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Spring 2018

# My acting process: getting out of my own way

Emelia Pinamang Asiedu  
*University of Iowa*

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## Recommended Citation

Asiedu, Emelia Pinamang. "My acting process: getting out of my own way." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2018.  
<https://doi.org/10.17077/etd.rsobe27p>.

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MY ACTING PROCESS: GETTING OUT OF MY OWN WAY

by

Emelia Pinamang Asiedu

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 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Paul Kalina

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Graduate College  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Emelia Pinamang Asiedu

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree  
in Theatre Arts at the May 2018 graduation.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank John Cameron, Paul Kalina, Anne Marie Nest, Kris Danford, Eric Forsythe and Alan McVey, under whose supervision I have successfully completed my acting training culminating in this thesis paper. I am also grateful for all of those with whom I have had the pleasure to work in productions, readings and classes.

The pursuit of my Graduate education would not have been possible without the members of my family. I would like to thank my parents, Fred and Charity, who have shown me the meaning of love and sacrifice. I would also like to thank my brother, Fred, and my sister, Joyce, for their unending encouragement. Most importantly, I wish to thank my loving husband, Andrew, for his patience, love, advice and support.

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

My thesis paper will address why I act and different aspects of my work as an actor. Acting training is a constant process and it is the job of the actor to keep up a regular routine that keeps one from going out of practice. I will discuss what I personally do regularly to stay in training. I will also discuss the process I go through to prepare myself to perform in acting roles. Though my approach to developing each new character is different, there are some aspects of my approach that remain constant.

This paper will also describe the kinds of stories I am interested in telling. Though actors are equipped to tell a wide variety of stories from many different perspectives, I, as a Ghanaian female artist of color, am drawn to specific kinds of projects that relate to my life experiences. These are the stories that I feel compelled to tell.

I believe my work is not just an occupation but rather encompasses the way I choose to live my life. So I will also discuss the ways in which I think my acting work is relevant in the world at large. I will include the ways in which I feel my work has had an impact in my environment, as well as how I hope to use my acting a vehicle to influence change in the future.

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## **PROLOGUE – MY ACTING MANIFESTO**

I first got on the stage because it was the place where my shy younger self could perform and not feel any inhibitions. I could become someone else and do whatever I wanted within that character's Given Circumstances. My view of acting has changed a lot since starting Graduate School. I now understand that acting should not be a way by which to escape myself, but rather to bring my unique self, experiences and insights into creating a character.

Acting is also a way by which I learn about the world. Having to put myself in someone else's shoes means I must look at things from different perspectives and this is awakening more compassion in me. I believe acting cannot be without compassion because that is how we are able to immerse ourselves in another's situation, rather than just commenting on it. I also think that given the actor's responsibility of handing truth to the audience, we (actors) should not skip doing dramaturgical research on characters. I feel a great responsibility to keep our work as close to the truth as possible. I believe acting is a service to the audience and so however a piece is presented, the audience should be able to connect with it in some way.

I am a Christian and acting is also a way by which I express and share my spirituality. As a result of having created theatrical and choreographed dance pieces in my church, the involvement of our youth members has grown, and they are able to put their creativity to use. Through this work, I have the honor of using my skills in service towards my spiritual beliefs. For me, being able to merge two of the most important areas

of my life, rather separating them, gives me complete fulfillment because I do not have to sacrifice my growth in one area for the sake of the other. Secondly, hearing from people that they were moved by a ministration gives my work a purpose by reaching out to people through a more visual channel. Now, a department has been established in my church for Drama and Choreography because the church recognizes how art positively engages people's energy, and also helps to encourage church members in faith, hope, peace and love.

I also believe that acting should be thrilling, exciting and daring! Though it is sometimes a representation of real life, it is also art, artifice and not merely pedestrian. It is exciting, challenging and motivating to see people showing the parts of ourselves that we hide, or daring to do things that we wish to do, but cannot do, or hold ourselves back from doing. I think that theatre should sometimes provide that kind of catharsis for its audience.

Regarding what my acting can be for the world, and how I will fit into the bigger picture, I hope to gain prominence by performing in works that inspire me. These include stories by women and about women, stories about Social Justice issues, and stories of the African experience told by Africans. Some of my favorite titles include: *Americanah* and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie, *Nirbhaya* by Yael Farber, *Eclipsed* by Danai Gurira. There is an African proverb that goes "Until the lion learns to write, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter", and so I want to use the knowledge gained from my theatre education to collaborate with people producing works about these experiences to which I am connected and have a sense of ownership, to produce authentic performances

grounded in true events. By doing this kind of work, I hope to help provide agency for the unheard voices associated with these events, and maybe even spark conversations and incite change. I hope that through my work I will be a living, working example of the value of art; to show that it is worthwhile to incorporate the arts into the educational system. I also hope for acting to be deemed as a feasible career choice for the many times that I, and many others, have been asked out of genuine concern, “*You’re studying Theatre? What are you going to do with that?*”

In order to get to where I need to go, I must recognize – as clichéd as it sounds – that I am enough. I need to bring more of myself to the work, rather than thinking I have to become someone else. My acting must be pulled from different facets of myself. I sometimes think that my experiences are not enough to make a character interesting, but I have to dispel that notion and instead find those sources of inspiration, truth and specificity for my characters within myself.

## **MY ACTING PROCESS: INTRODUCTION**

My Graduate learning has been formed on the premise that my life experiences and real human interactions are the foundation for my acting work. Good acting is based on a combination of the real and the imaginary. In the past, I have been able to compartmentalize my work and keep it quite separate from myself. I realize that I was doing a disservice to myself and to the work. In this paper, I will discuss the process I have developed since enrolling in the MFA program, using past performance references and performances at the University of Iowa as examples. There are things that I am constantly working on to open myself up more to the work, as well as the things I do during the rehearsal period, and finally what I do during the run of the show. I will divide my paper into these three categories.

## CHAPTER ONE - DAILY LIFE

When I come up against blocks in class and in scene work, it is a manifestation of parts of myself that I don't allow to come forward. So my characters have had access to a limited range of myself. I came to Graduate School to work on this; to find ways of opening myself up to playing more varied roles. I have learned that it starts with me – giving myself more experiences, pushing myself out of my comfort zone, giving myself a moment to identify my reactions and feelings towards things that affect me (but that I tend to brush aside), as well as being an observer of life.

In order to help myself with this, I have taken up John Cameron's challenge of making myself stay in my own uncomfortable real life moments longer than I usually allow myself to. I have been challenging myself to do "things that scares me". These are nothing huge or outrageous but little things that nudge me a little out of a passive existence, for instance maintaining more eye contact with people when speaking to them. It was such a revelation to realize how much I look away or at the ground when speaking to people. It speaks a lot to my shyness as a person. Further, it has become a way of emotionally guarding myself and keeping some distance from people and uncomfortable situations. My character *Euridyce* in "Welcome to Thebes" helped me to confront this. It served the character to make myself stay in the heat of moments and allow my internal experiences in emotionally wrought scenes to work through me, rather than cutting them off. John Cameron, in my feedback sessions has also told me that I can be very intellectual in my work and that in my acting, I can't know the answer until the moment happens. So I have been working to let go of control and allow my gut and instincts to

drive the work more, rather than censor my impulses. With that, I am learning to *fully* perform my impulses. I sometimes hold myself back from doing so, but I have to trust that if I am focused on pursuing my characters' action within their Given Circumstances, my impulses will be true for the moment. I am also learning to take my time in performance and allow my scenes to work on me from moment-to-moment – as opposed to just getting a performance or audition done – because it is the character's most important moment. When I turn off the critic and just *do*, I find more play in my work and I have more fun! It takes a while to get there but I will keep working on finding more freedom.

Even though I do not do floor work everyday, I believe it is important to maintain a strong supple body so I work out regularly. My time in Graduate School has also given me a greater awareness of my body. I can therefore adjust my posture properly if I find myself slouching, or I can work on efficient and sustainable ways to adjust my physicality to fit my characters.

I also learn a lot from teaching Basic Acting. Having to explain concepts to my students helps me reflect on, and clarify my thoughts about Acting, so I plan to keep incorporating teaching into my career as another way to continue learning about the craft.

I think that doing the afore-mentioned things will broaden my experiences and this will bleed into my work such that I can have more to draw from to help my work on stage.

## CHAPTER TWO - REHEARSAL PERIOD

When I get a script, the first read is very important to me. I pay particular attention to my first read-throughs because I gather a lot of information from my initial introductions to the characters and their journeys through the script. It is also an opportunity for me to gather unbiased views of the complexities, paradoxes, virtues and flaws of characters, which humanize them, and make them playable. During this time, I also note in my script, any images and impressions that come to me, and I add on to these notes with subsequent readings. I re-read my script many times during the rehearsal process because it helps me deepen my understanding of specific moments as well as the world of the play as a whole. In rehearsal when I feel myself getting stuck in doing things mechanically, I go back to the notes I took during my first readings. My notes remind me of my initial unfiltered reactions to moments and help me to refresh my approach to the work.

In addition, I research my play and characters thoroughly, and where available, I use the gravity of real life influences as fuel and constant reminders, as I did in “Welcome To Thebes”. I have found this to be my favorite kind of work because it takes the play beyond just the stage and it becomes a vehicle for hope and life affirmation.

There is something that attracts me to all the characters I play, but there are some characters that I don’t feel an immediate connection to, with regards to their experience. In instances like this Script Analysis is especially important to me. It helps to build strong Given Circumstances and Stakes. In my previous work, I would usually go in with pretty

low stakes. Personally, having the highest possible stakes works best for me. Even if they are not the character's stakes, it helps me have a better sense of what it will cost if I do not achieve my Objective. I read and score my script, find Objectives, Actions, and changes in Tactics. Scoring my script helps me to be specific with my work. Without scoring my script, I forget exactly what I want from the other person in the scene and that makes my work general. This also makes me lose sight of my character's stakes, without which the scene loses its importance and I don't play to my fullest edge.

Within that, I have found that there are several ways to do one tactic and so my characters do not always have to play the same physicality for a tactic. I also put my characters on their feet early, and work on them outside of scheduled rehearsals to get a sense of their physicality. Based on clues in the text, I find their grounding with their feet and how they move about in space. My Movement and Grotowski classes have encouraged me to express my actions through my body, and physically follow through with my impulses, images and inspirations. For instance, one physical exercise I have utilized in my work is that of Leads - leading with different parts of the body. This refers to using a specific part of the body to initiate a character's movement through space, in order to help in physically manifesting the character's personality. So someone who leads with their head when moving in space might be more intellectual while someone who leads with their chest or heart might be more emotionally expressive. I utilized this technique in "The Crucible" and I found a retracted heart lead for my role as *Elizabeth Proctor*, who has been cheated on by her husband and is dealing with hurt and mistrust of him.

Contrary to my earlier belief that my performance could become stale and monotonous with over rehearsing, I now want to know my characters inside out, and explore the vast range of choices within their Given Circumstances. It is also important for me to meet with my scene partner early on in the rehearsal process to discuss and build the world of the play and fill in any gaps. I find that this not only helps to define our character relationships but also helps us to familiarize ourselves with each other and build some amount of trust towards playing together in scenes. For instance, in Act I, Scene 2 of “By the Way, Meet Vera Stark”, which was a scene with my good friend, Tempestt Farrar, we got a lot of feedback along the lines of how it felt like our characters were truly friends in real life, as opposed to just acting like friends. People commented that they could tell we were really having fun, which got the audience invested in the scene and in some ways grounded the rest of the performance.

With regards to Voice and Speech work, since I am not American, I have become more conscious of memorizing my lines in the General American accent so it becomes easier for me to perform with it in rehearsals and performance. Whenever a character requires an accent, I start memorizing weeks ahead of time, in the accent. This is crucial for me because an untrained accent can be a mask that distances a character from the audience and one of my goals is to have the audience forget that I am putting on an accent. Getting comfortable with an accent ahead of time also helps me to drop in to a character more fully and not worry about the way I sound. I also like playing with the placement and pitch of my voice with many characters that I play so if I find that a

character requires a different pitch, I work with pitch variation early on in the rehearsal process.

I have also learned the great value of listening to, and reacting off my scene partners, and I have learned various exercises to help me better improve upon doing this. Initially, I used to control the scene by having my responses to my scene partner pre-planned, rather than taking my response off what they were doing in the moment. Another thing I used to rely on to make my performances less monotonous were the changes arising from audience reactions, which was very dangerous! Consequently, on a night when I was not getting much from the audience, I would fall into playing the mood and shape of a character. For this, our Mechanical Repetition and Point of View exercises have been very useful. Practicing them outside of class has helped me to notice subtle changes in others and react to them truthfully in the moment. I have noticed that this has started translating into my performance work. For instance, during the second round of auditions, I was called back to read for the part of *Ellida* in “Lady from the Sea”. I was quite nervous, especially because I really wanted the role. My scene partner was William Goblirsch, who is going through this training with me so we talked about our characters’ Given Circumstances, Objectives and Actions in the scene. This helped us to establish our relationship with each other and what we wanted in the scene. We also discussed our Moment Before and finally did a Repetition exercise just before we were called in. This helped a great deal in calming us both down and focusing entirely on each other. Knowing that we had this initial work done enabled us to take a moment in the room to really see each other, let go of all the background work and just respond to each other,

while fully pursuing our scene actions. It was a lot of fun because we found some surprising moments and responded to them, which brought the scene to life. There was a moment in which I wanted him to accept an apology, when I went to try to catch his hand, but he took it away. The subtle dismissal carried so much weight for me in the moment and the resulting shock and disappointment from it informed my next moment. I now understand how nuances are created in the same scene through different responses based off the other, while still supporting the character's objective in the scene.

I have also learned the value of using the various stimuli around me to fuel my characters' actions. During a scene in "By the Way, Meet Vera Stark," I was having a difficult time finding my way into an improvised slave monologue that *Vera* performs. I found my way in a pillow on set. As I spoke about pregnancy and a guitar, I endowed the pillow with the attributes of the things I was describing, and so using the prop helped tremendously in filling my character's sense of discovery.

## CHAPTER THREE – SHOW TIME

The period during the run of a show is when I find the routine within my process to be most consistent. This is because I have a regular set of vocal workouts and body warm ups that I have found to keep me grounded before I go on stage. I also give myself over in practical ways to be a vessel for my character: I sleep a good eight hours and get as much rest as I can, I speak softly and as little as possible to preserve my voice, and if I can afford to do so, I also excuse myself from any extra work commitments. During the day, I think about my character and I also reflect on the new things I learned from previous night's performance.

Before a performance, I like to arrive 20 – 30 minutes before my actual call time because this gives me time to settle and not feel rushed as I get ready. During this time, I warm up and put on costumes and makeup simultaneously. I do these two things together because I find that if I warm up too early, I lose my physical and vocal readiness before I get on stage. My typical preparation routine before a show goes as follows:

- General body stretching and two rounds of sun salutations
- Get dressed in base costume (Keep on tights and a tank top if I need to be more covered up)
- Do makeup and hair while doing vocal exercises: breath work, warming up the five floodgates, humming through my range, and resonance work

- Go on stage (if possible) and do exercises which open me up to the space:  
Sun salutations, rolling up and down through the spine on a hum with focus on breath, vocal projection, resonance work, articulation exercises
- Go back to dressing room and finish putting on costume and finishing touches while running lines for my character, in their accent and pitch
- Just before I get on stage I take a moment to ground myself by finding my breath in my lower belly, while thinking about what my character wants – their reason for going on stage

A thorough physical and vocal warm up is crucial for me. It helps me to feel grounding and gain appropriate breath support. A good warm up also helps me to get my mind, body and voice full, active and in a state of alignment, making it easier to play fully.

## CONCLUSION

My biggest take away from my time in Graduate School is that my craft is a work in progress. At each moment in time and for each project, I find myself focusing on something in particular, depending on what the role calls for and where I am in my life, coupled with how I connect with the character. As such, I may make some strides in that aspect, but there are always other areas I can lean into. For instance, in playing *Elizabeth Proctor*, I wanted to allow my vulnerability to come forward and share it with the audience, rather than clamping down on it. I felt I was successful at not hiding my softer side and I was proud of my work. In hindsight, the other thing I would have liked to explore were the moments where the character shows her unbridled anger and frustration based on the Given Circumstances of her husband having cheated on her, and the suspicion that comes with that. However, with each performance, I feel myself finding a better balance of the unique techniques that each new character calls for. My hope is to be able to find a specific process for each character, to the point where I can be in a ready state to bring forward all the things they need in performance.

## ANNOTATED PERFORMANCE HISTORY

The theatrical works listed below are submitted in fulfillment of the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree. All productions were for University Theatre at the University of Iowa except as noted.

### *By the Way, Meet Vera Stark*

Written by: Lynn Nottage

A Mainstage Production of the University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts

Director: Tlaloc Rivas

Scenic & Lighting Designer: Jess Fialko

Assistant Lighting Designer: Alexander Michel

Costume Designer: Hayley Ryan

Assistant Costume Designer: Chelsea Regan

Sound & Projection Designer: Wade Hampton

Projection Designer: Ted Brown

Dramaturg: Luke White

Assistant Dramaturg: Clara Renyen

Dialect Coach: Greg Walker

Stage Manager: Samantha Paradis

Assistant Stage Manager: Jacob Sikorski

Performed in Thayer Theater, February 1 – 10, 2018

Role: Vera Stark (Lead Role)

Cast: “Vera Stark” – Emelia Asiedu, “Gloria Mitchell” – Catie Councill, “Lottie McBride/Afua Assata Ejobo” – Tempestt Farrar, “Mr Slasvick/Brad Donovan” – Eli Jolley, “Leroy Barksdale/Herb Forrester” – Randyck Lewis, “Anna Mae Simpkins/Carmen Levy-Green” – Miriam Randolph, “Maximillian Von Oster/Peter Rhys-Davies” – Zach Twardowski

## ***The Crucible***

Written by Arthur Miller

A Mainstage Production of the University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts

Director: Doug Scholz-Carlson

Music Director: Erik Doucette

Scenic & Projection Designer: R. Eric Stone

Costume Designer: Hayley Ryan

Assistant Costume Designer: Chelsea Regan

Lighting Designer: Jess Fialko

Assistant Lighting Designer: Will Borich

Sound Designer: Jacob Sikorski

Dramaturg: Clare Moore

Stage Manager: Katy McGlaughlin

Assistant Stage Manager: Adam Norrish

Performed in Mabie Theatre, October 6 –14, 2017

Role: Elizabeth Proctor

Cast: “John Proctor” – Zach Twardowski, “Elizabeth Proctor” – Emelia Asiedu, “Reverend John Hale” – Eli Jolley, “Reverend Parris” – William Goblirsch, “Betty Parris” – Olivia Williams, “Tituba” – Alexi Bolden, “Abigail Williams” – Cora Lassen, “Susanna Walcott” – Mackenzie Elsbecker, “Mrs. Ann Putnam” – Marda Rude, “Thomas Putnam” – Yannik Encarnação, “Mercy Lewis” – Jivani Rodriguez, “Mary Warren” – Sidney Kuhel, “Rebecca Nurse” – Madeline Ascherl, - “Giles Corey” – David Priebe, “Francis Nurse” – Marquise Jackson, “Ezekiel Cheever” – Greg Delany Walker, “Willard” – Jacob Glass, “Danforth” – Elijah Jones, “Sarah Good” – Crimson Wood, Ensemble – Anthony Davis, Shakira Del Toro, Kaylen Luttenegger, Aiden Page, Kyle Schindler, Shelby Tippling, Ethan Walleser

## ***Welcome to Thebes***

Written by Moira Buffini

A Mainstage Production of the University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts

Director: Paul Kalina

Scenic Designer: Skyler Matthias

Costume Designer: Loyce Arthur

Assistant Costume Designer: Akeem Celestine

Lighting Designer: Heojeong J. Yoo

Sound Designer: Ted Brown

Fight Director: Lukas Brasherfons

Stage Manager: Samantha Paradis

Assistant Stage Manager: Ellen Kane

Performed in Thayer Theatre, March 2 – 11, 2017

Role: Euridyce (Lead Role)

Cast: “Megaera” – JaMaya Austin, “Mieltus” – Zach Twardowski, “Scud” – Sydney Speltz, “Euridyce” – Emelia Asiedu, “Tydeus” – Eli Jolley, “Pargeia” – Cristina Goyeneche, “Haemon” – Damitri Taylor, “Antigone” – Miriam Randolph, “Ismene” – Maya Bassuk, “Tiresias” – Ash Pierce, “Harmonia” – Daly Tighe, “Polykleitos” – Randryck Lewis, “Aglaea” – Elyse Fisher, “Thalia” – Taylor Edelle Stuart, “Euphrosyne” – Tempestt Farrar, “Eunomia” – Madeline Ascherl, “Bia” – Alyssa Boland, “Helia” – Hannah Adamson, “Eris” – Cristina Ranslem, “Xenophanes” – Hunter Menken, “Theseus” – William Goblirsch, “Phaeax” – Rob Siegrist, “Talthybia” – Weiyi Zhang, “Enyalios” – Marc Saladino, “Plautus” – Sterling Isler, “Ichnaea” – Rob Petrie

### ***Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike***

Written by Christopher Durang

A Mainstage Production of the University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts

Director: Eric Forsythe

Scenic Designer: Alex Casillas

Assistant Scenic Designer Skyler Matthias

Costume Designer: Hayley Ryan

Assistant Costume Designer: Ali Filipovich

Lighting Designer: David Thayer

Assistant Lighting Designer: Heojeong Yoo

Sound Designer: Wade Hampton

Stage Manager: Lindsay Warnick

Assistant Stage Manager: Merric Bower

Performed in Thayer Theatre, November 10 – 19, 2016

Role: Cassandra

Cast: “Vanya” – Miles Gatrell, “Sonia” – Catie Councell, “Cassandra” – Emelia Asiedu, “Masha” – Elyse Fisher, “Spike” – Zach Twardowski, “Nina” – McKenna Goodman

### ***Lady from the Sea***

Written by Henrik Ibsen

Translated by Rolf Fjelde

A Mainstage Production of the University of Iowa Department of Theatre Arts

Director: Nina Morrison

Dramaturg: Sam Collier

Scenic Designer: Kevin Dudley

Costume Designer: Cathy Parrott

Assistant Costume Designer: Hiram Alexander Orozco

Lighting/Video Designer: Lucas P. Ingram

Assistant Lighting/Video Designer: Ted Brown

Sound Designer: Kassia Lisinski

Props Master: Nic Wilson

Vocal Coach: Kris Danford

Stage Manager: Melissa L.F. Turner

Assistant Stage Manager: Erin Durian

Performed in Mabie Theatre, April 15 – 24, 2016

Role: Ellida Wangel (Lead Role)

Cast: “Dr. Wangel” – William Goblirsch, “Ellida Wangel” – Emelia Asiedu, “Bolette Wangel” – Niki-Charisse Franco, “Hilda Wangel” – Miriam Randolph, “Arnholm” – Miles Gatrell, “Lyngstrand” – Will Callan, “Ballested” – Greg Delany Walker, “The Stranger” – Eli Jolley, Ensemble – Erica Eiben, Aurora Green, Jason Grobstitch, Lily Larsen, Anna Tonsfeldt, Nicholas Wang

### ***Feminaàl***

Written by Nina Morrison

Director: Sam Collier

Assistant Director: Matt Schultz

Music Composer: Zoë Woodworth

Lighting Design: Heojeong Yoo

Costume Design: Hiram Alexander Orozco

Dramaturg: Alison Ruth

Violence Design: Lukas Brasherfons

Performed in Theatre B, October 22 – 25, 2015

Role: Betty

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