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Letting go and taking the leap

Kevin William Argus
University of Iowa

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LETTING GO AND TAKING THE LEAP

by

Kevin William Argus

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master's of
Fine Arts degree in Theatre Arts in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Professor John Cameron

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Kevin William Argus

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the
thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts in Theatre
Arts at the May 2015 graduation.

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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Written to fulfill a partial requirement for the Masters of Fine Arts degree from the University of Iowa, this is an exploration of Kevin Argus' journey as an actor. It is a personal text that documents his relationship with: the present moment, the state, and mask, which are the necessary requirements for great acting. He asks, "How can you drop into the present moment? How can you expand the state to give others a visceral feeling? How can you create a specific character?"

It goes on to recount pitfalls in the rehearsal process and the performance that are frequently encountered.

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WHAT IS GREAT ACTING?

In preparing to write this MFA thesis, I have read my previous two process papers and it is amazing how, without consciously attempting to figure it out, many of my questions have been answered and my hopes have been realized. For the first chapter of this thesis, I will describe how my definition of great acting has changed. I will then discuss blocks I consistently come up against in the rehearsal process and what performance means to me - why theatre is important.

In the past, I have said that great acting is unbridled freedom. That it is a full expression of the self that encompasses mind, body, and soul. While it is a full expression of the self without restraint, this definition is incomplete. It is not specific enough. The missing element is seeing what is actually in front of you and being present. With my previous definition, I could walk on stage and do anything as long as I was free and uninhibited. My uninhibited self could do something that is against the playwright's intentions or do something that doesn't serve my character's needs. Within the unbridled freedom, there must be presence and listening – listening to the character and surrendering to its desires and wants. Many times Paul, movement professor at the University of Iowa, talked about characterization as “the self, the state, and the mask/character.” My previous definition only discussed the self. If you limit your self through hiding, you cannot fully commit to the character. The self must be free and unbridled to serve the character.

A few years ago, I watched Paul Nolan's performance in *West Side Story* at the Stratford Festival and that performance is still the epitome of great acting to me. When I

watched him sing “Maria” it was breathtaking. There was no restraint from his self. He submitted his self fully to Tony and listened to his desires and saw what was really in front of him. Tony wants Maria. Everything about her is electric. As he stood on the floor of the thrust stage, he turned and saw her on the balcony. The breath he took in that moment took my breath away because he truthfully saw her. He was so present and open that the audience could feel Tony’s desires. He saw the balcony, ran, jumped to grab the wrought iron railing and pulled himself up over it to kiss her. The athleticism and freedom he displayed captivated me. He fully brought his self to the character and did not get in his way. He let go into the work. He genuinely discovered each “Maria” and when he flung himself onto the floor to belt the high B flat, it was pure bliss. He was open and present so he was able to listen to what he was singing, see what was in front of him, and surrender to his character. It was a beautiful marriage of unbridled freedom from his self and surrendering to the character’s needs.

On Being Present

How do you bring your self to the work? What does this even mean? Since I arrived at the University of Iowa, the biggest critique my faculty members have given me has dealt with bringing my self to the work. They would say that they see the mask and character development but not my self in the work. What I have discovered is that you must be present to bring your self to the work. This has been at the core of every class. In Meisner it was, “Listen. Observe. Repeat.” In Grotowski it was, “This is the moment of you life.” In Risk and Play it was, “Feel the floor. Smell the air.” All of these phrases help you find the present moment and truly see what is in front of you – living in the body and not in the mind. If you listen, observe, and repeat, you see what is in front of

you for what it really is and what is truly there for you to play with. If you accept that this is the moment of your life, you will be present with your surroundings and responsive. If you feel the floor and smell the air, you will drop your attention out of your mind and into the body where the present exists.

The clearest example I have of being present does not come from theatre, but from sports. I was standing on the 15th tee at Chestnut Hills Golf Club in a tournament. The weather was abysmal and I faced the most difficult tee shot on the course with a 3 shot lead, knowing I had the tournament won if I hit this ball in the fairway. There was a strong wind coming from the right side of the hole and the situation demanded I hit a fade with my driver to hold the ball up in the wind. I felt the soggy turf as I walked to my ball. I heard the squish of my steps. I felt the club in my hands and the wind on my left cheek. When I made contact with the ball, I knew it was perfect. The ball started down the middle and stayed right there. I did not even watch it land because I knew where it was going to land. I was fully present in this moment and responded to the situation as best I could. I did not attempt to fight the conditions. I did not get in my own way. I saw my targets, listened and surrendered to the elements, and responded physically. All of my memories of that moment live in my body, which is a clear indicator that I was present in that moment.

The present moment does not live in your mind, but rather your body. Eckart Tolle's *The Power of Now* has been a truly influential book on my life as well as my work as an actor. One of his major tenants is that the mind/ego distracts you from the present and that you need to go into the body – the present moment arises in a place of no-mind, which is consciousness without thought where you can feel space in the body.

He goes on to say that, “all true artists, whether they know it or not, create from a place of no-mind, from inner stillness” (24). How do you go into the body? How do you find this place of no-mind? Through the actor training and yoga, I have learned effective ways for me to drop into the present moment and the two easiest ways are the breath and the pulse.

Breathing onstage is absolutely necessary. I have found that my work stagnates and suffers when I do not breathe. The breath helps me stay grounded and flowing. If I stop the breath flow and hold my breath, my heart rate goes up and I shut the body off to the present. I go up into my head. Even as I am writing this sentence, I feel my breath go in and out. When I hold my breath, I feel a distancing between my body and the words on the page – I am holding back. I also feel a sense of panic as my heart rate goes up and my thoughts begin to spiral faster and faster. It fills me with anxiety and never ending thoughts. It is impossible to listen and respond in this space. There is no room for others to affect me. I have to use the breath to create space in the body for the partner, the human standing on stage with me, to affect me. Breathing creates a dynamic sensation in the body that allows me to drop my attention to my body rather than stay stuck in my mind where the present does not exist.

In addition to the breath as a way into the present, I have also found the pulse as a useful tool to drop into the body and become present. During one of Fannie Hungerford’s yoga classes, we discussed using the pulse/heartbeat as a focus of meditation. I had never considered this to be a focus of meditation and found it immediately drew me into the present. This has been a useful tool that I have continued to use day to day in my personal life and my theatre work. It is a really powerful tool. A couple weeks after Fannie

introduced this meditation focus, I had an impulse to run outside and go to a spot I had found on a run earlier that week. It was this rock in a stream that I could sit on. I could feel the sunshine on my skin, hear the water rushing by me, feel the cold stone beneath me, taste the air, etc...As I sat meditating, I felt my pulse at every chakra. After moving through each energy center, I felt a soothing movement throughout my entire body. When I let go of that meditation and opened my eyes, I could feel my entire body pulsing. I was not physically moving but the energy in my body was flowing with my pulse. I felt it everywhere. It was such a liberating experience as my energy pulsed through my body. In this moment, I was fully present with my body and my surroundings. I could feel the energy moving through my body and the energies of the outside world. In order to live fully and fully release into the work, I must move from this place. This is the starting place. In that moment, I was my full self present and ready to respond.

Feeling the pulse also changed my understanding of Paul's phrase, "Feel the floor. Smell the air." Paul used this phrase during the Hero and the Mountain, an exercise where there was one hero and the rest of the class was the mountain. The hero started on the ground and made a proposal by moving his/her arm or leg into a position. The class, moving as the mountain, would move underneath the proposal to support the hero as he/she climbed. Eventually the hero reached the summit, traveled for a while, and then descended down the mountain. As the hero, I raced through the climb to get to the peak. When I was up there, Paul was constantly telling me to feel the floor through the mountain and smell the rarified air at the top. I would do that and he would tell me I was not doing it, which really confused me at the time. I was breathing and smelling the air but something was not clicking. After experimenting with the pulse, I now realize that I

was not fully present when I was the hero. I was on top of the mountain but not truly seeing what was before me; not really smelling the rarified air on that mountaintop. I was not present in that moment. I was protecting my self from failing and looking dumb. I wanted to get the exercise right and these desires did not allow me to be present. I know now that I can feel the floor and smell the air as a quick way to drop into the present moment by truthfully doing both things. The easiest way to check and make sure I am truthfully smelling the air is to ask myself questions: What do I smell? What does it remind me of? Where is that smell coming from? Etc...All of these questions lead me into the body and away from the mind.

While I have used examples from sports, meditation, etc... the experience of the present moment is the same feeling in any event. I can transfer the ability to drop into the present during a sports event and life to the theatre. At the core of theatre, sports, and life is play. When you are playing fully, you are in the moment and present. In W. Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*, he tells tennis players that the easiest way to find the present moment is to "get interested in the ball...By not thinking you already know all about it, no matter how many thousands of balls you have seen in your life" (77). The ball could bounce differently and each shot is its own. It does not matter if your opponent has hit this shot thirty times in the match, it could be different this time. It is a new ball every time. An actor's tennis ball is his or her scene partner, who can change at any moment. Attending to the scene partner's every word and action ensures that I will find the present moment and play in it. I may have done the scene hundreds of times, but it is new and unique this time. It has never been done in this moment before and deserves all my attention. My partner might give me a small twitch that he or she has never done

before. He or she may touch you a line earlier. I have to respond to these moments in the present. Finding the present moment through the partner creates the same no-mind feeling, the feeling of going into the unknown.

This is the moment of your life. It is the only moment that truly matters. Live and play in it.

On the State

In the previous section, I have discussed the importance of being present and tools that help me be present. While being present is necessary to great acting, it is not the only requirement - The state is also necessary. What is the state? I would define the state as one's awareness of energy and his or her ability to manipulate it. It could also be referred to as size, audience contact, rockstar energy, etc... It is that unapologetic energy that says, "I am here. Feel my energy in this room." To me, acting is not only about beauty and form alone but the guts and the viscera as well. The last thing I want as an audience member is a performance that does not move me. I want to be captivated and touched. I do not want to see something that is pretty and technically perfect. I want contact with the art. As an artist, I strive for that contact with my partners and the audience. The State is the space that connects the actors to their partners, as well as the audience, and keeps the acting alive, enthralling, and most importantly, playful.

The importance of the State and letting go of a perfectly crafted performance has been a big shift for me since I came to the University of Iowa. During my evaluation at the end of my first semester, Anne Marie Nest, the voice professor at the University of Iowa, told me that I had to let go of technique and the desire for a perfectly crafted

performance if I wanted to find a new level in my work. I thought that holding on to the technique and tools I had used in the past were helping me find great acting, but they were actually holding me back. My desire to control my performances and craft them perfectly created a wall that I could not move through. This was very evident during the Spring of 2014 when I was frustrated and doing everything in my power to control the situation. I had always believed that if I worked hard enough and put the right people in my corner that I would be successful. I was frustrated with hitting the wall repeatedly. I could not move through the wall, release my work, and discover a new and more nuanced level to play in. I was stuck and limiting myself. I watched my classmate Chris in the neutral mask experiencing the ocean and I began to cry. Honestly, I am realizing as I write these words that I was crying because I was watching Chris go through the same struggle I was. When I told Paul acting was no longer fun for me, he said, “Good. It shouldn’t be fun now. You are hitting a wall in your work and until you break through that wall your work will never be fun.” These words hurt me at the moment and I responded by shrinking my size in my work. I did not want to let others affect me because I was scared to break through the wall.

I was not ready to break through the wall until Clown during the Fall semester in 2014 – that class changed how I viewed acting and understood the state. The wall that I did not understand or could even identify was suddenly staring me in the face. I was constantly distancing myself from my partners in my work. I could feel the wall that I was running into over and over again once I put on the nose. The wall, though, was something I put up. It was not anything anyone was imposing on me. I put up that wall myself. This giant green wall encircled me in all my work. As a result, I could not expand

the state past that green wall and my partners and the audience could not feel my energy. I had no ability to expand or contract the state. It was bound in this wall. The wall was a multifaceted monster; my fear of failure, the pressure I felt to perform well, my desire to create a perfectly crafted performance, etc.. When I put on the nose for the first time and entered, I saw my classmates and felt myself constructing that green wall brick by brick. That was such an enlightening experience. As I move forward in my work, I am sure the wall will creep up at times and it is important that I know how to move through it so that I can expand my state and connect with my partners.

How do I move through that wall consistently so it does not hinder my work? The answer lies in the breath and letting go. I struggle with letting things go and it is a lynch pin in my work at this point. When I let go and play in the moment, my work is free and uninhibited. When I do not let go, my ego prevents me from releasing into the work and playing fully. The only way to move through that wall with consistency is to let go of my ego, which constructs that wall to protect itself. Within that wall, my ego is safe. I am in control of the situation and there is no space for anyone to affect me. I am in control of my performance. Letting go of the ego and going into the body allows me to play fully and let my self be seen. In the present moment, there is nothing between my partners and me and my work is more connected, more vulnerable, and more courageous.

Once you are fully present, the state is malleable. It is possible to expand the state to push or pull on your target through the breath. During Mask, Paul had us throw an imaginary stone into a giant lake. We put on the neutral mask, turned and saw the lake, walked towards the lake, found a rock, picked it up, threw it, watched it fly through the air, and then watched as it disappeared into the lake forming ripples. The throw has

different intentions if you exhale or inhale. If you inhale and throw the stone, the state pushes the stone as it flies through the air. It feels like you are helping it fly further and further. If you exhale, however, it feels like there is a string on the rock and you are pulling the rock back as it flies through the air. The quality of your breath affects the state and whether it pushes or pulls on the target.

In addition to pushing or pulling the state, the breath is used to expand the state or contract it. At some point in my warm up ritual, I discovered breathing in the space. I remember standing on stage in the Decio Theatre at the University of Notre Dame before a performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and breathing in the air by the exit signs in the balcony. As I stood there taking in that far-reaching air, I felt my energy grow. Taking this expanded state into performance is necessary for great acting. The audience must feel your performance viscerally. It is not good enough to keep myself hidden behind my green wall. The audience will only see a technically sound performance, maybe even a beautiful performance, but that is all. If I am able to expand my state to reach to the audience, the audience will share what I am feeling and become active participants in the performance. Without the state, the audience is comprised of passive observers who are not fully engaged with the performance.

While I have used the audience in this example, it is also necessary to expand the state to reach your partners on stage. It is much easier to affect these partners if you are reaching out to them –if you are breathing them in. Expanding the state creates a circuit between you and your partner. Within the circuit, your partner affects you and you affect your partner, which creates truthful performances. Patsy Rhodenberg calls this breathing in the space and claims, “as we breathe a space and extend the right amount of breath to a

person, we touch them. You can sometimes sit in a theatre hearing an actor but not feeling part of that actor's process...when this happens the actor is not breathing the space" (56). Looking back, I realize that I was preparing my body to connect to that circuit as I stood breathing in the space before *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. I was waking up the space so that when I performed, I could easily reach out to touch my partners and the audience; I wanted them to be active in the performance and feel alive.

Finding the amount of breath I need to touch my partners and audience is not a science. It is a feeling. It is easy to overpower a space by expanding the state too much. When I went up and auditioned for the Great River Shakespeare Festival. I went into the space, which was a small classroom and totally blew out the space. I was way too large and while I was very connected to my pieces, I essentially threw myself at the auditors. Conversely, it is also very easy to underwhelm the space and not take in enough breath. When this happens, the state is very internal and the audience cannot feel you. To me, letting go is the key to breathing in the space fully and expanding the state to fill the room appropriately. My body knows how to breathe in the space and I have to get out of my own way. If I think about how much breath I am taking or the state, I am unable to tap into the state because I am not fully present. Letting go and trusting the body to breathe itself and respond to the energy in the room is the only way to expand the state to touch my partners.

Besides the breath, I have found that walking into a space with an open heart is necessary to expand the state. My previous desires to control and create perfectly crafted performances did not create visceral performances because I was not open and vulnerable. I was moving through the production with my green wall up and guarding

myself, afraid that an outsider, my scene partner or the audience, would ruin what I had created. That fear leads to control and the wall acts as a shield. If I walk into a space with my shields or walls up, I am not open to receive the space and play.

During *Sleep No More*, I had one of the most amazing experiences I have ever had as an audience member. John Watkins, who was in the show, told me over coffee the morning of the performance to be open during the performance. He did not tell me anything other than that. Just be open to the possibilities. As I moved through the immersive theatre experience that night, I had a hard time connecting to the piece. I did not see any performers for nearly forty-five minutes and was bored. I was wandering around the space wondering why this piece was so popular until I stumbled upon Macbeth moving through the graveyard. I had already seen him doing this, since the performance is on a loop, and knew he was going to move to a nearby area. I moved to that area so that I could get a closer look since there was a big crowd gathered around him and I did not want to fight the crowd. When he moved towards me, he stopped next to me and extended his hand. We were facing the same direction and I knew he wanted me to grab his hand. I grabbed his hand and then we walked through the space together. As we moved, I could feel my state change. I was actually part of the performance even though I was an audience member. The rest of the audience responded to me like I was part of the production because of my contact with the performer. I have never experienced that in any other production. Because the performer and I were both open to the moment and expanding our states, we shared an amazing experience. We were open and vulnerable and allowed our states to expand and feel one another. It was so visceral and moving for

me as the audience member. It really taught me the value of moving through the world with openness.

On the Mask

The first two sections of this chapter discussed the importance of being present in the moment as well as expanding the state in great acting. These are foundational elements to great acting but incomplete without the third element – the character’s mask. While the state and being present are closely related, the mask is a separate entity that is held up by the self. The state and being present are ways to bring the self to the work. They allow the performance to feel alive and responsive. Without these elements, the performance is flat and the mask hangs on the body. There is technique without heart. There is a beautiful performance without the guts or viscera. When the actor is present and with his or her state expanded to support the character’s mask, the performance comes alive in a transformational way. The mask consists of everything the character wants, needs, and what comprises his or her given circumstances. It requires specificity and exploration to discover how the character’s mask feels, breathes, and moves.

My relationship with mask has gone through a really big transition since I began my training. It goes back to my URTA auditions for graduate school. In my interview with Ted Swetz for the University of Missouri Kansas City, he asked me to perform my Laertes monologue. He directed me to give it to directly to Carla Noack and after doing so, described how he saw a great understanding of craft and mask, but was missing who I was in the piece. I did not understand what he was saying to me at the time, but I now understand that he saw my character’s mask in the piece without my self present. My self was not present in the work because I was not fully present and was failing to expand the

state while breathing in my partner. As a result, the performance was flat. It was technically sound but incomplete. It was not alive and resonant. It was only crafted well.

This critique has stuck with me and I continue to find myself relying too much on the mask, afraid to bring my self to the work with presence and the state. For the first two years at the University of Iowa, I struggled finding a balance between bringing my self to the work and the character’s mask. Earlier on I relied too much on the character’s mask. I spent time using tools like the “everything said,” which is a document that I filled out as I read the script for the second time. Here is a template:

Everything Said Template

Page #	What I say	What Others Say	What Playwright says

As I read the script, I filled out the columns so that I had a chronological document that I could refer to easily. If I was confused about the given circumstances in a scene, I could find exactly what my character knows, or doesn’t know, at that point in the play. I could also go back and change it as I made new discoveries during the rehearsal process. By the end of the rehearsal process, I had a neat and clean document that kept my given circumstances detailed and chronologically sound. I was a slave to this tool when I first learned it because it was too concrete in the way I used it. The mask became the most important aspect and I could not tap into my self or the state. I was only able to bring the mask to the stage because I was so focused on getting the character right. My “everything said” had to be right and that locked me up. I was not able to play. When I

realized this, I abandoned this tool in an effort to find more freedom and expression of my self on stage.

Recently, however, I have realized how I can use the “everything said” as a useful tool to create a specific mask and not allow it to prevent me from bringing the self to the work. I realized that the mask must be very specific and malleable. The more specific I can make the mask, the more room there is to play because I feel more confident in its craftsmanship. I trust that it will support me and this frees me to surrender to it. The more specific the mask is, the more willing I am to let go and let it support me. In order for the mask to support though, it cannot be rigid. You can create a mask using the “everything said” but it has to fit well on your self. Your self has to be present and you must use the state to fill the mask so that it comes alive and is malleable. In Grotowski, Eric Forsythe, a professor and head of directing at the University of Iowa, talked about mask as a filter for the self. It is not a hindrance and does not stop the self from coming through. The mask acts like a stone in a river; it changes the direction of the water but does not block it fully. If the stone blocks the river fully, it is a dam. The self has to flow through the mask and reach out to the partner with the state. When I first used the ‘everything said,’ I created dams that were rigid and did not let my self filter through. I am now able to create a mask that is malleable and lets my self flow through to create contact with my partners and the audience.

Besides the “everything said,” I try to ask questions that lead to a more specific mask for the character. I find the as-if and a sequence of “I want.....I am willing to.....I feel.....” helpful in creating a specific mask that lets my self flow. The as-if is the essence of your character. It can be anything. In *Water by the Spoonful*, my character, John aka

Fountainhead, came into his second scene with a reckless abandon after falling off the wagon earlier that night. He enters the online chatroom and blows it up. In essence, he entered the scene like a wrecking ball. In order to put the essence of a wrecking ball into the mask, I explored what a wrecking ball is. What does a wrecking ball feel like? What does it smell like? What does it feel like to swing into a building and feel it crumble with your force? Through the exploration, I discovered that the wrecking ball swung in my pelvic bowl. It was a cool, rough, and heavy swing that resonated deep within my muscles. As I stood backstage before the scene, I imagined that I had a wrecking ball swinging back and forth in my pelvis before I entered. As it got closer to my entrance, the wrecking ball swung with more force and weight until it swung me on to the stage. From this place, it was easier to tap into the essence of the character's mask.

Another tool I have is a sequence of questions that I learned at the University of Notre Dame. The first question is, "What do I want?" This question simply gets at the root of the character's desires. You must know what your character wants so that you pursue it fully. If you do not have a clear objective, you wander around on stage lost. Answering this question gives you a specific target that you can breathe in and with which to connect. The second question is, "What am I willing to do to get this objective?" This question reveals the stakes. My character may be willing to relinquish everything in his or her life for this one objective – it is the most important thing in the world. I then take these two questions and put them in my body. I move around the room saying what I want aloud and professing what I am willing to do. After letting this exploration inform my body, movement, architecture, etc...I ask myself the final question, "What do I feel?" At this point, my body is warm and I am aware of sensations throughout my heart, pelvis,

legs, arms, etc...As I explore the architecture, I declare what I am feeling. I say it aloud in the room. I feel joyous. I feel afraid. I feel ashamed. I feel victorious. I locate where these feelings reside in my body so that I can tap into them later.

I explored Juliet's "Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face" speech in voice class during the fall semester in 2013 and applied the sequence of questions to help discover her mask. Before the speech begins, Juliet longs for Romeo and he appears in the orchard. She wants Romeo to profess his love and is willing to give up her family name to hear those sweet words. When I explored this, I walked around room 172 and used the loft as the balcony. I found that she had an open heart and such a strong desire for him that she would lean out over the balcony to get as close as she could to him. The movement started from the heart and she fights against the balcony railing. The railing creates an obstacle and I felt exhilarated and frustrated that I could not be closer to Romeo when I leaned out over the balcony. I also discovered a big shift in her mask when she realizes that Romeo may take her behavior as light and foolish – that her love may not be as serious as she claims it is. It felt as if there was a fire in my heart that was stoked in that moment. For me, there was a tactic shift in that moment. The fire is stoked to a point where it explodes and the desperation peaks. This stoking fire also acted as my as-if. The essence of the fire informed the character's mask because Romeo was her stoker. He could make the fire roar. This as-if rooted me in Romeo so that as I performed the monologue, I stayed in contact with him so that I could be stoked to the point of desperation that caused me to lean out over the balcony railing.

These questions and the as-if help me develop a specific mask for the character that lives and breathes. It must live and breathe so that it can be responsive. In the past, I

have created masks that were too rigid and distancing. They distanced me from my partners and I could not connect with them because the mask was too impermeable. The key to developing the mask is finding specificity and freedom. It is not set in stone. It is free and open. In the last two years, I have explored how to create a free and resonate mask and the key for me is flexibility. It cannot be so thick that I cannot be seen through it. It must be flexible and breathe. Developing the specific character's mask is not an academic research practice that I must get right; rather, it is a fun exploration through the body.

Those are the three requirements for great acting in my opinion: presence, the state, and a specific character mask. I am sure that my definition for great acting will change as I move into the world and experience more theatre. My definition will change as I change and it should. My definition has grown to be more specific since I first arrived and the University of Iowa and I hope it evolves with me as I continue to grow as an artist.

REHEARSAL PITFALLS

The first chapter of this thesis was dedicated to what I consider to be the three core elements of great acting. This chapter is a slight departure from that theme and focuses on the rehearsal process. While crafting a character, there are issues in the rehearsal process that I consistently come up against. I will address major issues and provide ways I have found to move through these issues.

Imagination

At times I have found it difficult to buy completely into the given circumstances of the play. I struggle with this when I do not take enough time to specifically imagine the given circumstances. I have a tendency in my work, as well as my life, to work too efficiently. I used to view the given circumstances as a checkbox that I would spend some time working on and then move on to another element of the character's mask. This attitude is not useful though. It makes the given circumstances stale and boring for me. As a result, I have trouble accessing them and feel disconnected from the world of the play.

I know I am struggling with my imagination when my imagination cannot affect my emotions. This happens when the images are not specific enough. To remedy this, I slow down and ask myself questions that make the images more specific. I take the images of the text and work one image at a time. As an example I will return to Juliet's speech. Take the first two lines, "Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face,/Else would a Maiden blush bepaint my cheek" (Shakespeare, 1114). When I worked on this

monologue, I slowed down and took time to specifically imagine each image. The “mask of night” became a beautiful, deep purple mask that formed perfectly to my face. It was smooth and cool. Layered on top of the deep purple color were tiny, stars. As I said the lines, I felt the night wrap itself around my face. It was as if the night was coming down from the heavens to envelop my face. I then came to “maiden blush bepaint” and it conjured up an image of a pure white face being painted red with a soft make up brush. This image fit underneath the “mask of night” perfectly and changed the expression on the mask. The images flowed and affected each other and in doing so, affected me. I took the time to conjure each image and let it affect me. Once I did this, I could feel the given circumstances in my body and in the space. They were not trapped in my head, but released in my body and the space.

Finding this freedom with the imagination is important. I have run into this wall with every character I have ever performed. Taking the time to slow down and let the images live is necessary for me. The two best ways for me to slow down are drawing the images and lying down and listening to them. Drawing forces me to slow down because I cannot move past an image without taking the physical time to sketch it. My imagination can move no faster than I can draw.

Another realization I have had about my imagination is that it works just as well when I imagine the future as it does when I imagine the past. Konstantin Stanislavski compared the Given Circumstances to a pearl necklace and said, “we need an unbroken line not of plain, simple Given Circumstances but ones that we have coloured in full...every moment you are onstage, every moment in the outer and inner progress of the play, the actor must see what is going on around him” (74). This description values being

present and seeing what is truly in front of you so that you can respond to it. I love the image of a pearl necklace because of how these necklaces are made. Just like individual scenes are strung together to make a play, individual pearls are strung together to form the necklace. The given circumstances do not end when the play ends though. The play is just a section of the character's existence, even if the character dies during the course of the play. It is easier for me to buy into the Given Circumstances of the play if I imagine the future as well as the past. Declan Donnellan calls this entering the matrix in *The Actor and the Target* (116). When I view the string of pearls as a logical step that flows A → B → C → etc. I sometimes feel bound by this logic and get stuck in my head. It is sometimes helpful to think of the individual scenes as individual pearls that happen as opposed to causing one another. When each scene happens on its own, I feel more freedom to release my self and buy into the given circumstances of that moment. It feels easier to let go.

Getting it Right

My previous training gave so much primacy to the text that I had a hard time releasing the images and trusting them. The images were facts to get right and the script was a problem to solve. This stifled my creativity and I could not release the images from my head. They had no space to live in my body. I approached the script and the given circumstances as a math problem. I sometimes revert back to this when I feel the pressure to produce a product on stage and it only hurts me. Trying to get the character right is futile. It is an impossible mission. The only thing I can do is bring my self to the mask I have created and play in the moment. If I do those things, I have done all that I can.

I have included getting it right in the rehearsal pitfalls chapter because it I find that, while it happens in performance too, it starts during the rehearsal process. Trying to get it right puts me in my head and limits how specific I am because it makes me afraid. When I try to get it right, I move from a place of fear instead of a place of love. As a result, I do not risk. I do not play and my growth in rehearsal can stagnate. I am stuck in my head, afraid to make a choice about the character. I shut down. It is one of the worst feelings in the world. It is so constraining. When I let go of trying to get it right, I have so much more fun and risk much more.

This attitude gets in my way most when I have to make a drastic physical or vocal shift. During the 2014 fall semester, I did an independent study with Anne Marie to learn dialects and trying to get the dialect right got in my way. The most difficult part of picking up the accents was not the sound shifts, musicality, zoning, etc...but learning the accent and then releasing it. Towards the end of the semester, the feedback was always, “connect more with your partner” and I could feel it. Trying to get the dialect right put a wall between my partner and I. I have a tendency to try to make the accent perfect and focus so much on the technical elements that I forget that I am talking to another person. My fear that native speakers will laugh if they hear my accent drives this desire to get it right. Moving from this place of fear makes it impossible for me to connect with my partners.

How do I shift my perspective so that I move from a place of love instead of a place of fear that tries to get it right? This is something I am still working but have found that breathing helps the most with this. For example, my breathing becomes really labored when I speak in a dialect I am still learning. I have difficulty dropping my breath

low and supporting my voice fully. Sometimes I practice speaking in dialects when I walk home from the Theatre Building and whenever I switch into Received Pronunciation, I find my breath up in my chest and a lot of excess air when I am done speaking a thought. My breath feels foreign and forced. There is so much effort and I feel tension in my shoulders. It feels terrible in my body and I remind myself to drop the breath into the pelvic bowl. Eventually my breath settles and it is more comfortable. Getting it right affects my breath because my chest and shoulders tighten. It creates a lot of tension physically and mentally. When I let the breath drop lower I am able to calm my body and mind and this puts my attention on my breath as opposed to failing.

In the summer of 2013, I had to do a bad Italian accent for the University of Iowa's touring production of *No Fish in the House* and I should remind myself of this experience because I was able to let go. I had no formal training in the accent. I simply listened to it, learned a few sound shifts, and took the leap. When I am trying to get it right I refuse to take the leap. Taking the leap in *No Fish in the House* was way more fun and I found a freedom in the dialect that I have difficulty finding when I study a dialect formally. My breath was much lower and released. When I am trying to get it right, I need to let go of my ego and take the leap.

Letting Go

At some point in the rehearsal process I find myself at a crossroads. It usually happens about two weeks before opening. I start to feel nervous in anticipation of the final product. I start to wonder if the work I am doing is good enough. Have I done enough imagination work? Have I specified my actions? Am I going to fail? It happens in

every rehearsal process. My ego starts to take over and I have to move through that. When I reach this point, I have to let go and take the leap.

Because of my size, I am rarely supported by others. Physically I am more comfortable supporting others than being supported. During exercises like the trust lift, flying, falling from heights, etc...I have to let go physically and take the leap. Flying and Falling from heights first year were great exercises in trusting that the world will be there to catch me. I have to trust that the world will catch me even though it is hard for me. It has always caught me though. It is so much fun to fly through the air because that suspension in the air is glorious. It is exhilarating.

I get in my own way so much and it really stifles my work. When I have trouble letting go during the rehearsal process, I am holding myself back. I can stand on the blocks ready to jump and back away. Jumping is a perfect representation of letting go because you have no control when you are in the air. You are at the mercy of gravity and the world. Whenever I get to a point in the rehearsal process where I feel stuck, I have to let go. It is exactly like standing on the blocks ready to jump and at some point you can only move forward by jumping. Whenever I am about to take the leap I can feel my heart begin to race as my body screams to be present. I see what is in front of me and I have the choice to leap or not. Ultimately, I must leap. Just like when I stood on those blocks first year and saw my classmates waiting to catch me, I get scared when I have to leap in the rehearsal process. The trust that the world will catch me allows me to jump and let go. In that moment when you let go and leap, there is no going back and there is liberation as you fly.

This is as much rehearsal pitfall as a life pitfall for me. There is no prescription I have found and I doubt there is a panacea for it. All I can do is let go, find the present moment, and leap.

Changing the Space

Sometimes during the rehearsal process I get stuck in a rut and I cannot feel the room. Just like another human being, a space as an energy pulsing through it and a history. Each of the events a room has experienced leaves an imprint. It is exactly what trembling does to our bodies. Whenever I am finished trembling, I can feel the activity in my body. The tremors leave an imprint and I can tap into them because I am in touch with them. When I enter a space, it can break me out of a rut by tapping into those imprints and shift the energy in the room.

The easiest way I have found to tap into the energy of the room is to create my own energy bubble to connect to the space, which is expanding my state. Expanding the state to meet the room's and the interaction of my state with the room's energy shifts the vibrations in the room. It can awaken an imprint in the room.

During clown, I had this moment on October 20 where I was able to change the space in the room. I sang "Hit the Road Jack" over and over and through the repetition, something clicked and I finally let go. I moved around and connected with my classmates and it was euphoric. I wrote in my journal "No holding back. When I finished, I could feel the energy in the room and it was so free and ringing. It felt amazing and alive." It was the most liberated I have ever felt in a theatre. It was messy and there was no desire

to get it perfectly right. Because I put myself out there, I changed the space in the room and moved to a new plateau. In order to do that, I had to let go and release.

Back to the Basics

Most of what holds me back in the rehearsal room is my fear of failure or trying to get it right. My desire to create a perfectly crafted performance that is beautiful holds me back. I have a huge toolbox now that I can use to help find the present moment, expand the state, and create mask. Each rehearsal process is different and I will come across problems that I have never encountered before. How will I deal with these problems? I will go back to the basics. The basics are being present, awareness of the state, the mask, breath, play, joy, etc...I have my journals that will remind me of this journey and can spark insight into what I will face.

I will also face the problems I have already described. They will creep up on me if I am not vigilant. That green wall that I put between my partners and I will come back from time to time. The beauty is I know how to respond.

I need to be open. I need to see what is truly in front of me. I need to feel the body and trust it. I need to respond. I need to go into the mess. I need to trust that the work I've done will catch me when I leap.

If I am every lost, I will return to the simplicity of a dog playing fetch. The dog is fully present when he is playing fetch. He has his target of the ball and his companion throwing the ball. Each throw is an opportunity to relish and play in fully. The essence of the dog is as basic as it gets.

Be a dog.

PERFORMANCE

A few years ago I would have told you that the journey ends with the performance. Once the show goes up, it is about keeping it consistent and the same every night. That is not true for me anymore. The journey does not end when the show goes up, but continues on. Opening night is not the end of the journey. It is not the beginning. It is simply a step along the journey. I am not going to break down performance like I have other elements because it will be a repetition. The pitfalls I experience in rehearsal are the same I run into during performance as well. I use the tools I have in the same way during performance as I do in rehearsal and in life. Instead, I will say why performance is important to me.

To me, theatre and performance are a part of life, a reflection of culture. And because of this, the theatre has the power to make grown men cry just like sports do. I admire Phil Jackson tremendously for his success and the way he applied compassion and love to the game of basketball. He was able to find the sacred nature of basketball and impart that wisdom to his players. When he reflects back on his early career, I hear a lot of myself in his journey.

When I was starting out, I...thought I could conquer the world with the force of my ego...Back then I would have scoffed at anyone who suggested that selflessness and compassion were the secrets to success...but after searching long and hard for meaning everywhere else, I discovered that the game itself operated according to laws far more profound than anything that might be found in a coach's playbook. Inside the lines of the court, the mystery of life gets played out night after night (22).

I used to think I could do it all myself. As long as I worked hard enough I would create something. Maybe I would have created art, but it was not going to fulfill its potential. I had to learn to have compassion with others and myself. I had to rediscover my love for the theatre and that it is a joy and privilege to perform. The theatre for me, like basketball for Phil Jackson, is a place where the mystery of life gets played out. It is a sacred place. Stanislavski said that humans “always try to make communication with the living soul of an object” (235). That is what should happen in the theatre. As an actor, I must strive to connect with the living soul of my partners and the audience. When this happens, a unique event that can never be repeated occurs. Those moments happen when the actor is present, aware of the state, and flowing through the character’s mask. Those moments of true human connection where souls are touched is why I got into the theatre and why this matters.

It is a special occasion when you walk to the theatre for a performance. I feel the anticipation and everything is heightened. The energy of the parking lot is different. As I stand in the wings and hear the audience, I get so excited. I am about to share my work with them. I am about to share myself with them through this character and story. I share it openly, vulnerably, joyously, and lovingly.

People of Orphalese, beauty is life when life unveils her holy face.
But you are life and you are the veil.
Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.
But you are eternity and you are the mirror.

Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*

PRODUCTION LOG

Spring Awakening

Adapted from Frank Wedekind, Music by Duncan Sheik, Lyrics by Steven Sater

University Theatre Main Stage

Director and Choreographer: Nathan Halvorson

Musical Director: Jason Sifford

Scenic Designer: Kevin Loeffler

Costume Designer: Patricia McGourty

Lighting Designer: Bryon Winn

Stage Manager: Amber Lewandowski

Cast: Aneisa Hicks, Ali Borchers, Jessie Traufler, Haley Courter, Amelia Peacock,
Andrew Wilkes, Ben Rausch, Josh Ollendick, Michael Sotelo, Thomas Eslinger

E. C. Mabie Theatre, November 9, 2012 – November 17, 2012

Roles: Georg/Dieter – Supporting

She Stoops to Conquer; or the Mistakes of a Night

By Oliver Goldsmith

University Theatre Main Stage

Director: Kristin Clippard

Scenic Designer: Andrew Nelsen

Costume Designer: Melissa L. Gilbert

Lighting Designer: David Thayer

Stage Manager: Melissa L.F. Turner

Cast: Luke Millington-Drake, Allyson Malandra, Sasha Hildebrand, Nate Wasson,
Amelia Peacock, John Whitney, Sam Hawkins, Aaron Weiner, Adam Phillips, David
Freeman, Katie Boothroyd, Lily Henderson, Molly Brown

E. C. Mabie Theatre, April 19, 2013 – April 27, 2013

Roles: Jeremy the London Servant/Stingo the Landlord – Ensemble

Bad Seed

By Maxwell Anderson

Iowa Summer Repertory

Director: Eric Forsythe

Scenic Designer: Paul M. Collins

Costume Designer: Emily Busha

Lighting Designer: Jess Fialko

Sound Designer: Andrew Stewart

Stage Manager: KatyBeth Schimd

Cast: Emily Hinkler, Steven Marc Weiss, Kristy Hartsgrove, Sasha Hildebrand, John Muriello, Mary O’Sullivan, Aaron Weiner, Katie Consamus, Samuel Zager

Coralville Center for the Performing Arts, June 27, 2013 – June 29, 2013

Role: Emory Wages – Minor

No Fish in the House

By Tom Willmorth

University Theatre Special Touring Project

Director: Paul Kalina

Cast: Keyla McClure, RJ McGhee, Daisy McKinlay

Tour across Iowa July 14, 2013 – July 22, 2013

Roles: Tony/Graziono/Custodio – Principal

Water by the Spoonful

By Quiara Alegria Hudes

University Theatre Main Stage

Director: Tlaloc Rivas

Dialect Coach: Careena Melia

Dramaturg: Madison Colquette

Scenic Designer: Taesup Lee

Costume Designer: Jess Fialko

Assistant Costume Designer: Emma Zhang

Lighting/Video Designer: Peggy Mead-Finizio

Assistant Lighting/Video Designer: Lucas Ingram

Sound Designer: Bri Atwood

Stage Manager: Melissa L.F. Turner

Assistant Stage Manager: Rachel E. Winfield

Cast: Christopher Cruz, Valeria, Avina, Regina Morones, Morris Hill, Kristin Ho, Jordan Corpman

David Thayer Theatre, October 10, 2013 – October 20, 2013

Role: Fountainhead aka John – Supporting

Absurd Person Singular

By Alan Ayckbourn

University Theatre Main Stage

Director: Eric Forsythe

Assistant Director: Marina Johnson

Vocal Director: Anne Marie Nest

Scenic Designer: Kevin Dudley

Costume Designer: Emily Busha

Lighting Designer: Peggy Mead-Finizio

Stage Manager: Rachel E. Winfield

Assistant Stage Manager: Kristine Moffitt

Cast: Molly Brown, Andrew Wilkes, Lani Engstom, Lesley Geffinger, Patrick Dulaney

David Thayer, Theatre March 6, 2014 – March 15, 2014

Role: Geoffrey Jackson – Principal

Four Stories

By Micah Ariel James

University Theatre New Play Festival

Director: Nina Morrison

Scenic Designer: Hannah Morris

Costume Designer: Melissa L. Gilbert

Lighting Designer: Alex Igram

Sound Designer: Alexandra Johnson

Stage Manager: Katie Burnett

Assistant Stage Manager: Therese Pechacek

Cast: Valeria Avina, Keyla McClure, Regina Morones, Ruben Lebron

Theatre B, May 5, 2014

Roles: Murphy/Seamus/Parke – Principal

Othello

By William Shakespeare

Riverside Theatre in the Park

Director: Ted Swetz

Assistant Director: Emily Penick

Text/Voice Coach: Saffron Henke

Scenic Designer: Josh Christoffersen

Costume Designer: Tyler Wilson

Lighting Designer: David Thayer

Sound Designer: Drew Bielinski

Fight Choreographer: Jason Tipsword

Stage Manager: Sarah Hoffmann

Assistant Stage Managers: Meghan Boucher and Kimberly Carolus

Cast: Ron Clark, Steven Marzolf, Jess Prichard, Jody Hovland, Tim Budd, Spencer Christensen, Kelly Gibson, Ron King, Daver Morrison, Chris Peltier, John William Watkins, Felipe Carrasco, Heather Lawler, Nick Narcisi, Katie Slaven, Michael Walsh

Festival Stage in City Park, June 28, 2014 – July 2, 2014

Roles: Clown/Officer – Ensemble

Order Now

By Theresa Giacopasi

University Theatre Gallery

Director: Lesley Geffinger

Scenic/Costume Designer: Melissa L. Gilbert

Sound/Lighting Designer: Bri Atwood

Film Editing: Landon Sheets and Lesley Geffinger

Stage Manager: Akash Bahlerao

Cast: Zach Hendershott, Megan Henry, Molly Brown, Zuri Starks

Theatre B, October 16, 2014 – October 19, 2014

Roles: Jack Manning – Lead

The Liar

By David Ives, Adapted from the comedy by Pierre Corneille

University Theatre Main Stage

Director: Eric Forsythe

Assistant Director: Marisa Ramos

Vocal Director: Anne Marie Nest

Scenic Designer: Josh Christoffersen

Costume Designer: Angie Esposito

Lighting Designer: Cassie Malmquist

Stage Manager: Kelsey L. Petterson

Assistant Stage Manager: Bre Anna McNeil

Cast: RJ McGhee, Ari Craven, Alex Philoon, Nate Wasson, Keyla McClure, Allyson Jean Malandra, Christina Sullivan

E.C. Mabie Theatre, April 16, 2015 – April 26, 2015

Roles: Cliton – Principal

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