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## Climbing the ladder with no hands at all

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*University of Iowa*

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CLIMBING THE LADDER WITH NO HANDS AT ALL

by

Keyla Ann McClure

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

May 2015

Thesis Supervisor: Professor John Cameron

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Master's Thesis

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Keyla Ann McClure

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

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## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

This is the thesis of Keyla McClure analyzing her artistic process, growth as an artist, and future artistic goals. It includes an annotated performance history and bibliography of academic resources from her time at the University of Iowa

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Climbing the Ladder with No Hands At All.....	1
Annotated Performance History.....	11
Bibliography .....	18

## **CLIMBING THE LADDER WITH NO HANDS AT ALL**

The best way I can describe where my process is right now is to reference to a moment in Paul Kalina's Clown class from Fall Semester of 2014. I did something I never thought I would be capable of doing. I climbed a ladder without my hands.

I have a terrible, crippling fear of falling and heights. It stems from a high school experience involving an orchestra pit and my poor vision. At the beginning of my training at the University of Iowa, I couldn't fall five inches backwards into the arms of a classmate twice my size without bursting into a frenzy of anxiety and tears. And that's exactly how all of my work was. If I was afraid of something, or it made me uncomfortable, I would shut down and back away. I wouldn't even get close to the edge of my comfort. And then training happened. A lot of training that is recorded in twelve hand-written journals about my experiences. And I found myself atop a ladder – willingly facing my fear. Here is my journal entry from that day:

“12 November 2014

Chris entered first. He moves so slow that I was chomping at the bit. I entered once too early and Paul made me go back. I knew it was too early the moment I got out there – I could feel it. When I did enter I got very excited – all of this happy joyful energy was bouncing around inside of me. I came up to the audience and that made me excited and then I saw Chris and that made me even more excited and so on until I had a foot on the

ladder. By putting my foot on the ladder first Paul said I had made a promise and that I couldn't use my hands to climb it, but I had to climb the ladder. I was still pretty excited until I got to the third rung and then I started to feel unsteady. I still couldn't use my hands, but sometimes my body would lunge forward, out of my control and I had to pull myself back and refrain from gripping on for dear life. The higher I got the more anxious I became until my body was laid across the top of it unable to resist the urge to hold on and I was wrapped around the safety of the ladder as much as I could be. Meanwhile, Chris had climbed up the other side to save me, but all he could do was beat his gloves together and cry with empathy. What do I do with that?! After I was up there for a while I started getting really dizzy. I was afraid to move because I figured if I passed out while draped over the ladder at least I wouldn't fall off, but I knew I would have to eventually climb down and so when I felt a little better I started making my way around the other side, between Chris and the ladder. That was the absolute scariest part. I was so afraid it was going to tip over with all of that weight on one side. After what seemed like an eternity on top of the ladder I finally hit the ground and the reality of what I'd just done hit me so hard. I had come over the ladder and I had stuck with it. I didn't back away from the edge which is something I always do, or used to do. Suddenly I couldn't breathe and I felt dizzy and cold and panicky and I started crying. I had to lie down on the floor and let it pass. Something released in me that I think I'd probably been holding on to a long time. I can't really describe the feeling any other way but just one big release. At one point I wanted to start screaming and breaking things, but that felt more like a defense and maybe it was. I also still couldn't move at this point – everything was tingly and I couldn't even feel my lips. All I could really do was let out a weak 'I hate you'.

After class I was exhausted and nauseous for a while – I stayed horizontal on the green room couch for a long time.

Paul told me to focus on the victory of overcoming the obstacle and not the trauma of the event. I see where he is coming from with this. I have a tendency, especially in my own work – to only focus on the negative aspects and not the positive. I'm no good at taking compliments.

Some of my classmates think Paul pushed me too far and they were worried about me physically and emotionally. I don't think that is true. I always had the choice to stop or come down. I chose to keep going – and as terrifying as it was there was still some fun and joy in pushing myself that far.

I don't really know how I feel about it, but I know it was a good thing. It is a reflection of my work in the program and how much I've grown without truly realizing, until now.”

I think this experience is a metaphor for not only my growth, but how I want to work as an actor going forward. I want to find the edge, the place where it gets scary and exciting and uncomfortable and push on that edge to see what I can find. That is the kind of work that I like to watch and it is the kind of performer I would like to be. Playing it safe is boring to watch and boring to perform, risk is the opposite. Risk is thrilling.



However, to get to that delightful point of risk and play you have to do some boring ground work first. When beginning work on a character I use the acronym GOAT. This stands for given circumstances, objective, action and tactics. Given circumstances are every fact I know about the play or the character. This is the base for all of my work on the play. Examples of given circumstances are age, location, time period, physical stature and anything that the playwright lists as a fact in the script. From here I expand my research on the world of the play. When working on the given circumstances I don't add any inferences or ideas of my own. It is important to start with a solid base of facts and build upon that so everything fits with the world of the play and isn't immediately corrupted by my own ideas about the play. Given circumstances are the first thing I look to when starting a new process, but I let them go once rehearsal begins. It is nice to do the work in advance and have it to turn back to should something feel amiss or need to be revisited. However, bringing given circumstances into the rehearsal room typically places me in my head so I trust that my previous work will support my rehearsal without relying on it in the moment.

The Objective is what I want boiled down to its simplest idea. This is usually a one-word noun. Action, to me, is a more detailed and visceral description of what I want. There is an overall, Super-Objective and Through-Line-of-Action for the entire play. This is important so I know where the character is going from beginning to end. And then Objectives and Actions can change many times over the course of the play and even during the course of the scene. This is when a beat change happens. A beat change is when something happens in a scene that changes the objective of one or more characters.

If something happens that changes the objective and action of every character in the script this is called a unit change.

Tactics are action verbs I use to try and accomplish my objective and action. Examples of tactics are to scold, to seduce, to castrate and to tease. I mark my objectives, actions, tactics, and beat/unit changes in my script as a reminder of what is driving my character in the scene and in the play. However, like given circumstances, I find that caging myself in with these things can pull me out of the moment and cause me to play entirely from energy. So, I think about them, write them down as part of the road map of my character and then leave them behind unless I need to revisit them.

Script organization is very important to me in the rehearsal process. My methods vary depending on if I am working on a new play or an already established work. For a new play I prefer to use a Five Star Flex binder to keep my entire process in one place. These are convenient because the front flap can fold back for easy carrying during rehearsal, and the rings make adding new pages simple and quick. Inside of the binder I keep five tabs marked: script, info, dramaturgy, notes, and paper. Under the “info” tab I keep all contact and scheduling information and any other logistical papers. For “dramaturgy” I keep any research I have done as well as any packets from the dramaturg. “Notes” keeps anything I’ve written down during the process, including table work and working notes from the director. I also keep any drawings or doodles that help me visualize the play in this section.

In the “script” portion I separate the scenes with sticky tabs, marked in a decimal number format. For example, Act I Scene I will be marked as “1.1” and so on. The sticky tabs are important, because they can be removed and added on to new pages should an entire scene change. Inside the front pocket I keep a pen, pencil, reinforcement labels, a highlighter and Wite-Out tape. The reinforcement labels are helpful when pages get worn out on the binding from frequent use. New plays typically use standard-size printer paper as opposed to the book format of already published works – so having access to a three-hole punch and reinforcement stickers is imperative to keeping everything organized. The Wite-Out is for line changes that do not require entirely new pages. Rather than crossing out the previous line and writing the new one to the side, which can get messy and confusing, I use the Wite-Out tape to erase and then write the new line in over the old line to keep my script as orderly as possible. It is important to use the tape version rather than the liquid because the tape does not require dry time before writing in the new line.

For an already published play I keep everything separated. I have my script, which is usually in book format, a notebook for any notes, and a folder with clerical and dramaturgical information.

The reason for the two different methods is that for a new work a lot of the process begins on the first day of rehearsal. I may receive a draft of the script in advance, but this is usually in flux until the official freeze date. For most of the new plays I’ve worked on, the script is not frozen and can undergo significant changes until up to a week before the production. So it is vital for me to keep all of my information in one place since the play

is still in process and major changes can be made. It's also easy for me to then remove all of my process from the binder and place it in file, opening up the binder to be re-used for another show. I like to keep all of my work in one file for reference. Since, playwrights may make changes that specific to the cast and crew of the production, I like to keep my work and contributions with the script should I ever need to reference it.

If I am working on a play that has already been frozen or published, more work can be done pre-production. Memorization, character work and dramaturgy can be done before the rehearsal process begins, so it isn't as necessary to keep all of my work in one place. It is easier to keep everything separated since the research and development side of the process can be worked on outside of the rehearsal room more easily than with a work in progress.

I mark my script the same way for every production. Keeping it in the same format makes it easy for me to read through my script and memorize lines and blocking. At the top of each scene I mark down my objective and action at the start of the scene – If this changes during the scene I write the new objective and action above the line where the change happens. This also represents unit changes in the scene and beat changes are marked with a \* on the left hand side of the page. I also write my blocking on the left side of the page in a printed, acronym format. For example, “cross downstage right” would be written “XDSR”. Tactics are written on the right hand side of the page in cursive next to the line I intend them for. Operative words are marked with underlines. An important word gets one underline, a very important word gets two underlines and a word that

needs coloring gets a squiggly line. Sentences that need to end in an upward inflection or downward inflection are marked with arrows pointing up or down accordingly. This isn't for every single line, but places where I struggle or moments that need special attention. If I have any costume changes or props to deal with during the scene that is also marked at the top of the scene with a box around it. At the front of the script I keep a list of all costume changes and prop presets that I should check before the show.

Once all of this organizational work and analytical work is done, the real fun begins for me. This is the part of my process that is really difficult to describe, because unlike the highly systemized process I use for prep work and script organization, this part of the process is where I let the chaos in. This part of my process takes place after table work and mostly in the rehearsal room and any extra work I do outside of that time. This inspiration usually comes from an abstract idea or image that inspires a physicality or vocal quality for the character. This is where I work from the outside in.

The best way to describe this is to talk about my work on Sam Collier's *Four Stories* in which I played three very different characters: Sawyer, Duff and Abigail. I did the same prep work for each character, but the ultimate creation of each role came from a different inspiration for each one. The character of Sawyer was tied to a chair after being caught trying to steal and destroy items from two sisters on the last day of the world.

I think my strengths in my work stem from my natural ability for comedy. I have a strong grasp of comedic timing and understand the anatomy of a joke, so comedic moments

come easy to me. I also bring a lot of energy into my work. I run on a high internal energy frequency and when I can harness this and radiate it I can have a large presence.

From taking Shakespeare with Alan MacVey I've gained a very solid grasp of analyzing a text. I'm good at finding operative words and adding color to my language so that what I am saying is easily understandable to an audience. This has been really helpful in my work on *The Liar* as I'm able to understand the nuances of the script and make sense of the complicated and confusing plot.

Things that hold me back are when I let my fear take hold of me and I pull back from what my instincts are telling me to do. I'm also prone to fear-based procrastination. When I'm intimidated by something I tend to put it off until the last minute. So, my goal in my future work is to face my fear the way I did when I was on top of the ladder and push through the moments when I want to pull back and hide.

One big stride I've made, that still requires some growth is letting myself be uniquely me. For a very long time I've tried to be people I'm not. It wasn't until recently that I realized that I don't need to be Meryl Streep. I will never be Meryl Streep, and I'm ok with that. I have a unique personality and voice all my own and when I let that shine my work is so much more interesting. I have to continue trusting my instincts and not comparing myself to others or blindly listening to the advice of others without question.

The thing I value most in theatre and performance is the ability to connect to the conscience of an audience. Every performance has something to communicate and I want my work to reflect that. I am especially interested in working on comedic works that have a strong social commentary. My favorite way to approach tough conversations is through a comedic lens, because it makes everything easier to swallow.

In the past three years I've grown from a bleach-blonde, terrified little girl who was afraid of her voice and thoughts on the world. I'm not exactly sure who I am now, and I'm not sure that I will ever truly know, because life is always changing. What I do know is that I'm learning to own my voice and my power. More than anything I want my work to reflect me as a strong, smart woman who isn't afraid of her own fear.

Chapter Two  
Performance History

*The Liar*

By Pierre Corneille adapted by David Ives  
University of Iowa Mainstage  
April 16, 2015 to April 25, 2015

Director: Eric Forsythe  
Stage Manager: Kelsey Peterson  
Assistant Director: Marisa Ramos  
Assistant Stage Manager: Bre Anna McNeill  
Costume Designer: Angie Esposito  
Scenic Designer: Josh Christoffersen  
Lighting Designer: Cassie Malmquist  
Cast: Kevin Argus, Ari Craven, Allyson Malandra, RJ McGee, Alex Philoon,  
Christina Sullivan, Nate Wasson  
Location: UI Mabie Theatre  
Role: Clarice (Leading)

*Water Bound*

By Sam Lahne  
University of Iowa Gallery  
October 30, 2014 to November 2, 2014

Director: Ariel Francoeur  
Stage Manager: William Sorenson  
Scenic Designer: Josh Christoffersen  
Costume Designer: Angie Esposito  
Lighting Designer: Cassie Malmquist  
Sound Designer: Ray Ockenfels  
Dramaturg: Madison Colquette  
Assistant Director: Will Asmus  
Cast: Nate Hua, Alejandro Lebron, Adam Phillips, Caitlin Rose, Matt Schutz, Taylor Adelle Stuart  
Location: UI Theatre B  
Role: Nea (Leading)

*Four Stories*

By Micah Ariel James  
University of Iowa New Play Festival Gallery



May 5, 2014

Director: Nina Morrison  
Stage Manager: Katie Burnett  
Assistant Stage Manager: Theresa Pechachek  
Dramaturg: Kristi Banker  
Scenic Designer: Hannah Morris  
Costume Designer: Melissa L Gilbert  
Lighting Designer: Lucas Ingram  
Sound Designer: Alexandra Johnson  
Cast: Kevin Argus, Valeria Avina, Alejandro Lebron, Regina Morones  
Location: UI Theatre B  
Role: Duff/Sawyer/Abigail (Ensemble)

*Quiet, Witches*

By Sam Collier  
University of Iowa Workshop  
February 28, 2014 to March 1, 2014

Director: Nina Morrison  
Stage Manager: Alisha Lemon  
Lighting Design: Lucas Ingram  
Scenic Design: Lucas Ingram  
Costume Design: Melissa L. Gilbert  
Graphic Design: Zoe Woodworth  
Cast: Valeria Avina, Elena Bruess, Bree De Souza, Aurora Green, Emily Hinkler, Kylie Jansen, Kasia Plazinska, Marisa Ramos, Miriam Randolph, Alex Rinehart, Zuri Starks, Weiyi Zhang  
Location: UI Theatre B  
Role: Thalia (Ensemble)

*Medusa Undone*

By Bella Poynton  
University of Iowa Gallery  
October 18, 2013 to October 20, 2013

Director: Ariel Francoeur  
Stage Manager: Kelsey Petersen  
Stage Manager: Kelsey Petersen  
Lighting Design: Bri Atwood  
Scenic Design: Marisa Ramos  
Costume Design: Lani Engstrom  
Makeup and Effects: Josh Christoffersen  
Cast: Aneisa Hicks, John Whitney, Suzi Culbertson, Melina Nieves

Location: UI Theatre B  
Role: Stheno (Supporting)

*No Fish in the House*

By Tom Willmorth  
University of Iowa Summer Rep  
July 8, 2013 to July 22, 2013

Director: Paul Kalina  
Cast: Kevin Argus, RJ McGhee, Daisy McKinlay  
Location: Tour of Western Iowa  
Role: Flaminia/Lydia (Ensemble)

*Half-sick of Shadows*

By Kat Sherman  
University of Iowa New Play Festival  
May 6, 2013

Director: David Hanzel  
Stage Manager: Katy Beth Schmid  
Scenic Designer: Josh Christoffersen  
Lighting Designer: Matt Carney  
Costume Designer: Noah Brown  
Sound Designer: Matt Benyo  
Cast: Lani Engstrom, Serena Faith, Elizabeth Hinkler, Emily Hinkler, Beatric Huston, Zach Isom, Keyla McClure, Tim Mizones, Matt Schutz.  
Location: UI Theatre B  
Role: Guinevere (Ensemble)

*MOLD*

By Deborah Yarchun  
University of Iowa Gallery  
February 22, 2013 to February 24, 2013

Director: Katarzyna Plazinska  
Stage Manager: Joe Pray  
Scenic Designer: Josh Christoffersen  
Lighting Designer: Cassie Malmquist  
Sound Designer: Gabby McNally  
Cast: Felipe Carrasco, Evie Stanske  
Location: UI Theatre B  
Role: Jess (Leading)

*Champagne Gods*

By Emily Dendinger

University of Iowa Gallery

December 6, 2012 to December 8 2012

Director: Kristin Clippard

Stage Manager: Sarah Kate Patterson

Scenic Designer: Adam Phillips

Lighting Designer: Peggy Mead-Finizio

Costume Designer: Emily Brink

Sound Designer: Bri Atwood

Cast: Aaron Weiner, Bella Poynton, Chris Rangel, Mark Smolyar, Suzi Culbertson

Location: UI Theatre B

Role: Gwendolyn (Ensemble)

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