place. There are others who do not fully understand what it is that keeps them inhibited. It is advantageous to remind the students that their classmates are there to serve as a supportive audience. I make it clear that the studio is a safe place to experiment and that it's okay to fail. It seems that they do not fully embrace this until we reach peer critiques after their first graded performance. This is the most essential component of the class because they start to trust each other.

After the poem, the students must perform a monologue. I want them to learn to be the point of focus in their first performance. When I began teaching, I would use the first weeks of the class for partnered scenes, but I realized that during this process one student would drive the

scene while the other was content playing second fiddle. These students would try to hide, or not commit fully and allow their partner to do most of the work. I then moved to the monologue process because they must understand how to fill the space with their character alone. Though they find this incredibly scary, they start to realize that their peers are rooting for them.

Their first monologue showing is followed by a peer critique and work session. During my first few semesters at UVa, I would work with the student who performed while the rest of the class observed. I found that this did not engage the entire class, and it wasn't as beneficial toward the student who had performed under my public concentrated scrutiny. Some students felt that they were put on display while workshopping the monologues with their peers watching. Working onstage alone with me (while others observed) made them feel more insecure about performing than the actual performance itself. In an effort to make the critique process valuable to the students, I allowed the students to become more engaged by offering feedback. I opened the floor immediately following their monologues, allowing thoughts on the performance to come from students while the monologue was still fresh in their minds, instead of having them submit papers expressing those ideas after the fact. Along with the coaching, the comments from their peers seemed to resonate with them and even surprised me a few times due to the depth and practicality of their suggestions. During this process, the students start to develop a rapport with one another that helps the class move forward in our work. At this point, the class has started to develop a dynamic that can only be compared to the same that can be seen in relationships between families. They start to develop close bonds outside the classroom, which only helps to strengthen their work. I do not want to discourage this. I want the students to develop these close relationships so they can use that once they move into scene work. It is important that they begin

to trust each other so that they move from strangers to an ensemble.

Once the students feel comfortable with one another, we start to explore Viewpoints. I find it interesting that the confidence of those who are more reserved flourishes in this work. They finally find the courage to express themselves fully. I borrowed an exercise that I picked up in my movement training where a group takes portraits and studies the characters within and explores movement through kinesthetic connection, aided by the introduction of music. This exercise has always been one that awakens creativity within each student. This exploration allows them to communicate with one another nonverbally. Their instincts become very heightened. I no longer have to coax ideas out of them; instead, they feel compelled to try new things every time they take the stage. It's very pleasurable to see male athletes who are usually the last to get on board with the ideas presented in class take the reins and just let go. Once they perform these pieces for their peers, they realize just how aesthetically pleasing the human form can be. They also discover how much trust they have with their audience although they use no words. Now that the students have complete trust in themselves and their peers, I add another element to their training where technology plays a major role.

Adding the technology aspect to the class proved to be a bit daunting at first. The main problem was finding new ways to mix technology in a way that did not interfere with the acting component. I began by letting the actors film their rehearsals, but it soon became obvious that they were approaching the assignments with a film mindset rather than for the stage. Once the students and I sat down and outlined what it was that we were trying to achieve, things began to become a bit clearer as the semester progressed. The one assignment that proved to be a major success was where I sent two students to Starbucks to perform the scene *Sure Thing* from David

Ives' *All In The Timing*. They Skyped into the class, and we watched them perform live. Though there were a lot of outside elements, it turned out to be a very rewarding experience for the class and the duo who performed. I've since made it a part of the curriculum, and students jump at the opportunity to perform living theatre.

Taking students who have no prior knowledge of the work and molding them into creative, expressive artists is no easy task. Creating an atmosphere that allows them to build trust with one another is incredibly advantageous to the work that we do. They begin to look inward for inspiration. They find that they can express themselves fully and communicate with others on stage. They begin to look at theatre with fresh eyes. They no longer see theatre as just entertainment, but as a forum for human connection. They build relationships within the structure of the course and, in the end, they always find ensemble.

## Chapter 4

### My Thoughts on Acting

Character. It is what defines us all as human beings. It is the process of making personal life choices that determines our place within the rest of society. Character determines how we act in life. This is also true for actors who are developing characters for the stage. Every choice that I make on stage defines the character of my character, which influences the way I am perceived by other characters and the audience as well. This detailed attention to character development is essential, especially in the realm of theatre, where the holy grail that we seek as actors, is truth of character and the truth of life. It is this creation of character—the creation of theatrical truth—that I believe is the essence of creating life on stage. It was Stanislavsky who said "in the creative process, there is a father, the writer, the mother; the actor pregnant with the part, and the child, which is the role to be born" (Stanislavsky 127). In my time here at the University of Virginia I have been introduced to many different acting philosophies that focus on the development of character. I had prior knowledge of some of these philosophies, and others were completely foreign to me. Through exploration of various acting methods and my own experimentation on the stage, I have come to a consensus that no one acting process is the right process for me. Yet all the different philosophies contain aspects which lend themselves toward character creation. I have taken what I feel are the best aspects of various techniques and integrated them into a process that I consider to be uniquely my own.

This integration of the variety of methods has had an enormous effect on me as an actor. I have not only broadened my understanding of the different acting methods, but I have learned to put them into practice. At one time, Stanislavsky was the only process available to me to assem-

ble a character. Now I see that the search for truth in character development is not a complete science. I must be willing to accept new ideas that will help me develop character and explore new avenues of artistic expression to arrive at those new ideas, even though I may not use these ideas in performance. For example, in creating the character of Monsieur Don Homenides de Histangua in a production of *A Flea In Her Ear* at the University of Virginia, I considered Maria Aitken's ideas in high comedy and her warning to actors not to play a character based on a literary label associated with the style of the play "style is not a manner of performing" (Aitken 135). Histangua could not be a farcical buffoon just because the play itself is a farce. In thinking of Maria Aitken's warning, an actor can do themselves a disservice by believing that they can approach their work based on the label put forth by the play's style. It reinforces the idea that I cannot be lazy and say that there is one way of doing this. In other words, I cannot simply play the genre; I must still do all the leg work in order to fully develop a character. This is an example of how I have re-evaluated the process I use to build character in order to make each character more alive and vibrant. I have opened myself up to considering new ideas and new ways of expressing those ideas.

Coming out of my undergraduate training, I thought there was one single process to building character and that was the Stanislavsky-based system known as *The Method*. Developed by Lee Strasberg, *Method Acting* was and is a popular approach to developing character. Not only was this *Method* being taught by my own teachers, but I observed that every actor I admired as a young artist seemed to use this technique and find success. It's understandable why I was so caught up in the idea that *The Method* was the only method. I admired the emotional connection and depth which these actors displayed and I thought this was key to developing character. After

arriving at graduate school I discovered emotional connection and depth are important when developing character, but there are other keys to character development that are equally important.

My introduction to vocal training brought about the first noticeable changes in my approach toward building character. Prior to beginning my graduate training, I did not consider vocal awareness as anything that was too important toward character development. Of course, I knew that it was imperative that I am heard, but to score a script with each vowel sound and connective consonant link was beyond my comprehension. This awakening of vocal awareness opened my eyes to some terrible tendencies that I had as a speaker. To my horror I found that some of these tendencies had become a part of my natural way of speaking. Never was this more apparent than when I performed Shakespeare. While in a production of *Romeo & Juliet* at the University of Virginia, I found it incredibly hard to retain memorized text and I routinely received line notes. I clearly would not have been understood by my audience if I did not do something drastic. Using the Lessac Technique (as discussed in Chapter 1) I was able to pull it together in time for the show, but because I employed the technique at such a late date in the process, it was at the sacrifice of character development and very important text exploration. At that moment, it hit home that I had to become a dedicated text worker in all areas of character development or risk never reaching truth onstage. Since the production of *Romeo & Juliet*, I have tried to pour over the text early in my process to vocally build the quality of my character and uncover hidden secrets within the text that lead me to a more intimate understanding of my character.

Another epiphany I had during graduate school, came when I began to explore a character's physicality and how that physicality affects his world. The birth of a character's physical life is another essential key to creating a unique being onstage. Discovering the physicality of

character begins from a place of neutrality in the actor. Finding my body's neutral state affords me a blank canvas on which I can create my character. It is from this place of neutrality that I begin to paint my character's portrait by using the physical principles of Rudolph Laban's Effort Actions. These principles are incredibly helpful because they allow me to create beyond my own physical habits. Every human has their own body type and habitual actions. Through Laban, I find which actions best suit the character type and add some idiosyncrasies (character habits) to those actions in an effort to tell a clear story as well as set this character apart from myself and the rest of the characters onstage. During a production of *Rhinoceros* at the University of Virginia, I took the chance to practice this technique in front of an audience. I played two characters—The Grocer and Botard—and I wanted them to be uniquely different though they shared the same body. I saw the character of The Grocer as a man who wasn't too sharp and who was constantly being emasculated by his wife. I found that The Grocer best lived within the Effort Action "Slash" because he was someone who was indirect, heavy, and fast. On the other hand, the character of Botard was someone I saw as a "Punch" which is direct, heavy, and fast. These two Effort Actions allowed me to work from a common base (myself) while giving each character his own unique life onstage. It is the Laban vocabulary that, for me, is an essential key to start developing a character. I feel liberated when I use the Effort Actions onstage and, because of this, I champion Laban. Effort Actions bring characters to life; all I need to do is allow them to live in the world of the play. For me, the physical approach to the work has an immediacy that I do not find in the introspective questioning offered by Stanislavsky. This is not to say that emotional query does not have its place, but in my case I can easily get stuck in my head if it is the only key that I have.



It is important to create a character that is compelling but one cannot do this alone.

Though there are one man shows, the chances that I will ever be onstage alone are very small. In order to connect fully with my partners onstage I apply the ideas presented in the study of Viewpoints. Viewpoints give an actor specific direction to help complement the character and the ensemble as a whole. Movement and connective energy are the two factors that make Viewpoints essential to creating character relationship. It is the one step that allows me to focus on the character through utilizing a group dynamic. It allows the cast and myself to develop a nonverbal language on stage that can carry us through to the end of a run. I personally benefit from exploring the world of the play through this process. It affords me the opportunity to plug into the kinesthetic energy generated by my colleagues. It also gives me the opportunity to feed them my energy as well. During the rehearsal process for *Crazy For You*, I found that there were moments where I was crowding the space of my fellow actors. I could feel this kinesthetically. I worked on feeling my partners energy and we found a common place to work from which was productive for the both of us. During the rehearsal process an environment became established where I developed a rapport with the other actors in the production, while using Viewpoints to build strong character dynamics with the other characters in the show.

Yet another discovery that I found in my time in graduate school is the importance of connecting with the actors with whom I share the stage. It does not matter how fully an individual character can be developed if there is no trust between the partners that allows for a creative relationship to emerge. I now see that it is imperative that I seek this level of trust with all my stage partners in order to reach the truth for our audience. The connection with my partners is dependent on the level of trust that we share. This trust is essential toward building a relation-

ships that deepens our work. For instance, when I share the stage with certain actors there is a strong connection of trust that allows for our work to flourish. There is a willingness to play fearlessly because we have a deep understanding between us. We have developed a vocabulary on-stage that is unique to us and us alone. It is very apparent to me when trust is present and I feel its absence when it is lacking between me and other actors. I understand that as I move forward into the professional world I may not have the opportunity to cultivate these relationships of trust because of time, money, or someone's disinterest. I understand that the educational theatre setting lends itself toward creating ensemble especially when you share the studio with same people daily. Though I may not have this key to building character at my disposal once I leave the University, I still value its contribution toward the betterment of my work, and I will continue try and initiate these relationships of trust wherever possible.

From the various techniques that I have explored here at the University of Virginia, I have selected certain aspects from each technique that work for me and I have developed a system of my own which incorporates a body of concepts into an efficient process for building character. As I stated in the beginning of this chapter, my undergraduate training only offered me Stanislavsky's System in order to build character. I still use this system to engage my imagination (Stanislavsky's *Magic If*) and explore personal connections to my character (Stanislavsky's *Emotional Recall*), but it is no longer my singular key to building character. It has joined forces with a variety of techniques that I now consider my new process. I employed this new process during the run of *Crazy for You* and put my philosophy to the test. I started with the text, mining through the script with voice and speech work enabling me to uncover Lank quickly. From there I began to build the character's physical life using Laban, Viewpoints and creating ensemble with

my partners. Working in the studio with the other actors, I started to develop a kinesthetic relationship with those onstage. This process continued to grow once we moved the show into the performance space. I dealt with the emotional highs and lows that Lank experienced through exploring the Stanislavsky System, which helped me find the character's vulnerability. More importantly, that newly found vulnerability helped to define a character's impulses and understand his choices that then led to the character's humanity.

Now that I move forward into my professional career it is imperative that I continue to build on the process I used in *Crazy For You*. I am committed to further developing a system of building character that creates a rapport between myself and my partners, and most importantly keeps me hired. I must be dedicated to my vocal work in order to understand my character and allow him to be understood by the audience. The vocal work is like heading toward a destination and looking for the route. Once I feel comfortable about whom I believe the character is I can move forward in my physicality. This means keeping my body in a condition where I am able to display the physical traits that bring truth toward the character's life. I have developed a process that helps to create an environment where I can experiment with my colleagues to better the production as a whole. The relationship we develop allows us to trust one another which allows us to grow within the world of the play. I can no longer treat my craft as a hobby. I must approach my career with the dedication of an artist and the mind of a business owner. I am very happy with the process I have built in graduate school, although that is not to say that I will not change. An actor should always be ever-changing lest he or she ends up left behind. I feel it is my obligation to continue to research different acting techniques, old and new, in an effort to better my craft. As this leg of my journey ends another will begin. New ideas will influence me, and others

will no longer have their uses. This is my metamorphosis and it will never truly be complete. It is, as my thesis title reflects, my journey from actor to artist.

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## Appendix

### Video Supplement

Included in this video are two monologues. The first is from the play *The Wild Duck* by Henrik Ibsen. The second is a monologue from the play *Mr. Nobody* by Ashley Richard. These monologues exist to be a visual display of my acting ability and the growth that I made here at the University of Virginia. These monologues will also be uploaded to my website as part of my acting portfolio.

Ashley Richard <ashleyrichard409@yahoo.com>

to me

**Hello Mr. Murray,**

**I am writing you to grant permission for the use of one monologue from my play Mr. Nobody. It is to be used for a thesis project explained in the previous email. I also grant you permission to use this intellectual property for your personal website with the understanding that there will be no monetary gain from this use. I hope all is well and good luck with the rest of graduate school.**

Ashley Richard