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SIGNS OF BLACKNESS

by

William Fitzgerald Flood
BFA, Wright State University, 2002

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the
University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Performance

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2013

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A Thesis Approved on

April 2, 2013

by the following Thesis Committee:

Prof. Nefertiti Burton, Thesis Advisor

Dr. Amy Steiger

Dr. Edna Ross

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my grandmother Alice Marie Flood, who would have loved to see me shine. It is also dedicated to the minority in every corner; may we always remember our voice and cherish it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have many people to thank for this artistic journey. First and foremost my thanks goes to my creator. Without that source uplifting and strengthening me, I would not have made it to graduate school to begin with. I also must thank my parents (Michael and Edwina Flood) who never even flinched when, at a very young age, I told them I wanted to perform. They have been a relentless source of support and encouragement, and they are my foundation. I must also thank the faculty of the Theatre Arts Department at the University of Louisville. I have learned so much about myself and the kind of art I want to create. Through this process, I have been able to cultivate and refine my talents. I will forever be grateful for this time in graduate school which deepened my understanding of my voice and artistic path.

“Being oppressed means the absence of choices.”¹

– bell hooks

ABSTRACT

SIGNS OF BLACKNESS

William Fitzgerald Flood

April 2, 2013

The life of an African American male homosexual artist, making his way in the theatre of America, is one of paradox. It is comprised of a litany of limited choices which also stay in flux. Yet in this void of choice, one must find a way to stay true to oneself, his racial heritage, and sexual/spiritual core. An artist of color, he must try to maintain this firm foundation while working as a commercial artist in the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalistic, hetero-normative culture that is the American theatre. The signs of blackness that are intended, given, and received by my audiences vary greatly. In my sojourn at the University of Louisville, I have played many roles that have strengthened, broken, and confused archetypal black stereotypes. This thesis will explore and analyze my journey. Chapter 1 explains my start in acting, my birth as an artist, the mentors who inspired me and fostered the genesis of my artistic passion, the formation of my aesthetic sense as an artist, and my reasons for deciding to go to graduate school and further my academic exploration of acting. Chapter 2 includes an analysis of three roles I have played at the University of Louisville, examining them through the lens of rehearsal, production, and the signs intended and perceived through my performance. Chapter 3 describes my thesis role. A full examination of my

process, the character analysis of the role, the rehearsal, and revelations found during the process. Chapter 4 discusses performance and the direction my thesis role has traveled. My journey as the character is explored there. Chapter 5 details what is next for me artistically and what I leave behind for future graduate students.

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CHAPTER I

The Beginning

“All art is a kind of confession, more or less oblique. All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story; to vomit the anguish up.”²

— James Baldwin

The first time I can remember being moved by something labeled “Art” was by the art of song, sung by none other than Judy Garland. I was eight or nine years old. The occasion was my very first viewing of the 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*. When Judy Garland looked up at that pale grey Kansas sky and uttered those words we all know to be near and dear to our hearts now, “Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high, there’s a land that I’ve heard of once in a lullaby.”³ She sang with such an open heart, “vomiting up” as Baldwin says, her fear and sadness connected to her dry, vapid, dull Kansas home. I was transfixed, and utterly changed by her open vessel of emotion. Even as a young child I knew that performance left me different from when I came to it. This was to later become my hope for all theatre, for it to be transformative. It should always be an agent of change. It was the combination of perfect vocal technique, melodious, honeyed tone, and a clear, bare, raw open emotion, striving to be known and loved and set free to that over the rainbow place, somewhere out there, that captured me then. I knew when I saw and heard Judy Garland sing

that prayer to the heavens for sanctuary, that it was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I had no clue acting was something you could do as a profession at eight, however I knew that whatever Garland was doing to me was special. I wanted to be able to do the same thing to and for others. I expressed to my parents this dream to entertain, to carry people to another place as I had been carried by Garland. The only kind of entertainment my parents were interested in at the time was Holy Ghost entertainment, so that meant one thing to them...so I was enrolled in the “buds of promise” children's choir at the First Baptist Church in Louisville.

All of those nights in my room as a little boy singing along to my old records of Judy Garland, and Nat King Cole, and Peggy Lee, and Ella Fitzgerald paid off. This was where I found my singing ability. I could sing rather well, having been unknowingly trained by the finest masters of the American Songbook via my grandfathers' record collection. There was a hierarchy of seniority even in the children's choir however , so I did not get solos first off, it took quite a bit of time for me to get noticed by the choir director Joann Johnson, who noticing my talent, gave me a solo to sing in the choir. It was a short line in “This Little Light of Mine.” However when I sang it, I took a deep breath, and envisioned that grey Kansas sky, and told the audience my testimony of Gods goodness through the lyric. The audience exploded in applause after I returned to my spot in the choir stand from the microphone. It was then I was hooked. The applause did something to me, it changed me. I truly know what the character of

Eve Harrington meant in the movie All about Eve when she spoke the now famous lines:

If there's nothing else, there's always applause. I've listened backstage to people applaud; it's like waves of love coming over the footlights and wrapping you up...every night different hundreds of people love you. They smile. Their eyes shine. You've pleased them. They want you. You belong. Just that alone is worth everything.⁴

This want to belong, this attraction to love, was attractive to me of course. The adoration of the audience is certainly not a new lure for the artist, but it also has not lost any of its staying power. The welcoming and approving arms of the audience are a seductive, warm place to exist in.

I had a series of mentors who helped to mold and influence my aesthetic sense as an artist. There was my chorus teacher Terri Hereford of Newburg Middle School who popped in a videocassette tape one day during class, and led to another watershed moment for me. I watched the screen as gang members started to dance down the street to a rhythmic, strident music, my mouth dropped in awe as melodies sweeter than honey came wafting from the television screen into my heart. I am speaking of the genius that is Leonard Bernstein and his work West Side Story, the music, the choreography, the seemingly erratic change of time signature all moved me the same way Somewhere over the Rainbow did. It transported me by the power of emotion, the power of harmony in the notes. I could not fully understand and receive the world Bernstein was inviting me into. I could not agree more with his understanding of "great work of art."

Any great work of art ...revives and readapts time and space, and the measure of its success is the extent to which it makes you an

inhabitant of that world- the extent to which it invites you in and lets you breathe its strange, special air.⁵
– Leonard Bernstein

Terri always instructed me to, “mean what you are singing, it makes the people in the seats care.” I have carried this with me since the 6th grade when she uttered those words to me. It was Terri who took our chorus class on a field trip to the Youth Performing Arts School to see the musical Carnival. Upon seeing the dazzling production, with people singing and acting the songs as purely as Natalie Wood did in West Side Story- I knew YPAS was the place for me. The day I received my acceptance letter from YPAS in the mail, was like Charlie Bucket getting his golden ticket. Getting the chance to study acting, and singing and dance, was a dream come true for me at the tender age of 15. It was at that school that I was blessed to be instructed by William Bradford and Gail Benedict. These two played a huge part in my artistic foundation. William Bradford taught me simply that, “you must always want something more than anything else in life onstage.” That was a new concept to me. Up till then everything was play, a lark; something fun to do. Yes, acting is playing, but it is the most difficult playtime one can ever experience. “Great acting is not easy; anyone who says it is is either shallow or a charlatan. And one of the hardest things about acting is admitting that it is hard.”⁶ – Robert Cohen

William Bradford graduated from the Yale School of Drama, and instilled in me a sense of discipline and a hard work ethic. Playtime was over with him. I remember many a day in his acting class I wondered why acting had to be this difficult. It was simply that I previously had no concept of the work involved. He

also introduced me to some of the great black artists. Yes I knew of Lena Horne and Nat King Cole and Ella Fitzgerald from records I had listened to as a child. However I had no idea that lady with the bananas around her chest was the great Josephine Baker. At 15 I had no clue what kind of firebrand she was for women, and black artists. Bradford introduced me to Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance. My parents had talked about these things, but of course children pay no mind to their parents, what do they know after all in a teenagers eyes? Bradford filled me in on the beauty of black, sophistication circa Harlem in the 1920s. The foundation he laid came in handy years later in Blues for an Alabama Sky.

Gail Benedict opened the door for me to the world of dance for me. She had been a Broadway dancer working with legendary choreographers Donald Mckayle, Bob Fosse and Gower Champion. The sense of movement and articulation of body and isolation she taught me have served me well in many an audition and performance. The slinky, seductive, provocative, yet classy and polished dance stylings of Fosse just fit me like a second skin. The hip rolls, the inverted legs, the mixture of the quick and the slow movements, these things were organic to me and I took to his choreography and dance style quickly. Gail taught me how to use my body as a dancer, to act through dance which Fosse instilled in her. She told me that Fosse told her “the best dancers are the best actors.” I never forget that. To be a technician is to simply kick your leg as high as you face, to be a dancer is to kick your leg as high as your face because if you don't kick you're going to start screaming and not be able to stop. That passion,

that fire, is what Gail taught me, and I dance with the intensity of a firecracker, all due to her.

YPAS at the time, held a college and career day for their seniors, where the top arts colleges came and auditioned the students. I had a list of my top schools that I wanted to get into. I was called back to the top five on my list- Wright State University, Cincinnati Conservatory of Music, Emerson College, Point Park College, and Penn State. I went to all of the meetings with each school and spoke to their representatives. All of them made their case as to why I should attend their university, and all of them accepted me into the program on that day. I had my pick of the litter in terms of schools. I chose WSU. I made the choice for several reasons. Several of the upperclassmen I had worked with in shows at YPAS were attending there, and had nothing but praise for the program. Nicole Scherzinger, who played Dorothy to my Lion in the Wiz at YPAS my freshman year, was in the program and assured me it was stellar, very challenging, and was what we were used to in terms of hard work. Proximity to home was also a plus. Driving a speed within reason, the trip from Dayton OH to Louisville is about 3 hours. This was just enough of a parent buffer zone for me. Socialization within diverse peer groups is a big part of undergraduate education. One needs a certain feeling of being on their own in other words, to feel unburdened and unfettered. If your parents are fifteen minutes away, it is difficult to find your own voice as an artist, independently of paternal influences. So the three hour distance was enough to insure freedom, but also guarantee that when I was homesick, I could drive home. Another reason for going to WSU

was that the chair of the theatre department Stuart McDowell. He accepted me on the spot at career day, and said he would be calling in a few days to see what kind of scholarship package they could offer. Within days I was informed of a full scholarship. The other schools couldn't compare with the word of mouth recommendations, proximity, and financial aid. I was off to Dayton for the next four years of my life. It was there, that I met my final two mentors who started me out on my way in the world professionally, Joe Deer and Lee Merrill. Joe Deer was a "hooper" in tap terms-an old school dancer. He had also done several shows at Lincoln Center in NYC, and worked with Tony Award winners. He always liked to say, "Act with quantum emotional value yeah? Give me all that you got, always." A dancer just like Gail in terms of intensity, he never let me slack. If he felt like I was not committing fully to a John Patrick Shanley scene, he would stop the scene, and instruct me to sit down. I remember one instance he told me. "Billy you're not here today, take a minute and sit, we can do this scene again when you decide to show the fuck up." He was hard as nails as an acting and dance teacher, but he was also a great shoulder to lean on when I needed help. There was a time I was going through great emotional troubles dealing with my sexuality and the usual dating drama that goes along with a freshman year of college. I ended up in his office weeping into his chest. He just let me cry all over his shoulder and let me wail. I completely broke down into tears sobbing into his shirt and ruined it. Joe Deer is a wonderful mentor-someone who is there for you emotionally but refuses to take any less than your absolute best, in terms of acting work. He always sticks to the objective. What do you want in the scene,

and how are you going to get it. Is your partner reacting, if not change your tactic, change it again, and again, and again until it works.

Lee Merrill was my voice teacher at WSU. When I say voice I mean singing, not speech. She is a coloratura soprano, and among her many credits she played Johanna in a production of Sweeney Todd and was directed by Harold Prince, She is a complete revelation. She is also a true gift to singing. Lee is the reason I can act through the expressive power of my singing instrument. In her voice studio, I learned to control my rate of breath moving over my vocal folds to precision to master long passages of phrase in singing. For instance a long Rodgers and Hammerstein phrase as in the famous song from Carousel, "If I loved you." It takes extreme control to be able to sing the phrases all the way through without taking a breath in the middle of a line, Lee taught me that control and technique, all the while instilling the need for delivering the lyric. Just like Joe she was always after me to maintain my want. She would ask me, "ok it sounds glorious, but what do you want? What is it you need from the other person. I should be able to name the want by the expression in your voice, words should not even be needed. You should be able to sing vowels and I should be able to know exactly what you mean." That was one of her favorite exercises, and it is a powerful way to get in touch with the subtext of a piece. Singing the vowels of a song, without consonants, unlocks emotional value, and can key you into a moment you missed in your analysis. Lee helped to create an artist, from what was just a guy with a great voice by instilling a great confidence, but also pushing

me to not just stand there and sing pretty, but demand an answer from your partner.

I spent four nurturing, fantastic years at Wright State University and graduated with my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Acting. Upon graduation, I spent the requisite amount of time after university thinking about what I was going to do with the rest of my life, and moved to NYC. I lived in Washington Heights on the 6th floor of a huge apartment building on 175th street. There was no elevator and there were local crack heads sleeping on the stoop. Upon arriving in NYC, my luggage with all of my head-shots in them, (that I had just had done by Chicago photographer Larry Lapidus) and my clothes-did not arrive at LaGuardia airport when I did...luckily I had some underwear, and had some savings so I could shop for clothes. I had a handful of headshots I had accidentally shoved into my carryon bag. I went to my first round of auditions, and within two weeks, I had booked the role of the Cowardly Lion in a national tour of the *Wizard of Oz*. I was ecstatic, and being cast in such a great gig, so early, was a validation to me of me making the right choice in moving to New York. I had a month before the tour went into rehearsals in Philadelphia, so I had an acting gig and a month to explore NYC. That was incredible, and as I look back and think of the millions of people who move to NYC and never find acting work, and thanks to my training at YPAS and WSU I had a national tour in the first two weeks of moving to the big apple. The blessing of that was lost on me then, however now I can see the accomplishment. I found a church home in Marble Collegiate Church, and a community of artists and friends there that I am still close to till this very day.

I went down the *Yellow Brick Road* three times. I traveled in two East Coast tours, traveling from New York State to Florida, across to Texas and back. I went on one West coast tour traveling from Philadelphia to Seattle down to Texas and everywhere in-between before heading back to New York. All of the tours stopped at myriad cities big and small in-between. The conversations I had with small town and big city Americans will stay with me the rest of my life. This was an America that embraced difference. I would meet white people at the local Laundromat in town and they would recognize me from the show and strike up a conversation. It was lovely and a far cry from the white supremacist hierarchy I would be thrust into once I went back to NYC after tour. Once the dust settled from the success of my touring, and I was back in NYC temping, I saw a different side to Broadway, and the theatre producing community in NYC.

The first audition I went to where I could tell things were different was the national tour of the Irving Berlin Musical, "I Love a Piano". It was going to be directed by, a well-known director and actor in the big apple. I knew I had one thing going for me, my voice. It was truly as James Baldwin calls it, "...a thing, a gimmick, to lift him out and start him on his way." I knew that if I could get in the door to sing, I had to be called back. There were about two hundred men and four hundred women present at the audition. This was the usual number of people in attendance as this was what they call in the industry a "cattle call", a huge open audition, where anyone can show up. At any rate I sang, "I love a Piano" it had been a staple in my repertoire so I made the bold choice and sang the title song of this review. The director loved it and handed me music to go over

with the accompanist and learn in the room. It was a song called “Everybody Step” an old syncopated tune. I knocked that out of the park, and so they passed me on to the dance audition. It was rather simple Charleston routine, and I threw in a toe touch jump, and both the director and the dance assistant in charge of the audition marveled as I jumped higher than anyone in the room. They passed me through the dance call and paired me with three different white actresses to read some scenes. I soon noticed I was the only black male called back for the character actor and leading male role. We worked through the scenes for hours and hours. The director continued to switch the actresses over and over, but with me reading the same scenes. This led me to believe that the production team had decided upon me for the part, as they seemed to just be seeing what actress would work best with me. I found out that I could not have been more wrong. At one point in the running of the scene, the director stopped it and said to me, “Billy, what you're doing is fine, but could you be less hip?” I paused. That code word seemed clear to me. I was trying to figure out how I could address this sudden racist remark. I asked the director if he could clarify his statement. He said, “Yes, your acting is solid, but I need you to realize this is set in nineteen thirty, I need less Sidney Poitier and more Fred Astaire.” He said it. He wanted me to be less black in other words. I wanted that tour very badly, because he was a very big name in NYC and working with him would have been a huge boon for my career. The white actress I read with in the room and I are still friends to this day, because of this ordeal. Time froze for a few minutes after the director made this statement, and I simply said, “Ok let’s start again.” She and I

exchanged a look, and she said so much in that stare. I had just betrayed my own people, for what- A 9 month tour of a crappy musical review? I was utterly shamed inside, and she knew it. We went on with the scene, and I tried to make the adjustments to be, "less Sidney and more Fred". I flattened my vocal tone to reduce richness in the voice, and I stiffened my spine to have a straight flat back, I tried to suck every bit of richness and soul out of my frame and voice, to achieve enough, "whiteness" for the famed director. So after emotionally putting on whiteface for this man, it ended up being to no avail as I did not get the part anyway. It turned out to be one of the greatest lessons of my life; I vowed to never again betray my gut feelings and who I am to get a part. You must retain your humanity at all times in this business as the business will do everything to take it from you. As I look back I realize what a blessing it was to not get that gig. It almost killed my artistic soul to perform "whiteness" or a caricature of what being white is for such for just that small amount of time- I cannot imagine trying to do that for nine months. It shamed me because I let him trap me. I let the director lull me into the false belief that I was not enough as a black artist. The semiotics of blackness, my energy, my soul, the IS-ness of my essence as an African American was the thing that got me the call back and through the dance call, but when it came down to the scene work, the director wanted to make me a white man, the sad thing is I let him try. The group of white men and women on the other side of the table in that room had the power, and I let them wave it over me. It hit me like a ton of bricks, what James Baldwin wrote,

"Negroes in this country... are taught really to despise themselves from the moment their eyes open on the world. This world is white

and they are black. White people hold the power, which means that they are superior to blacks, and the world has innumerable ways of making this difference known and felt and feared.”⁷ – (Baldwin 25)

I had let them take away my power. In that moment with the white director, I had let him push me into believing I was less than as a black man, that being Billy Flood, in a new set of given circumstances just wasn't enough, and being white was the thing to do to get the gig.

It happened over and over again, not always in the same way though. I would audition, and the gift of my voice would get me called back, but then, always it would come down to a white young male and me, and the white young male would end up getting the gig. It seemed the white supremacist entertainment complex could accept me as an animal, a beast touring around the country as a Lion, but casting a large, dynamic black man as a regular person, a human being was incongruous to them. I remember another incident that stuck with me. Once I was told by a table of white producers of a new Ray Charles musical, to, “black it up, your singing is beautiful but it's not black enough.” A table of white men telling a black man he doesn't sing, “black enough”...said to me that they have an image of what blackness is. Apparently, I did not fit into their mold of what it is to be black. Archetypes are common in theatre, they are the mold that has been imitated. Stereotypes are oversimplified copies, made up of exaggerations and assumptions, with no real context of the thing being simplified. In essence for an actor stereotypes are just lazy and verge on all of the "isms" racism, sexism, ageism etc. Those producers had stereotyped

blackness to mean one thing to them. bell hooks summed up their likely motivations very well in part six of her televised interview on cultural criticism.

This is what blackness has come to mean in Hollywood, it doesn't have anything to do with what color the person is it's a certain image of blackness that Hollywood believes can be negotiated by any cultural maker. Black people aren't needed to produce black cinematic culture, because white people can produce that culture..."⁸

In their minds they knew the image of blackness better than I did. This audition ended differently than the first that caused me pause. This time the audition went in a different direction. I was in control and I took back my power. I had learned my lesson from the months of racist oppression and intimidation from the white supremacist production teams. I simply reclaimed my cultural voice, and after being told to "black it up" I took a breath, exhaled my rage, thanked them for the audition, and turned around and walked out of the audition room. I had enough of submitting myself to foolishness. I am sure their faces were in a state of shock, however I did not turn around to see. I had made the decision. I was finished with this post-colonialist self-hatred. I was an artist, a black artist, and I needed to get back in touch with what that meant to me. I was finished with the white supremacist entertainment complex, and it was time to do my own thing. It was clear to me that the time had come to refocus, reboot, and reload my artistic self. My love for the theatre had been stripped out of me by the racism of the business. It was time to regain my sense of self and stop taking a back seat to my career. I decided that I needed to pause and take stock of what had happened, and take control of my artistic life. I needed to rediscover why I was acting in the first place. It was time to renew what was driving me all along.

Take the time to think about why I was doing all this in the first place. It was time to go to grad school for acting.

The decision to go to graduate school was not a fast choice, or an easy one. After all, I had already acted in a piece for a directing student colleague of mine for Anne Bogart, and after getting his Masters in directing from Columbia, he is in the same position job wise as he was before he went to graduate school...unemployed only now he is several thousands of dollars in debt. So I had several questions to ask. Do I stay in NY? Or do I go elsewhere? That question pretty much answered itself as the schools in NYC were all astronomically expensive and they all offered little to no financial aid. I would have had to go into hundreds of thousands of dollars in student loan debt to even consider those schools. Plus what were they teaching at those schools that I could not read in a book, or be taught at a stellar state school? The answer is nothing, absolutely nothing. So I looked at the Grad Acting program of the University of Louisville.

The draw for the program to me was the chance to dig into African American plays, as my entire working professional career had been white normative musical theatre. This is the majority of commercial work since the white entertainment patriarchal complex produces most if not all of what is on Broadway and regional theatre. I needed to be more exposed to playwrights of color, to directors of brown skin like me. Even the scene work I was doing in undergrad was Chekov, or Shakespeare, or Shaw or John Patrick Shanley. The chance to finally bite my teeth into August Wilson, or Suzan Lori Parks, was very

exciting. So I auditioned for the program and moved back to Louisville, Kentucky to start my graduate career.

CHAPTER II

The Right Guy

Blues for an Alabama Sky was a journey of discovery that I would gladly repeat over and over again. This was an experience where everything seemed to click. I was cast in the role of Guy Jacobs, who is described in the script as a gay costume designer. Now this role had the potential to be a minefield of clichés and traps for a black artist who happens to actually be homosexual. It one way it allowed me to put on a jacket that was familiar, since being black and homosexual in 2012, in many ways, sadly, is not too different in terms of society's rules of acceptance, than being black and homosexual in the summer of 1930, time period in which *Blues* takes place. In *Deals with the Devil and other Reasons to Riot*, the playwright of *Blues*, Pearl Cleage, says this about why she writes:

I am writing to expose and explore the point where racism and sexism meet. I am writing to help myself understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is both racist and sexist.⁹

I find it beautiful and poetic that with that inspiration, she also wrote a character in *Guy* that fully explains what it is like to be a black gay man facing a similar form of oppression. The form is identified as being sexism, from the same male source in the character of Leland Cunningham. He is a southern-raised, religious man. The sexism *Guy* faces is called homophobia, or more correctly

today "hetero-sexism" according to Patrick D. Hopkins in his writing entitled *Gender Treachery*:

Heterosexism characterizes a political situation in which heterosexuality is presented and perceived as natural, moral, practical and superior to any non- heterosexual option. As such heterosexuals are justly accorded the privileges granted them- political power, sexual freedom, religious sanction, moral status, cultural validation, psychiatric and juridical non interference, occupational and tax privilege, freedom to have or adopt children and raise families, civil rights protection, recourse against unfair hiring practices, public representatives in media and entertainment industries, etc.¹⁰

There is a scene in the play where Leland confronts Guy in his own house about homosexuality and Guy is forced to throw him out. That kind of homophobia was exactly what Guy left Savannah to escape from. I needed to convey that in my portrayal. There is another scene where Guy comes in to his house bleeding and disheveled from a street fight, where he was attacked for being ostentatiously dressed. He mentions carrying a straight razor at all times due to the homophobia in Harlem at the time and the attacks a homosexual man could be subject to in the streets.

Blacks and homophobia are an interesting topic that I needed to delve into deeper to really flesh Guy out as a character. Dr. Barry Chung, Professor and Program Director of Counseling Psychology Indiana University Bloomington, has Studied LGBT people of Color, and he has developed fascinating theories detailing the trauma and stress, people such as Guy Jacobs go through. Dr. Chung talks of the "double edge stress" syndrome people of color who are of the LGBT community experience. He explains that it causes many problems. This is due to the fact that you cannot be accepted by the gay dominant white

homosexual group, which is one stress, and then you cannot be accepted by your racial minority group, due to heterosexism within your racial minority. This is the second stress, which gives the syndrome its name. This can cause the homosexual person of color to feel extremely isolated and alone according to Dr. Chung. bell hooks, in her book, *Talking Back* also addresses this double edged problem.

Often black gay folk feel extremely isolated because there are tensions in their relationships with the larger, predominately white gay community created by racism, and tensions within black communities around issues of homophobia¹¹

Angel saved Guy from all that self-doubt and let him be able to accept himself. Self-acceptance was also helped along by the community of artists and friends Guy met in Harlem at the time who were also in the LGBTQ community, such as Langston Hughes and Bruce Nugent. In the script these artists invited Guy to their lively weekly soirees and showed him a way to live life to the fullest and not be ashamed of his sexuality.

My director Nefertiti Burton has a swift rehearsal process. We were told to be inquisitive, and expected to be completely "off book" the first day of rehearsal. Off book is industry term for having all of your lines totally memorized. This was a challenge that the majority of the cast met. Our very first day, we all sat down at a table as a cast and started reciting the lines of the play as best we could from memory. It is common to have what is called a read through of the entire script on the first day of rehearsal, but to be expected to know the entire script was quite a challenge. To my recollection however we managed to forge our way through the first two acts pretty well, remembering most of our lines. We were not

as fortunate when it came to remembering the rest of the play. The going was quite rough. This process of jumping right in mostly memorized started us out knowing that a lot was expected of us. As an actor you tend to perform up to the bar that is set for you. If a director requires the bare minimum, that's what many actors will give. Nefertiti requires one hundred percent of your facilities, so we knew from the very first day that much was expected, and we as a cast tried our best to come up to the high bar that had been set. Coming in to the rehearsal process with so much of the play in your bones and memory already from the start, also sets the actor up to have a head start in terms of knowing what you want. You are further ahead in knowledge of what your character thinks, and knows, earlier in the process. Starting the process already knowing your lines, gives you more time to play and vary your intention behind every line. It lets you change your goals and obstacles early on, because you're not worrying about what the next word is coming out of your mouth at an earlier time in the process.

Every role is different, so for my acting aesthetic and process, my approach to every role must then also be different. The door that opens a character for me changes with every piece. Sometimes it can be a fragrance, other times it is a song, or an image. I never know what will bring me to the character, and the character to me. The door for Guy was through his environment, his clothes, and his relationship with Angel. Guy is in his thirties according to the play. Being in my thirties, I set his age at 31, which was my age at the time I played the role. He is said to be a costume designer for many different clubs in Harlem. The Cotton Club was such a huge nightspot for the

black high life in Harlem I placed him designing there as well as the other myriad clubs mentioned in the play with names like The Kit Kat Club etc. Guy is not a resident designer anywhere after his quitting his regular costuming gig for Angel's sake, and as the Depression is in full swing, he must freelance, designing dresses for showgirls all over town, wherever he can get the work. In my mind between making clothes for chorus girls, he would most likely take in personal mending, if it paid well. Guy and Angel, his best friend whom he takes in and loves like a sister, have an interesting relationship. They met in a brothel in which they both found security and emotional protection. Ms Lillie's was the place they lived and worked in. This was where their friendship was forged. Guy and Angel developed their strong bond of trust, and really learned they could lean on each other when times got tough. Guy has the history of being able to make do when he must. Guy has always protected Angel but the interesting thing is that she almost left him in the brothel. If he had not been informed of her departure by another prostitute, he wouldn't have even heard her leaving as he states in the play, "she was happy to see me, but she sure would have left without me. Angel doesn't like to say goodbye."¹²

So although Guy loves Angel as a sister, he always knows deep down that Angel is going to look out for Angel. He knows that, in other words, she always has one eye on the door. I had to ask myself why Guy Jacobs, being so sophisticated and cultured in this world of poets, singers, playwrights, dancers, and artists of all stripes would keep putting up with and supporting financially and emotionally such a selfish person as Angel. It is easy to see why Angel would

stay with Guy. After all Guy puts a roof over her head whenever she is in a troubling spot, and food in her stomach and designs and makes beautiful clothes for her to wear. The question I needed answered as an actor, in order to make sense of the role, was why did he continue to stay with her? This was imperative for me as an actor. In my process, I have discovered that every action, every intent, must make sense psychologically for me as the character. Whether any character I play is insane or not, this must be figured out for me to play the role with the necessary commitment and belief to bring the audience along on the journey. What was the payoff, in other words, emotionally and practically for Guy in keeping this relationship? I decided to go straight to the source, the author of the play itself, Pearl Cleage. I emailed her concerning my issues with Guy, and his seeming to let Angel walk all over him, but always being there to bail her out time and time again. Cleage responded:

The key to the relationship between Angel and Guy is, that she helped him see how beautiful he was. When they were in Savannah, making their way in the sex industry, he felt hopeless and ugly and strange. She accepted him for what he was--"she let me see how beautiful I was." and for that gift he "forgave her everything."¹³

Dr. Cornel West addresses this self-hate that Cleage refers to *in Black Sexuality* stating,

This demythologizing of Black sexuality is crucial for Black America because much of Black self-hatred and self-contempt has to do with the refusal of many Black Americans to love their own Black bodies--especially their black noses, hips, lips, and hair¹⁴

Guy puts up such a strong facade, a tough walk and talk in the play, that it was good for me as an actor to find much of that was bravado, that underneath

that tough, streetwise, hard, but polished layer of a man who carries a straight razor, there was a scared young man, who according to Pearl, saw himself as ugly and strange, until Angel showed him his true self. Thus she was the mirror Guy needed to see his beauty. In essence, Angel permitted Guy to be the strong male figure that he is. Multiple layers of a character enrich the portrayal for me as an actor. The more signs I can find and investigate and play with, the more real the character is for me, and therefore for the audience. In real life people are multifaceted, and they must also be for me as an artist, or they come off flat and not true, one dimensional to be exact. Guy has so many themes and signs associated with him that he was fascinating and a thrill to play and work with as an artist. He signifies blackness in his strong ties to the black community in Harlem. His activist spirit signifies a strong sense of self and confidence. This is shown in the play when he defies social conventions in the black community at the time and wears high fashion clothes outside that signify his homosexuality to any onlooker. This brings on a homophobic physical assault, but he defends himself. This defies stereotypes of homosexuals being not able to defend themselves or being non masculine. In America we associate the sign of masculinity with violence. One only has to look at professional sporting events, car commercials, and the armed forces to see all of the things we in America ascribe to masculinity. For Americans, masculinity is the sign, and it signifies violence. We do not associate homosexuality with masculinity in general. When I say we, I specifically mean the predominant heterosexist, Eurocentric, heteronormative mind that is the oppressor. This is the society in which American

theatre-goers are socialized. So Guy being able to defend himself physically against his homophobic, heterosexual attackers, spins the presumed signs associated with homosexuality (physical weakness, nonmasculinity, feminine tendencies) on their head. I emphasized this by the intentions placed behind the lines concerning the fight. When Guy walks back into his apartment after he is attacked in the street, with his clothes ripped and distressed, Angel asks him why he keeps going around “looking” as he does, implying that he is dressed in a way that will incite violence. In his lines of response, I loaded the lines with an intention to convince, to affirm and to assure Angel that Guy was in control of the situation. He signifies homosexuality with his dress, physical manner and tales of the parties he goes to with beautiful men.

I noticed from the script that Guy runs with a particular type of crowd in Harlem. From the text we learn Guy runs with the black glitterati of the time he speaks in Act 2 of attending a huge party with Langston Hughes and Bruce Nugent, and Hollywood stars. This gave him a certain debonair air of sophistication that I needed to capture. There is a certain gait with which people of this class carry themselves. Now Guy being from the deep south and poor, but becoming a part of this new black sophisticate class, means Guy developed a whole new way of walking and talking for himself. He knows French, as he speaks several French phrases and words in the show. Now, French was not a language commonly known by most Americans in the 30s, let alone African Americans. I deduced from the given circumstances of the play that Guy must have picked it up by talking and working with Josephine Baker, and Langston

Hughes, and so many others. Guy routinely mentions both and has correspondence with Josephine the entire play through telegrams, and there is a large portrait of her in his apartment. Josephine is Guy's vehicle to a new life in Paris, a life of champagne, and glitz, and fashion, and freedom from the devastation that is Harlem in the Depression.

I had several visual influences for Guy Jacobs to develop my sense of deportment and carriage. A black artist running in the social circles he did at the time would have certain body language, a very particular way of speaking, walk with a certain gait, and so on. Cary Grant, with his cool style and subtle grace was a great influence. That might seem strange, with Guy being so grounded in his race, however in that time period, to be a high class, sophisticated black artist, one would need to emulate Hollywood glamour to a certain extent. He has an understated male sexual power and chemistry that exudes sophistication. Then there was Cab Calloway, the famous band leader. Calloway was outrageously flamboyant but the very height of professionalism, and he had the respect of his peers. Langston Hughes, with his tweed blazers and slicked back fine hair and his smile, were a huge influence on me towards my portrayal of Guy. In my research I found that a lot of what went into the "look" of the early black stars of the Cotton Club and film had to do with what is called post-colonial syndrome. Trying to portray signs of whiteness in the physical look of your features and dress as close to Caucasian as you can would get black entertainers more work. If their hair was straight instead of naturally curled, if their skin was lighter, and on and on. Guy would do the same as his

contemporaries Nugent, Hughes, Baker, Horne the list goes on and on. In recent times black actor Martello Nathaniel White of Britain wrote a play "Blackta" about the issue that is still prevalent today even within the black community purported by what bell hooks refers to as the white patriarchal heteronormative entertainment complex: "It links back heavily to slavery: they call it post-colonial syndrome... Sometimes in the black community the whiter your features are, the more attractive you're seen to be."¹⁵

Guy was a beautiful paradox for me to tackle as an actor. He is a person deeply entrenched in who he is as an artist, and as a person of color. However he is also a victim of post colonialism and the struggle between trying to maintain gainful employment as an artist in Harlem of the 1930s, and staying true to his color and race. That meant you slicked your hair back to appear to have straight hair, and you spoke French to prove your intercontinental sophistication. There were certain signs one would signify to show that you were in the know and fit in with the right crowd.

What Went Wrong

In thinking over everything that went well in terms of positive signs of blackness, I am also led to think of the opposite. In terms of the negative signs of blackness signified to an audience in my time here at the University of Louisville two roles come to mind. These two roles were very different. The degree to which the signs of blackness portrayed are negative and the reasons why they are negative differ. One has to do with the writing of a piece, crafted to be racist in the basic construction, and the other has to do with casting, and from my

perception, the trouble with color blindness and the semiotics of being the lone minority onstage. The two roles I am referring to would be that of Arlecchino, in *The Seven Labors of Arlecchino* and Lord Hastings in *Richard the Third*. Theatre is a medium of seeing and hearing, the visual images the audiences see are paramount to the experiences they have and can strongly dictate what they come away with. In fact it can decide what kind of transformative experience they are going to have. Images have great power.

I want people to think about the power of images, not just in terms of race, but how imagery is used and what sort of social impact it has- how it influences how we talk, how we think, how we view one another. In particular I want people to see how film and television have historically, from the birth of both mediums, produced and perpetrated distorted images. Film and television started out that way, and here we are at the dawn of a new century, and a lot of that madness is still with us today.¹⁶

—Interview with Spike Lee

Images, and the signs those images signify to an audience are of central importance to an actor of color, working for a predominantly white audience. It is certainly true of our audiences at the University of Louisville. In the repertory company show *The Seven Labors of Arlecchino* I was cast as Arlecchino, a clown servant who is a buffoon. The entire company wore the masks of *commedia dell arte*. There were subtle and overt signs of the sort of subversive things going on with that production which was toured around the Jefferson County Public School system. For instance, the other three actors in the show all had masks that were a fantasy color, blue, green, pink respectively. I, a light brown skinned African American, had a light brown-skinned mask. The color was almost identical to my actual skin color. So in that sense, an audience already is

getting a visual sign that this actor is more like his mask, in other words, this actual person of color is like this foolish character; the mask is even the same skin color as the person playing the role. In my estimation, this is a subliminal, subversive sign to an audience. Then you have the fact that the character is simply a fool, anyone could have played the part. However, the fool had been specifically cast as an African American male before me as well. Why was the choice made to cast an African American male as the fool twice, when there were other males in the repertory company who could have played the role?

These signs are too loud to be ignored as coincidence. I had to make a lot of choices mentally and physically to rationalize why I was going along with playing this buffoon, as a person of color. I felt much like Hattie McDaniel who became a legend in the African American arts community for becoming the first actress of color to win an Oscar and said, "I'd rather play a maid and make 700 a week, than be a maid for 7."¹⁷ I had to adopt that mindset and artistic approach as an artist and a person of color. I am on assistantship, and repertory company is my job, this is the role I have been cast in. I will carry on. It pains me to think that I was complicit with the director in maintaining the racist, age-old stereotype of the black fool. Repertory company performs for children, every day, and often the rep company is the first play these children have ever seen. To know that the first black person these children saw portrayed onstage was someone without the sense to not put butter in his pocket, or a fly down his pants, breaks my heart.

However, when you are a victim of institutional racism perpetrated by the industry itself, and by your director who wrote the piece, you do what you have to

do to get by and keep your assistantship. I feel like the guards at Auschwitz saying this, but I did what I was told... However, unlike the guards at Auschwitz, who were put on trial for crimes against humanity, I was also the victim. It's always easy for the oppressor to victim blame. After much introspection and thought on the matter, I have realized that I was victimized in that situation, and am slowly picking up the pieces and moving on. In a sense I was pushing myself, or pushing my own people into the ovens on command of my oppressor-the oven that cooked my self-respect and my dignity as a black artist. I marvel at how I did it every morning, often twice in a day.

In analyzing the situation now, I know I dug deep into the traditional actor questions we are taught to ask with the European Constantine Stanislavski method of actor training. It is not lost on me that as an actor of color, I am trained in a white European model of thinking about acting. This American obsession with realism in acting as taught by a Russian European acting theorist is a colonization of the mind in terms of acting training. That this European acting theory is the professional industry standard, all over the world, is also worth noting. That being said, I tried to focus on what Arlecchino wanted goal wise, to try to push the obvious tones of minstrelsy and buffoonery out of my head. The character wants desperately to please his mother, and be a "good boy" as his mother instructs him. However he is limited in mental power and follows her instructions as she says them, without thinking. Once again, there are so many racist overtones here. My mother was played by a white actress. That being the case, a director should be sensitive to what images are represented and shown,

what signs are interpreted by an audience when they see a white woman telling a black man he is a "good boy" after accomplishing a task. In any stretch of the imagination, this picture, this scene, takes us right back to the antebellum south, and all of the sordid racist history of that time comes back and is dragged into the forefront of an audience's mind. Another troubling moment occurred when I was instructed to sing a song, to the well-known minstrel song melody, "Camptown Races." In a moment where Arlecchino is instructed to squish grapes with his feet, it was written in the script by the director to sing these lyrics to the tune of the infamous minstrel song. I was also to prance around in a minstrel fashion, which was very disconcerting. The meaning behind all of this brings to mind this quote from Eric Lott in his writing *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working class*: "The fact is that minstrel songs and dances conjured up not only the black body but it's labor, not only it's sexuality but it's place and function in a particular economy."¹⁸

The sociological and political ramifications of this obviously adult, large African American male, who is buffoonish, prancing around as a minstrel, performing farm tasks for a white male are staggering. Arlecchino churns butter, bales hay, stomps grapes, gathers eggs, and milks a cow. These are all chores a slave would carry out on a plantation...so the choice to cast a black actor as Arlecchino and a white actor as the Farmer twice...is very interesting indeed. This all seems far too pointed to be considered a coincidence. These are issues and themes; visual and thematic signs a director is supposed to see, be cognizant of, and address. Certainly this is expected of director who is aware of semiotics and

movement and is teaching in a program with an African American Theatre certificate. I am moved to think of the words of bell hooks here,

Constantly and passively consuming white supremacist values both in educational systems and via prolonged engagement with mass media, contemporary black folks, and everyone else in this society, are vulnerable to a process of overt colonization that goes easily undetected. From teaching resistance: the racial politics of mass media.¹⁹

Having considered all this as an actor of color, I still was conflicted in whether I was misreading signs, or, what the director's intent was. Signs presented are not always intentional; this is why the knowledge and inquiry into semiotics is vital to theatre as one must be made aware as an actor, and certainly a director, what is portrayed and seen by an audience through our actions, and our being onstage. Maybe this director was truly oblivious to the racist and sociological issues and signs being brought up and represented in *Arlecchino*. I pondered this during rehearsal. However the moment came that removed any trace of doubt in terms of suspicion as to motives of the director. At the beginning of the play, one of the first series of gags that happens is that a fly is caught in the pants of *Arlecchino* and it buzzes intermittently during the play. This causes the character to dance and fling himself about during most of his many labors as the fly is troublesome, tickling or bothering his genital area. He keeps telling his mother that there is a "fly in his pants" to which his mother replies, " *Arlecchino* all pants have flies" obviously referring to a zipper. This happens over and over again in the script. Finally at the end of the play, the fly buzzes again and makes *Arlecchino* jump and flap about, and the mother realizes this commotion and says, "Oh a fly! Well let it out *Arlecchino*," to which I

open my pants, dig down into them and grab the imaginary fly and release him and say, "Fly away free, free, free at last, thank God almighty, you're free at last". This was a tense moment in rehearsal, and it was obvious even to the director this was inappropriate, as the director immediately defended this bizarre choice of dialogue by telling me the black actor who portrayed this character before me, had improvised this bit of dialogue... I was being told by my director that this demonstration of minstrelsy, this mockery of Negro spiritual and the memory of the late Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King was justified and perfectly fine, because a person of color had come up with the bit. I was told, "He came up with it," and that it "works," to use the director's words. So I was faced with an impossible situation. How can I justify this overtly racist choice that was forced upon me, and that I must follow? All actors at a point in their careers come to a crossroads with a director where they do not agree on a piece of blocking, or a choice in regards to a line reading or some piece of stage business, but this was far more detrimental than a disagreement over blocking. I had to find a way to attempt to take the racial sting and hurt out of this moment. I was directed to keep the Arlecchino mask on and deliver those lines. That choice kept a certain level of artifice and character up. I was also directed to deliver them in the same high pitched childlike voice I had developed in rehearsal for Arlecchino. I felt that in order to make a break, and to deliver some amount of decorum and respect to these words, a clean cut had to be made. A break in the action of the play needed to occur so the audience would know that this was not business as usual. I needed the audience to recognize these sacred words- these lines were

not, in fact, another joke. So I came up with several physical and vocal signs to give the audience, some things that would signify a marked change to the audience.

Before I delivered the lines, I physically stopped moving. This was a physical, spatial change for the audience as the character Arlecchino is always in motion. By standing still suddenly after vibrating like a whirling dervish for 20 minutes, that clued the audience that something was about to happen differently. After I stopped moving I took my mask off. This was another big shift, as the audience was now confronted with my real African American face, no longer hidden behind a mask of brown ethnicity. My actual human face of color, affects humanity, and soul for the audience. Then the look on my face was one of earnestness, and conviction. This came not out of trying to emote, or effect a quality, but I wanted to communicate with the audience the meaning and history of these words. So the look on my face that they could actually finally see affected the audience semiotically in a real way. The next change I made in the signs I was giving to the audience was my voice. I dropped the high childlike voice, and spoke from a deep place of chest resonance. So when the phrase "free at last, free at last, thank God almighty you're free at last" came out of my vessel to the audience, it was my natural speaking voice of power from Billy Flood, not the clown Arlecchino. It was the best I could do to try to mitigate the damages done to the audience. The reaction differed with each audience. Sometimes it worked well, and I could feel the audience stop and take that journey with me to the place of respect those words take us as a culture. Other

times I could feel the anger from the teachers of color in the room who could not get past the summoning up of these words to include them in a comedic minstrel show. This would result in a tepid applause when we finished, as opposed to the thunderous applause we received when the moment "worked" with my semiotic physical and vocal inclusions added. I put worked in quotes, because there is not way to make such a flagrant mockery of the sacred thrown into a children's theatre show "work." There is just successfully making it less offensive in my book. Sometimes that was achieved and sometimes it wasn't.

The University of Louisville production of *Richard III* was set in medieval times. In those times minorities both in gender and race held fragile, feeble positions in society. Vikings captured black peoples and brought them back to Britain and Ireland, and King James IV of Scotland had black moors present at court. This is a fact missed in most productions of Shakespeare in this country as you rarely see people of color in said productions. I was cast as Lord William Hastings; Lord Chamberlin in an otherwise all Caucasian cast. It does have an effect on an audience when you cast an actual historical figure with an actor who is not the same race as the figure portrayed. Socially, I officially had a high status, being Lord Chamberlin is a high office, however in the very first scene onstage Hastings is taking orders from Richard, who had status over me, so from the outset the audience sees a white male, giving me orders. Richard orders Hastings to leave his presence and go see the King who is ill. It makes little difference that Richard as played by the white actor at the time was jovial, and treating me as an equal emotionally in the scene, as in the end I still take and

follow orders from him, establishing my lower status. I, as an African American male noticed this from jump street and tried to battle this by physically making changes to signify grace, and power. I kept my chest and head lifted, and adapted a physically powerful walk, swift, thrusting my legs out with big steps when I walked, just as Hastings was emotionally and socially trying to push his way through the world, I physically wanted to express that, by taking large strides in my walk to physically take up more space. I thought if I can carry myself with dignity, and grace, it will be felt by the audience, even though my character is constantly taking orders onstage. I also made a concerted effort to look people straight in the eye, and make a definite choice when I did not. A black male averting his eyes and looking down at the ground when any white male speaks (as I did when the King was lamenting the death of Clarence) can take us back to Jim Crow and slave days in the minds of audience members. Hastings is described as a well-liked and respected man. The two young princes adore him, so he is a kind fellow as children flock to him. He goes to church often as he compliments a priest on his last sermon. Hastings seems to get along with all. So he seems jovial, liked by children, and church going. These traits are positive and led me to have a pleasant demeanor, smiling, laughing etc. However, Hastings is also trusting, and gullible, and never sees the axe coming. Hastings laments his foolishness in the soliloquy before his beheading. He recognizes his stupidity and naïveté too late. The fact a black male is cast as the fool who realizes too late, always smiling and laughing while the white protagonist plots to kill him, speaks

to reaffirming old racist ideologies of blacks being mentally inferior to whites. As bell hooks states:

Until all Americans demand that mass media no longer serve as the biggest propaganda machine for white supremacy, the socialization of everyone to subliminally absorb white supremacist attitudes and values will continue. Even though many white Americans do not overtly express racist thinking, it does not mean that their underlying belief structures have not been saturated with an ideology of difference that says white is always in every way, superior to that which is black²⁰

In *Richard* the message is made very clear, blacks are easily fooled and used as pawns, and easily discarded. With one word Richard has Hastings' head cut off. I attempted to counter the foolishness and sweet nature of Hastings with several choices of intention and physical/vocal choices that I hope semiotically imparted meaning to the audience. These changes included a slow realization, in my last monologue, a stricken and shocked look on my face, shallow breaths, rigid frame, and then a collapse in the middle of the stage to deliver my moment of clarity. The famous "momentary grace of mortal men" speech was my place to inform the audience that I finally understood what was going on in the background all along. I see the folly of my ways, and it is all over. Hastings sees at that point how dense he was, and the error of his trusting ways. I had placed my vocal register in a low place of deep chest resonance for the majority of the show. Upon the revelation I was going to be beheaded I brought my register up vocally to portray fear, and innocence. I let my chest sink, and outstretched my hands wide to the audience, physically pleading and imploring them for them to understand my plight. I surmise that with that powerfully written soliloquy I was able to momentarily turn the tables, and present a strong, intelligent, black male,

who though going to die, is finally aware of what's going on and exhibiting some kind of agency in his last moments. Hastings lays a curse on Richard and exhibits some authority in those last moments onstage. With Hastings's last lines, I finally get the chance to order someone else around. I order the executioner to lead me to the block, when he had given me leave to pray. This final ability to give others orders, when I had been taking them the entire play, gives the audience a new picture, a new base for Hastings.

Hopefully in the end, I was able to use the racial stereotype of the proud, but order following Negro, and change the perception. I turned a reductive stereotype into a proud archetype by the end, to a man with clarity, resilience, and strength, this was portrayed to the audience by Hastings not being drug screaming to his death, but walking proudly to the chopping block. This was a very important sign for the audience to see and keep in their brains. The proud image of this black man going to his death without hesitation is juxtaposed with a stage of white men tossing the head of the black man around the same stage later, laughing and making jokes about him. One can imagine the very same scene set at the aftermath of a lynching in the south. Black bodies swinging eventually breaking from the heads, body ripped down by gravity, and the heads batted about by white supremacists laughing about the foolish brown man or woman... I knew that was coming, so I really wanted the sign of my defiance to stay with the audience. It was vital for them to not see defeat, but victory in my death, as I died well. A white actor later in the play had a wonderful monologue about "kind Hastings." While a wonderful touching soliloquy, due to there being

only one person of color in this production, one cannot help but think that the magical negro stereotype, having served his purpose, can now die in peace... This is a narrative that despite my best efforts, I am afraid played out onstage when the white actor spoke his monologue, holding my severed head in a bag. These are images the director did not quite think through.

Colorblind casting can work well in different situations. It is my thought and my position that if more minorities had been cast, then a lot of these unexpected negative semiotic issues could have been completely avoided, or could have been ignored. For instance if just ONE of the queens had been of color, or Clarence, or Buckingham, then these issues of visual isolation onstage, an audience potentially hyper focusing on the one person of color available to them in this world onstage, wouldn't occur. I suggest that it is only when there is just one racial minority an audience sees onstage that you fan the flames of stereotypical thinking. It is the focusing on the one, and making race so apparent in the play that becomes a troublesome thing. What is meant to be colorblind casting can become very color sighted. I suggest that the one actor of color onstage represents the entire race, instead of just the character, when they are the lone person of color that the audience can see represented. In asserting interpersonal relationships R. D. Laing writes,

I may not actually be able to see myself as others see me but I am constantly supposing them to be seeing me in particular ways and I am constantly acting in the light of the actual or supposed attitudes, opinions, needs, and so on the other has in respect of me. Now the views that others have of me cannot be called 'pure' perception; they are the result of interpretation.²¹

This is evidenced by what happened to actor Clarence Smith who was playing the King of France in the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1991 colorblind cast production of *King Lear*. He spoke his first line of dialogue, "this is most strange," from act one scene one of *Lear*, and he was heckled by a white French woman in the audience. Smith goes onto say:

Somebody in the audience says, "Well, yes, it most bloody certainly is [strange]!" and shouted. And every time I spoke, I was being heckled. And you can imagine, you look out into the auditorium, and it's just a sea of white faces, and I'm like, "This isn't happening. Something else is happening, Clarence. You [just] think that every time you speak somebody is saying you should not be speaking." And basically, there was someone in the audience who was French who said it was a disgrace that a black man was playing the King of France.²²

To put it simply, I borrow the title of Dr. Cornel West's book, *Race Matters*. An audience actually does have eyes to see with, and they notice color. Having only one person of color in an otherwise all white cast, specifically singles out your one actor of color. So this raises a question regarding intent from the director. It seems in the United States there are two ways colorblind casting is done. The first way is a seemingly overt manner of casting, where there is an actual diversity of races onstage, with no regards to relation. Such as was done with Audra McDonald in the Roundabout Theatre production of the musical *110 in the Shade*. The actress is African American, and her father was played by a Caucasian actor, and so was her brother. The town they lived in was peopled well onstage with many other persons of color, as well as white. So you had a wide palate of colors onstage, all married to each other, related etc., so it is simply accepted by the audience that all these different races are related. There

isn't an issue there, because race is a non-factor, in that there is a large equitable volume of representation. Almost everywhere you looked onstage, there was a different color to see- no one to single out, and so you see everyone.

The second way that it is done is by physical isolation. With one actor of color in the entire play, the audience cannot help but see the difference, and it is loud. When I was not onstage, everyone they saw was the same skin color. When I enter stage and break the continuity of sight, introducing brown to a sea of white, there is a shift in what is seen. The audience, whether they want to or not must notice the visual disparity between my brown skin and the sea of whiteness that was onstage before my arrival. It is that kind of striking difference that leads an actor of color to have to consider several questions that need to be grappled with. The casting was a conscious choice obviously, I auditioned, and I assume was given the best role that the director thought I could handle and chew into. However was the fact I was the only person of color onstage thought through? Were the visual connotations of white men tossing around a severed black man's head considered? If these matters were thought out, what was the intent from the director for these moments? One can never be sure of the true intent of anyone but themselves, however an actor of color must ask these questions and be concerned with the reception of the intended audience.

It is this interpretation by the audience, socialized to view art, film, television, theatre, music in a white heteronormative world view, that as an artist of color I must take notice of and be concerned with. That worldview shapes their reception and ingestion of every word of dialogue I say, and every physical move

I make. August Wilson described his understanding of the expectations set upon blacks in the white normative world view in an interview with David Savran in 1987 from *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American playwrights*. "To make inroads into society you have to give up your African-ness. You can be doctors, lawyers, be middle class, but if you want to go to Harvard, you have to give up the natural way that you do things as blacks."²³

What I am forced to combat as an actor of color is this worldview by the predominant white male gaze in the culture. Wilson describes it as such:

White society tells Africans you can't act like that. If you act like that you won't get anywhere in society. If you want to make progress, you have to learn to act like us. Then you can go to school, we'll hire you for a job, we'll do this that and the other. I don't see that said of other ethnic groups. Asians are allowed to maintain their Asian-ness and still participate in society. That suppression of blacks does not allow you the impulse, does not allow you to respond to the world without encumbrance. I try to reveal this and to allow my characters to be as African as they are, and to respond to the world as they would.²⁴

CHAPTER III

Moving On

The Artifacts by Steven Fechter fell into my lap serendipitously. A fellow graduate MFA student and I were discussing different shows to possibly perform in our third year as thesis roles and *The Artifacts* was emailed to me. It just happened to coincide with contract negotiations failing regarding the musical director I had found to direct my then planned thesis role, *Agwe* in *Once on this Island*. It was suggested to me that I switch thesis roles from the spring to the fall. The motives for me to make that decision were two fold. One, it gave me more time to write, and secondly, I wouldn't have had to fill my time being so concerned with the musical director change affecting my thesis role. So I made the switch and decided to do my thesis in studio theatre. This was a huge undertaking between the other grad student and myself. Mainstage theatre has a budget funded by the university. Studio theatre is totally student funded, supported and run. This means the students must pay for all aspects of production or at least manage them and get them sourced, funded, found etcetera. Even marketing is up to the students for a studio theatre show. So the other grad student, Cara McHugh, and I went to work. Studio theatre had a budget of 100 dollars. Cara and I both applied for grants through the school of interdisciplinary and graduate studies and were successful in receiving a 100 dollar grant. We wanted to make sure to get a director for our thesis role, so we

went to the Associate Director of the Tony award winning Actors Theatre of Louisville, Zan Sawyer-Dailey and asked her to direct. Once she asked us who was in the cast and had a chance to read the script, she agreed. Once we had Zan on board, things really fell into place, Michael Hottis volunteered to design our lighting and Charles Nasby bent over backwards to pull props and set pieces from storage. I provided my own costume as my clothes were contemporary, but Zan was gracious enough to pull from Actors Theatre costume vault for the many period pieces needed. Zan, Cara and I were very excited about this script. It features the classic literary and dramatic characters of Hedda Gabler and Miss Julie, but tells us what happens after, and recontextualizes their famous stories as a backdrop to the current drama of a graduate student taking her final exams, and her professor who is caught up in his own world of troubles and hopes.

The play is at times realistic and nonrealistic, and moves violently back and forth between reality and fantasy. I thought at the time that it would be a great challenge to walk that line as an actor. Rare is the play that wrestles with both realism and non-realism. Realism and non-realism are two seemingly opposed schools of thought in theatre, so to do a play that contains both was exciting and fresh. The theatre department has a predilection for realism and rarely dives into the rabbit hole of excitement and wonder that non realism can bring to the theatre. So the mix of the two is very rare and sometimes plain unheard of on the UofL stage. The script was ripe with moments actors live for-a death, physical struggle, emotional highs and lows, many chances for multiple intention changes and readings of lines. The playwright, Steven Fechter, was

extremely responsive through emails. We were very fortunate as a cast to have unlimited access to the playwright. Quite often in theatre the playwright is dead and has been for quite some time. This is due to a problem in the theatre of mostly doing old established works over and over again. This being a fresh fairly new work, we had direct access to the mind of the works creator, which is a rare treat. He was very happy to answer any and all questions we had as actors regarding the text, intentions of the character, psychological motivations and so on. Through email, I asked him what he thought was at the heart of the character of Nelson. I inquired about academic glory and the hopes Beth will help him write his great opus, and suggested that yes he is attracted to her, but wondered what makes him flip the switch and try to ravage her? What brought on his rift with reality? Was it all her coming on to him before that revved his engine sexually? I asked him to please tell me anything and everything he wanted me to know about Nelson. He answered,

Here are my thoughts regarding Prof. Nelson. Nelson first tried acting, didn't get very far, and became an academic. He settled into a small Midwest college and became its "star." He likes being a big fish in a small pond very much. But he's basically lazy. He's never going to finish his second book. He gets by a lot on charm and cunning. He's very adept at working the politics of academic life to his advantage. Why Nelson "flips" in the last scene is a good question. One could say that cruelty and lust are hidden parts of Nelson. The fact that Beth burns the exam and rejects him fuels Nelson's fury. One could also argue that Beth and/or Julie and Hedda have cast a spell on him. The classroom has become the world of Strindberg and Ibsen and Nelson becomes a pawn in the Divas' game. Or it could be a combination of all of the above. I leave that up to the director and actors to choose.²⁵

For my purposes as an actor, Steven had just given me an abundance of good information to chew on and work with. After being told that Nelson tried

acting, but didn't get that far, I know a few things. I know immediately that he is a frustrated actor, with all that comes with someone in that mindset. An artist who has been pushed into another line of work for either lack of talent or scarcity of work can be a very angry person to deal with. They are frustrated because they don't have an outlet for their creativity. Stifled creative expression can choke the spirit out of a person. This gave me information that Nelson could be quick to anger and have a flair for the dramatic, as he is living on the edge of his emotions. However, Steven also tells me that Nelson is charming and cunning. These are also traits of actors. An actor can assess any situation and present the face needed for the moment. From Stevens' words, it would seem Nelson could do the same. In the script we saw that Nelson convinced Beth's committee to permit her to take her examinations a third time. This is extremely rare, so it is obvious Nelson is very skilled at getting people to do what he wants, convincing them that he knows what is best. This becomes very important later in the play when Nelson must convince Beth to help him write his second book. Not everything Steven wrote to me as a playwright is useful for an actor, however. In my process, it is not helpful to think of a character as good or bad, evil or angelic. These are simply states of being and qualities that tell me nothing about the motivating forces for the behavior.

For Steven to tell me that lust and cruelty are hidden parts of Nelson and that is why he flips out and tries to murder Beth does not give me any actable information. Cruelty and lust are emotions available to everyone. We can all access those, but that doesn't mean we can all jump to trying to sexually assault

someone as Nelson does. As an actor I must have a strong need and reason to do what I do. There must be a cause that pushes Nelson to the edge, more than the general idea that he is evil. So for me, I had to tuck that information away. I did not want to get stuck in the acting trap of qualities here. Sometimes a mood can help, but that's something a director could hand you. For my process, I had to come up with reasons and wants. What does Nelson want, why does he want it, (the reason) and how is he going to get it? Nelson is desperately trying to keep his "big fish in a small pond" status as Steven stated. So to do that in academia he needs to keep publishing. He realizes he doesn't have the talent or energy to write at this juncture in time. Then the universe sends him Beth, an over eager doctoral student who worships him. Nelson sees his chance to use her to get his second work published. Nelson's wants are simple. He wants Beth to ghost write his second publication. This want is multi layered as he also wants and needs her to finish her examinations. Her repeated failure to finish reflects poorly on the mentoring capabilities of Nelson. This, in the mind of Nelson, will put him back in the academic spotlight, and maintain the status quo. So when Beth decides to burn her test, and throw the ashes of the test about the room, Nelson just completely loses touch with reality and flips out. His reputation is soiled by her failure. His ego and sexual prowess is damaged and bruised by her rejecting him. When Beth burned the examination, she burned Nelson along with it.

Now, Steven also suggests that the magic theory might also be viable. Steven wants us to consider that the two women, Hedda and Julie, are really sorceresses and have enchanted Nelson and that makes him completely lose his

mind to rape Beth. He is much like Macbeth, who questions whether the witches made him kill, or whether he had free will and killed on his own accord. I find the magic theory boring, because it has nothing to do with the character. Magic is special outside forces that manipulate and do what they want. That leaves the actor with a void of choice.

Nelson has a particular problem to deal with as well being a faculty member of color. Part of the semiotics of blackness is that my color is what the white supremacist socialized audience sees first. I am a black male, who happens to be a professor. Whereas my white counterparts are seen as a male, who happen to be professors. So race must be factored in to Nelson's collegiate position in my mind as the actor of color, for black professors have a very different road to travel in terms of job opportunity and career advancement opportunities. For example, this selection from *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*:

Not only is there a significant shortfall in the number of black faculty nationwide, but those blacks who do hold positions are concentrated in lower level faculty posts. In 2003 only 3.2 percent of all full professors were black, up from a quarter of a century ago in 1981. Of all black full time faculty in 2003, 16.1 percent were full time professors. In contrast 28.6 percent of all white full time faculty members were full professors in 2003.²⁶

Now in 2009 the latest year complete data is available, there were only 6,086 blacks in full professor posts.²⁷

So in 2009 blacks made up only 3.4 percent of all full professors. Not much improvement. This shows what a precarious situation Nelson is in. It is fragile, and at any time the bough might break. This raises the stakes exponentially in terms of mental stress on Nelson and just how much he needs

and wants Beth to do well on the test, and research for him and write. His career could be riding on this publication.

The given circumstances laid out in the play assert that I am in my forties, I am a professor at a small Midwestern university in the present day, I taught Beth English Restoration, and I head her doctoral committee Hedda remarks that I look familiar to her. Nelson is the embodiment of Tessman in some ways, and much unlike him in others. He is similar in his apparent meekness and in his appearance and manner. Tessman however was never rash, like Nelson, or impulsive at any time.

This sort of detailed feedback was all gold to me. Zan, the rest of the cast and I sat down to table work the first week. We read through the script twice, just delivering the lines with the first instincts that came to us. After each reading of the script, Zan would ask us questions to stoke the fires and get our brains thinking about actions and intentions. She asked me several thought provoking questions that fueled a deep dig into the mind of Nelson. Zan asked me what his endgame was. The script tells us that this is the third time Beth has attempted to take her final exams. What is riding on this for Nelson? How high are the stakes? What happens if she fails? How if at all does this reflect on him? Has Nelson faced any retribution from the rest of the faculty or the department for his charge canceling the previous two times?

Steven Fechter is a playwright who became known as a screenwriter when he adapted for the screen his play, *The Woodsman* starring Kevin Bacon and Mos Def. He is extremely engaging to correspond with and he told me to

read this poem, to give me insight into Nelson. The T.S. Elliot poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is long, so there is just a sample of it here. Nelson quotes the poem in the play, so I needed to read the poem myself to understand more about the mindset of Nelson. In it you can see the perfect description of Nelson, you can just see him moping around. "Politically cautious and meticulous full of high sentence but a bit obtuse, at times indeed almost ridiculous almost at times the fool... I grow old I grow old, I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled"²⁸

Ibsen, Strindberg, and Beckett are the three authors who influence this play greatly. Zan gave our cast the task of looking at these three playwrights and thinking about their aesthetic and how that contributes towards the characters. The play is an interesting one as it deals with two characters being fully aware that they are creations, Hedda and Julie, while Nelson and Beth are unaware of their creation, or at least choose to be ignorant of it in the beginning.

CHAPTER IV

The *Part* Thickens

Nelson wants very specific things in terms of objectives in this play. His goal is to get his second book published. He needs Beth to gain her academic credentials not only to save face with the rest of the faculty, but also for his research and publication. What does all of this mean? How do I process all of the signs and symbols and not become paralyzed as an actor? How is that even possible? Well, I can be paralyzed by the white supremacist gaze, or I can excel in spite of it. I chose spite. In the script written by Fechter, Nelson is murdered decisively by Beth. He goes to have sexual relations with her, as she has been seducing him the entire play and coming onto him at every turn literally throwing herself onto him. Zan my director even had Cara physically get too close to me in scenes, and gaze seductively at me while delivering lines. All of this was to build up the sexual tension to the final scene, where everything comes to a head and we have the confrontation. So, as it is written, in stage directions, Nelson places Beth onto the table and begins to climb on top of her. She states that she will not scream. Then Nelson screams, "Oh My God" clutches his throat and blood starts spurting from his neck, and he staggers, then falls down dead. Beth has cut Nelson's throat with the same straight razor Countess Julie used to cut her throat.

Zan was concerned with that ending. She was worried about the technical concerns with managing blood spurting all over the stage, and all that entailed. She also did not like Beth being such a cold blooded killer, with little room for ambiguity. So with the permission of Fecter, she changed the death. Instead of Beth willfully cutting my throat, Zan brought in a fight director from Actors Theatre of Louisville, and we staged quite a physical fight that involved us running around the table, me picking Cara up and throwing her down to the ground, me picking her up again, placing her on the table, and three physical approaches to the table I had just placed her on. I came at her three times. Once to choke her, once to slap her, and the third approach she kicked me with both feet, that was to knock me off balance and spin me around, which caused me to fall to the floor and hit my head on the floor with a large thud from my physical knapp. This led to different responses from the audience. Some people reported they did not believe I had died, and just knocked unconscious. Others reported that they knew I was dead. However still other audience members expected me to spring up from the floor any minute. This was exactly the response Zan wanted. She likes for the audience to have to participate in the narrative and fill in the blanks for themselves. Instead of having every question answered for them, and the meaning of everything wrapped up in a shiny bow, Zan for this production preferred the audience to leave with more questions than answers. That goal was achieved, as seemingly every person I spoke to had a different thought on if I was dead, or when I would awake, or whether the entire play was a dream played out while Beth was recovering in an asylum on her first breakdown

mentioned in the play. The change of Beth willfully killing Nelson by cutting his throat with a razor, to Nelson hitting his head on the floor after Beth wards off his sexual attack, makes the white actress less reprehensible. Fechter did not seem to think so, but to my taste, it dramatically changes how the audience feels about Beth. It contributes to making the actor of color look more beastly, inhuman, if only by making Beth less guilty in murder. Nelson tried to assault her, yes. However, Beth had been coming onto him and throwing herself at him the entire play. Nelson had put Beth off during all of her many advances, and when he finally gives into her, she murders him. I was curious as to the mindset of all of these people. What was mentally pushing them into the various drastic directions they were taking? I consulted an expert, talking to noted Psychologist, Dr. Edna Ross concerning the motives of characters in this piece. She was moved by the fact that

...all the characters were motivated and blinded by their own ego. None of the characters seem to have any empathy for anyone else. In their own mindsets they are all victims, yet what is fascinating is they all make an effort to then reach out and victimize others. They are all looking out for number one. In the end, their own selfishness brought about all of their downfalls.²⁹

In essence *The Artifacts* is a modern morality play. Everyone seems to get his or her just desserts. For Nelson, it brought an end to his physical life, however if one is to believe he was simply knocked unconscious, there are several other ghastly implications as well. He will surely be fired for having sex or attempted sex with a student. Beth left a suicide note where it is implied she mentions all of what happened. If he lives he will surely then go to jail for what might even be construed as aggravated manslaughter as he possibly to any

outside eye, drove her to her suicide and death, depending on how a trial goes. So his egotistical quest to regain academic glory and find sexual gratification in the process ended up in career death and possibly actual physical death. It all comes down to basically being the end for Nelson on all fronts, emotionally, mentally, and perhaps physically. Hedda and Julie are already physically dead, and with the information given in the show, we see they are cold hearted and emotionally dead as well, at least when it comes to love, or empathy for others. Beth has just crossed the astral plane and has joined Hedda and Julie in their immortal quest for adventure. She realizes they are incapable of loving her and she will be lost forever saving these two. Beth loses her potential academic success, her mental hold on reality, and perhaps her physical life also. All have fallen due to the search for self gain.

CHAPTER V

Settle The Matter

After weighing what an audience sees when a person of color enters the stage among a sea of difference, after making physical and vocal changes to embody the role I am playing, yet also taking into consideration what the role is saying about my race, sexuality and the politics of performance, how can I let go? How do I fully embody a living breathing character if every move is calculated, and measured, and thought out in advance? This is as simple as asking someone how they make blocking or choreography look spontaneous and new. After I investigate and discover what I need to do in order to present an African American male with whom I can be satisfied in terms of symbols and signs, and how I perceive I may be interpreted by the audience, I can let it go and move on with the basic acting work of what my character wants. In other words, I have to do a lot more preparation in store for me mentally as an actor of color than my white counterparts do. They can blithely pick up a part and think about actions and objectives. They are a part of the white normative view. Regardless of whether they are differently abled or a part of the LGBTQ community, if they are white artists, they are still in group. A sub group perhaps, but they are still within the oppressive, dominant, majority. They can still operate from a place of white privilege. They are not forced to consider the alternative storyline and life. I am the other, the alternative storyline in their dominant worldview which is what

the vast majority of plays are created in. As an actor of color I have no choice but to live with the fact of the white supremacist media and find a way to navigate it, and ford the stream of racial consciousness, until I come to a tranquil place. That is where the images I am radiating and the images I believe to be perceived by my audience are one. That sense of tranquility and quiet is the place from which I can begin the normal acting work. That is when my intention and goal work can begin. Just as with blocking, I learn it, craft it, focus on it till it is second nature, then I move on and perform the piece. When I am crossing stage left to the table in *The Artifacts* on a certain line, I am not crossing thinking that this is the blocking I was given. I am crossing because I am playing an induction tactic of listening to Beth, so she will be more inclined to open up to me, and be more pliable. It is exactly the same when it comes to the semiotics of blackness. Once I have analyzed the cultural and social meanings, ramifications and interpretations involved with me being a person of color in these given circumstances, and adjusted my acting intentions, goals, vocal inflection, and body posture, and their language, to present a character I am comfortable working with, I can release and live comfortably in that head space and body space. Just as with the blocking and lines of memorized text, it has now become a second skin I no longer need to focus on. It is a matter of just seeing that information, receiving it and being able to release it emotionally and strategically. My body can then live inside that context of my research and analysis of the signs of blackness. Being cognizant of how we are seen, heard, and how we are perceived is invaluable to an actor of color. It is important, however, to note that it

is not my goal to simply critique the heteronormative society or demonize the white normative culture we all exist in. I am diagnosing a disease, and prescribing a medicine to promote the cure. The medicine is understanding through contextualization of the stresses and oppressive systems an actor of color must exist in. It is my goal that through this understanding all of us as a society of artists (white and black peoples and everyone in between that color binary) can work together to arrive at equality, and break down these stereotypes, and reductive signs. For true synthesis, and unity, at minimum we need to understand what we are receiving as an audience, and transmitting as actors of color. The words of James Baldwin express my ultimate goal: "If the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it."³⁰ This change is intended for all. We must yell fire, and bring attention to the conflagration, before it can be extinguished.

Next!

For the graduate students who come behind me I offer some advice, three things I have learned that I pass onto you. Take control of your artistic career. Hold fast to your dreams, and never give up on them. These phrases may be brushed off as trite, however that does not make the core of their meaning untrue. In fact the opposite can be argued, as the causes and occasions that bring these phrases to mind have come up so many times, we are used to the phrases. Trite does not in fact mean untrue, it actually means tried, true, and tested. In telling future graduate students to take control, I mean just

that. Do not wait for the acting faculty of any university to inspire you, or give you creative ideas. Be open to inspiration and have an artistic thirst for yourself.

The moment of inspiration does not come to someone who lolls around expecting the gift to be free, it is no giveaway. It is the pearl for which we have to pay a great price, the price of intense loneliness, the price of that vulnerability which often allows us to get hurt³¹ (L' Engle 196)

I did not wait for a professor to approach me with roles for my third and final year of graduate school, I went to a faculty member and asked them what plays interested them, and what shows did they want to direct. We then discussed our artistic passions and decided upon a show that we were both excited and interested in. In terms of my thesis show, I also took charge with my graduate committee and petitioned to do my thesis in studio. I am taking charge of my own career in life on the outside of graduate school in opening up my own theatre company with a partner. The lesson I learned auditioning for years in NYC stayed with me, I will no longer just sit and wait, and passively be a part in my own career by auditioning and letting someone on the other side of a table decide my fate. I am taking charge by producing and directing the kind of theatre I have a passion for and that speaks to me and my business partner, who is also an artist, and who shares my vision. In holding fast to your dreams I speak to thinking big and dreaming big. Acting is a difficult profession that a lucky few get to pursue as a career. Always remind yourself of why you are doing this for a living, and what drives you on. Dream of the kinds of plays you want to perform in and the types of audiences you want to reach, and make a plan on how you will make both a reality. Lastly, I will say never give up. Everyone wants to be an

entertainer these days, but only the ones who stick with it prevail. The actors who get employment are the actors who continue to show up audition after audition.

Persistence is key, as Calvin Coolidge said,

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan "press on" has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race!³²

Always say what you mean, and mean exactly what you say. Say what you mean not just in regard to your artistic integrity, which is a given, but in holding yourself fast. As an artist, decide what you want to do. What that is could be many things but the point is to pursue it with the utmost. Never let anyone take away your agency, your power. Steady your resolve in a daring, frightening fierceness in the acting choices you make and, eventually, that will get you cast again and again.

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Wright State University
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