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I have no process: a detailed and required explanation of my process

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I HAVE NO PROCESS:
A DETAILED AND REQUIRED EXPLANATION OF MY PROCESS

by

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fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
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Thesis Supervisor: Professor Paul Kalina

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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

William Miles Gatrell

Has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
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PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This is William Miles' Gatrell's relatively short diatribe about the inherent flaws in theatre academia followed by an examination of how fear stifles art. It concludes with a cliffhanger.

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CHAPTER 1: PROCESS AS DEFINED BY AN AMATEUR

Asking an actor about their "process" usually produces a lengthy conversation about the steps they take when first approaching a role. They will talk about finding operative words, the detective work required to suss out a character's true intentions, the physical exploration, or the elaborate personal history they've crafted based on the three lines their character speaks in the script. This laundry list of performance principles gives actors a constant upon which to hang their hats. No matter what situation a performer finds themselves in, they know the mechanisms of creation that rest in their artistic toolbox. It provides a sense of safety within a chaotic and uncertain field. Processes are good.

Most academic institutions approach theatrical education from a process driven perspective. The students are given specialized training from artists who have worked in the field. Each professor has had their own training in a handful of acting techniques. They filter that knowledge through their own experiences in order to forge a partially unique approach to the craft of acting. That style is then passed to the students who filter it through their experiences, and eventually conclude with a marginally altered version of their instructor's methods. This is what creates the modern, collective understanding of acting.

Even if two conversing actors studied techniques originally penned by different authors, they can inevitably find common vocabulary and common ideas. Each generations adds and modifies the ideas that came before causing older methods to blend and take new shape. Like particles in an accelerator, the ideas of Sandford Meisner collide with Jerzy Grotowski or Patsy Rodenburg, and give birth to something new and powerful. This process has been accelerated by modern technology, and our increasingly global community. Their are no longer any significant

barriers to knowledge. Artists can read a fellow artist's ideas from across the globe and immediately incorporate them into their local community.

Students of acting are bombarded by an almost overwhelming amount of opinions on how to approach their craft. Professors offer strong beliefs honed over years of practice, articles and books give exposure to a seemingly infinite array of contradictory and complimentary concepts, and peers provide loudly proclaimed opinions created by whatever image macro their high school drama teacher posted on Facebook. This deluge of thespian theses shape a student's understanding of their own process. Eventually, they must dissect this plethora of performance possibilities, and stitch the pieces into a monstrosity they can call their own.

Creating a process is a difficult undertaking, but it can be essential in grounding an actors work. An actor's process is a self created set of "laws" applied to a naturally lawless craft. An environment free of constants can be troublesome to navigate, and technique can be the buoyant log lifting a drowning performer's head above water. Like a well made surfboard, an actor's process provides the safety and stability needed to properly shred a script's righteous waves. I am here to say that processes are good, and that I don't have one.

CHAPTER 2: THE EASIEST PART

When discussing starting a career in acting, people tend to parrot an old saying: "If you can do anything besides acting… do it!" This is a phrase often spoken by people working in the business. It is used to drive home the point that acting is a difficult career, and that if you could choose a different path then the safe, easy choice would be to take it. I think this is a troublesome cliche. It is just one of many scare tactics used to "protect" young actors by driving them away from an over-saturated and unstable market. For a lot of aspiring actors it is the first things they hear about the business. It also feeds into this idea of "acting is an honor" that I see expressed so frequently in schools. The concept is that working as an actor requires sacrifice and suffering, and that only those who are willing to give it all can ever truly succeed.

Phrases like the one above are born out of a desire to protect people. The reality is that acting can be a difficult career. Very few people manage to make it their full time job, and even fewer gain any sort of acclaim or notoriety from the craft. I understand the need to communicate that truth. We don't want graduating classes filled with naive performers unprepared for the harsh realities of the business. I also understand how, for many professionals, being an actor can feel like a badge of honor. Actors study and work for years with no guarantee of success. When someone finally finds that success, the ability to call themselves a working actor feels like an immense achievement. This justifies the suffering that came before, but it also does something far more insidious. It creates the idea that in order to succeed as an actor, you *have* to suffer first.

When suffering becomes a given, theatrical training begins to include training on *how to suffer more successfully.* Of course, no university places that on their plan of study. Those lessons are couched in other more benign ideas. If you're an acting student and you're curious if you're being taught to suffer just look for the phrase, "In the professional world…". Students are

constantly made aware that they are in an academic setting, and that the rules are different in a professional one. When a student is struggling to accomplish something, professors frequently choose to inform them of how much easier things are in the academic word. It is the stick that beats the horse, a reminder that any struggle you face in school will be multiplied ten fold upon graduation. Every minor academic failure becomes evidence of a lack of preparedness for the future because if you fail in school *you've failed at the easiest part.*

CHAPTER 3: THE EVIL OF STANDARDS

Art of any kind is ultimately a subjective experience. The majority of an audience, critics, and other professional may agree that a particular performance was an example of "bad acting", but some may have greatly enjoyed the work. The definition of bad acting can also shift from show to show, year to year. Techniques learned fifty years ago look stiff and stilted when viewed with a modern lens. Shows also have unique styles, and what works for one may stick out like a sore thumb in another. A negative assessment of a work can come from many different places, and not all of them relate to acting. The consumer may have problems with the script, the direction, or just miss the point of the piece. When working on a show and putting it up for the audience, it is easy enough to tell yourself that art is subjective. We can calm the sour moods caused by bad reviews with the soothing balm of subjectivity. Unfortunately, learning requires objectivity.

Teaching any sort of theatrical technique in an academic setting naturally requires a set of standards that the students must strive to reach. Students must be graded, and constructive feedback needs to be given. So how does someone create this set of standards? Most base it on their own experience and training, some chart out individual plans of study based on what they've observed from students. Neither method is perfect, but some method is required. Standards are a necessary evil.

A students ultimate priority is to satisfy their teacher. Some teacher say that acting students should work for themselves, focus on what they need. This is an impossible task. The feedback from a teacher has to be acknowledged, progress has to be made in the direction they specify. They control the feedback; they control the grade. This can be an effective way to learn a new technique. You practice, train, and struggle until your rendition of the technique is as close the

professor's standards as possible. This gives you a great overview of the new subject, and learning things someone else's way is the first step in finding your own.

So where is the evil? The harm lies in how this process impacts a student as they exit an academic setting. Theatrical schooling is rabid fire exposure to a hundred different ideas and techniques. After learning something new, there is little to no time for a student to explore how that new technique fits into their approach to the craft. Students practice what they can in the roles they are given, but inevitably have to shift focus to the next new idea. When the time to spread wings arrives, students exit a program with a process cobbled together from the various techniques they learned, and at least partially defined by the standards of their professors. More time is required to create an individual standard, and shake off the one prescribed by the instructor.

CHAPTER 4: WHERE DO I COME IN?

Discussing the flaws of theatre academia is essential to understanding how I view the

actor's process. My acting has been almost exclusively shaped in an academic

settings. From two years at an arts high school, to four years acquiring a BFA, to the three years

I've invested in my MFA, my resume features the word "University" far more

than I'm comfortable with. The rubrics with which I grade my work have been shaped and

molded by nine years of schooling, and dozens of different mentors. Now, at the end of it all, I

am called upon to define my process and publish it for the world to see.

The question on my mind as I prepared to tackle this enormous request was simple: Who is

this for? I wanted to try and discover what this thesis intends to accomplish.

Am I writing it for the graduate college?

Yes.

Am I writing it for the professors who will read it?

Yes.

Am I writing it for myself?

The answer initially was "no". Which led me to reflect on my graduate experience as a whole.

What had I done for others, and what had I done for me? I realized that much of my time at the

University of Iowa was spent worrying about satisfying the demands of others. Traveling further

into my past, I found similar experiences in other programs. So, if most of my theatrical pursuits

have been defined by someone else's standards, how can I adequately describe *my* process?

CHAPTER 5: HISTORY ABRIDGED

I entered into my time at the University of Iowa with a wealth of academic experience and a smattering of professional experience. I also arrived with a cart of emotional baggage, and a good deal of confusion about how to work my craft. My technique was rusty, and I lacked a lot of the certainty I once had in myself and my work. I came to the program seeking guidance, not only on how to be a better performer, but on how to make effective and healthy use of my natural skill set. I had a variety of skills, but no idea how to use them. I thirsted for something to ground my work, give it definition, and help me feel less lost in this lawless liberal art.

My first year came with a number of hardships. While my grades have always been positive, I've never found myself to be a particularly good student. The concepts and assignments I could navigate well enough to get a good grade, but things like taking notes, paying attention during boring parts of class, and going above and beyond with assignments just never felt like my style. It was rapidly brought to my attention that this approach to learning was not going to fly in grad school. I found myself coming up against many walls in class.

However, my work in shows proved much more successful. This would become a running theme in my time at the university. It reflects my core belief that I am not a good student. Academia is difficult, but the process of creating a play is where I thrive. Throughout my life professors have had problems with me, but I have never had a complaint from a director. My fear of disappointing my teachers made my primary objective to prove myself to them. My work in grad school became a tug of war between working to please others and working to improve myself. Those two things can appear very similar on the surface, but the intent makes all the difference. When I entered a class trying to "succeed" at whatever was being taught, I continued to find myself running in to walls. Even when I succeeded, I did not understand how to apply my

success to anything beyond the classroom. Work that was praised in class did not function on stage.

Most of my classes were affected by this insecurity. I'd work hard to please the professor, receive positive feedback, and then find myself hitting an unexpected wall. I'd frequently get stuck on some section of the class, a concept I just couldn't wrap my head around. At some point each semester I would become frustrated, and allow my anxiety to pull me away from the work. I'd pay less attention in class and work less at home. Eventually I'd either break through, or the subject of the class would change, but I was never able to find any real consistency in my work.

CHAPTER 6: HE HERE AND NOW

Things have started to turn around here in my final year. I have been finding myself more and more capable of knowing when I need to listen to others, and when I need to trust myself. For example, my work in Clown class initially consisted of me chasing after what I thought would be defined as "success". Every time I thought knew what I needed to do, I'd find that I'd somehow missed the mark in a completely new way. My feedback was rarely positive, and I fought to turn that around. Eventually that fight was too exhausting, and I stopped worrying so much about improving my feedback or taking every single note I was given. Just like that, I found success. The moment I let my clown work be what I wanted it to be, the feedback I received swung towards the positive. More importantly, I gained more from the work. I was better able to internalize the concepts, and devise ways to incorporate them into all areas of my work.

My experiences in Clown class ran through my mind as I stared at an early draft of this very thesis. It was filled with buzz words from various classes, an assessment of my work before grad school that more closely resembled self-flagellation, and the description of a very robust process that I absolutely do not use for every show I do. It was a thesis manipulatively designed to please the readers. I gained nothing from the process of writing it, and it said nothing that I truly believed.

So I stepped back, and really looked at how I approach the roles I play. I've approached each and every role radically differently. I'm not talking about the usual flexibility that all acting processes should have. Detailing each process read like a ransom note. Each approach included steps that didn't ultimately serve me. I would utilize certain techniques in an effort to incorporate something I had learned from class. I'd do far more written work than I actually needed as if

some judgmental god would frown at me if I didn't. But there were also elements in my processes that were born from my own instincts. I would occasionally let myself be fluid and go where the role took me. When utilizing the gift of hindsights, those moments were when I took my work to new heights.

I have spent too much of my life fearing that every failure in school means an assured defeat in the professional world. This fear led me to constantly trying to define myself by the standards of others. I gave in to my hunger for affirmation. I craved "success" in school because I wanted to feel like I could make it as a professional. I held myself back from growing as an artist because I tried to force myself into somebody else's mold.

In just the last few months my thinking has started to change. I have new ideas about the art I want to create, how I define success in my field, and the things that really matter to me in life. I learned so much from this program and now it's time to let it live in me. I have the training, I have a stack of journals, and I'm ready to leave the safe womb of academia. I'm defining success by my own standards, but in doing so I have left many comfortable constants behind. I am a tabula rasa.

CHAPTER 7: MY PROCESS

Read the script… and see what happens next.

ANNOTATED PERFORMANCE HISTORY

Lady From the Sea

By Henrik Ibsen

Translated by Rolf Fjelde

University of Iowa MainStage

April 15, 2016 t0 April 24, 2016

Director: Nina Morrison

Dramaturg: Sam Collier

Scenic Designer: Kevin Dudley

Costume Designer: Catherine Parrott

Assistant Costume Designer: Hiram Alexander Orozco

Lighting/Video Designer: Lucas P. Ingram

Assistant Lighting/Video Design: 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

Cast: William Goblirsch, Emelia Pinamang Asiedu, Niki-Charisse Franco, Miriam Randolph, Will Callan, Greg Delany Walker, Eli Jolley, Erica Eiben, Aurora Green, Jason Grobstich, Lily Larsen, Anna Tonsfeldt, Nicholas Wang

Location: EC Mabie Theatre

Role: Arnholm (Supporting)

Vanya, Sonya, Masha, and Spike

By Christopher Durang

University of Iowa MainStage

Nov 10, 2016 to Nov 19, 2016

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: Hoejeong Yoo

Sound Designer: Wade Hampton

Stage Manager: Lindsay Warnick

Assistant Stage Manager: Merric Bower

Cast: Catie Councell, Emelia Asiedu, Elyse Fisher, Zach Twardowski, McKenna Goodman

Location: EC Mabie Theatre

Role: Vanya (Principal)

Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play

By Anne Washburn

Score by Michael Friedman

Lyrics by Anne Washburn

University of Iowa MainStage

Feb 03, 2017 to Feb 12, 2017

Director: Tlaloc Rivas

Music Director: Jason Sifford

Scenic Designer: Nic Wilson

Costume Designer: Brittany Dee Bodley

Assistant Costume Designer: Lindsey Kuhn

Lighting Designer: Alex Casillas

Assistant Lighting Designer: Christian Hahn

Sound Designer: Jacob Sikorski*

Choreographer: Michael Sakamoto

Fight Choreographer/Weapons Consultant: Lukas Brasherfons

Dramaturg: Molly Winstead

Stage Manager: Katy McGlaughlin

Assistant Stage Manager: Aubrey Near

Assistant Stage Manager: Nic Steffes

Cast: Holly Grum, Danny Whiskeyman, Rubina Vidal, Greg Walker, Natalie Lurowist, Catie Councell, Will Callan, Leela Bassuk, Yannik Encarnação

Location: EC Mabie Theatre

Role: Matt/Flanders/Scratchy (Ensemble)

The Pirate Queen

By G. Flores

University of Iowa New Play Festival

May 05, 2017

Director: Lukas Brasherfons

Dramaturg: Alison Ruth

Scenic Designer: Nic Wilson

Costume Designer: Hayley Ryan

Lighting Designer: Ellen Kane

Sound Designer: G. Flores

Fight Choreographer: Lukas Brasherfons

Stage Manager: Aubrey Near

Assistant Stage Manager: Adam Koob

Cast: Caitlin Rose Edwards, Marda Rude, Zach Twardowski, Rubina Vidal, Catie Councell, Emelia Asiedu, Jessica Wade

Location: David Thayer Theatre

Role: Brenz (Supporting)

The Importance of Being Earnest

By Oscar Wilde

University of Iowa Summer Rep

Jun 15, 2017 to Jun 25, 2017

Director: Josh Sobel

Scenic Designer: Nic Wilson

Costume Designer: Jenny Nutting Kelchen

Milliner, Hair, & Makeup Design: Brittany Dee Bodley

Lighting Designer: Jess Fialko

Sound Designer: Wade Hampton

Dialect Designer: Katherine Slaven

Dramaturg: Alyssa Cokinis

Stage Manager: Melissa L.F. Turner

Assistant Stage Manager: Alexis Hinman

Cast: Maya B. Bassuk, Eric Forsythe, Holly Grum, Eli Jolley, Kristy Hartsgrove Mooers, Ashley Lapointe, Lisa Tejero

Location: EC Mabie Theatre

Role: Algernon Moncrief (Leading)

The Dybbuk of Dachau

By Charles Green

University of Iowa Gallery

Nov 09, 2017 to Nov 12, 2017

Director: Eric Forsythe

Scenic/Costume Designer: Chelsea Regan

Lighting Designer: William Borich

Sound Designer: Jacob Sikorski

Dramaturg: Molly Winstead

Production Stage Manager: Lindsay Warnick

Rehearsal Stage Manager: Gwyneth Forsythe

Assistant Stage Manager: Colten Langfitt

Cast: Elyse Fisher, Allison Woitte, Julia Comer

Location: Theatre B

Role: Zalman (Supporting)

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