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How I failed to get my MFA

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HOW I FAILED TO GET MY MFA

by

Allyson Jean Malandra

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

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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

Allyson Jean Malandra

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.

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To Bodde Bauer, for believing in me,
To all of my mentors, for teaching me how to fail gloriously,
To my parents, for their infinite love and support,
To my MFA ensemble, because we did it,
And to Valeria Avina, for without your friendship, I wouldn't be the person and actor
that I am today.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This is the thorough examination of Allyson Malandra's process of becoming a character, and the many different challenges and triumphs she has faced throughout the past three years of developing her craft. It also aims to bring into focus where the work will be headed throughout the many years to come.

The goal of this process paper is to examine the many different details and intricacies that go into a role, and also how to troubleshoot problems that may arise throughout the journey. Our process is how we, as actors, attempt to create life on stage, and discover and unfold the underlying truth that connects all human beings. It is understood that each role for an actor will present a different set of challenges, and therefore it is important to understand a baseline process that gets at the core of the actor's work. Through examination of this process, previous and current challenges in the work will be discussed, as well as ways to move through these issues. Ideas on what is valuable in acting will be discussed, as a way of staying centered and focused, and also retaining quality in the craft. The examination will also explore three main pillars of the work—breathe, listen, and play—and how these anchor Allyson's artistry. The ultimate goals of this examination are to create a support for the process, to challenge her work in the future, and to help her continue to grow and expand, both as an artist and as a person.

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CHAPTER 1:

ON FAILURE, LETTING GO AND NOT KNOWING

Failure.

At first glance, this word carries some pretty slimy connotations. It's a word that is associated with shame and disgust, sorrow and fear. However, as my time as a graduate student comes to a conclusion, I would have to say that my relationship to this word has changed drastically: I no longer fear its presence. I have actually begun to make friends with this word, and I have had the realization that it has been the main contributor to my personal and professional growth over the past three years. Without failure, I wouldn't be writing this thesis. Without failure, I would've never taken the risk of coming to graduate school in the first place. But most importantly, without failure, I wouldn't be standing here today—I would still be rolling around on my back, unable to walk, like a baby. However extreme this thought may be, it is simple truth. For, at the conclusion of these three years, I have finally begun to accept the fact that failure is not a permanent condition. Failure is merely a part of our lives to teach us our most valuable lessons, and to push us to new heights and destinations along our life path. It is not about giving up, but quite the opposite—it is about reinvention and creativity.

That being said, I also surrender to the idea that I really don't know. I don't know exactly where my progress is; I don't know exactly how to prescriptively find a character; and I don't know if what I do for my character's is "right" or not. But

what I do know is that I have fallen in love with this idea of not knowing. It has been a difficult journey, but letting go of my need to get things right or have the right answer has really begun to have a deep impact on my work. I am an artist, and I have learned techniques and processes to help me find my character's, but at the end of the day, I just have to try the ideas and tools I have, see where they land, and adjust them from there. In a sense, I have to summon my courage, walk to the top of the high dive, jump off, and not know where I'm going to land—either into a pool that is full, or empty, or somewhere in between. It is this willingness to fail, and it is this ability to remain open to it and embrace it, that has begun to unlock a lot of doors in my work.

I came into this program knowing certain things about myself, my process as an actor, and the world of theatre, but I sought this training, essentially, because I still felt as though there was so much more to learn. After three years in this program, I am positive I know *some* things, however, there is so much more learning to be done. There is so much to learn about my craft and myself, and things are always changing, therefore it seems to me that this journey is endless. So, in a way, it's comforting to know that this process will never be over, for there's not one final answer or end result: you just keep working as best you can to make new discoveries. I have made so many realizations about myself since I've come to Iowa that it's sometimes hard for me to keep up with all of them. Sometimes I will have a discovery, but it's only just begun to plant a seed in my brain, and I still need time to work it out or allow it to sink into my brain and body. While other times, I might have a discovery while I'm physically doing something, and then all of a sudden the

changes manifest themselves while I'm doing whatever it is that I'm doing. There are times that I feel as though the changes and discoveries are coming at me so fast, that I feel like a cup that is overflowing, and things are just running up and over the top of the brim. I'm exploding on the inside, which can be very overwhelming at times. But once the pieces settle, I'm usually able to gain some clarity on what just happened. Although, sometimes I'm just left utterly confused, and sitting in the confusion and allowing it to be there has been a difficult thing for me to do. I like to know and understand, so it has also been a very good lesson of surrendering to the unknown.

CHAPTER 2:

ON PREVIOUS CHALLENGES AND ROADBLOCKS

There's a saying that we use in rehearsal: "Always know where you've just come from and also where you are going." Although I would say that it's not so important to know the gritty details about where you're heading in the next ten years, it's certainly important to know where you have just come from. I emphasize this as an entire chapter because I think that recognizing old habits of my process will only strengthen my ability to recognize them when they decide to rear their ugly head from time to time. For, I'm only human, so they *will* return at some point—it's inevitable—and my knowledge about them will enable me to witness their presence in the future.

Letting go of getting things "right"

Throughout my life, until coming to graduate school, I had always thought about getting things "right." That is, that I say my words and lines exactly how I've carefully thought about and planned for them to come out; my character is a well thought out and calculated person, and the decisions I've made about her (or him), have been based upon extensive research I've done in my script and in dramaturgical resources for the show I'm performing. This isn't to say that I've taken all of the spontaneity out of my roles, because there has always been that element within my acting, however, it has been stifled, cut short to certain degree, and thus a lot of impulsive decisions have been shut down. Instead of allowing myself to act upon an impulse I felt, I would get an urge to do something, think about

it, and then decide if it was “appropriate” or not to my character. I guess, in short, I had begun to put too much thought into my acting, instead of relying on the natural instincts I felt from within my gut. So, naturally, when I came to Iowa, hearing the words, “stop trying to get it right,” were a bit jolting at first, and difficult to fully comprehend. Not to mention the fact that I felt the need to defend myself, because the conscious part of my brain wasn’t always seeking the “right” answer; a lot of times it was the unconscious part. In other words, I didn’t even know that I was doing those things: unconscious incompetence. It seems as though the smallest inklings of change have only just begun to settle into my craft, as well as my life, because I can finally consciously make the decision to ignore the “right” thing now and do what my heart is telling me to do. The first experience I had with taking the pressure off of myself to “get it right” was the first round of auditions we went through at the beginning of our first year. There had always been something within myself that felt stifled and strangled when doing monologues. Furthermore, my monologues would inevitably end up going stale—always searching for that one moment of truth I had found in rehearsal, but never again being able to recreate that feeling or moment. The key here was my attempt to recreate something that had existed previously, instead of living in the moment of the now. Instead, I was presented with the idea that I should stop trying to get things right all the time, because that is a hopeless battle: acting is art, therefore there is no right or wrong. You might as well take the pressure off of yourself to get it right. Let go and feel free to play; rather than try and try to achieve something that is unattainable, predictably resulting in self loathing and destruction and feeling let down that you

didn't do everything exactly as you had intended. As Lao Tzu says, "By letting it go, it all gets done. The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is then beyond the winning." In all honesty, there's no way you could ever be successful if you put such pressure upon yourself to do everything exactly right. After all, in life we don't do things right or wrong, we just do them. This was a new approach for me—a breath of fresh air. The few days I had to rehearse my pieces before the auditions, I found myself finding new connections to my pieces, and also finding new moments of movement or stillness in places that were quite the opposite before. New moments came about organically because I was taking all the work I had done, the knowledge I had of the pieces, and then playing within that structure.

Last year, I was confronted with another enormous challenge—a musical. As a music theatre professional that had lost her voice, I had sort of written off doing musicals from my entire life. Well, not sort of, I had, in fact, written them off, and closed that doorway into that part of my life—shut it up, locked and sealed forever for business. I lost my ability to sing around the age of 25, and I was faced with the doom of having to change my career. I decided to take my career in a new direction, and pursue an MFA in Acting so that I could continue to perform and create my art, without my singing voice. At the end of my first year here at Iowa, through hard work, dedication, and the release of tension and old habits, I reclaimed my ability to sing. This has had an extraordinary impact upon my life, one that has been very exciting while also being very scary. Opening myself up to sing again has been so scary because it has forced me to open up one of the sources of my ultimate failure,

and explore it, expose it, and bring it to light. It's the epitome of me standing naked in front of an audience—supreme vulnerability. Perhaps this sounds a bit dramatic for a singing voice, however our voices are our identity, and for me, my voice was also my livelihood. I had based my entire career upon my ability to sing, and it had been taken away from me indefinitely, or at least it seemed so at the time. Deciding to sing again was frightening because I wasn't sure if I could physically do it, but forcing myself to try and see if I could heal enough to make it possible was part of the huge risk and challenge. If I agreed to try, that still meant that I had to look the possibility of realizing that this was a permanent loss in my life—a catastrophic failure—right in the face. I had tried in the past, and failed. But for some reason, this was the final straw, and if I couldn't do it after this try, I was never going to attempt again. Luckily, for me, I was able to pass through to the other side, or perhaps break through the wall, and I came through onto brand new ground on the other side.

Then came the challenge of being cast as the lead in a musical—Ruthee LaVie in Makeover. Not just any lead, but one who sings for the majority of a two and a half hour show. Overall, for this process, I was forced to go into my fear, and stand stark naked in it. I could write an entire novel on just my struggles, challenges, fears, triumphs, and lessons I learned throughout the process of Makeover, but for the main point of letting go of “getting things right,” I will focus on my singing in that show. It's challenging enough for a person who has been consistently singing professionally to do a show in which they sing 18 songs, but for someone who hasn't yet built up all their strength and stamina, and a person who was still learning to

accept the sound they had achieved at this point in her healing journey, this was a tumultuous process for me. In one aspect, I struggled with just being able to hit all of the notes my character sang. The songs were sometimes long, and they were very challenging—some stretching two octaves. Many of them also sat in my *passaggio* (or the passage between my head and chest voice). In the process of losing and regaining my voice, this was the weakest area of my range, and singing in it was only adding an extra layer of frosting to my “going into my fear” cake. Besides the reality of a difficult score, I was also struggling with the idea of letting go of the way I used to sound, and accepting my new sound. In other words, I had to let go of getting my voice “right,” and accept what was here in the now. I had to learn to accept my voice for all of its strengths, but also for all of its weaknesses; and I had to learn to love the failure, the ugly, and the imperfection. I had to learn to love my voice of the present with its unique scars. Throughout a majority of the process, I was working against myself, grasping desperately at the idea of getting every note right, making every musical line beautiful, and every song perfect. Somewhere along the way I had lost sight of the fact that, “Perfection is like death”, or so says Pema Chodron. Once you’ve attained something that is perfect, there is nothing left to do—the process is over, and there is nothing left to be learned, lost or gained. The composer of the show, Kim Sherman, reminded me of a very important principle in music (and also acting). She said: “If you screw up, just keep going. You don’t have time to worry and think about the note you just sang wrong, because then you’re missing the other 5 notes that have happened since.” In other words, you must stay in the present, and let go of the failure. It had also been suggested to me that it didn’t matter if I

screwed up. No one is going to remember those three notes I croaked out during the show. What they will remember, though, is if I hold onto them, and stay with them, instead of letting the imperfection show, and letting the beauty of standing naked radiate throughout my performance. I had to settle for the imperfection, accept my journey for where it was, and just stand in that fear, which, at first, was sort of like being buried up to my nose in quicksand. But after a while, I began to embrace the unknown, forget about each individual note, and step out into the space, ready for play. I had even grown to love the moments of uncertainty and the moments I made mistakes, for navigating my way back on track created a sense of what it feels like to be fully alive. Embracing that exhilaration was something I have never been able to do in the past.

Letting go of my drive

Along the same lines of “getting it right” was another huge realization I have had about myself since coming to Iowa, both as a person and as an actor. I am a very motivated person, one with drive and determination. These are qualities I like about myself, because I despise laziness. In a way, I think that lazy people lack a sense of passion in life; they lack that spunk and desire. I, on the other hand, am a very passionate person, full of desire, drive and heart. However, it was through my wonderful driven personality that I developed one of my largest glitches—my desire to be “the best.” I had never looked at the ambition in my life as an act of violence towards myself, because I only saw it from the validation side, knowing within myself that this quality is essential, to some degree, to success in life. I desire success in acting for the same reasons anyone wants success in his or her life, but

especially because I want to perform. There are so many amazing roles out there just dying to have their story's told. I had never realized that this need to succeed had been blown so far out of proportion, that I felt as though I needed to be the best actor. Not good, not great, not talented, but the best. When I finally stopped myself one day, and asked myself the simple question, "What does it mean to be the best actor?" then and only then did I realize how ridiculous this was. Of course you can't be the "best" actor, someone like that doesn't exist (well, give or take Mark Rylance, but you get the point). Besides deciding who the best actor is, what does being the "best" even mean? You can't measure your acting ability with a stick or an equation. Acting is so subjective—everyone has their own opinion—not to mention the fact that there are so many talented and remarkable actors in this world with different niches, that it's no wonder it's so difficult to answer the question: "Who is your favorite actor?" I've realized that the drive of success can become unhealthy, where it becomes an obsession, or takes control of your life, so much that you lose sight of what you wanted to do in the first place. This drive had also begun to diminish the artist within me. It had inflated the "editor," or the part of yourself that judges and questions everything you do, only tearing you apart, piece by piece, until you begin to shut off your impulses due to the overwhelming amount of judgment you have towards yourself. A part of me forgot that I just want to create and perform my art, whether that's performing in a show I was cast in or a show I have created, and that is how I will be successful. I suppose this was just a large realization that I need to harness my passion for my craft in a positive direction—fueling my creativity and the artist within me—instead of in a negative way—comparing myself to others, and

allowing my “editor” to take over, questioning the validity of everything I create. In an article entitled “Compassionate Backbends” from [Yoga Journal](#) that I read last year, this idea of letting go of what you want to become really struck me:

“Ultimately, it is only in letting go of what you wish you could be, in seeking greater freedom to be who you actually are at any given moment, that the process of your becoming unfolds” (Tremblay).

This idea of letting go of “getting it right” is something that was really present in my work throughout most of my first two years. I feel as though a major shift occurred within my work at the end of my second year, and I don’t know how or when it happened, but it has left me a changed artist. This process of getting up, swinging the bat, and seeing where you’re at that day is something that I adapted, and began to practice. Whereas before, I would’ve been driving myself to get things right, and be a good student, and make sure I’m following the correct path to success. Now, I’m trying to see where I’m at, adjust from there, and then keep walking down the path, or perhaps turning and taking a new one. Simply put, I’m learning how to enjoy the journey more, and letting go of my old habit of end gaining. I’m not always successful with it—sometimes my desire to do more and do better get in my way. However, other times, something new has begun to sprout, and this new flower is one of freedom and artistry. I’m open to take risks and fail, because I know the worst thing that can happen is that whatever I bring to the rehearsal just doesn’t work, and I will then keep searching for something that does. But I suppose it’s through allowing myself to fail that I actually end up finding the

greatest triumphs, because this permission is what ultimately trumps my drive to success.

Letting go of control

One of my biggest challenges in developing a character, and one which stems from my desire to “get it right,” is my tendency to play shape, or an idea of a character, rather than allowing there to be the contradictions, nuances and multi-dimension. This idea of playing shape stems from the need to get things “right,” or feeling as though a character is limited by their title, or by the things I think someone like that would do. In other words, my brain gets overinvolved, and I shut down and rule out interesting possibilities, just because I stay the one road course, instead of branching out to see what else there could be available. For instance, during the mask workshop in the Spring of 2014, I was playing a mother, and I limited that character to all of the “motherly” things I think a person with that role in life would do, instead of opening up the character to all the possibilities in the world—all the possibilities of a human—and then picking from that. The fact that a mother is a person is foremost important, and her job as a mother is only second to her humanity. When I play an idea of something, I instantly take myself out of the equation, and the qualities I bring to that character as a person. Not only that, but I also limit that character to very simple and basic things, and so we do not see a multi-dimensional person, but the idea of what that character is. He or she therefore becomes two-dimensional, or completely predictable. Moreover, what is ultimately interesting is who the mother is within me, and how I uniquely express being a mother. The personal connection to our characters is also what helps

eliminate shape, because we bring the myriad of different facets within ourselves to our work. I have found, though, that playing around with as many wild and crazy ideas as possible has helped me release some of those preconceived ideas I may have about my character. It helps because it allows me to shatter the ideas I have about my character through playing with it in a million and one different ways, and thus, I begin to add different flavors to that person. I have also found that when getting up to do an improv in mask class, or even when getting up to do a scene, I sometimes get all these ideas in my head as to what could possibly happen, or I begin to create funny scenarios in my head of things that could happen. I believe that part of this is due to my fear of release, but I also believe another part of it has to do with the fact that my brain runs a million miles per second. I am a creative person by nature, so my neurons are constantly firing, and creating and playing. I used to think that I had to shut down these thoughts, I thought that I needed to curb them or restrain them because having them was planning things, and I wanted to let go of planning in my work and open myself up to the unknown. I thought that getting rid of these thoughts would help to eliminate the playing of the shape of my characters by sort of shutting down my mind and my over-thinking. I have recently realized that although I would like to lessen the presence of these pre-planned thoughts in my work, that it's not a bad thing to have these thoughts. In fact, having them is great, and part of who I am as a creative individual, but shutting them down or trying to eliminate them only makes them stronger. It makes them get more and more agitated, and makes me feel like they're going to explode, much like a can of soda that has been shaken. Instead, I have learned to let them go, to let them

continuously flow within me, but to not hold onto them after they have made themselves present. It is in letting them have a voice, allowing them to be present but not held onto, that I am able to release them and move onto the next thing that comes my way. At the end of the day, I need to work off of what my partner is giving me, not some idea of what a character would and wouldn't do. We all have contradictions within ourselves, and finding those contradictions is part of the process, but also the difficulty in creating a complex character. Along with that, embracing my own contradictions, and what I have, personally, that I can bring to my characters is always going to be the most valuable resource that I can offer. As Stanislavsky says, "The person you are is a thousand times more interesting than the best actor you could ever hope to be."

Another major change within myself since I've come to Iowa has been the recognition that control in our lives is usually what creates the biggest problems. Until coming to this school, I had never recognized control as the biggest culprit of discourse and unrest within us. Throughout our lives, so many things control us, whether it's our parents and teachers as children or our bosses and schedules as adults. Being controlled by something is inevitable in life, so it's easy to see why we try to control everything else that doesn't already have a hold on us. Such was the same with my acting. I used to try to control so many things about my character, from how I was pre-planning how to say my lines, to making sure that I hit the same movement at the exact same part in the scene that worked at some point in time. I have come to understand that this is the antithesis to good acting, for it inhibits the possibility for anything new to happen in the moment. I didn't even realize that I

was doing this to myself until it was brought to my attention. I didn't know that I didn't know, in other words I was in the "unconscious incompetence" phase in the learning process. I began exploring this concept my first year with my work in Lady M, and I started to question a lot of things I was doing in the show. This concept of control was distant to me at first, as it should be, since I was just becoming enlightened of its presence in my work and my life. The question of how much repetition should happen during a performance became a very trying one for me personally. Should I always hit the same spot in my blocking at the exact same moment each night? Or, is there flexibility there, in essence less control, which would allow my character to be freer? Could I know my blocking so well that I would be able to follow my character's instincts to move during that performance? I decided that the second option is the one that is founded on truth, on things happening in the moment and for the first time. There is a very large difference between recreating a great moment and allowing a great moment to happen. I have no interest in the former, and I realize that I had been doing that in a lot of my work. Furthermore, I think it's literally impossible to recreate a great moment, for then you are just setting yourself up for failure. The beauty of truthful moments is that they are fully present, not living in the past by recreating something that already happened, or in the future, by anticipating what is about to come. They are just here because you are working off of your partner. While I understand that you can't completely change your character and your blocking during a performance, there is room for movement and change. Acting is about release—both of who you are as a person, and also releasing yourself to your partner and the audience—not about

constriction. As mentioned above, I am now able to come into scene work or rehearsal without an agenda, both for myself and my character, and just play, and see what comes about in the moment.

The first year of graduate school, I began to fully comprehend the extent of control's hold over my work with my Ibsen scene. We had been working on the concept of listening, both to our scene partners and ourselves, and then reacting to what we hear. Simply put, the golden rule of acting (developed by Sanford Meisner): never do anything unless something happens to make you do it. I was aware of the fact that when approaching a character, I tended to develop patterns of speech. This is a habit that all actors are always working to break. Patterns will develop, but if you are able to limit their presence, the words can be free, and the possibilities within them are endless. If you make decisions about how your character would say something, you thus prevent any real listening in a scene from happening. How can you be listening if you already know exactly how your lines are going to fall out of your mouth? I had never thought about my "character work" as being a restrictive thing, but once you see how controlled and precise this makes your words, it's easy to understand that any chance of new discoveries has been shutdown. Breaking patterns of speech will always be a challenging thing for me, as it is for anyone, because as human beings we seek patterns. I have found that with applying different tools from technique, and by making a big, sloppy mess of my lines and my choices in rehearsal, I'm able to shake some of the patterns free from my speech.

CHAPTER 3:

CURRENT CHALLENGES: WHERE AM I AT?

Although I would love to say that I am now completely free from my previous challenges, and I have plateaued onto a new level within myself as a person and as an actor, I know that is completely false. I do, however, believe that I have learned a lot, and in a way, I have broken ground onto a new part of myself, both as a person and as an actor. But I also know that we are all like onions. As humans, we possess these layers, and as we break free from one layer of habit, sometimes we begin to understand that the habit goes deeper within us, or there is another layer below our last discovery. We work through another layer of our onion and break through, only to discover there is something deeper still—a new challenge that awaits us as we dive deeper within our consciousness. Sometimes, our habits will show up in other forms, but when we trace their roots, we realize they are merely connected to something else we thought we had moved past in previous years. It is in this way that I am reminded, yet again, that this process is a journey, and a cyclical one at that. As Greg Anderson says, “Focus on the journey, not the destination. Joy is found not in finishing an activity, but in doing it.”

Letting go of speed

This year, throughout my work in clown, in Crescendo, and most recently, Good Kids, I have come up against my need for speed. Since I was a child, I have loved doing things fast—I talk fast, I eat fast, I move fast, I drive fast, etc. In fact, playing energy in my work has been a challenge for me throughout my past—it’s

just another part of my need to drive. I will play the energy of the scene instead of really taking in what is around me and letting that affect me. The thing that clown began to show me is that although I love to speed through things, I must take my time. I must take each moment as it comes, and I really have to enjoy each little piece for what it is in the present moment, for if I truly allow myself to be affected, it forces me to slow down. I can't speed ahead or anticipate, and I can't fall behind the action. I am actually breathing and living continuously in the present, and allowing myself to just take each moment for what it is, specifically. Forcing myself to slow down has helped me to fight against generalization—glossed over moments that are completely missed because of my need to drive, to make sure I'm "doing" everything. Slowing me down started in clown. The form forces you to take your time, because you have no idea what is coming next. You can't speed ahead because everything matters—and each little moment is the steppingstone to the following.

This principle was highlighted again for me during Crescendo, for I was playing a Bouffant Clown, which is a type of French Clown that represents (generally speaking) the darker sides of life, the grotesque. My partner, Mo, and I were forced to slow down, and live continuously in the present moment, because we didn't have a set script. We had a rough idea of what we would do, and what each bit part we had was about, but everything else was up to creating in the moment. Each performance was as different as the audience, for all of our material was based solely on what we were given that night, and that exact moment. We couldn't predict who would be in the audience; we had to wait and see. I will talk about this later, but for right now, I will focus on my need for speed, and that part of my drive.

If I didn't take the time to slow down, and really breathe and take in each moment for what it was, I would end up jumping ahead, pushing, and ultimately, losing my audience. Once I realized that I had to actually go much slower than I thought I did, things began to breathe more, my work with my partner began to live more, and, as a result, our audience was much more connected to us, and vice-versa. I didn't have to push and tighten, but instead, I had to do the opposite: slow down and relax. I believe this need for speed has something to do with my inability to trust myself, and to believe that I am worthy of taking my space. I feel rushed because I think I must "do" something in order to hold the audience's attention, however, in reality, I don't have to do anything. I need to play my action—only do what is necessary. I am working to find the economy in my self and my characters, because anything that you don't need is noisy. My director, Paola Coletto, told me during this process, "to do less than what I think is necessary." Those words have begun to ring true for me this entire year. All of this is connected to my inner drive, and my ability, or rather inability, to trust my work and myself. But I will explore both of those momentarily.

This need for speed and drive came about yet again (surprise, surprise) during my process with Good Kids this past winter. My role in the show was quite different than any other role I have ever had—I was the narrator of the show, and I also possessed a type of controlling power over the action on stage. Due to the nature of this role, my scene partner wasn't the other actors in the play, but instead, it was the audience. As a result of this, all of my dialogue in the play was monologue work. When I first approached my character, Deirdre, I was rushing through

moments, and feeling the need to push and rush because I felt that I would lose the audience if I didn't keep up a quick pace. I was so scared of taking my space, and allowing Deirdre to have her moments of silence when she needed them.

Interesting enough, I also began to see a lot of overlap between my work in this show and my work during auditions, always rushing through my work because I feel this need to "do". During the rehearsal process, however, we really began to slow down, and pull apart each monologue, piece by piece. We, meaning my director, Alan and I, began to find all of the nuances within each speech, all of the moments of connection for Deirdre, and allow these to have breath—both literally and figuratively. I didn't need to rush to hold the space, I actually needed to slow down and breathe, and trust that what I had to say was important. That being said, trust and release ended up getting in my way again, even with my slower approach to my work.

Letting go of my drive: trust and release

I suppose it might be impossible to draw my challenges with trust and release asunder, since they are innately connected to my ultimate challenge—drive. I have difficulty releasing my work because I don't fully trust myself. I feel the need to drive and push and "do" because I am worried that I am not doing enough. I am still working on trusting the work I have done, and just releasing it all, with all of its imperfections and fallacies, however, this might be the biggest obstacle in my work currently. My first experience with trust and release happened in Crescendo.

As I mentioned earlier, I have always had difficulty with improvisation and just working in the moment, because I always put this pressure on myself to create

something. In my mind I thought I had to have something planned because I couldn't be brilliant enough to think of something great in the moment. It wasn't until I was cast in a role that was not only a devised piece, but also a complete improvisation every performance, that I began to fully understand what that "release" was that John Cameron always taught us about in Meisner class. Even in my first year in Meisner class, I would experience some moments of release when I wouldn't think too much or worry about what I was doing, and just trust that I am a capable human being who can do simple repetition. I always put some sort of pressure upon myself, though, that I had to not screw up and really know what I was doing before I did it, because not having any plan was absolutely terrifying to me. What would I do? What would I say? Of course, I realize now that this is all so stupid. But at the time, as much as I told myself not to worry, and just let go, I think the more and more I got in my own way by formulating plans of what to do. Up until opening night of Crescendo, I still wasn't fully aware of the fact that I didn't have to "do" anything—I just had to breathe in the space and let everything I see have an affect on me, and let my environment, the external, do all of the work for me. There was nothing I had to do except stand there, breathe, observe, and "repeat" in a way. Yes, curiously enough, that sounds exactly like Meisner class to me. Anyway, it was finally on opening night that this all clicked for me, and I had this giant "Ah-ha!" moment, when I realized that everything I need is in the space around me. If I need inspiration, I look to the space. If I need to feel the audience, feel connected, feel the state—I look to the space. As our other director for Crescendo, Matteo Destro, said: "Inspiration is all around you. Everything you need is already present in the space."

I finally understood what it felt like to just let go, play, and have fun. I didn't have to formulate what I was going to say, all that I had to do was take in everything around me, which, in turn, connects you to the present moment. There were an inordinate amount of things to play with, if I took the time to really see them. The artistry happens when you allow yourself to be surprised, then listen, and then move forward with your intention of your impact on the space. By focusing on everything outside of yourself, you take yourself out of the equation and out of the way.

I learned this lesson again in clown class. I will never forget the day that we were doing "scale work." Essentially, you stand in a line, and you have to go up and down the scale, from 1-10, on an emotion. You take what your partner is giving you, and then build it (or decrease it, depending on which way you are going), and then pass it along to the next person. I remember realizing that I didn't have to think or do anything, I just needed to wait, breathe, and openly receive what my partner was giving me. I had to let my partner and the space, the external, do the work for me. If I trusted in that, I would find myself where I needed to be. Then, I could take that, and churn it up, and begin to stoke the fire; or, if we were working down the scale, begin to tamper it down, which is essentially the same as releasing it, and letting it go.

Over these past few months, I also began to notice this "holding on" and "gripping" within my voice. I had always noticed it before, and it had felt as though I was holding and protecting that part of my body, sort of a perpetual shield. At that point, I had only noticed it when I was tired, and my voice was tired and scratchy, and I felt this extra gripping when trying to speak. However, I began to notice that a

lot of what was getting in the way of me singing, and also tiring out my voice on stage, was that I wasn't fully releasing the sounds that were coming out of my mouth. I was to an extent, but it was almost as if I didn't trust what was going to come out, so I had to micromanage everything, in order to make sure that every piece was landing exactly how I wanted it to land—ultimate control. Once I realized that I must release to my voice and my body, and allow it to do its job, all of a sudden, this richer sound began to flow from my mouth, and I found myself having much more phonation in places where I struggled to manage my voice previously.

I also began to notice this vocal habit during my process in Good Kids. I began to take notice that when I was speaking my lines, there was still something very held about them, something managed. It almost felt as though I was holding onto each moment so much, digging in and really trying to milk every single second for what it was, that I couldn't let it breathe, couldn't let it just land where it was going to land. As a result, my voice was getting tired, and I began to realize that a lot of my issues in the past in shows where I was getting vocally exhausted undoubtedly had to do with this gripping. This wasn't the first time I noticed gripping in my work, and I'm sure it won't be the last. I attribute this sensation to a lack of trust. I didn't trust what was going to come out of my mouth when I was singing. I didn't trust the way my words were going to land, even though I had spent countless hours preparing for my role. Something was still trying to make sure every single detail was not only attended to, but that it was landing exactly how I wanted it to land. Everything was completely over managed and placed. Everything was too calculated, so much so that I couldn't let myself experience any surprise, or even any

failure. I was too much in control, and I needed to invite in the chaos. This over management not only was present in my voice, but it was also present in my work as Deirdre. As much as I knew I had to work off of my audience, to really take them in and feel them, for most of my performances I was still failing to fully “breathe them in.” Besides that, I was holding onto the work I had done so much, that I wasn’t allowing myself to really have fun and play throughout the show. I was to an extent, but it wasn’t until the final three performances that I realized what that real release of my work felt like. Previously in performances, I had held onto each little moment so tightly, making sure every detail was attended to in such a meticulous way, that I ended up cutting Deirdre off from her joy in life, from her ability to just be her. Instead, I was micromanaging everything that I had done because I didn’t trust myself enough to know that no matter what, all of that work was going to be there. My missing link was the fun. I was so concerned with driving to be great, and proving this work I had done, and making sure that I was doing the very best that I could at every moment, that I just stood in my way of achieving all of that because I couldn’t let go and do my thing. This gripping onto something to make sure it is good is just completely strangling any creativity and fun that could possibly happen at any moment, which, in turn, just creates a laborious performance that is muscled through and not fun to watch. We, as the audience, see all the work you have done, and we don’t care to see it. We want to be told a story. It wasn’t until the last three performances that I sort of threw caution to the wind, and just relaxed and began to trust myself and just let the story roll through me, like a wave, moment by moment. I finally let go of my drive to get somewhere or be something. This is when I began

to understand, I think for the first time, that feeling of just being free and not caring about what the audience thinks. I had a story to tell, but it was much more fun to let the story unfold before my very eyes, opening myself up to spontaneity and surprise, and just letting the pieces fall where they may. If you work hard in rehearsal, which I had, then you can trust that the muscle memory will be there, because it will. But even if it isn't one night, perhaps it will lead you to a new place, one that is different and a side you never saw coming from yourself and your character. It might lead you to brilliance...or maybe it won't. Perhaps you will fail super hard. But you must be willing to let go and take that risk. For we all know, that no matter how hard you fail and fall down, the clown always gets back up.

CHAPTER 4:

WHAT I FIND VALUABLE IN ACTING

Over the past three years, my idea of “good” acting has changed quite dramatically. I will move away from the word “good,” and instead, define what I find valuable in acting. I want to move away from good because it begins to imply that there is some sort of quantitative value in this definition, something to be achieved, a goal. “Good” also begins to bring in a sense of right and wrong, black and white—and acting is nothing if not completely grey. For, in our choices on stage, we don’t make the right choice, or the perfect choice; we make the stronger choice, the choice that is most interesting.

Acting is a release of your inner impulses, which arise out of the truth of the moment you are in at any given time. Acting is playful, creative, and imaginative. Acting is a passionate journey, full of discoveries and connections. To me, at this moment, acting is all of these things, but most importantly, it is a release of who I am right now. In the past, I always tried to run away from who I was in my work, because I felt as though I was never good enough or creative enough or whatever enough to constitute a significant artistic individual. I always saw other people’s work as being superior, no matter what I had created. I began to put up my own road blocks by qualifying myself as being unable to produce and create certain types of things, like write a play or start an ensemble theatre group. I had never tried it, so I instantly deemed myself unable to do it, instead of opening myself up to the possibility of it happening. I have changed a lot while being here in Iowa, and I am

continuing to change as I type the words in this paper. For now, though, I realize that everything about my work has to be connected to me and who I am. For there is only one me in the world, and my artistic voice and expression are what I should value and hold above all else. I can't be someone else or do the work that they do, because I am not that person. Releasing the impulse is essentially releasing who I am at this very second, without judging, curbing, or filtering any of it. It's just me—but the most dynamic and truthful version of myself. The more I value who I am as a person and what I can bring to the table, the more my work will open up for me. Then I will be able to do more things I never dreamt possible. I am a passionate individual, one who loves the theatre, and loves to dive in head first to any theatrical outlet. That is who I am, and, for better or worse, I just need to own all of it.

Acting is also one giant game, and I am here to play. When you rehearse for a role, you bring yourself to the role, because that's what you have to work with—your tools. You begin rehearsal, and decide to open your heart and soul up to the rest of the cast, the other characters, the director, and most importantly, your own character. You open yourself up to the unlimited discoveries and possibilities you make while taking the artistic journey through a rehearsal process. However, whether you're headed to rehearsal, or opening night, or your 208th performance, you come ready to play the game. You bring who you are in that moment, you see the others who are with you, and you allow yourself to be swallowed whole in that experience. Whatever they bring, you see, you take in, and you react to it. That is how you release the truth of that moment. Your own impulses, releases, and discoveries are what make your work, ***your work***. You also play to win. You put

yourself out there, you play with 100% of yourself, and you go after your objective with everything you've got. You risk losing everything you have; because if I fail fabulously, at least I know I gave it everything I had without regrets. For, when you step out onto the stage, you must fully believe in what you are doing.

Acting is a journey, not a destination. There is nowhere to get or some massive prize at the end. You must trust that if you have done the work, discoveries will happen. It's also about releasing the impulses you feel in every moment of your day. Of course, both of these things are easier said than done. Releasing the inner workings of your mind, body, and soul is just the same as opening up your entire being to anyone in the world, and inviting them to come inside, look around and stay for a while. It can be uncomfortable, disconcerting, and challenging. Acting is about being brave: you take the journey no matter what feelings you have, and then you take all of those feelings and release them. Acting is being vulnerable, and being open to *all* of your emotions, not just the ones you are comfortable expressing. Social mores aside, if you pretend to be fine when you're feeling very annoyed by someone, then you are lying. That's not releasing the truth of the moment, and that's not releasing who you are. No matter how you think you should feel about something, what you really see and what you really feel are always going to be the truth of the moment, because that's what is happening right now. As an actor, you decide to take the journey into the unknown. You put yourself entirely out there, play with every ounce of your being, and then release who you are and how you see the world to the others who are playing with you. Each time you step into a character's shoes, you play the character one moment at a time, but from where you

are in that moment, staying present with every little high and low, every single step of the way. There is no “finish line,” or meter to judge your final product against. The performance is just a result of the journey you have taken in rehearsal, and the piece and the ensemble continue to live, breathe and evolve up to the very last minute of the last show. That’s the kind of acting that is raw, passionate, visceral, and truthful. That’s the kind of acting that I believe in.

CHAPTER 5:

MY PROCESS

Disclaimer: Saying that there's a prescription for creating a character has already created an obstacle, because our art, like all art, is not black and white. There is no mathematical formula that I can equate or do each time I become a character that will produce a solid result. For each new character that I tackle, it is all a matter of trial and error, and using the tools that I have acquired in different ways, and also being curious about the ways in which I can use them. Plus, it is also being aware of my habits and my personal traps. Throughout each role, we will all struggle with different things. Each point in our lives will reveal a new thing to work on for our selves. The beauty of possessing a "tool belt" is that we are able to use different tools for different problems. I will come up against different challenges with each new role I work on, and I will also face different challenges when I don't have a role to create. I must continue to live in the present moment with myself and also with my craft. You cannot think your way in—you must *find* your way in. That is what this process is about.

My process can be divided into three large steps: Breathe. Listen. Play. Within these three main pillars lies my personal connection to all of them, and how they are all interconnected to my work and my performance. In a way, this is a rough "road map" of how to troubleshoot my habits and challenges. For, when I come back to these main pillars, I am reminded of how to work through my personal traps.

Breathe

When it comes to connecting to myself, these past three years have been quite an explosion of exploration for me. One of the most important things I need in order to fully connect to myself is breath. Our breath is what connects us to our inner self, our scene partner, the audience, the space, and the earth. Great acting requires an energy, or a radiance, from yourself outwards to those all around you. The only way to connect to yourself, and bring about your dynamic presence, is through your breath. Our breath controls just about everything that we do and feel within ourselves, from our thoughts to our emotions. If you aren't connected to your breath, essentially you aren't connected to yourself. Our inspiration, or our inhalation, is exactly that—our inspiration for thought, emotion, and life. On the inhalation, we pull into ourselves and dive in: we experience sensation and life force. On the exhalation, we expand outwards, sending our energy out into the world. Learning to breathe deeper has been hard work for me. I used to feel free and open while lying on the ground, doing Tremor work, and allowing my breath to fall in while in any reclined position. However, when I would stand up, I felt constrained and constricted, and my breath would only fall to about as deep as my chest. Through extensive Tremor work, yoga, and just constant attention to my breath, I have made some real progress, and I'm able to allow my breath to fall deeper than it ever has in the past. I've realized that connecting to my breath generally clears up most of my personal "blocks," or things that I do when I get in my own way, and allows me to stay connected to the moment, myself, and my partner.

Through Yoga, I have learned a quick three-step process connected to my breath, which is applicable at any point in our lives, whether we are on stage or not, but I find it particularly helpful in my artistry. In a way, it sort of resembles the same three-steps I am presenting as my process. In Yoga, I have learned to breathe, observe and soften. You breathe in to take in energy and life, you observe what you feel, what sensations you are feeling in your body, and then you listen and find the areas you can soften. You use your breath to soften these areas, and it is through breath that you are connected to all of these sensations. When we experience tension or resistance, you must bring attention to that spot and breathe into it. It is through breath that it will eventually transform. This principle applies both literally—in our bodies with sensations and tight muscles—but also in our lives and craft, when we experience resistance outside of ourselves, especially in dealing with life crises.

Through deepening my breath, it has allowed me to open up more of myself, and create a larger presence, or, as we sometimes call it, the “state.” The state is that state of readiness, or play, that you experience when your senses are heightened, and you are focused on everything happening around you. You are present—all of your muscles are tingling and your body is awake and alive. This creates a certain presence about you. This presence is energy that radiates from your body and allows you to be seen by others, while simultaneously taking them in as well. This presence is a two way street, and you must engage soft focus in order to take in everything around you. You must allow yourself to be affected, and then that effect produces action (or a reaction) within you, and thus propels you forward. The

caveat to this is that just because you are ready, doesn't mean that there is tension. Just because you are working to create the state of readiness, doesn't mean that you have to overwork, for the harder you work, the smaller you get. In fact, there is an absence of tension when you are really engaging the state and also connecting fully to your breath. For, it is the connection to your breath that releases tension.

Connecting to my breath has also allowed me to calm down a lot of my anxiety; as a person in general, but also when my performance nerves begin to kick in. Up until recently, I used to get such bad performance anxiety, even when I would be performing in class that I would feel as though I was going to pass out. It made performing a bit tortuous at times, and I would be lying if I didn't admit to questioning my own career choice based on this problem. In all honesty, even though it has calmed down some, it still happens a lot. But I'm working on allowing that burst of energy, or life force, that I feel when I'm nervous to free flow throughout my body. If I stand there, and hold onto it, and continuously try to swallow it or put it away, I end up exacerbating the problem, and igniting that churning furnace going on within me. It sometimes gets so bad that I hyperventilate, and I lose feeling in my hands. I've been working on allowing the nerves to be there, acknowledging them, and telling myself it's OK. Letting them be present allows them to move through me, and out from me, so that they're not all trapped inside of my body, with me trying to shove them away. It's another way of just letting go, and letting things flow freely—I acknowledge what is *actually* happening at that moment, or where I am at. As Catherine Fitzmaurice would say, ask yourself, "What is the most authentic me at this very moment?" As mentioned

before, I'm also naturally a very fast person. My inner rhythm moves quickly, and I have a hard time slowing down. I have found that breathing, and really allowing the breath to fall in—as opposed to forcing it in or making my body breathe deeper—has also helped me to slow down my inner rhythm a bit as well. When I am not breathing, my internal life begins to speed out of control and my anxiety levels shoot through the roof. The only way I can describe how that kinesthetically feels is by saying that I come up and out of myself. I begin to live somewhere outside of myself, and it feels as though my body is trying to catch up and my heart is in my throat. Through breath, and deepening my breath, I've found it allows me to settle back down and into myself, which allows things to come at me, and affect me. Plus, I suppose it is still connected to my drive and trying to do something or get somewhere. There is nowhere to be but the present moment. I can take my time, breathe when I need to, and take my space. When I stop breathing, the space shrinks and deflates around me. When I stay connected to my breath, I am breathing with the space, and simultaneously, the space is breathing me.

Listen

I suppose true listening is analogous to true connection. Both imply that there is a dialogue, a back and forth action occurring, not just a one way street of either pushing and giving too much, eliminating the room for anything to come back in; or not giving anything, and only receiving everything, with no reaction to what is happening. For me, true connection is about listening to my character, listening to myself, listening to my partner, and listening to my audience.

There are many ways in which I find connection to my character, but the most basic process that I use for all of my text work is the “GOAT” foundation; or Given Circumstances, Objective, Action, and Tactics. I choose GOAT as the foundation for all of my work, simply because, there is nothing more boring than watching a person act who has no action, no need. Now that I teach acting, the distinction between active and inactive acting is much easier for me to see. In our own lives, we never do anything without a need or a want. Our wants in life are what take us through our journey, and when our wants change, we change our course of action. Such is the same for all of our characters; it’s just that a lot of times the stakes are heightened, thus creating drama. I have always been a huge proponent of doing extensive work in the given circumstances, along with dramaturgical work that will support your character and your show. You must know your given circumstances: they are everything. In both class and rehearsal, I’ve experienced just how powerful going back to the given circumstances can be, showing me where I have made assumptions or generalizations about my character that are not informed by the text. The minute we go back to the text and the given circumstances, a lot of things that are vague or generalized immediately become specific.

Alongside of the given circumstances work, I would add imagination and imagery work. While working on a role, you need to create the life you are living, so taking time to do imagery work has always been very helpful to me. A character doesn’t begin and end with the play—they have an entire life story behind them. Just as you have a full and complete history of your own life, your character should

have the same. You must be able to understand where that character came from, and also where they are going. Last spring, for And I will hold you/When you are broken, I've did a lot of imagery work with the words (the show is written in verse poetry), and connecting to the images that those words conjure within me.

Exploring and discovering images, especially with words from my dialogue, is very helpful for me in my process. I think it's important to make your imagery work specific, so that you're not just speaking words, but you are communicating colors, textures, sounds, emotions, light, shapes, and everything else your character associates with his or her speech. The given circumstances work is so important because it lays out the rules of the game for you, or, in other words, the rules of the world you are living in. You must know exactly where you are at all times in order to have complete freedom within that structure. You must always challenge yourself to be as specific as possible in order to play fully and risk everything, so that you are able to uncover the greatest riches.

After your given circumstances, you begin to solidify your objective and your action. I firmly believe that there is no room for confusion when defining what your character wants, and what he or she is doing to get it. If you're ever in doubt, look to the text. Usually your character's dialogue will inform you as to exactly what they are going after. Once you've decided, the other essential part is that you have an action that can withstand weight; it won't be easily knocked over. You need a strong action so that you have something to work with, something that you are going into your scene to fight with, and you are using it to win. You have to want that thing so badly, that there is nothing going to stop you from getting it. I absolutely hate "safe"

theatre, because in a sense, it's just lazy. There is no passion or drive, it just wants to coast through the story, never really making a statement to anyone. When a character is passionate about what they want, and they will stop at nothing to get it, I'm totally engaged and drawn in to the performance.

The tactic work will only open doors to new possibilities within your character, and a lot of times, things that you never would have thought possible. Tactics enrich your work as a whole, creating new levels and dynamics within a role. I've come to realize that everyone you meet in life is completely unpredictable. Even someone you know very well will always do something out of character every once in a while. This caveat to life is what makes the tactic work so applicable to any role in any situation. Tactics also help to eliminate mood and energy overtones within the work. Over the past two years, I've noticed that once you're able to change the tactics your character is using, it helps shake things up, instead of letting them run stale. A good use of tactics adds twists and turns to a character, or to a scene, that you never saw coming.

Using the GOAT analysis and our imaginations as the basis for connecting to all characters, there are a number of other tools I use from that baseline in order to explore and allow my character to unfold, such as status play work and the "As-if". I will refrain from explaining and naming all of them, because, as mentioned before, I use different tools at different points, and this isn't the core of my process. It is more about being open to the possibility of using any technique or any method at any time in order to discover as many things about your character as possible.

Next, comes the challenge of listening to myself. One part of that listening has to do with bringing myself to my characters. This is how listening to my character and myself are interconnected. It is through doing my homework on the technical end, and then adding my artistry as a person and my life experience, that I create a character that isn't just on paper, but is an extension of my creativity. This personal connection is, as I mentioned before, what makes my work genuinely my artistic expression.

Listening to myself is congruent to trusting myself. For some reason, trust is a huge struggle in my life. I have a tendency to want to prove the work that I have done on a character. I also have a tendency to not trust my instincts. I have a tendency to push on things that are happening (perhaps to prove that I'm releasing or feeling something), instead of trusting that me feeling them and acknowledging them is enough. I suppose a lot of this battle has to do with trusting and following my heart, rather than my brain. Following my heart has been such a huge shift within me these past three years, and it is one that I continue to work on. When I'm able to trust my inner impulse, things usually fall into place.

In order to listen to my partner, I surrender to them, and then play. So, after doing all your extensive research and groundwork for your character, you basically have to throw it away. I'm not saying that you don't work within the structure you have built, but you let it move from the forefront of your mind to a "back burner" in a sense. All the work you have done will still be present; you have to trust that it will be there. Everything that you need for the scene is within the other person. I'm beginning to understand that the greatest actors are those who listen to both

themselves and to their scene partners, and then react to what is being thrown at them. This, in its simplest form, is “living in the moment.” If you are fully present with what is happening at that moment, you will be able to react to whatever it is that is thrown your way. After all, the “golden rule” of acting from Sanford Meisner shines true, along with John Cameron’s addendum: “...but there’s always something.” You need to react fully and truthfully to what is happening, or else you’re just falling into some sort of recreated moment or mood. I was never privy to the fact that there was something called “mood” until I came to this school. In the past, if something was being overshadowed by a lot of mood, it would just seem very one note to me, as though I was being beaten over the head with the same emotion. Now that I understand what it is, it seems as though the only way to break free from its claws is to really listen, and then react to what you hear. Your reaction doesn’t have to be “right or wrong,” it just has to be a truthful and fully released reaction, motivated by whatever just happened the very second before. As mentioned above, you’re given something from your partner. This, in turn, affects you, and there is a moment where your reaction churns and flips, and becomes your action, or, in other words, it propels you forward. Thus, one of the greatest laws of nature—action creates reaction, which creates action, and so on. If you are truly listening and truly reacting, you will be living in the moment. You will be creating a slice of life, of “humanity,” for the audience to bear witness to. It’s almost as if you’re letting them in on some great secret. There is no other place but the theatre that we can create this public solitude, and open ourselves up to others in the most vulnerable and exposed ways possible.

Something that canopies listening to your partner and listening to the audience is listening to the space. Mask, clown, and working on Crescendo allowed me to think of space, and my body in relation to space, in a completely new and different way. As mentioned before, everything that you need is already present in the space. You just need to allow yourself to experience it. Everything that we do is all about how you carve and create and change the space.

The last part of listening is connection to my audience. This one is tied into all of the previous connections, but it is the ultimate reason why we all act in the first place: to form a connection to our audience. My largest realization about my relationship to the audience has come through mask and clown class, for I have finally begun to understand the difference between sharing with the audience and seeking the audience's approval. The latter is the destruction of our creativity and artistry. You want to share what is happening onstage with the audience, that way they are included in your work, and they follow alongside your character's journey. The audience is your "other partner" in the show, and your relationship to them is one of constant listening as well. It is no wonder Stanislavsky divided our circles of attention into 3 distinct circles, with the last circle containing the audience.

Listening to the audience to see if they are with you or not is something that is so imperative to our art, for without an audience, why bother? Without an audience, you have no reason to perform, unless you want to perform for yourself in your bedroom as a hobby. That is not to say, however, that they should rule what you do on stage. You are in constant communion with the audience, not begging for their acceptance. If you let their reactions rule the quality of your performance, you will

end up in your head, judging and criticizing your work and losing connection to your character and your scene partner. You have a task to do. You must share it with the world, as an open expression of invitation to commune, not one of privacy, which makes us feel uncomfortable for having seen something we feel is inappropriate. You also cannot control what the audience should be thinking or feeling—that must be left up to them to decide. You must openly give of yourself and allow them full control. For example, if you look out into the empty space and imagine you’re seeing a castle, it doesn’t matter if the audience sees the exact same castle as you, because that will never happen. All that matters is that they see that you’re seeing something, and it is through the reflection of you actually seeing that castle that they will experience something too. I suppose I made the biggest realization about this through mask and clown because you are constantly sharing what is happening to you with your audience, or giving “reports” to the audience. Through your reporting, you not only give the audience a chance to see what is going on within the scene, but you also allow yourself time to formulate where your next move is. You bring them along for the ride, every step of the way. The caveat here is that the audience can also bring you along. If they are really loving something that is happening, then stay with it. Explore it. But in order for this to happen in the first place, you must be listening.

Mask and clown has also made me realize how much I depend upon audience approval of my performances. This constant seeking of approval has made my “editor” a ruling force in my creative process and has also affected my performances during shows. However, through mask and clown, I’ve realized that part of my

problem was that I wasn't giving myself permission to fail, or, in other words, I wasn't giving myself permission to be disliked by the audience. I have a personal problem with seeking approval of those around me, and it only adds personal judgment to everything that I do on a daily basis. I am working hard at letting this go, but all of this work is a constant process. I've begun to realize, that the more and more I give myself permission to fail, the less and less I care about attaining the approval of the audience. Which, brings me to the last step in my process:

Play

However you reach your character will always vary, but once you arrive, then you must play. Play is about risk and letting go. Without risk, there is no play. If there is no chance of failure, there is nothing to lose, and thus, there is no excitement. A soccer game is so interesting and fun to watch because the players enter the field, unsure of their ability to succeed. However, they risk everything they have: they play their hearts out, in order to score that winning goal. It's not easy, but the risk of failure is what keeps the fuel pumping, and also what keeps the entire stadium of spectators engaged in the game until the very end. Without that risk of real failure, we would all just live in a safe bubble, never experiencing anything new and never taking any chances. In a way, I think that is because through failing, I usually learn the biggest lessons. It also adds fuel to my fire to keep going, and to try something new and different. I used to fear failure more than anything else in my life and in my work. I was so scared to fail as an actor because I was so passionate about my art, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing it. My first year here, Paul Kalina told us, "You must let go of that which you fear to lose the

most.” Well, I must say that over the past three years, I’ve tasted failure over and over again, and having tasted it so much, the flavor has become more appetizing. You realize that the worst thing that is going to happen after a failure is that you see what you did wrong. You build up your courage to go up and try again, risking exposure, and risking everything you have all over again. As the poet Christina Henry states, “Only a person who risks is free.” In my case, yes, risking and embracing the failure has set me free from depending upon someone else to give me worth.

Through letting go of my fear of failure, and also through the use of play, I have begun to see that they help to release my inner drive. My drive is probably the thing that gets in the way of my work the most, because it makes me end-gain and push so hard on myself to reach some unattainable goal that doesn’t exist. It also creates this monstrous energy within me that pushes me in my work, resulting in energy and generality taking control. When I am open to failure, it balances me out. Being open to failure allows me to do the work that I want to do because of the artistry involved, not because I need to prove that I am great. That failure helps me to release some parts of that need for validation within me, and instead, just take the journey for what it’s worth. I came across a quote about failure in an article about creativity, and it has certainly stuck with me: “Resilience is practically a prerequisite for creative success. Doing creative work is often described as a process of failing repeatedly until you find something that sticks, and creatives—at least the successful ones—learn not to take failure so personally...Creatives fail, and the really good ones fail often” (Gregoire).

Clown has certainly shown me what it is to use my mistakes and failures. As humans, we always want to fix the mistakes—clean up the spilled milk, or tie the shoe that has come undone. However, clown teaches you how to use those mistakes and mishaps, and flip them on their heads, so that they become your greatest treasures. As Paul would say, “They are a gift from the Clown Gods.” Paul would also say: “Stop fixing the problems! They are your gold!” It is true, though, because they are gifts. They are something to be cherished and used, because they are reality. When mistakes happen on stage—as they always will since part of the excitement of live theatre is that you really don’t know what is going to happen—we generally will acknowledge them, but then get back to what was supposed to be happening. This can also be super scary at times, because if you’re in the middle of a performance and something goes entirely wrong, I know my instinct as a person three years ago would’ve been to panic. Through my training, I’ve learned to see these mistakes as something to be capitalized upon. The beauty of the mishap is that it can teach you something new. It can show you a new way of seeing a prop you’ve never noticed before, or it can create a brand new bit in the moment that you never saw coming. When I’m able to use the mistakes, I realize that I don’t need to get back on course, but that the course is actually unfolding before my very eyes. I just have to see it. The failures have taught me something new, and sometimes they give me material. Although I will not solely be performing clown entrees for the rest of my career (even though I wish I could), this idea directly applies to any other work on stage—whether it is a mistake that happens in rehearsal or a complete disaster that happens in the middle of a performance. There’s no need to panic—I

just need to see what's there, play it, and allow it to take me to unforeseen ground. It's all about perception, and how you use what you're given to create the greatest artistry.

Play is also about letting go. You get to a point in your work that you have gone through everything over and over again, and then you must release it. When a basketball player goes to practice, she will run drills and exercises over and over again in an effort to get more consistent and solid. However, when that same player goes into the game, she isn't sitting there thinking about the drills she was doing in practice the week before, she is simply present and responding off of her opponent. The same is true in our work and in my process. I will rehearse and pull apart my scene layer by layer until I have explored and exhausted every inch of it. However, when it comes time for performance, I must let that all go and just do it. I have to trust that I have done the work enough to release it and just play in the moment, working off of my opponent, otherwise known as my partner. It is in this way that play keeps you fresh all the time, too, because it makes you take notice of the small details that will be different from night to night. Maybe your partner has looked at you slightly differently tonight, or maybe he or she has really laid into you in a new way with a particular line. Playing your game to win and to get what you need and want will always keep you fresh and alive, and perpetually discovering.

I also need to keep my character open to play. Searching for the fun within any character is always so rewarding, because it shows you what excites them, what they feel passionate about. For instance, when I was working on Deirdre in Good Kids, I found that hacking on the Internet was how Deirdre played. She loved

digging up as much dirt as she could on people, and also righting the wrongs in the world in a “silent vigilante” way. These things were the greatest thrill of her life. This immediately brought me closer to this character, and also helped to show me how I could get excited about her passion. I think people’s passions and the things that really excite them reveal a lot about their soul. When creating a character, finding their play is almost a direct path into their heart, plus it gives you so much to work with. You understand what makes them tick, and by doing that, you’re able to find the fun for both you and them.

Staying playful helps to keep me in a more positive place throughout my work, and I’m sure it will help to keep me positive throughout my career. We all come up against serious challenges throughout different processes—some are within ourselves, some are conflicts within the ensemble, some are conflicts with the director, some are a combination of any of these. However, by staying playful and curious, it helps to keep my mind in a place of openness and less resistance. Keeping my mind in the playful realm helps me to have fun, and remember that I do this because I love it and it is my passion. Plus, I guarantee that if you are having fun, the audience will be having fun. A friend of mine recently told me: “It’s never about how great you are going to be; it’s about how much fun are you going to have?” That really struck something within me, because almost always when we are having more fun and playing, we excel to a much higher level than if we put this pressure on ourselves to do everything great. I guess the moral of the story here is that you will be great if you allow yourself to be. By staying curious, when I come up against those roadblocks and those challenges throughout any process, I will be able

to throw caution to the wind and experiment with something new and unthinkable. By opening myself up to being playful, there is nothing out of question, nothing thrown away. Anything and everything is possible. Plus, it's a reminder that no matter what happens on stage, everything is just play. Whether you're playing the most tragic character in the world, and that character's heart is breaking for two hours, you must find the fun in that for you as a person. When you begin to think of your work in this way, it takes a lot of the laborious nature out of the performance, and really invigorates and energizes you as a person. Don't get me wrong, it still takes a tremendous amount of energy, but through play, you are allowing any performance to be fun and exhilarating.

CHAPTER 6:

OK, SO WHAT NOW?

At this very moment, the phrase I am living by is, “Don’t try. Just feel” (Yoga Nidra Practice). My natural habit is to drive through things in my day-to-day life, and also in my work, just trying to push and muscle through it all, racing to grasp that ultimate goal in my hands. The trouble with this is that along the way, I shut everything else out, just spewing and giving, not letting anything in, and not taking the time to just be and live in the moment. I get so caught up in trying to reach this goal and give as much as I can, that I forget to take down my wall, and let things in, let them affect me. However, I like this phrase because instead of shutting everything down, and telling myself to “just do less,” I still have something active. I just have to allow myself to feel things, allow myself to be happy just being. I must remember that there is no ultimate goal to be grasped at, and instead, I can let go of the muscling, and be happy just sitting in my shit. When I let go of this drive, this push to avoid anything that could have an effect on me, I find myself playing and finding a stronger connection to everything and everyone in the world around me.

I must say that I have also begun to realize that although graduate school has been here to help me learn and develop my personal process, it has also made me realize why I do what I do. I used to do things in order to get them right and to get approval, as I’ve stated quite a bit already (for I still do this to a certain extent). Over the past three years, my mindset has shifted, and I realize that graduate school is here to remind me that I need to stop doing my work for validation, and embrace

that I do it because it is my passion. I am preparing to know myself well enough that I don't need all this guidance when I leave here. I suppose part of the shift in my life, both in my work and also in my personal life, is that I've begun to stop trying to please other people. I don't really know if what I'm doing is right or wrong, or if this journey is calculated properly or not, but I just need to do it, and do it with love and passion. As Matteo Destro says, "It's all about the love." Love is why I act, and continue to create my art: I do it because I want to pour my heart and soul into everything I do.

Moreover, at this point in my journey I realize that it is time to pay homage to the lessons I have learned through my failures, but embrace what the future has in store for me. It is time to take everything I have learned throughout this process and sort of forget it. I must remember that it will always be a part of me, but from this point forward, I must invent myself as an artist. Essentially, I must forget everything that I know and discover my own way.

In the future, I hope to continue to grow, both as a person and an actor. I hope to continue to create my own art, and to have the courage and bravery to remember that I have the creativity, knowledge, and ability to create whatever it is that I envision for myself as an artist. I am not limited solely to the opportunities that are presented to me through auditions, but I can create my own opportunities, and go out onto the street to perform a piece if I want to do that. I can build my own theatre company, one that encourages artists of all walks of life and all disciplines, because I realize that we are all in this together. I can take a deep breath, go out into the world and continue to be inspired by everything around me. I can create art that

stands for social change and engages the community. However, no matter what endeavor, I must remember to always follow my heart.

I also hope to be a sponge—remembering to let go of what I know, and focus on what I don't know. What I already know isn't particularly useful to me, because it leaves me stuck in patterns and life becomes pretty mundane. If I know something, I have this one thing that keeps me safe and guarded. Knowledge is power, but it is finite. By focusing on what I don't know, I will remain open and curious, and I will continually discover and grow and expand. In essence, by giving up the power of knowing, you give over to something more exciting and useful: discovery. Along with this element of discovery and curiosity, is allowing myself to experience as many things as I possibly can, whether it is traveling to a new country or learning a new language. It is so important to me that I am a human being first and foremost, and my experiences throughout my life will always help to shape the artist that I am in a positive direction.

I must always remember my clown, for it is she who has taught me so much about who I truthfully am as a person at my core. She is always the one who brings me home when I have lost my way. She is the very root of my soul, and therefore, she can always be my compass to guide me throughout my life, no matter what endeavor.

Something that I will continue to live by as I move forward in this crazy journey we call life is the Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi—or the acceptance of imperfection. Wabi-Sabi stresses three principles: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect.

Pared down to its barest essence, Wabi-Sabi is the Japanese art of finding beauty in imperfection and profundity in nature, of accepting the natural cycle of growth, decay, and death. It's simple, slow, and uncluttered—and it reveres authenticity above all. It celebrates cracks and crevices and all the other marks that time, weather, and loving use leave behind. Through Wabi-Sabi, we learn to embrace liver spots, rust, and frayed edges, and the march of time they represent. (What is Wabi-Sabi?)

By accepting these principles, I have begun to open up the door to my artistry as an individual, or those things that I can bring to my characters that are the expression of me and my life experience. After all, we don't look at a Van Gogh painting to see what he got right; we look at it because we want to see the world through his eyes and his experience. The beauty in our imperfection is the heart of who we are as people, and to me, it is the unwritten story of my journey in life.

ANNOTATED PERFORMANCE HISTORY

The Liar

By David Ives; Adapted from the comedy by Pierre Corneille

University of Iowa Main Stage

Directed by Eric Forsythe

Assistant Director—Marisa Ramos

Scenic Designer—Josh Christoffersen

Lighting Designer—Cassie Malmquist

Costume Designer—Angie Esposito

Stage Manager—Kelsey Petersen

Assistant Stage Manager—Bre Anna McNeill

Cast: Kevin Argus (Cliton), Ari Craven (Alcippe), Keyla McClure (Clarice), Rj McGee (Dorante), Alex Philoon (Philiste), Christina Sullivan (Isabelle/Sabine), Nate Wasson (Geronte).

Location—E.C. Mabie Theatre

Dates—April 16th-26th, 2015

Role: Lucrece—Supporting

Good Kids

By Naoimi Iizuka

University of Iowa Main Stage

Directed by Alan MacVey

Scenic/Projection Designer—Kevin Dudley

Lighting/Projection Designer—Lucas P. Ingram

Costume Designer—Loyce Arthur

Assistant Costume Designer—Desiree Smith

Sound Designer—Bri Atwood

Dramaturg—Lukas Brasherfons

Choreographer—Alvon Reed

Stage Manager—Rachel E. Winfield

Assistant Stage Manager—Amanda Harwood

Cast: Taylor Stuart (Choloe), Alex Rinehart (Amber), Kylie Jansen (Madison), McKenna Goodman (Brianna), Molly E. Brown (Daphne), Caitlin Edwards (Kylie), Julia Sears (Skyler), Skyler Matthias (Conner), Danny Petersen (Ty), Kit Grassi (Landon), Christian Hahn (Tanner), Tyler Hendershot (Ensemble), Morgan Jones (Ensemble).

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Dates—February 5th-15th, 2015

Role: Deirdre—Principal role

Crescendo

By Paola Coletto, Matteo Destro, Paul Kalina, John Rapson, and David Bills
University of Iowa Partnership in the Arts

Directed by Paola Coletto and Matteo Destro

Writer/Collaborator—Paola Coletto

Writer/Mask Creator/Collaborator—Matteo Destro

Composer/Music Director/Collaborator—John Rapson

Collaborator—Paul Kalina

Collaborator—David Bills

Scenic Designer—Kevin Dudley

Costume Designer—Jae Hee Kim

Assistant Costume Designer—Desiree Smith

Lighting Designer—Bryon Winn

Assistant Lighting Designer—Joshua Hinden

Sound Designer—Andrew Stewart

Vocal Director—Anne Marie Nest

Dramaturg—Madison Colquette

Stage Manager—Alison Kochman

Assistant Stage Manager—Kelsey Petersen

Assistant Stage Manager—Lauren Watt

Cast: Valeria Avina, Felipe Carrasco, Ari Craven, Aneisa Hicks, Morris Hill, Paul Kalina, Alay Arcelus Macazaga, Allyson Jean Malandra, Bre Anna McNeill, Chris Rangel, Damitri Taylor, Rubina Vidal.

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Dates—October 9th-19th, 2014

Role: “Little”—Ensemble

and I will hold you/when you are broken

By Lisa Flora Meyers

University of Iowa New Play Festival

Directed by Mario El Caponi Mendoza

Assistant Director—Hiram Alexander Orozco

Multimedia Designer—Mario El Caponi Mendoza

Dramaturg—Madison Colquette

Scenic Designer—Josh Christoffersen

Costume Designer—Jae Hee Kim

Lighting Designer—Cassie Malmquist

Sound Designer—Ray Ockenfels

Stage Manager—Amber Lewandowski

Assistant Stage Manager—Mathias Blake

Cast: John Whitney (Branch), Ashley Sorensen (Daphne), Jordan Corpman (Alma)

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Dates—Tuesday May 6th, at 5:30 and 9 pm

Role: Rose—Supporting

Makeover

By Darrah Cloud (Book & Lyrics) and Kim D. Sherman (Music)

University of Iowa Partnership in the Arts

Directed by Nick Demos

Assistant Director—Ariel Francoeur

Music Director—Mark Bruckner

Choreographer—Nick Demos

Assistant Choreographer—Peggy Mead-Finizio

Writer's Assistant—Ryan Oliveira

Preliminary Scenic Designer—Sam Transleau

Scenic Design Adviser—R. Eric Stone

Costume Designer—Melissa Gilbert

Assistant Costume Designer—Angie Esposito

Lighting Designer—Bryon Winn

Assistant Lighting Designer—Cassie Malmquist

Sound Designer—Bri Atwood

Dialect Coaches—Morris Hill, Anne Marie Nest, Valeria Avina Ortiz,
Nathan Wasson

Stage Manager—Leigh'Ann Andrews

Assistant Stage Managers—Amber Lewandowski, Ali Kochman

Cast: Allyson Jean Malandra (Ruth Levine), Amelia S. Peacock

(Marilyn), Niki- Charisse Franco (Dorothy), Amy Toruno (Carmen),

Michael Penick (Fred Gotovich), Sydney Hayes (Dinah), Dylan

Davenport (Frankie as a child), Chris Matheson (Frankie aka Pierre),

Nate Wasson (Comte Erich du Arsenault); Ensemble: Ben Alley,

Mathias Blake, Katie Boothroyd, Ali Borchers, Haley Courter, Ari

Craven, Ariel Davis, Skyler Matthias, Tim Mizones, Regina Morones,

Melina Neves, Josh Ollendick, Frankie Rose, Michael Sotelo, Taylor

Edelle Stuart, Rubina Vidal.

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Dates—February 6th-16th, 2014

Role: Ruth Levine—Leading role

The Imaginary Invalid

By Moliere

New Adaptation by Emily Dendinger, Kristi Banker, Carol MacVey, and the
Cast

University of Iowa Mainstage

Directed by Carol MacVey

Scenic Designer—Josh Christoffersen

Assistant Scenic Designer—Kevin Dudley

Costume Designer—Emily Busha

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

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Dates—November 14th-23rd, 2013

Role: Yvonne—Supporting

The Aurora Project

By Bella Poynton

University of Iowa New Play Festival

Directed by Rachel Korach Howell

Scenic Designer—Tyler Brogla

Costume Designer—Amy Price

Lighting Designer—Jess Fialko

Sound Designer—Taylor Cook

Dramaturg—Kristi Banker

Stage Manager—Joe Pray

Cast: Ben TeBockhorst (Constantine), Melina Neves (Nora), Nate Sullivan (Designer), Frankie Rose (Questry).

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Date—May 11th, 2013

Role: Gatekeeper—Supporting

She Stoops to Conquer; or The Mistakes of a Night

By Oliver Goldsmith

University of Iowa Mainstage

Directed by 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 (Young Charles Marlow), Sasha Hildebrand (Mrs. Dorothy Hardcastle), Nate Wasson (Mr. Richard Hardcastle), Amelia Peacock (Miss Constance Neville), John Whitney (George Hastings), Sam Hawkins (Tony Lumpkin), Aaron Weiner (Sir Charles Marlow), Adam Phillips (Diggory the Valet), Kevin Argus (Jeremy the London Servant), David Freeman (Roger the Servant), Katie Boothroyd (Thomasina the Maid), Lily Henderson (Pimple the Maid), Molly E. Brown (Bridget the Cook).

Location—E.C. Mabie Theatre

Dates—April 19th-27th, 2013

Role: Miss Kate Hardcastle—Leading Role

Lady M

By William Shakespeare

University of Iowa Mainstage

Directed by Matt Hawkins

Scenic Designer—R. Eric Stone

Costume Designer—Emily Busha

Lighting Designer—Jess Fialko

Sound Designer—Andrew Stewart

Stage Manager—KatyBeth Schmid

Cast: Regina Morones (Lady Macbeth), Valeria Avina (Weird Sister),

Emily Hinkler (Weird Sister), Elizabeth Hinkler (Weird Sister),

Matthew James (Macbeth), Nate Wasson (Duncan), Luke Millington-

Drake (Malcolm), RJ McGhee (Banquo), Dylan Davenport (Fleance),

Bryan McIntyre (Macduff), Nicole Lane (Macduff's Child), Ben

TeBockhorst (Ross), Lesley Geffinger (Doctor/Soldier/Rebel), Scott

Myers (Orderly/Soldier/Rebel), Felipe Carrasco

(Murderer/Soldier/Rebel), Luke Cunningham

(Murderer/Soldier/Rebel), Breeyn Tigh (Murderer/Soldier/Rebel).

Location—David Thayer Theatre

Dates—October 11th-21st, 2012

Role: Lady Macduff—Supporting

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