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Process in progress : birthing a character

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PROCESS IN PROGRESS
BIRTHING A CHARACTER

by
Lesley Geffinger

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

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Professor John Cameron

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

Lesley Geffinger

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

Thesis Committee: _____
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For Anita Guide, who has always been my number one fan.

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Thank you to my professors and instructors for allowing me come, play, fail and grow. Thank you to my fellow classmates who challenged me to be a better artist and encouraged me to embrace and share all of me.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

The following paper is a summary of my personal process as an actor. My process, as any process is in a constant state of flux. I discuss my current approach to a role from the callback portion of an audition to performance.

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PROLOGUE: ACTING CONTRADICTIONS

What I love and value about acting is exactly what I struggle to fully understand. It is an art comprised of contradictions. Actors are given the task to find the truth in a character that only exists in the black and white of pages of fiction; plays and screenplays. Fiction is make-believe, a lie of sorts. So one might say an actor's task is to find the truth, in a lie: find the real in the unreal and give it life. That's magical if you ask me for when we breathe life into a character; we make it human because it lives through us as artists. It's an art of giving birth. However, we are birthing things, characters, that don't actually exist. This is a beautiful, complicated contradiction the art form what we call acting. The way by which we come to give life to these characters is equally paradoxical because in order to do so, within acting's complexity we must consistently simplify, by way of specification. We must also pursue this search for a character knowing that there is no particular formula for any one role, no prescription on how to administer the discovery of any given character we might portray. In order to make a character appear real an actor has to be selfish and fight for their character, but in order for a scene to work truthfully, an actor must be selfless. We as actors are charged to find the logical in the illogical and we can't use our brains to do so, we must use our gut.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY STAGES OF GIVING LIFE TO A CHARACTER

When approaching a role, I first make strong choices or decisions about the character, which are very much topical for the purpose of callbacks do my best to allow my instincts to take over regardless of whether or not they fit the character. By the time I get a callback, have usually read the play or at least significant parts of the play in order to have a spring board to launch myself from. I also like to hear what others think about the play or the role I am auditioning for in this stage of the game. I most often get very broad opinions, generalities or stereotypes, but it helps get through the callback process. I know full well that some of what I find during callbacks may stay but much will change and grow if I get the opportunity to develop that character.

By the time our first table read takes place I like to have the play read at least two more times; sometimes this isn't possible. I like to read the play once through simply to hear and see the whole story in my imagination. I try not to focus on my part too much because I want to get a feel for everyone in the story. However, if something strikes me, I'll make a note of it in my script. The second time I read it, prior to table work, I put a great deal of focus on my part and make notes in my script as I see fit. I simply look for things that pop out to me at this point in the process. I feel as though I am just being introduced to the character through my eyes specifically. I might make a note about what someone else in the play says about her, become drawn to a line that I think reveals

something deeper about her. Basically, I allow myself to see whatever it is that I am able to see about the character and her circumstances in the play.

It's at this point that I work to identify personally with the role if I haven't already. And if I have, I work to further that personal relationship between myself and the character. I aim to become aware of what it is about me specifically; my past, my life, my voice, my body, my experiences, etc., that relate to, share or have in common with the character I am portraying: knowing full well of course that this is just the beginning. I continue to explore these personal connections throughout the entire process of the show.

CHAPTER TWO

TABLE WORK

My goal during the first reading is simply to get through it. The reading is stressful for me because I am dyslexic. Reading out loud is something I have always struggled with and remains a sensitive and potentially embarrassing experience. At a read through, I don't have any excuse for messing up my lines. In a callback, there is a lot happening and less pressure to get the words exactly right. I also know that people are looking at other aspects of me other than reading. Therefore, I keep my focus on the page and pay very little attention, if any at all, to making character choices. I absolutely don't try to do an accent this first time around. My focus is simply to do the best reading I can for everyone in the room. Though I do my best, it's difficult for me to truly hear or visualize the character and make new discoveries during this initial read through. Should I get my script early, I make sure to highlight my lines in yellow.

Table work is something that was new for me when I started my MFA training. What I have come to use it for is open communication and conversation about the play as a story being told as well as actor-self-discovery and director-self-discovery. By now, if my objective or super-objective hasn't become clear to me, use table work as an opportunity to discuss it with my director: this is the time for that kind of thing. It's also a time to ask questions, but not necessarily a time to find answers. I like it when fellow cast-mates are able to give me some insight into my character through discoveries of their own

character. However, if an actor has a suggestion about something specific about my character that clearly came from their experience as a person, I often throw it out. I don't believe in playing director or acting coach to my fellow actors and I appreciate the same in return. Again, insight is very helpful, but I believe this is my journey to bring the specific role I have been cast in, to life. That responsibility is in my hands and my hands alone. I see my director as my guide and the character as my own personal adventure.

CHAPTER THREE

REHEARSALS

My main objective as an actor in the beginning of rehearsal is to memorize my lines as quickly as possible. I write every line down at least twice, sometimes many more. First, I write out each line with a space between them where my scene partner's lines would go; then, I write out each scene as a monologue. I continue to repeat both in my head and out loud on my own as much as possible. This is also a visual reference for me. Admittedly, I don't do enough memorization work with a partner. Finding someone to run lines with me outside of rehearsal is not my strong suit. Movement while memorizing also helps: something as simple as walking around in whatever space I am in. Additionally, I now know to look for a cadence or syntax that a character might have. Being aware that character I am playing has a certain way she speaks, helps me to break down memorization blocks that impair my ability to remember lines. I am also a stickler for memorizing lines exactly as the playwright wrote. I want to believe that all playwrights chose their words carefully and intend them to be spoken precisely as they are on the page.

Throughout the rehearsal process I make notes in my script, notes about anything: discoveries, circumstances, thoughts, movement, blocking, ideas, questions, comments, concerns, drawings, shapes, anything that comes to mind. I underline operative words, lines and phrases of particular significance to the story, repeated lines, common words that the character may use or anything else that catches my eye. If I am working with an

accent, I write out the words in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) below my lines. I will also often write out various lines that prove to be more difficult than others in a separate notebook or on a separate piece of paper in IPA in order to help with memorization, cadence, syntax as well as pronunciation. I keep these notes or notebooks with my script. Daily notes given by my director are also written in my script. Sometimes I write them on the page of which I am to take the note or, on the back of a page dated when the note was given. Though there is little organization to how I mark up my script, I like to keep it all in the same place.

As the rehearsal process continues I do research on the play whether there is a dramaturge or not. I research anything I have a question about. I could look up something as simple as a word or as complex as a city map. I look for anything that might clue me into the character I am playing and the world in which surrounds them. My investigation throughout the rehearsal process is sporadic and non-linear. I may study something for an hour or two and it may lead me to further exploration I may look something up and spend a minute or two deciphering its relevance to my character or the play.

Meditating on the character I am playing is something new for me. I feel that in a relaxed state my imagination and inner senses are more acute and easier to access. It's a new part of my process so I feel that there is still much to discover. Nevertheless, I use this method to imagine what the character's real life might be like if any given scene were to exist in reality. I also imagine them in random situations, maybe what their wedding was like, what a date might look like, how shopping might feel, how they would clean or not

clean. I also use it to build my character's relationships, for example: If I know I need to find the love in the relationship I'm playing, I will use this meditative imaginative state to explore what, how and why my character loves the person she is with within the world of the play or her world before the play begins. Moreover, I visualize myself as the character making the choices she makes in the play as I search for answers as to why she makes those choices. Spending time imagining my character as a real person, through me, helps me create as well rounded and as fully developed character as possible at this point in my work. I find it an immensely valuable tool thus far. I don't think I am entirely aware of how much I use this techniques, meditation itself has become a daily practice, often multiple times a day if I am able. Nevertheless, meditation is something I plan on using to access future roles.

Meditation also allows me to maintain a connection with my breath. I do a lot of breath work in my meditation. Breath-work every day helps keep the muscles involved pliable and assists in keeping my breath as low as possible on a daily basis. I still hold my breath and fall into some of my other bad habits from time to time, probably more often than I am aware, but this daily ritual has no doubt had a positive effect on my work as an actor, artist and human being. Incorporating vocal work along with my breath work is something I need to add at the very least semi-regularly.

Rehearsals are a time to be brave, unearth, explore and untangle a play. It's a time and place to make discoveries: therefore, I need a safe place/space to do so. Here is where we, I, as an artist make wrong choices for my character and for the play. Ideally, I will

make more discoveries that I can keep rather than throw out, but those do happen. It's important for me to know that I can fall, that I can fail and that that is part of my journey. I know that when I don't feel safe, I shut down and my ability to let go, access and release my impulse is near non-existent. The artist in me dies a little bit which is not good when I am working to give birth to a character. It's difficult for me to jump into a process if I don't trust the collaborators who create the environment I am jumping into. This is not one of my strong suits because there are more work environments out there that are unfriendly, than friendly. I believe that as I grow confident both in my work and in myself, will be able to create a role freely in any environment. Until then, gaining back confidence will take time.

A sense of ensemble helps me in release my impulse at rehearsal. Trusting those around me as peers, as well as myself, is vital to the creation of a role. I don't know exactly how it happens, but I do know that a sense of oneness aids me in developing a role. I truly believe that while there may be small parts, there are no small players. I wish more theatre artists embraced this idea. With that said, group warm ups are my favorite. Bouncing energy off one another can levitate a room. That energy actually clears the space in my mind and makes it far more free for us to expand as actors. While I'd prefer a warm up that is more to my personal needs every time, I do so enjoy any group warm up. I take care of my personal needs in worming up on my own when I have to.

I have also embraced the idea, to the best of my ability at this point, of working off the other person. I think I get stage fright sometimes. I think I used to get it when I was

younger as well, and when I come back to the concept that it's just me and my scene partner, I calm down. It doesn't always work because I often get very nervous before taking the stage, but it has helped significantly. Furthermore, it's true. It is just you and your scene partner(s) out there on that stage. They are all you've got. So, I do my best to be as present with them as possible. I know *they* are who and what is most important to me on stage as an actor. It feels good to know that. Being present for them and focusing my energy on them hasn't failed me yet.

Costumes and/or make up can also give me a way into my character. Shoes inform me at least partly as to how I move. Hairstyle or jewelry can advise me of a psychological gesture my character may have that I haven't yet found. Dress rehearsals are like a heightened rehearsal for me because we don't have an audience and we have all our toys to play with. This is often where and when the real playtime begins. It's like the icing on a cake and the decorations, sprinkles and candles are like the performances, there is still room for adornments, but the foundation has been laid.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHOWTIME

During a run warming up physically, vocally on my own as well as with my ensemble, is vital to me as a performer. Having fun and connecting with my cast and crew prior to curtain is also crucial to my success as well as our show's success. I look through my script every night in the dressing room and sometimes shortly before I go on stage. I say my lines out loud each night before a performance on my own and line-bash when I can. This is the one thing that has remained consistent in every show I've done, well, all but one. One of my instructors suggested I try not doing it right before a show, rather earlier in the day, but it wasn't my favorite. Going over my scenes every night has become a ritual I am okay with keeping. Everything else I am free to flex.

My prep before a scene is currently within the given circumstances of the play. Though these preps are often not full, I simply don't have the ability to work a personal prep as I feel it takes me out of the place and space I am supposed to be working. I believe that as I continue working and developing my imagination through meditation exploration my preps will become more and more full. I have also found that doing squats, squat-sits, squat-leg-raises, push-ups and planks are great physical preps. This helps with my overall energy and focus and can be done quietly in small spaces.

I go on stage each night knowing that it's a new night and nothing will be the same. I am embracing that idea more and more. Beating myself up less and less has been a personal goal and I think I still have a long way to go in this area. But I am letting go of mistakes or missed opportunities to follow my impulse better. The past is the past and there is nothing I can do to change that, both in life and in life on stage: move forward, learn and grow.

EPILOGUE: PROOF OF LIFE

Evidence as to whether or not I have succeeded in giving birth to a character in a play happens in moments. These moments can take place anytime throughout rehearsal or anytime during the run. Sometimes these moments are longer or shorter, usually shorter at this point. And what these moments are filled with is a feeling of connection between me and the character. These moments happen when I am listening and responding fully to my scene partner and my character within the given circumstances of the play. These moments are the life breath of the character I am playing. Instances when fiction becomes reality through me. Contradictions become synonymous.

ANNOTATED PERFORMANCE HISTORY

Luck of the Irish

By Kirsten Greenridge

University of Iowa Main Stage

Production Team:

Director	Tlloc Rivas
Assistant Director	Maritza Pineda
Scenic Designer	R. Eric Stone
Costume Designer	Melissa Gilbert
Lighting Designer	David Thayer
Assistant Lighting Designer	Alex Casillas
Sound Designer	Ray Ockenfels
Dialect Director	Anne Marie Nest
Dramaturg	Alison Ruth
Dramaturg	Madison Colquette
Stage Manager	Kathleen Hains
Assistant Stage Manager	Alisha Lemon

Cast:

Nessa Charles	Diviin Huff
Hannah Davis	Aneisa Hicks
Mr. Donovan	Kevin Burford
Joe Donovan	John Whitney
Mrs. Donovan	Sasha Hildebrand
Patty Ann Donovan	Lesley Geffinger
Lucy Taylor	Regina Morones
Rex Taylor	Morris Hill
Rich Davis	Ruben Lebron Villegas
Miles	Bennett Ruhinda
Ensemble	Shane Nielsen, Alice Doherty

Location: David Thayer Theatre

Dates: March 5, 2015 to March 14, 2015

Role: Patty Anne Donovan, Principal

Order Now

By Theresa Giocopasi

University of Theatre, Gallery

Production Team:

Director	Lesley Geffinger
Stage Manager	Akash Baharo
Scene Designer	Meslissa Gilbert
Lighting & Sound Designer	Bri Atwood
Costume Design	Company Members
Dramaturge	Allison Ruth

Cast:

Jack Manning	Kevin Argus
Shan Manning	Molly Elizabeth Brown
Natalie	Zuri Starks
Woman	Megan Henry
Man	Zach Hendershot

Location: Theatre B, October 16-18, 2014

Role: Director of the Production

Absurd Person Singular

By Alan Ayckbourn

University Theatre Main Stage

Production Team:

Director	Eric Forsythe
Assistant Director	Marina Johnson
Vocal Director	Anne Marie Nest
Scenic Designer	Kevin Dudley
Costume Designer	Emily Bushá
Lighting Designer	Peggy Mead-Finizio
Sound Designer	Andrew Stewart
Stage Manager	Rachel E. Winfield
Assistant Stage Manager	Kristine Moffitt

Cast:

Jane Hopcroft	Molly Brown
Sidney Hopcroft	Andrew Wilkes
Eva Jackson	Lani Engstrom
Geoffrey Jackson	Kevin Argus
Marion Brewster-Wright	Lesley Geffinger
Ronald Brewster-Wright	Patrick Dulaney

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

Role: Marion Brewster-Wright – Principal

The Imaginary Invalid

By Carol Macvey, Emily Dendinger & Cast

Adapted from Moliere

University Theatre, Main Stage

Production Team:

Director	Carol MacVey
Scenic Designer	Josh Christoffersen
Assistant Scenic Designer	Kevin Dudley
Costume Designer	Emily Bushá
Assistant Costume Designer	Angie Esposito
Lighting Designer	Cassie Malmquist
Sound Designer	Jeffrey Shuter
Stage Manager	Katie Burnett
Assistant Stage Manager	Joe Pray
Dramaturg	Kristi Banker
Choreographer	Jeremy Blair
Music Director	Brooke LeWarne
Music Consultant/Arranger	Emily Christoffersen
Movement Director	Marc Frost
Vocal Coach	Careena Melia

Cast:

Argan	Nathan Wasson
Madeleine	Lesley Geffinger
Yvanne	Allyson Malandra
Angelique	Christina Sullivan
Toinette	Sasha Hildebrand
Cleante	Andrew Wilkes
Maxim Profite	Ari Craven
Dr. Diquad	Aaron Weiner
Thomas Diquad	Michael Sotelo
Babu Bupkiss	Luke Millington-Drake
Quartet	Molly Elizabeth Brown, Sarah Lovell, Brooke LeWarne, Amelia Peacock

Location: David Thayer Theatre, November 13-23, 2013

Role: Marianne, Supporting

The Aleph Complex

By Deborah Yarchum

University of Iowa, New Play Festival

Production Team:

Director	Megan Rivas-Monaghan
Stage Manager	Colin Bleker
Scenic & Lighting Designer	Andrew Nelson
Sound Designer	Troy Ellerbroeck
Costume Designer	Jae Hee Kim
Dramaturge	Kristi Banker

Cast:

Nicky	Emilia Hodges
Naomi	Lesley Geffinger
Borders Guy	Jacob Schiller

Location: Theatre B, May, 9 2013

Role: Naomi, Principal

A Dream Play

By August Strinberg

University Theatre, Main Stage

Production Team:

Director	David Hanzal
Assistant Director	Annie Levitz
Scenic Designer	Kevin Loeffler
Costume Designer	Amanda Quivey
Assistant Costume Designer	Emily Busha
Assistant Costume Designer	Noah Brown
Lighting Designer	Andrew Nelsen
Sound Designer	Bri Atwood
Composers	Jason Palamara, Matt Smart
Vocal Director	Janet Ziegler
Dramaturge	Jenni Page-white
Assistant Dramaturge	Zachary Isom
Dance Captain	Emily Hinkler
Stage Manager	Adriana Fernandez
Assistant Stage Manager	Jessica Brennan

Cast: Ensemble

Ali Borchers
Thomas Eslinger
Sarah Finley
Lesley Geffinger
Emily Hinkler
Elizabeth Kilmer
Regan Lamb
Tim Mizones
Alyssa Perry
Ben Rausch
Samuel Summer
Andrew Wilkes

Location: David Thayer Theatre, March 7-16, 2013

Role: Ensemble

Lady M

By William Shakespeare, Adapted by Matt Hawkins

University of Iowa Main Stage

Production Team:

Director – Matt Hawkins
Stage Manager – Katy Beth
Scenic Designer – Eric Stone
Costume Designer – Emily Busha
Lighting Designer – Jess Fialko
Sound Designer – Andrew Stewart

Cast:

Lady Macbeth	Regina Morones
Lady Macduff	Allyson Malandra
Weird Sister	Valeria Avina
Weird Sister	Emily Hinkler
Weird Sister	Elizabeth Hinkler
Macbeth	Matthew James
Duncan	Nate Wasson
Malcolm	Luke Millington-Drake
Banquo	RJ McGhee
Fleance	Dylan Davenport
Macduff	Bryan McIntyre
Macduff's Child	Nicole Lane
Ross	Ben TeBockhorst
Doctor/Soldier/Rebel	Lesley Geffinger
Orderly/Soldier/Rebel	Scott Myers
Murderer/Soldier/Rebel	Felipe Carrasco
Murderer/Soldier/Rebel	Luke Cunningham
Murderer/Soldier/Rebel	Breeyn Tigh

Location: David Thayer Theatre

Dates: October 11, 2012 through October 21, 2012

Role: Doctor/Soldier/Rebel, Ensemble

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