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Process of Performance

An Acting Thesis

By

Jennifer Ann Hunt
B.A., Roanoke College, 1992

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2003

PROCESS OF PERFORMANCE

By
Jennifer Ann Hunt
B.A., Roanoke College, 1992

A Thesis Approved on

November 19, 2003

By the following Committee:

Thesis Director

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Though this is indeed a tremendous personal accomplishment, it is by no means mine alone. Many supportive people lovingly encouraged me along the way and so, for their contributions, I wish to thank:

My family for always having an encouraging word and their love.

Stu Cox for his patience and love.

ABSTRACT

PROCESS OF PERFORMANCE

Jennifer Ann Hunt

December 16, 2003

In fulfillment of the thesis project requirement for the Master of Fine Arts Degree at the University of Louisville, I portrayed the multiple roles of Clytemnestra, Electra, and Athena in Dr. Steve Schultz's translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in February, 1998. Additionally, I acted in at least one play each semester utilizing the skills and techniques that I learned in the program's classwork.

This document includes a discussion of each class, the methodology studied, and how I was able to apply each class to that semester's acting project. It also contains personal observations on my own strengths and weaknesses as an actress and the steps I took to integrate those discoveries into my work on the stage. The final chapter presents an analysis of the characters Clytemnestra, Electra and Athena and the rehearsal process of *Oresteia*.

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INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1998 I completed my classes at the University of Louisville. It was during that last semester that I started writing my thesis and I had the bulk of it written when the semester ended. As life after school started I soon lost focus on my thesis paper and found myself pushing forward with my life and away from the paper. Five years have passed and I have returned to the paper only to find that I have grown beyond some of the discoveries contained in Chapters 1-5. I fought the temptation to update my discoveries, deciding that what I had written then was true for then and should be kept as close as possible to what I was discovering at the time. With that in mind I have made few alterations other than the grammatical. I did, however, edit some of the bruises my ego suffered in the learning process. While at the time of my instruction some of the criticism seemed unjust, the experiences I had at U of L have made me who I am today and I wouldn't change that for anything. Therefore, with no regrets, I give you my experience of attending three years in the U of L Theatre Department. While my three years at the University of Louisville were not easy years I have come to believe that what is simply handed to you instead of being worked for is not worth having.

At the beginning of my studies at the University of Louisville I was given the option of two formatting styles for my thesis. The style I choose was the "mini-thesis". This style asked for a chapter each semester discussing class and performance work. (The second choice of style was to write a thesis paper on my final performance.)

Part I of this thesis consists of chapters 1-5 and is written in the style of the mini-thesis, a semester-by-semester journal of my class work and performances. Part II is an analysis of my thesis role in the *Oresteia*.

When I first entered the University of Louisville theatre department I was unaware of how much growth I was about to experience. I had a basic idea of what my weaknesses were as an actor, but I was unprepared for the extent of these discoveries. In this thesis I will discuss how these discoveries revealed my weaknesses, what lessons had the most influence on developing my technique, and how I applied this technique to play a role.

When I started the program I knew that I had difficulty with physical expression. I felt awkward in my own body and uncomfortable using my arms for any sort of gesture. I also felt inhibited by doubts in my own ability to be a good actor. I knew this had manifested itself in my work and had kept me from making bold choices, but I didn't realize just how much it had held me back.

The first semester started off with many challenges. I felt I was in over my head and would not be able to step up to the challenge. Despite my feelings I went back for the third day and for the second night of auditions. I was cast in *A Bright Room Called Day* and started rehearsals the next night. I then realized that the department had made a commitment to me and, in turn, I must make a commitment to the program even if I felt overwhelmed. I began rehearsals for *A Bright Room Called Day* with renewed determination to do my best. Yet my efforts were met with mixed reaction. At the end of the semester, during my advisory committee meeting, I was to discover that the professors had found my performance on stage and in class to be lacking. I was surprised

at their observations but was more perplexed that they had waited until classes were over to inform me of their perception of my work. This word—perception—now holds new meaning for me. I had thought I was making adequate headway and conveying a positive attitude about the work but somehow I was “showing” them a negative attitude. I was confused that my desire to improve had been misinterpreted. This was to be my first lesson on presenting myself as an actor and a product in a competitive business.

In my second semester I found I was focusing most of my attention on reversing this perception of a negative attitude. I became a virtual cheerleader in my classes, working diligently to put my best foot forward while encouraging my classmates to do the same. I felt confident that I had mastered my perceived negative attitude by approaching the work with a genuinely positive attitude. Yet, again, before my second semester committee meeting, I found myself preparing a rebuttal defending my commitment to complete my degree due to being told to think long and hard over the summer whether or not graduate school was right for me.

Over the summer break I decided I simply had not done enough to prove to the department that I was worthy of a degree. I decided to start a campaign to pad my resume. I began by working with Professor Trudy Wheeler as a vocal and acting coach for her summer children’s theatre, TAXI. During the school year I worked as a free-lance agent for Shandwick USA, hiring myself and other students for paid commercial acting gigs. In my assistantship duties as Assistant to the Chair, Professor Bert Harris had asked me to research grants for the Repertory Company to attend a theatre festival in Avignon, France. I attacked this project with gusto and took it upon myself to initiate and organize a chapter of the national theatre fraternity Alpha Psi Omega (APO). Through this

fraternity I organized an end-of-year showcase event, picnic, and awards ceremony involving the entire department. I worked on the studio theatre board and helped with house management and box office duties. I also volunteered as a vocal and acting coach for undergraduates and contributed to the script analysis of a student-written play.

As for my classes and mainstage shows, I scripted and performed my Solo Command Performance for Professor James Tompkins and learned to sing, dance, and perform the Suzuki technique for *Bacchae*. For *A Woman Called Truth* I performed African dance and the Virginia Reel and sang gospel music. I also had my first taste of a Shakespearean play in *Much Ado About Nothing*. At the end of the year I realized that what had started out as my attempt to prove myself to the department had turned into a year of personal triumphs.

This momentum carried over into the third year of my graduate career. In the summer between my second and third years, besides working once again for Professor Wheeler, I worked for the YMCA with special needs children. My hopes were of gaining enough knowledge to start a theatre program of my own for such children. This proved to be a taxing but highly rewarding job, giving me the much-needed confidence to tackle my final year. I had already approached Professor Steve Schultz at the end of my second year to direct my thesis and we decided on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. At first, I felt intimidated at the prospect of playing characters of such magnitude. As I became more comfortable with the choice I grew excited about this opportunity. I started my research over the summer and felt well prepared on the historic and academic aspects of the script by the beginning of my third year. I was eager to get started and found myself disappointed that rehearsals would not begin until the second semester. Instead of

wasting energy anticipating rehearsals I resolved to use this positive energy toward my classes and independent work.

In my fifth semester I joined a professional improvisation comedy troupe and performed in public once a week. I performed an original piece for the Pleiades Company and have since gone on to perform the same piece for a university gathering. I continued to work for Shandwich USA and put energy into expanding my client list. This work outside of school proved again to be a building block for my self-confidence. I had gained faith in my ability to apply my schoolwork successfully to the world outside of academia. I carried this pride in my abilities back into the classroom and was able to also apply it to class work.

Now, at the end of my graduate career, I feel a great sense of accomplishment and pride in my performance. I have developed a sense of what works best for me on stage, found many tools to help refine my work, and gained a healthy sense of self-confidence that allows me to perform my best.

In this thesis I will discuss, semester by semester, how in each class I learned new techniques and how I used those techniques to create characters for each semester's performance project. The final chapter is an account of the techniques used to build the roles of Clytemnestra, Electra, and Athena in my thesis performance of the *Oresteia*.

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST SEMESTER

08-26-95

August 1995—December 1995

In my first semester, I was cast as Paulinka in *A Bright Room Called Day* by Tony Kushner. The play is placed in Germany in the early 1930's and tells the story of a group of friends dealing with the impending occupation of Hitler and the Nazi party. The play was directed by Professor Steve Schultz and included a cast of students.

The description of Paulinka in the script describes her in the following way:

*Paulinka Erdnuss: mid-30's, but looks a little younger.
Actress in the German film industry; a featured player on
her way to becoming a minor star.¹*

The script goes on to suggest that Paulinka is the least intellectual of her group of friends. Her need for psychiatric counseling and her dependency on opium implies a need for attention and a lack of resolution, which carries over into her choice to abandon her country and friends.

I knew that playing Paulinka would present many challenges. I had not acted in three years and was left feeling exposed and vulnerable. Since rehearsals started the first week of school, I was forced to face my fear of performing in front of my new colleagues before I had taken any of the classes.

¹ Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1994), vii.

As for my daily classes our program required us, as a class, to enroll in an acting workshop led by Professor Georgette Kleierer, Script Analysis led by Professor Victoria Norman-Brown, Stage Movement led by Professor James Tompkins and Stage Voice led by Professor Rinda Frye. Even though I felt as if I was putting the cart before the horse by starting rehearsals before I could get a grasp on the classes, I resolved to use the opportunity to apply my daily class work to the evening rehearsals. It became almost overwhelming to fully digest all the new information and apply it to rehearsals but I persevered to keep up with the work.

Acting Workshop—Goals

Our first assignment for acting class was to pair off and develop a scene around an open script. We were to create a character biography that included our relationship to our “other”², our character’s goal, and the obstacle to that goal. My partner was James Nurse and we set off to do the best job we could. We spent hours rehearsing and refining our intricately built scene. We created a married couple with a complex entanglement of love and respect for each other but, because of the husband’s coming to terms with his gay identity, they were splitting up. We opened the scene by setting it the morning after his revealing this long suppressed secret. Neither one of the characters wanted to hurt the other so, as a result, we created a poignant, bittersweet love scene in which both characters neither lost nor gained a thing. While the scene was well supported with subtext and character histories, it didn’t work due to a lack of conflict. Professor Kleierer was aghast to hear the extent of our subtextual work and proclaimed that we had made the scene overly complicated. “What do you want from him?” she

² Robert Cohen, Acting One (Mountain View: Mayfield, 1992), 19

asked me. I mulled this question over for almost a full minute before replying with a long list of conflicting answers. She pointed out that this was far too elaborate for such a simple scene and that I needed to shorten my “want” to one goal. She asked me to fill in the blank. “I want him to blank.” Even with this huge hint I still didn’t grasp what she wanted. “I want him to not leave” was my response. She quickly pointed out that it is almost impossible to play a negative objective and quite a bit easier to play a positive one. My second choice was for him to stay. As James and I started our scene with this new goal I felt my character change from a scattered and befuddled wimp to a more focused and confident woman. I had centered my focus so closely to my goal that all sense of self-consciousness had fallen away. I found no room for distracting self-criticisms. All of my attention had been directed at my scene partner and on obtaining my goal. This focus freed me to make bolder choices with my tactics as well. Instead of pleading with puppy-dog eyes as I passively watched him pack his suitcase, I felt myself compelled to rip the clothes out of his hands and to fling the suitcase back in the closet. This gave James more of an obstacle to work against and made for a much more dynamic and entertaining scene.

During the rehearsal of *A Bright Room Called Day* I continued to work on developing a sensibility for strong, clear choices. I would ask myself exactly what it was Paulinka wanted. I would then whittle my response down to fit in that one sentence, “I want to leave” or “I want to hurt him.” One particular scene left me searching for a goal. Paulinka and her friend Agnes were having coffee in Agnes’ apartment when Paulinka starts gossiping about Hitler.

Paulinka: You hear all sorts of things. You know that in Munich he developed an incestuous infatuation for his

cousin. He forced her to live with him and a whole lot more besides. She killed herself. She was seventeen. And at the studio I heard from someone who has a brother high up in the Party that every woman who winds up in his bed either kills herself or has an accident or is found murdered later.
Agnes: Oh that's nonsense.
*Paulinka: You don't believe it? I do.*³

At first, I imagined that Paulinka was simply gossiping but I realized the goal of “to gossip” was not a very strong one. I then tried to direct the goal toward my other and decided on “to impress Agnes.” As I was not getting a significant reaction from my partner I changed it to a more aggressive “to disgust Agnes” since this seemed to be her goal in sharing this troubling information. It was not until I used Professor Schultz’s technique of subtextual exploration for the ending lines of the scene that I realized what Paulinka was going for.

Paulinka: Agnes, do you believe in evil?
Agnes: It's not something you believe in. There are evil men, of course.
Paulinka: Diabolical evil?
Agnes: What are you asking me?
Paulinka: Do you believe in the Devil, Agnes? That's what I am asking you. Do you believe in the Devil?
Agnes: At my age?
*Paulinka: Because I do.*⁴

This confession on Paulinka’s behalf gave me insight into her biggest fear; the devil was a great and imminent force that was living in and affecting her world. I realized Paulinka was looking for someone who shared her own fears and the morbid gossiping was a tactic to get Agnes to confess her fear of the evil at hand. With this insight I changed Paulinka’s goal to “force Agnes to confess (her fear).”

At the next rehearsal I worked to apply this new goal to the scene. Before entering

³ Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1994), 32

⁴ Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (New York: Theatre Communications Group Inc., 1994), 33

I took a second to remind myself where I was coming from and what I was about to do. I had a clear image of Hitler in my mind and the bizarre sexual acts he allegedly committed. I also reminded myself that Paulinka was scared to death of the possibility of being dragged down to Hell, kicking and screaming. She wanted consolation that Agnes had the same fear.

At the next rehearsal, as I sat myself down to the table and watched the lights come up on the stage, I realized my focus was again directed to my own presence. I found myself checking my feet to see if they were positioned correctly, checking my posture for a straight spine, registering my breathing for deepness of intake and mentally talking my way through the steps of pouring tea. With all this extra “talk” going on in my mind I found it nearly impossible to focus any energy on Agnes. The most I was accomplishing was sitting pretty and spitting out the lines in the right order. Even though I had defined a strong goal for Paulinka I was still so caught up in being aware of my own presence that I had to struggle for outside awareness.

Throughout rehearsal I continued to take the time to discover Paulinka’s line-by-line intentions by exploring subtext and marking each goal in the margin of the script along with the obstacles for each. Before rehearsals I would review Paulinka’s goals and mentally explore different tactics to overcome her obstacles. Still there were many times I found myself watching the scene as if I were an outside observer. As my line would approach I found I had to take a few, precious moments to regroup my thoughts and refocus on the action of the play. This act of regrouping opened my awareness to one of my biggest obstacles, fighting for focus. Although I did not achieve the focus I felt I needed for the performances of *A Bright Room Called Day*, and still felt disconnected

from the character and the action of the play, I was excited to have discovered a weakness. I felt motivated by the challenge and inspired to seek answers from my class work.

Stage Voice—Using Personal Memories

Professor Frye introduced us to an exercise that presented another eye opening challenge. Professor Frye asked us to free our minds of our critical, inner voices and to visualize sun-centers in the middle of our bellies. We were to mentally fill our centers with air, light and energy and to allow our emotions to flow freely through us. Try as I might, all I could visualize was an empty gut with no emotional connection what so ever. It seemed the harder I tried the louder my inner voice became. I found all my energy trapped inside my head while I listened to myself argue.

After five weeks of trying to jam myself into gear I lost my patience. I expressed to the group my frustration with my inability to do the work and privately vowed to overcome this obstacle. At that point Professor Frye led us through a series of spine rolls and tongue stretches to prepare us for another try. She asked us to place our hands on our stomachs and lower backs in order to feel our breath drop in to our centers and to vocalize from this area. Having failed once again to feel anything, I felt tears of frustration well up and excused myself from the classroom.

I tried to pass by Professor Frye to make my escape but she caught my arm and asked me to stay in the room. As the tears started to stream down my face Professor Frye encouraged me to speak some lines from any scene I had been working on. My mind was blank at first but I found a few lines and tried feebly to squeak them out. My voice was quivering and the clamp around my throat was making it difficult to take in deep breaths.

Professor Frye asked that I try again. Once more I squeaked. On my third try I felt my throat open to take in a deep breath and my voice came out strong, deep and solid. It felt whole and complete. Professor Frye asked me to feel where my voice was originating and, to my surprise, I felt my pain and frustration emanating from my belly and coming out onto my voice.

Through all my efforts to sound perfect, I had cut myself off from my own emotions. I was excited that I had made a breakthrough but worried that I wouldn't be able to apply it to Paulinka. I found that in rehearsal for *A Bright Room Called Day* I was also trying to manufacture instead of allowing my emotion to be enough. There was one scene in particular where I felt the awkwardness of manufacturing an emotion. Preceding this scene, Paulinka had been to her analyst's office to discover that he and his family had left the country in the cover of darkness. Paulinka enters Agnes' apartment crying in frenzy, falls to her knees and "screams a long, loud wail."⁵ From the very first staging of this scene I knew it would be my most dreaded entrance. I never felt up to the extreme of the entrance and found myself rushing through in order to get it over with. Once again, as I stepped onto the stage, I found myself monitoring my every move. I felt locked-in to a taped inner monologue that dictated where I was supposed to be standing and how loud I was supposed to be speaking. I had hoped I could call upon the emotional experience from class and use it for the scene but when the moment came to apply it I was so distracted I could barely remember why my character was saying her lines.

In order to do something to make the scene work I felt I had to fake my way through. I decided to concentrate more on her dramatic nature than on the real issue at stake, Paulinka's fear of what the future held for her. I ignored this fear since I didn't feel

⁵ Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1994), 97

up to it and concentrated more on the self-induced hysteria of her “show” for Agnes. It seemed easier to logically pick and topically apply a manufactured emotion than to find a personal connection with the character. I gave in to my analytical, inner voice and “staged” each emotional outburst. During performance I felt I delivered a solid and reliable performance yet one that only produced a two-dimensional character. After the show was over I reflected on this scene and felt I had been protecting myself from the pain that can go hand in hand with emotional recall. Since the play dealt with the topic of the Holocaust I found myself overwhelmed by the prospect of making that emotional leap. In the end, I remained distant from much of the emotional work needed to fill out the character.

Movement—Tension

I found my lack of self-confidence reared its ugly head high in movement class. I was constantly being challenged by the assignments. At my committee meeting with Professor Tompkins I discussed what I thought I had been doing and he pointed out his perception of my actions. After listening to him repeat some of my classroom comments, I began to understand his point of view. Throughout the class I had been continually insulting myself. I had spoken negatively about my ability to do the work and vocally criticized myself after I had performed an assignment. Professor Tompkins pointed out if I didn’t believe I could do the work then, no one else would either. As a result I had cut myself off from success.

The exercises Professor Tompkins had us perform emphasized his point. One exercise was to throw a shoe across the stage, close our eyes, walk to it and pick it up. This exercise proved to be a tool that exaggerated the physical quirks I had developed

over years of holding tension. He pointed out that I walked with my pelvis thrust forward, my lower back crunched, my shoulders pinched up and back and my ribs splayed forward. Professor Tompkins interpreted this physical stance to communicate as “partially engaged”. As this was the perception I was showing through my daily life I was then made aware of how much it read on stage. Through the vigorous warm-up I became more aware of these tension spots and worked to strengthen my muscles in order to gain control over these habits.

I also found my negative attitude to be a factor in rehearsals for *A Bright Room Called Day*. I was continually second-guessing my ability to do what Professor Schultz was asking of me. Even as I entered a scene I found myself focused more on what I shouldn't do rather than what I could do. This compounded my difficulty in making a connection to Paulinka and allowing myself to be in the moment of the play.

During rehearsals for *A Bright Room Called Day*, when first trying to rid myself of these tensions, I found myself shifting focus once again to monitor my bad habits. This continuously took me “out of the moment” of a scene and made me unable to give the other actors much of my attention. One night, during performance, I became acutely aware of this dilemma. The blocking of one scene had me sitting on a bench down right with my back turned toward the audience. Agnes and I were alone in the apartment and I was describing the details of my last psychoanalytic session. Although my focus was supposed to be on Agnes, all I can remember was concentrating on my posture. I found I was mentally visualizing a straight spine and relaxed shoulders instead of listening to Agnes or even myself! Because of my newfound awareness of my posture I felt it was more important for me to present to the audience an actress who knew how to hold her

body properly. Since that performance I have come to realize my focus was split due to the uniqueness of enhanced body awareness. I had only just begun to explore the art of movement in class and was practicing to become more aware of my every move. Little did I know then that I was too focused during performance on what should have been worked out during rehearsals. Since then I have found a balance to my split focus. I realize that while it is good to be aware of my movement while on stage, the time to focus the majority of attention on my body is during rehearsal, not a performance.

Playscript Interpretation—Personal Connections

Script Analysis proved to be an exasperating experience. The demands of class quickly brought my attention to the depth of analysis necessary to fully understand a play. Our class was assigned to read one play per week and to write a paper on it. The papers were to have an analysis of each script and to include a personal connection based on the analysis. Try as I might I felt lost trying to find a personal connection to the script or to the characters. I felt as if I was not looking at the script from an actor's point of view but from a reader's. I was looking more for the literary and symbolic qualities as opposed to the life experience of the character. This was prohibiting me from relating my own experiences to the script and using it as a practical tool.

Upon my first readings of *A Bright Room Called Day* I could easily recognize the literary elements but was unable to make the crucial leap from the typed word to a personal connection. My logic and reasoning seemed to stand in the way of allowing me to explore my own responses to the action of the play. It was not until Professor Schultz introduced me to subtextual analysis that I began to gain insight into a new technique for personal connections.

Early in our rehearsal process Professor Schultz sat us down in a circle on the floor and asked us to look at each of our lines individually. We were to start at the beginning of the script and first speak the thought behind our character's lines, and then the line itself. At first I was confused as to how to start this process. I listened as the actress playing Agnes started her private monologue from her first line of "Capitalism is a system of...of..."⁶. She began with a lengthy description of how she (the character) was feeling at the moment, who was affecting her and what the other person had just said to her. She ended with the thought leading to the impulse to speak the line. I was completely astonished that she had gotten all of that information out of one little line. I knew at that point that I had my work cut out for me. Mine was the second line in the script and I found myself hesitant to share what I thought my character was thinking and intimidated at the prospect of sounding simplistic. None the less, for my character's interjection of "Digestion. A digestive system!"⁷ I came up with "Agnes is at a loss for words so I'll step in to save her from embarrassment."

Although I felt this was an adequate first attempt at subtext I realized I would need more work on the technique. I continued to go back over the script looking for the thought preceding the line and eventually came up with "I am drunk and high. I feel good with my friends and am enjoying the party. I think I am witty so I'll interrupt for a laugh" for my first line's preceding thought.

During rehearsals I found the subtext, like the other new techniques I was learning, was distracting me during performance. Along with my inner monologue of where to go and how to sit I had added in the preceding thought of each line. Once again,

⁶ Tony Kushner, A Bright Room Called Day (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1994), 3

⁷ Tony Kushner, A Bright Room Called Day (New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 1994), 4

it was not until after the run of *A Bright Room Called Day* that I understood this work to be for rehearsal, not performance.

Acting Workshop—*A Bright Room Called Day*—Paulinka

The most beneficial stage of rehearsals for me was the exploration of subtext. This combined with the techniques I was learning in script analysis class allowed me to make a personal connection with Paulinka. Unfortunately, the connection in my mind was a connection I was unable to apply to the stage. I had constructed a complete picture of the settings in which she lived, her psychiatrist's office, the stages she worked on, and the rallies she had witnessed. I felt I had the intellectual work well constructed for the character but lacked the ability to connect it practically to the character and to the action of the scenes. This left me feeling like I had a split focus, one part of me half focused on the stage while the other half was on myself.

My difficulty with split focus first showed itself when I entered a scene. Professor Schultz noted that I entered as if by osmosis. I was hanging back and not giving my full attention to the moment. In fact I was concentrating more on the technical aspects of the character such as muscle tension and deep breathing than on the scene at hand. Even during performance I remember concentrating on and correcting my posture. When it came time for me to speak I found I was not focused on the give and take between actors but on the quality of my vocalization. I had broken myself down into a machine with disconnected parts. This resulted in what I now call "selfish acting." All of my focus was inward with only a minimal awareness of what the other actors were giving me. I had completely cut myself off from reacting spontaneously in the scenes.

Even though I was having difficulty applying the class work and maintaining

focus I did have some success. During Paulinka's monologue in which she remembers her past, I found myself able to mentally view the places as I described them. My imagination allowed me to see and smell the streets Paulinka had walked down and to easily recall the sighting of the black poodle. Using my imagination to fill the monologue was a key moment in my exploration of acting. My goal was to then be able to do that with a fellow actor.

In order to reach this point, though, I was asked by Professor Schultz to meet with Professor Frye to explore the concept of evil in the monologue. Professor Frye began by asking me if I had ever experienced anything I could call evil. I recalled the actions of a woman who had dedicated herself to hating me. Due to her malicious feelings for me she had spread scandalous rumors and threatened to "get me" no matter what the cost. I informed Professor Frye of this woman and told her that she was the closest thing I had encountered that personified evil. Professor Frye then asked me to use this woman as a substitute for the black poodle. As I transposed my experience of once being physically attacked by this person to the attack of the poodle I found I could clearly imagine walking down a dark alley and stumbling upon this threat. I recalled my own fear of possible harm and used it to fuel Paulinka's fear of the poodle. Even though I was speaking the words of an event that had never happened to me I was, in truth, relating to the audience the experience of my own personal attack.

Once again I discovered that my imagination could do a lot of the work for me. I felt this monologue was a crowning point and a valuable experience that has helped me since. It was during this monologue that I felt the character really come to life. I felt she spoke from her heart through me. Because of the success I felt with this monologue I was

encouraged to work toward having the same future success while interacting with other actors.

CHAPTER TWO

SECOND SEMESTER

01-15-96

January 1996—May 1996

My performance project this semester was Emma in *Pterodactyls* by Nicky Silver.

The play was directed by Professor Bert Harris and was set in modern day. The author's note in the script describes the play as follows:

*Pterodactyls is a play about, among other things, systems of denial and the price they carry in the world today. As such, most of the characters have a specific method of denial (memory loss, alcoholism, abstraction, etc.) and as a group, the Duncan family lives in a grand mechanism of denial: farce. (The characters) muddle along never noticing a threat until it's too late.*⁸

The script indicates that Emma uses memory loss as her method of denial. She also has the symptoms of a hypochondriac and addictions to various prescription medications. Her constant memory loss seems to be a result of the molestation by her father. She is completely powerless to free herself from her environment and looks to her gay fiancé to rescue her. It is not until after her suicide that Emma becomes lucid and addresses the audience with a monologue describing her happiness in death.

⁸ Nicky Silver, *Pterodactyls* (New York: Dramatists Playservice, Inc., 1994), 5

My classes this semester were mostly a continuation from the first semester.

Professor Jim Tompkins led us in movement and Professor Rinda Frye led us in voice.

Professor Bert Harris conducted our acting workshop and Professor Steve Schultz led our academic class entitled Approaching Realistic Drama.

Acting Workshop-Games

By the time I got to Professor Harris' acting class I was eager to further explore my lack of focus. I also wanted to pick up where I left off in Professor Kleierer's class with working on relationships between two characters. However, on the first day of class Professor Harris surprised me by saying we would be playing theatre games all semester.

Professor Harris started off by bringing a jump rope to class and asked us to form two lines. Using a four count the person in the first line would enter on one and exit on four while the person in the second line would enter on three and exit on two. The two lines would continue rotating until the rhythm was broken or someone got tangled in the rope. This seemed easy enough as I had played jump rope as a kid. When it came my turn to jump into the mix I found I was consistently missing the first count and almost getting caught in the rope. I tried repeatedly to feel the beat of the rope hitting the floor and mentally counted so as not to miss my turn. Even with these genuine attempts to master the exercise I still felt myself holding back. By my third time through my classmates had caught on to this pattern and were yelling an encouraging "GO" each time the rope smacked the floor. This affected me in two ways. First, the exclamation startled me and I felt my whole body tense with the expectation of something about to happen. This tension froze me like a deer caught in headlights. This was very similar to the feeling I

would have before entering a scene. I found I would have to back up, duck my head and gather strength all over again before I could re-approach the rope. Secondly, I realized if I were to duck my head and prepare sooner I would then be ready on time. With this preparation I found myself jumping in more consistently at the right time. I found I could begin to trust and respond to my impulse.

My tendency to hesitate became a consistent theme throughout rehearsals for *Pterodactyls*. With every new scene I felt myself wanting to hold back and over-analyze the situation instead of taking a risk and jumping in without hesitation. In order to overcome this obstacle I found I had to prepare myself before rehearsal started as I had in class. I began arriving 15 minutes early to accustom myself to the space and clear my mind of any distracting, inner voices.

To help myself achieve this I decided to take on the attitude of a child playing. I allowed myself to enjoy my time in the rehearsal room and to enjoy the company of my fellow actors. I found myself looking forward to rehearsals instead of dreading the inevitable mistakes I would make. I worked to invest a spirit of play and to allow this spirit to quiet my censoring, critical, inner voice. If I allowed that inner voice any time to speak it would talk me out of even trying to participate. Once I had discovered this I continued to practice throughout rehearsals to turn off this censoring voice. I felt as if I were throwing a switch between my analytical self and my acting self. When the acting switch was thrown I found I could jump into a scene with a sense of play and an ability to explore with confidence. When the analytical switch was on I could feel myself becoming self-conscious with all my energy directed inward instead of outward toward the scene and the other actors.

I learned that games are an excellent tool for discovering my personal obstacles. During the beginning of class I would hang back and talk myself out of participating and enjoying myself in the games. By the end of the class I had developed a sense of my instinctual responses and did not censor my thought before it could be realized. When I did find myself reluctant to participate in the work I concentrated on relaxing my body and turning my focus to the game at hand instead of inward on my negative, inner voice. This relaxation and focus allowed my confidence, the foundation for me to be fully responsive to my impulse. Now when I approach a new situation, whether it be in theatre or out, I find that I can flip on that playing switch and allow myself to fully focused and engage in a scene.

Stage Speech—Internalizing an Image

I felt my second semester of voice class was the most beneficial in the development my imagination. I felt confident about my progress in the previous semester's voice class and was looking forward to leaping my next hurdle. For Shakespeare's impending birthday Professor Frye asked us to choose a Shakespearean sonnet to perform for class. I quickly picked one out, memorized it and presented it a week later. After I delivered the sonnet Professor Frye asked me to remain standing while she stood beside me with her hands on my belly and lower back. With each word of the monologue she guided me down so that I hung from my waist. She would then have me repeat the word as she shook my body out. With each word, I would bend down, shimmy and come back up. By the end of a sentence I found I was out of breath and had to widen my air passage in order to breathe. This resulted in my breath supporting each word and giving each a fullness that vibrated throughout my body. Professor Frye pointed out that I

had previously drawn my breath from the chest up resulting in a breathy, whisper-like quality. I was forcing my body to release tension through exercise and relaxation. This allowed my breath to drop down into my abdomen and gave my words more breath support. This newfound breath support allowed me to speak clearly and with confidence instead of pushing from my chest and vocalizing on shallow breath.

During rehearsals for *Pterodactyls*, in order for me to tap into my newfound breath support, I found I had to really work on my body to opening up its airways. I began by swinging my arms in large circles and inhaling deeply. I rolled down my spine and hung from my waist as I shimmied out a sigh on sound. After this I then jogged around the room while swinging my arms and vocalized random sounds. I felt much like a chicken as I strutted around the rehearsal room but resigned myself to this technique until I was able to more easily access my breath support. As I continued through rehearsals using this technique I realized this “chicken dance” worked just fine. The arm stretches worked to loosen the tension spots in my shoulders and to loosen my chest muscles. The spinal rolls and hanging from my waist worked to align my normally crunched lower back and splayed ribs thus allowing for easier breath flow. The running also helped to exercise my diaphragm. This discovery helped me realize there is no one warm up that works best for everyone but rather whatever techniques work best for the individual. I had personalized my first actor warm up and was excited to continue developing more warm ups in my other areas of training.

The next exercise in voice class became very important to me. Professor Frye had asked us to copy the sonnet onto paper and cut out each word individually. With these pieces in a bag next to us, we relaxed on the floor and picked out a word. After we

had read the word we closed our eyes and let our imaginations toss it around to see what meaning the word held for us. Once we discovered a personal connection we were to move on to the next word. This was to continue until we had internalized each word and connected each to a personal image. Once finished we tried the sonnet again.

On this second attempt, I found the image of each word I spoke would pass through my mind as I was speaking it. The more I let myself indulge in the personal significance of the images the more I found my voice able to convey a richer meaning to the audience.

With this new technique I set out to “beef-up” Emma’s ending monologue. After she had committed suicide Emma comes back from the dead dressed in her wedding gown to address the audience. For the first and only time in the script Emma has regained her memory and has also found love in death. She begins the monologue by explaining that the gun was the best present her brother could have ever given her. She then describes her reunion with her old classmate, Alice Parker, and how they spend their time reading aloud to each other. Finally, Emma describes the love they share between them.

Sometimes, we just hold each other. And I run my fingers through her hair and she touches her lips, gently, along my cheek. She makes soft sounds, comforting sounds and she takes her time and runs her tongue along the edge of my ear. We take off our clothes and just look at each other. I was shy at first, but Alice helped me and never rushed me. She held my breasts in her hands and ran her lips between them, down my stomach. I touched her eyelids and her forehead and her hair and her fingers and the back of my neck. And she enters me and I am everywhere at once and nowhere at all. And I remember everything and find that nothing matters. And for a moment, for a moment that lasts forever, we become one person. And I forget, we forget, that we were ever alive. And everything makes perfect sense.⁹

⁹ Nicky Silver, Pterodactyls (New York: Dramatists Playservice, Inc., 1994), 66

I found the descriptive language of the monologue instantly engaged my imagination and allowed me to clearly see the memory of someone caressing me as Alice had caressed Emma. I could feel myself “remembering” the touches throughout my body as I described them and found my body moving instinctively to the memory. I realized that as I felt each touch my focus would shift to this sensation. Then, as I spoke, the experience of the sensation was expressed on the line. Since that exercise I have often used this technique of internalizing an image to help in line memorization, remembering sequence of events within a monologue and to further enrich the poetry of a script.

Stage Movement—Self Limits

In my second movement class I felt was able to make tremendous progress throughout. I worked to turn my negative comments on my work into words of positive, personal encouragement. When I felt I had not achieved my desired goal in an assignment I would silently forgive myself and remember that the important point was that I had tried something new. I also reminded myself that the classroom is the place to explore and I should feel comfortable if I made mistakes. This self-reminder allowed me the freedom to explore within the assignments. I also began to purge myself of my overly criticizing, inner voice.

Through the solo scene work in movement class I found I had a difficult time with trusting my own instincts. Several of the exercises were geared toward the timing involved in building to a climax, reaching that climax and knowing when to end the scene. I was continually cutting the moments short resulting in weak climaxes and abrupt endings. This became a great matter of concern for me. If I couldn’t feel my way through a simple assignment of waking up, seeing an object, doing something with the object and

putting it away then how would I be able to perform an actual script?

What I eventually learned to do was take my time. I had been rushing everything to the point of missing the details necessary for the audience to know what I was doing. I found this to be particularly true with the mime work. I incorporated what I had learned in voice class with internalizing an image and took the time to discover the details involved in that image. The result was that I took more time to allow the audience to see what I was seeing. I also allowed myself the time to give reactionary details. Once I slowed myself down enough to notice the details I began to gain a better sense of timing. Again, my lack of self-confidence led me to believe that anything I did on stage would be uninteresting and therefore I should hurry to get it over with before anyone noticed how bad I was.

Once again, the idea of seeing the memory incorporated itself into my acting. While building the ending monologue for Emma in *Pterodactyls* I was asked by Professor Harris to deliver the lines as if I was having an actual sexual climax. He asked that I engage the audience in my imagery and build them to a climax with me and to allow them to see the aftermath of great sex. As I visualized the specific images I allowed myself the time for each picture to develop in my imagination. In order for me to feel my way through the timing of the climax I found I had to be completely engaged in the moment of the memory. Now, exactly how I was able to overcome my inner monologue of where to sit and how to speak and focus so directly on the memory of the monologue is still a mystery to me. I feel it had to do, in part, with finding enough confidence in my abilities to perform the monologue and to let go of the stern control of my inner voice.

Approaching Realistic Drama

Building onto Script Analysis class, the main goal of Approaching Realistic Drama was to further research the world of the play and to make more in-depth, personal connections to that world. Professor Schultz had us read *Uncle Vanya* and assigned several exercises to help us make these connections. In one assignment Professor Schultz asked that I imagine myself in the world in which the characters lived. He asked that we take some time at home to sit down, relax, close our eyes and visualize the house in which the characters lived. We were then asked to write a description of one of the rooms in the house. When I performed this exercise I found that with very little effort my imagination had filled in each and every room with wonderful detail. Once again, I was struck by how easy it was to let my imagination do all the work.

The second step of this assignment was to pick one of the characters and to write a letter asking them anything we wanted to know. This assignment seemed to me to be too personal. When I tried to write to the character I felt like a nosey neighbor looking for gossip. Then Professor Schultz asked us to reply to our letters as the character to whom we had written. I found I could only summon up the curt reply of “mind your own business.” I found that asking myself as these characters a personal question was still uncomfortable for me. Using my own emotions to fill in the answers was still a foreign and intrusive experience and I found myself reluctant to commit emotionally to the character. In the past, when building a character, I had used experiences to build the character but had used the experiences of others. I drew upon the stories told to me by friends, movies I had watched and stories I had read in books. While all of these are valid and usable sources I realized they were not my strongest choice. This exercise asked that

I look at my own reactions to similar situations and to analyze why I had reacted as I did. I needed to take these discoveries and apply them to the character. I knew the use of personal experience in place of vicarious would lead me to greater connections with my characters but something was still holding me back.

Even though I had difficulty with the letter writing I employed this technique with building Emma. I took the time to use my imagination. I closed my eyes and envisioned myself as Emma interacting in the environment where she lived. I also took the time to envision this character and talk to her to find out how she responded physically and vocally. This was a vital part of integrating myself into Emma's world and understanding what she perceived. I asked Emma how she felt around a father who continually molested her, a mother who was always drunk, and a brother she couldn't ever remember having.

To practice this exercise and to present these questions to Emma I found a quiet spot in which I could relax free of interruptions. I closed my eyes and allowed my imagination to explore the images I had already built from the first reading of the script. I then added to these images by asking myself specific questions such as "how does Emma react when angry, overjoyed or overwhelmed?" I then applied these images and feelings to the character while in rehearsal. I began to feel myself have automatic reactions to the very sight of my father. I had conditioned myself to act in a neurotic manner at the mere stimulus of seeing another character. Building onto these neuroses I discovered that Emma had a favorite corner in the living room of the set. Whenever I felt threatened, which was frequently, I would retreat into this corner where I felt somewhat safe. This retreating became a prominent safety net and character trait of Emma's.

Performance Project—*Pterodactyls*—Emma

In preparing the role of Emma in *Pterodactyls* I was able to discover a tool I now use consistently with each character I play, the technique of muscle memory. Previous to this I always had difficulty with learning my lines and remembering the sequence of the scenes. I was always worried that I would forget what would come next. *Pterodactyls* was to be my biggest challenge so far in line memorization. Because of the tangential nature of Emma's interjections I had to run through a scene several more times than was normal for me.

The script was structured so that one-liners came rapid-fire, one on top of another. After the first excruciating week off book I was still calling for lines or missing some lines entirely. To make matters worse my character spoke in tangents and responded to the other characters with a delayed reaction. This made it nearly impossible to get my lines in the right order every night. I knew something different had to be done and decided I needed extra rehearsal time. I increased my 15-minute, pre-rehearsal time to 1 hour so as to run my lines. Because I was by myself and had no way of being completely off book I decided I would mark through where I was standing when I said each particular line. I thought by memorizing that I was, for example, standing next to the table when I said "oh, my", I could use this as a short cut to triggering the line. What I did not realize was this short cut has a technical term and is actually taught as a tool. This tool is called muscle memory.

Now when I am in the process of learning the blocking and lines I go to rehearsals early so that I can walk my blocking and internalize the sequence of movements combined with the sequence of lines. Once I have internalized the blocking into muscle

memory I feel more comfortable and better able to turn my attention to the exploration of character. I find that if I don't have to focus on what line comes next or where I am supposed to be standing I am freer to focus my energy on my fellow actors and to explore the development of character relations.

CHAPTER THREE

THIRD SEMESTER

08-26-96

August 1996—December 1996

My performance project this semester was as a member of the chorus in the *Bacchae* by Euripides. The play was directed by Professor Bert Harris and was directed in an eclectic style that included Suzuki, African dance, intricate choral odes and masks. This training was highly demanding requiring us to rehearse over both our semester breaks, and leaving me exhausted.

I was excited to be cast in the *Bacchae* for two reasons. One, I had never been involved in a chorus before and was looking forward to the experience of ensemble rehearsal and performance. Two, I felt honored to be performing one of our history's most ancient and well-studied plays. My own study of Greek Theatre began in college with the Festival of Dionysus. I had been impressed by the celebrations of the Greeks and found myself admiring Dionysus for his influence on the people. I felt Dionysus to be the patron god of theatre and had developed a reverence of my own for his unfettered spirit. Because I felt a personal connection to Dionysus I felt being cast in the *Bacchae* would give me an opportunity to pay homage to the god responsible for theatre today.

It is a vision at once terrifying and beautiful, as terrifying and beautiful as Dionysus, the Greek god of fertility, who stood for the mysterious and irrepressible forces working throughout nature, sustaining and renewing life

*in all of its abundance, all of its vitality, and all of its wild and uncontrollable energy. Those who embrace that vision, who worship Dionysus, experience the joy of his followers, the chorus of Bacchantes; those who defy that vision, who seek to repudiate it and repress it, experience the suffering of Pentheus and his mother Agave.*¹⁰

I began rehearsals for the *Bacchae* with the hope that my own performance would, much like a religious ceremony, pay homage to this great god and strengthen my bond to the theatre experience.

My classes this semester included an acting workshop on African-American drama led by Professor Lorna Littleway, voice led by Professor Rinda Frye, movement with Professor Jim Tompkins and an academic class of theory and criticism led by Professor Bert Harris.

Acting Workshop—Targeted Speech

I found I learned two valuable tools in Professor Lorna Littleway's acting class, a different approach to script analysis and a new appreciation for the diversity of other cultures. Professor Littleway introduced us to scripts written for, by, and about African-Americans. She wanted us to explore the cultural backgrounds of the characters and to justify why a character reacted as he did. For example, in *Native Son*, we explored why the black chauffeur was motivated to smother his white employer's daughter. At first I tried to justify these actions through my own life experience. With Professor Littleway's prompting I came to realize there are cultural differences of which I was unaware. In order for me to fully understand a character's motivation I needed to first understand the cultural background of this character. Because I had limited knowledge beyond my own culture it was necessary for me to immerse myself into other cultures.

¹⁰ Carl Klaus, Miriam Gilbert, and Bradford Field, *Stages of Drama* (Chicago:St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1991), 66.

Throughout the semester I engaged in a variety of cultural experiences focusing primarily on the African-American culture. I attended drum and dance classes, watched African-American performance artists tell of their personal struggles with race relations and visited museums with African-American displays. What surprised me most was the difference between two groups of people brought up in the same country. I learned of the different ways African-Americans have had to adapt to white culture while white culture has had to adapt very little to them. This one-sided adaptation has caused a rift in communication between the two cultures. My exposure to other cultures led me to be more aware of the diversity of my own community and has opened new avenues of research for building a character.

Building onto this cultural awareness Professor Littleway asked us to take a script, scan over the lines quickly and underline the words that drive the scene. This exercise took some getting used to. At first I found myself only targeting the pronouns. When I read through the scene with the "I"'s and "me"'s vocally punched, the scene brought on the feel of very egocentric characters. I found that if a character emphasized the "I" or "me" in a line then the line became about that character and her feelings rather than about the other characters in the scene. Professor Littleway then asked us to erase our first choices and try again. This time I targeted the adjectives and the characters became more susceptible to emotion. With practice I was able to look a script over quickly, target the words that advanced the action, and give a cold read that made sense and had substance. This was opposed to before when I was blindly struggling through a script, vocally punching random words hoping I was making some sense out of it. I learned an effective tool in the use of targeted speech. I have continued to use targeted speech for each script I

approach and find it to be a practical tool for discovering a character's motivation.

I was not able to apply the technique of targeted speech to the *Bacchae*. The choral lines called for unity of speech and a rhythm that made individually targeted interpretation of the lines impractical. It was not until shows that I performed in my fifth semester that I was able to employ this technique.

While not able to use targeted speech I was able to apply my newfound cultural awareness to my performance in the *Bacchae*. Because I was a primitive woman acting on primal instincts I decided to study the movements of tribal African women. I watched videos of African ceremonies and paid particular attention to their dances. I had to focus my attention on individual body parts to catch the rhythm of the movement. Once I had identified each movement I practiced in front of a mirror and slowly integrated the other individual movements. As each movement symbolized an aspect of tribal life such as planting or harvesting I gave each step its own name wove a story into the choreographed dance. This process allowed me to incorporate African dance style successfully into my own dance. Also through my cultural research into the African-American culture I observed a spirituality that is uniquely theirs. I tried to capture a sense of this spirit and also to incorporate its jubilation into my dance.

Stage Movement—Move That Body And Tell the Story

At the beginning of the second year Professor Tompkins informed us we would be working primarily with masks and on writing our Solo Command Performances for the next semester. I had heard stories of previous solo performances and was simultaneously looking forward to and dreading the experience. I was eager to begin work on the assignment yet fearful that I would not be able to meet the challenge. As we

were to work on the Solo Command Performance on our own time Professor Tompkins used our class time to teach us the art of Pantomime Blanche. This was tremendous fun and I practiced regularly outside the classroom to see if I could communicate with others unfamiliar with the technique. This training helped me to be more comfortable with using my whole body to tell a story. Before coming into the program I could hardly pull my arms away from my side to gesture. After Pantomime Blanche I found I had to tone down my gestures to fit into the world of the play. This was a great improvement in my stage movement and still proves to be a useful tool when I find myself in a show that requires the use of mime.

As we progressed through class Professor Tompkins introduced us to character masks. I felt I had come into my own element with this comic aspect of theatre. Professor Tompkins had us first work alone with expressive masks and eventually in pairs and then groups. What was most interesting about the masks was that each one had a life and emotional range of its own. One mask looked like an old, sniveling, homeless woman while another epitomized ugliness and vanity. The easy part of the work was watching someone else do a scene. I could see almost instantly where the character needed to go and what gestures were needed to reveal its personality. The hard part came into play when I was behind the mask. Once the mask was on I felt claustrophobic and unable to determine what I needed to do to demonstrate the character.

After several weeks of observing my classmates I caught on to one way of revealing the masks. First, I had to know the world in which that character lived and second, have that character react outside of the established world. Lastly, the character must regain their sense of their world. It was after this realization that I was able to

perform this technique with one mask. As is so often true of great moments it happened purely by accident. I was wearing the old woman mask, dressed in junky clothes and pulling a pet roller skate behind me. I had planned to go to the front of the stage, discover a feather, decide to place it in my pet sock's cap and place both in the skate for a ride. As it happened the skate started to wheel off to the right as I made my entrance towards stage left. In order to get the skate back on track I gave it a quick, swift kick as if to chastise it and continued on as planned. Because I had established that my character was slow to move and slow to react the swift kick went against what the audience would expect from the character. Also my acknowledging the skate enough to discipline it with a kick gave the skate its own personality and, in turn, informed the audience of my character. This experience also taught me I can't always plan what is going to happen on stage and I need to leave myself open to possibilities in a rehearsal.

My experience with masks fed directly into my character work with *The Bacchae*. As a chorus member I was costumed in a flesh colored body suit with a half mask decorated with beaded dreadlocks. From my experience in class I knew when wearing a mask my body's movement pulled more focus and told a more significant story. With this in mind I took particular care during the scenes where we were required to individualize our own movements.

During one scene, as Dionysus entered, we were to fall to the ground filled with the ecstasy of our god. I took this opportunity to engage my entire body in the movement. As characters in the chorus I had found that our movements were mostly stylized by the unison of fluidity and precision. I realized that as Dionysus entered we were to be affected by his great force and to act out of character as we had with the masks in class. I

took this opportunity to go in the opposite direction with my physicalization. I staggered my movements as if something was being painfully born within me. I doubled over with the pain and fought against it. The pain joined with the pleasure of knowing that Dionysus would soon be among us. As Dionysus entered I raised my arms over my head to welcome the feeling of joy. As I imagined the pleasures reaching an almost unbearable peak I threw back my head and arched backward at the waist as I vocalized a long, low moan. As Dionysus approached closer to me I stiffened my muscles as if in expectation of a blow of power yet continued to undulate slowly with pleasure. After Dionysus had left the stage I expanded my focus back out to the chorus and regained the fluidity and unity of movement that defined our group.

Throughout rehearsal I worked toward a unity of movement and vocalization with my fellow chorus members. I made sure I had clearly incorporated the African movements into my own dance and movement and rehearsed in front of a mirror to make sure I had internalized the basic African movements. Once I had recorded the movements into my muscles I felt more confident in my role and better able to synchronize with my fellow chorus members. Once I felt I had a feel for the world the chorus lived in I was better able to deviate from this as needed.

Dramatic Theory and Criticism

Dramatic Theory and Criticism with Professor Harris was a very challenging class. Professor Harris led us through several theorists and their opinions on performance. While I feel I was able to grasp a comprehensive overview of the continuity of changing opinions I found that I was unable to fully digest all the opinions of so many theorists in such a short period of time.

The class did introduce me to the effects of morality on the stage. While exploring the ideas of what should or shouldn't be shown on stage I discovered where I stood on some issues. One issue in particular was the use of verbal obscenities on stage. While I feel strongly that censorship should not be a word used in conjunction with art I also feel strongly about a more limited use of verbal obscenities. I feel verbal obscenities should be justified within the world of the play and not used solely for shock effect. Many times I have witnessed student written plays in which the characters use profanity in place of emotion. I have also found I object to the use of sexually revealing costumes when there is no justification for it in the script or in the character. For example, in a studio performance in the Thrust Stage at the University of Louisville, I had seen a young woman play the part of a stay-home mom. In a scene where she was supposed to be doing housework she came out wearing spiked heels and a tight fitting miniskirt. If the script had asked for her to seduce her husband I would have accepted the clothing choice. As it was she wasn't seducing but cleaning and I didn't believe her character. I find these choices to be masturbatory on the part of the writers, directors and actors. Profanity and sex should be used to enhance the script and support the choices of the script and characters. It should not be used to show the audience that it is cool to curse on stage and to show off some thigh.

I did feel our performance of the *Bacchae* was justified in its choices of nudity. Since the play dealt with Dionysus, god of fertility and primitive ritual, I felt comfortable with the directorial choices supporting this theme. Before rehearsals started Professor Harris asked the cast of the chorus whether they were comfortable with the idea of performing nude. After only a moment's thought I was able to answer "yes". I felt

confident the script would support the nudity. As it turned out we did not perform nude but nearly nude. We wore flesh colored body suits that gave the impression of nudity.

After contemplating this artistic choice I understood it to be a more tasteful one.

Although full nudity might have emphasized the importance of sex in relation to the play I had doubts as to the reaction of the audience. The majority of our theatre viewers are less receptive to “cutting edge” theatre and are unused to the liberated attitudes of nudity on stage. Because of this I felt that the better artistic and moral choice was made and the implied nudity made a sufficient impact on the viewers.

Scansion—Deciphering a Code

I entered Professor Schultz’s Scansion class with high expectations for myself. I had never studied Shakespeare’s plays and was left feeling as if I had a huge intellectual gap in my education. I was expecting to be able to come out of the class with the ability to analyze a Shakespearean script and to discuss it in depth.

Professor Schultz asked us to take several Shakespearean monologues and mark the iambic pentameter. We also found clues in the text that indicated word emphasis and line rhythm. I found that Shakespeare wrote clues into the line to indicate to the actor the rhythm and pace necessary to deliver the line. At the end of class I wrote my own short story in iambic pentameter and I was pleased that, although not Shakespeare, I had successfully written in verse.

Although the *Bacchae* is not a Shakespearean script the Greek and Shakespearean styles have much in common through their elements of rhythmic speech. In order for the chorus to work together we had to reach a rhythm of our own. We used the music, movement and song to guide us in our choices and as a group achieved an inner rhythm

that allowed us to move and speak as one.

Bacchae—Chorus

My greatest accomplishment from the *Bacchae* was that I not only acted but also sang and danced simultaneously. Previous to this I had been so self-conscious of my singing voice that I would not even sing in front of my trusted friends much less on stage. With the encouragement of my fellow Bacchaen chorus members I found I could warble a decent tune and perform African dance at the same time.

Along with my technique of muscle memory for lines I found the same technique worked for dance steps and songs. Many of the challenges of the *Bacchae* stemmed from it being my first time in a “musical.” I discovered that repetition was the key to getting a hold on this show.

Although African dance and the technique of muscle memory were beneficial to my performance the training that was an integral part of the *Bacchae* was our use of the Suzuki technique. Professor Harris sent word out that whoever would like to audition for the *Bacchae* could benefit from the scheduled Suzuki workshop. Professor Harris had arranged for Maria Porter, a member of SITI (Saratoga Institute of Theatrical Instruction) to visit our school and to conduct a weeklong intensive. Several of us jumped at the opportunity and signed up immediately. During our training we performed a group exercise called ghost walk, an exercise performed to music. When the music started the entire group was asked to immediately begin stomping for a period of three minutes. When the music ended abruptly the group is required to let go of all energy and drop to the floor. As the music of an eerie flute begins to play we slowly rose, individually found our “eyes of god” in the back of the theatre’s house and began our ghost walk towards

our goal. This music also had a designated time limit in which we were to aim for our last step to reach the edge of the stage as the music ended. This exercise strengthened my ability to focus outside of myself on the music and on my fellow actors. When we performed in the *Bacchae* we were required to move in unison to the beat of music and to give simultaneous physical reactions to the lines of other actors. This technique taught the chorus to move in unison with no single leader.

The Suzuki work and the scanning of lines fit well together. Both depended on rhythm and accents and helped to emphasize and support the primitive nature of the play. By breaking down my impulses to react to the group I was able to expand my focus out to the other actors.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOURTH SEMESTER

01-15-03

January 1997—May 1997

This semester I performed more than I had in any other semester. First I performed in the chorus of *A Woman Called Truth* by Sandra Asher and directed by Professor Trudy Wheeler. I then played Margaret in *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare and directed by Professor Rinda Frye. The combination of these two plays kept me in rehearsals from the beginning of the semester until the end.

*The essential uniqueness of Much Ado as a comedy, and its fascination, lies in the fact that it invokes our awareness of the complicated nature of private feeling and the indeterminate natures of private feeling and the simplicities of the decorous behavior which is supposed to embody such feeling. That is to say, Much Ado dramatizes sex, love, and marriage in close imitation of their complexity in actuality. This play, of course, is far too stylized to be "real," and it keeps us comically insulated from too deep involvement with its characters and its substance.*¹¹

While Margaret was a more substantial role and was my performance project for this semester I found I learned more about myself from my solo command performance. The solo command performance was our culminating project after two years of movement class with Professor Tompkins. The assignment called for us to write at least 12 minutes of original material to be performed alone. Our piece was to be based on a list

¹¹ David Stevenson, Preface to *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare (New York: Penguin, 1964), xxx

of our personal interests and experiences. When I first learned of this assignment I found myself instantly filled with dread. Never had I written for the stage much less imagined I would one day perform my own material. The assignment kept me busy for most of the semester and proved to be a true test of my creative abilities.

My classes included an acting workshop on Shakespearean drama led by Professor Steve Schultz and Professor Rinda Frye, stage movement led by Professor Jim Tompkins, and approaching period drama led by Professor Steve Schultz.

Acting Workshop—Doing it on the line

This semester Professor Schultz and Professor Frye decided to team-teach a course on Shakespearean acting. I still felt a deficiency in that area of theatre and looked forward to applying my academic studies of Shakespeare to the stage. I was expecting the professors to coach us on a specific acting style different from the traditional Stanislavski based technique our other acting classes had followed. I thought different gestures would be taught along with a specific technique for delivering the lines. I was surprised to find that many of the same acting notes were given for our Shakespeare scenes as were given to our modern realism scenes.

My exposure to Shakespeare was a tremendous leg-up for my work in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Between the academic Shakespeare classes and the practical application I was able to participate in the audition with more confidence. I had always felt intimidated by the prospect of auditioning and found this to be the first time I felt eager to test my skills. As I rehearsed the audition scene with my partner I quickly targeted the text for key words and beat out the iambic pentameter. But as I started the scene for Professor Frye I found it difficult to pull the line off the page and deliver it to my partner. As a

result I stammered and stalled on the words and eventually decided to read straight from the page. It was then I realized extra special care would need to be taken with Shakespeare's verse. Two classes and a couple of acting scenes were not going to alleviate my need to put in extra time interpreting the lines. I found I spent twice as much time analyzing the script for *Much Ado About Nothing* than for any other show. First I scanned the script and marked the accented words and then memorized the lines by rote. After I targeted the specific images in my character's lines I allowed my imagination to flesh out each individual image.

I came to realize that even though the language may seem foreign the characters are driven by the same goals that motivate modern characters. Professor Frye asked that I not act in between the lines, as modern, subtextual techniques would have us do, but to apply all the emotion and thought onto the lines. I found it exciting to discover the intricate relationships between the characters. Now I like to think that Shakespearean characters voice every little thought that flickers through their brains. The character's lines tend to dance from one emotion to the next with hardly a moment for silent contemplation. All the emotion is expressed on the lines.

Through this intense exposure to the works of Shakespeare I discovered a love for Shakespearean text. I enjoyed discovering the inner thoughts of the characters and applying it to the world in which those characters live. This class further encouraged me to keep a book of the complete works of Shakespeare by my bedside so that I could continue educating myself on his work.

Stage Movement—*Serving Up A Balance*

The assignment that trained me the most in movement class was the solo

command performance. Professor Tompkins told us we would be writing, directing and performing our own performance piece at the end of the year for the whole department. While I did learn many specific lessons from this assignment I feel the greatest lesson I gained was the experience of putting together a performance from scratch. Overcoming the many challenges involved in this assignment turned my negative feelings about my work into a positive attitude toward my abilities to do the work.

The first challenge was deciding on the subject of the piece. Professor Tompkins had us list several personal experiences and interests from which to pick out the subject matter. The next step was to figure out how to combine the subjects. Professor Tompkins made the choices from our lists. My list of subjects for performance consisted of waitressing, Buddhism and finding my adopted sister. Through strenuous brainstorming I came up with what I thought to be a sincere and humorous performance piece to present to the school.

My three subjects were well known to me I had little trouble coming up with stories from each. For my sister I decided to tell my mother's side of the story. She had just recently found her first child who she had given to adoption 30 years ago. As this subject contained enough material for many full-length dramas I narrowed the subject down to a more personal and immediate affect of the situation on me. I chose to explore how I was affected by the phone calls I would receive from my mother when she was feeling empty and lost and looking to me for comfort. It caused me much grief to hear my mother in such pain. While I wanted more than anything to make the pain disappear from her life I did not know the words to make this magical act happen. After some time I found myself impatient with my mother wishing she would overcome this depression. I

decided this impatience with my mother would make an interesting conflict for the stage.

Buddhism was also a subject that needed to be whittled down. I had been practicing Buddhism for four years and felt my practice to be a foundation for my practice of theatre. I worried about using religious references in my piece due to the fact that I am frequently turned off by theatre that pushes religious propaganda on me as an audience member. I debated on how I should deliver my faith to an audience without creating an atmosphere of discomfort for those unfamiliar with Buddhism. After much contemplation I decided humor was the direction. But once again I discovered obstacle. How would I present the humor without appearing blasphemous? To find my answer I looked back on my experience with other Buddhists. When I first started attending the larger Buddhist meetings I noticed a few of the members who took the motto of happiness very seriously. By this I mean they denied they had any negative feelings and jumped right into a forced happiness. I felt as if these members had blocked out their problems and put on a false happiness. Yet for all their happiness their problems remained. This is also part of Buddhism: that one should see one's own problems as a challenge to be overcome not ignored. If one doesn't face one's problems, then these problems will persist.

The second phase of the project was the actual performance. Several of us opted to perform together on a Saturday night so that friends and family could attend. Having loved ones in the audience combined with having to put my own work out in front of everyone left me completely terrified. There were several moments when I thought I was going to faint before I would have a chance to perform. I felt my self-confidence wavering. As I watched my classmates go before me I heard my critical, inner voice

compare my piece to their performances. I found myself prejudging my work and anticipating a negative outcome. As the performance before mine ended I felt my focus begin to scatter. It was as if everything I had worked for with this piece was disintegrating before me. I closed my eyes to regain my focus, said a prayer and took in some deep, cleansing breaths to try and calm my nerves.

I didn't faint. As I was putting on my skates backstage I worked at turning my attention from my critical inner voice to the performance I was about to give. I knew that if I went out on stage feeling apologetic about my performance that the audience would be able to read this and would feel sorry for me. I remembered from performing in Pterodactyls how the audience had read the fun we were having on stage and had experienced that fun as part of the performance. At that moment backstage I decided above all else I must first enjoy what I was doing if anyone else were to enjoy it. I performed my piece and had a wonderful time interacting with the audience and sharing my humor. I received wonderful feedback and concluded that my own enjoyment read to the audience. It was not until the next day that I realized I had accomplished something of magnitude. I was filled with pride about the fact I had written and performed my own piece. I visited the empty stage the next day and sat alone in the theatre for a long time remembering the experience. This accomplishment was the one that pushed my constantly wavering self-confidence over the top to self-assuredness. I felt if I could do this I could accomplish anything I set out to do.

Approaching Period Drama

This was my third Shakespeare class and the one I found very insightful. By this time I was more familiar with Shakespeare and attacked the assignments with gusto.

Professor Schultz had assigned the reading of *King Lear*. Through my scene-by-scene and line-by-line analysis I began to make significant personal connections to the script. At one point during class, while discussing the relationship between Cordelia and her father, I was overcome with emotion. I saw in my relationship with my own father many of the same interactions. From that point on my study of *King Lear* held significant personal meaning. I searched through the lines trying to put meaning to why relating to my father was so difficult. I asked myself how Cordelia and I could love and respect our fathers despite seeing their shortcomings more clearly than they could themselves. This time when Professor Schultz asked us to write letters to the characters and responses as those characters I found I had already composed numerous conversations back and forth.

Included with the text analysis Professor Schultz asked us to express our imaginations through other mediums of art. One assignment was to create an interpretive mask for one of the characters while another had us design and construct an interpretive, model set. These assignments allowed me to use my imagination with mediums of art other than acting to communicate my interpretations of the character's personalities. Now when exploring the imagery of a character and their universe I find it beneficial to visit museums, explore music I might not have otherwise listened to, and to play like a child with crayons and paper to further identify with the script. Although *Much Ado About Nothing* is a Shakespearean script it did not offer me the deep psychological insights that *King Lear* did. I did, though, have fun with the blatant sexual innuendo of my character.

Performance Project—A Woman Called Truth—Integrity of multiple characters

After being cast in *A Woman Called Truth* I was faced with the challenge of playing multiple characters. Most of the shows I had acted in had cast me in single

character roles. This play posed the challenge of creating a background for not one but six different characters. At first I imagined I would have to outfit each character with exaggerated physical quirks or vocal qualities. But as I progressed through the rehearsals I recalled the training from previous acting classes. They had taught me that what makes characters distinctive are the choices of strong goals and tactics, not layered, superficial quirks.

With this in mind I defined each character's goals and built a life history that supported these goals. From this history I was able to incorporate a distinguishing physicalization for each character. Instead of a physical impediment to distinguish one character from the other I was able to internalize the characters' goal into their overall physical appearance. This also allowed me to create characters that fit within the world of the play. Instead of pulling audience focus to my character with obviously exaggerated physicalization I was able to support the scene from within a group.

Having found myself in the chorus again I was able to retest my abilities as a singer and dancer. I performed African dance, the Virginia Reel, and sang gospel music. I found myself working on the different characters, not from the inside out, but from the outside in. The director would give me the circumstances--for example, you are at a slave auction in 1845 and you must move stage left and stand next to Allison and start singing after Laura's line. I found I had to justify quickly why I was doing the blocking instead of deeply analyzing the motivation for movement. It had to make quick, simple decisions and let that be enough. At one point I was an owner of a brothel house and was at an action to buy a new house girl, "to help the ladies and all don't cha know. Wink wink." Another time I was a lady who had lost her baby to sickness and was singing up to the

heavens hoping my baby could hear me. By making quick, simple scenarios, goals and backgrounds for each character I found that I could easily engage each without a lot of effort. I only had to think of a specific character trait and the rest would fall neatly into place. This has gone on to help me play other such multiple character roles. It has also helped me in single character roles go from one scene to another by allowing me to drop one moment and go to the next without hanging on to it or dragging it out. This “forgetfulness” keeps the moment fresh.

Performance Project—*Much Ado About Nothing*—Understanding to be understood

I was nervous about performing in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Since I had never performed in a full-length, Shakespearean play I was afraid I would not be able to apply the techniques I had learned in class to the play itself. When I auditioned I found I had difficulty taking the words off the page and delivering them to my audition partner. This brought my attention to the fact that this language would be a little more work than a play written in prose. With this in mind I set to work to overcome my difficulty with the script.

I started with text analysis to understand the script. I broke down my monologue to better understand what I was saying and used the technique of individual word interpretation from voice class. I wrote down the line-by-line intentions of the character and then rehearsed speaking these intentions on the line. I internalized images when describing the Beatrice’s dress and used gesture for muscle memory. Once I completed this I rehearsed my monologues by repeating them three or four times in a row to get a feel for the rhythm of the lines. I also alternated placing emphasis on key words to further convey the character’s intentions to the audience.

I found I had to understand fully what I was saying in order for the audience to understand. The use of text analysis and the imagery work combined to give me a clear understanding of the lines and allowed the audience to follow the difficult Shakespearean language. Now when approaching a Shakespearean script I begin right away to analyze the text and to internalize personal images related to the character's lines.

CHAPTER FIVE

FIFTH SEMESTER

08-25-97

August 1997—December 1997

This semester I opted to fulfill my performance project requirement outside of the department. I was cast as Virginia Anne in *The Road to Hell is Paved* by Joanne Gower Wilkerson, directed by Kathi E. B. Ellis and presented with The Pleiades' New Play Festival.

My classes included an acting workshop led by Professor Harris focusing on the process of an etude, stage voice led by Professor Frye, and performance theory led by Professor Schultz.

Acting Workshop—Etude It

Professor Harris opened our class by sharing his studies of the Moscow Theatre's acting techniques. He was impressed with their use of ensemble work and asked the class if we would be interested in experimenting with the same techniques. Professor Harris had offered to contract the grading of the class. With nothing to lose the class agreed to have him lead us through a technique unknown to all of us. I felt Professor Harris and I shared the same idea of what an ensemble could be. I felt a true ensemble could accomplish a sense of unity. I was looking forward to becoming an autonomous group that worked well together.

I was looking forward to a project the whole group could do together. I kept

remembering times when I had worked with others to weed a garden or to move a friend into a new apartment. These were occasions when a group came together with a common goal and worked together to reach this accomplishment. I did feel we accomplished this as a class. Through much trial and error I found several times when another actor and I had found that satisfying rhythm.

I found I made an unexpected break-through with the scene work. Professor Harris introduced us to the idea of an etude: a break down of each scene into events with each event triggered by an inciting incident. Our assignment was to pick a scene, mark the events and give a title to the inciting incident. We were to consider each event a mini scene within the scene. With the titles as a sort of road map we were to put down our scripts and improvise or etude the scene. At first I found myself tied to my script. I felt unsure and uncomfortable without an intricate blueprint of the scene. After a few rehearsals I became more comfortable with the assignment. I started to loosen up and allow myself to trust the process of an etude and found it to be a useful tool to explore a script.

The process of etuding incorporated itself neatly into my growing collection of techniques. During script analysis of *The Road to Hell is Paved* I internalized the images of the script into my inner movie by giving each event a title. These titles acted as road signs pointing me in the direction of the action. This technique was most useful for one specific climax in the script. The action called for Virginia Anne to begin joking about her nickname that then led to a self-induced, hypnotic fantasy. She then needed to jump back to the present moment and immediately into the memory of her physical abuse. My difficulty was with jumping from reality, to fantasy, to reality, and into the climax of a

painful memory. By breaking the climax down into these four parts and labeling each with a relevant title I was able to navigate this sequence with ease. Before rehearsals I would mentally rehearse the sequence of titles. This process allowed me to have more trust in myself on stage. Many times before a performance I had been plagued by a lack of confidence. My fear had been that I would “go up” on my lines and be left floundering on stage without direction. After memorizing the sequence of events and internalizing each into my inner movie I had little doubt in my ability to remember the story.

Stage Voice—Ego Death

My third semester of Voice focused primarily on mastering the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) and applying it to the learning of a dialect. I had always been able to mimic accents well and felt I wouldn't have any problems with the assignments. I began my dialect work with learning a high British accent. In the process I wrote out my monologue in IPA but found it difficult to apply to the accent. Instead I depended more on the dialect tapes and the mimicking of the rhythmic qualities of the dialect. When it came time to present my monologue I found I had the music of the dialect but had missed the basic placements of vowels.

When we began our second dialect I decided I needed to work on a different approach. I started as before by translating the words of the monologue into IPA. I then used flash cards with phonetically similar words to practice the placement of the vowels. I combined this placement with the monologue and practiced speaking the dialect until the vowel placement felt second nature. It was not until I had completed this part of the work that I turned to the dialect tape to add the musicality of the dialect.

From this experience I realized dialect work takes more than simply mimicking

the music of an accent. In order to fully imitate the dialect I found I had to be aware of placement of tongue, visualize points of focus and be able to control the soft palate and breath flow. As a result I was able to apply my IPA work directly to my character work with Virginia Anna in *The Road to Hell is Paved*. Because Virginia Anne was born and raised in southern Kentucky I knew I would be working to master the local dialect. To achieve her southern drawl I visited the zoo and listened to spectators with thick, Kentucky accents. I went home and from memory translated the accent into IPA, practiced with flash cards and successfully mastered a southern Kentucky accent. As proof of my accomplishment an audience member asked me if I was a native of Kentucky. All I had to answer were a few words for him to realize the drastic difference between my “neutral” accent and my character’s Kentucky drawl.

In addition to the dialect work, Professor Frye decided to introduce us to another useful tool. She sat a video recorder on her shoulder and told us to prepare ourselves for ego death. For each performance she recorded us and immediately afterwards had us watch the tape. I was taken aback at how awful fluorescent lighting made my face look. I found myself cringing each time my eyebrow seemed to twitch. My voice sounded artificial and forced and my movements appeared to indicate my thoughts. It was with great effort I kept from hiding my head in my hands and moaning out loud. This was indeed ego death.

After our first viewing Professor Frye had us take turns telling the group what we saw. Nearly everyone had one or two negative observations all dealing with how they looked. To this Professor Frye responded with a neat mental trick. Instead of thinking of the videotape as us, think of it as someone else. Also we must understand that video is a

completely different medium of art therefore performances on tape are not quite the same as on stage. I tried this mental trick the next time I watched myself on tape. I asked the director of *The Road to Hell is Paved* if she would record my rehearsal. I remembered the night of the taping momentarily going blank in between lines. I felt I had covered it well without undue fuss and was curious to see if I could catch it on the tape. I was able to pick that out and gathered other useful information on physicalizing, vocal qualities etc. I disconnected myself from the person on the tape and pretended that I was the teacher about to evaluate a student's performance. This helped me to balance my ego and to look at the tape as a tool instead of a curse.

Performance Theory

This theory class I found was the most applicable to my acting techniques. I was able to explore the different techniques that have been used over the years by actors and directors. I was asked and able to answer the question of what one exercise worked the best for me. I found that prayer was the best practice for me. By prayer I mean a combination of meditation, self-evaluation and positive thought. This daily practice enables me as a person and an artist to continue working toward achieving the best out of my personal, daily life and work.

I was also able to follow intellectually the progression of techniques through history, as it related to what societies were experiencing philosophically and how the popular philosophy of the time was affecting the thinking of the common man. The discussions in class raised questions for me such as "what are my own practices" and "what techniques are best for me." When I explored these questions I found I had, over

the past three years, unwittingly developed personal techniques that I used for character building, script analysis and actor exercise.

Through the training I had received thus far in the program I had developed many practices that I now use regularly. My own techniques, in overview, consist of the following; I found that I always use script analysis to divide a script into events. I then target the script for vocal emphasis of key words and character intention. From there I work on the physicalization of a character. I focus individually on character walk, gesture, posture and rhythm of movement. Most importantly I allow my imagination to be fully engaged while exploring the character. I imagine myself as this character and place myself in the same environment as she. I ask myself how I would feel and allow myself react to the events in the play.

The Road To Hell Is Paved—Virginia Anne

This was my first opportunity to test my newfound skills in the professional world. Due to the short rehearsal period and the unavailability of rehearsal space, I was only able to meet with the director twice and I found myself left with only my own intuition.

This lack of time forced me to refine my character building to its core minimum. I found I incorporated targeted speech from Professor Littleway's class for the first part of the process. Then I scanned the script for any clues to the character. Virginia Anne liked colors so I gave her a bright colorful imagination that she could lose herself in. She loved babies so I was able to recall my own maternal instincts from caring for children. The fact that she liked the quiet led me to believe she was fragile on a certain level and was more at ease in quite and agitated by distractions. Because of this I allowed her to have

moments of irritation and disorientation when she was pulled away from her fantasy world. Since the character used her imagination as an escape I took extra care to create rich images. I played out the fantasies like a movie in my mind so that I could be sure of the exact details.

For the building of the climax, as she relives the memory of her abuse, I used Professor Littleway's scoring technique. To allow the build to support the climax I placed tension throughout my body as she re-experienced the abuse. I screamed on the line and fell cringing while my body convulsed as she continued to relive the abuse. I continued the lines through this and didn't indulge in any extra moans. I felt it was that choice that allowed the climax to have its own integrity. It could have very easily been self-indulgent and more "dramatic" but I felt I owed this woman a real chance to tell her story. I wasn't just "acting" to be seen in a show but rather telling a very important story for this woman and others who have suffered abuse.

Because it was outside of the department, the feedback from an audience that had not seen my work in progress for three years was a litmus test of my abilities. It is one thing to do well in the safety of the classroom and quite another to perform in the "real world" and succeed. I was pleased to find my performance well received by all the audiences; I even received several offers for more outside work. This raised my confidence in my ability to leave the theatre department and work as a successful artist.

CHAPTER SIX

ORESTEIA

01-15-98

January 1998—May 1998

My performance project in my final semester was also to be my thesis performance. That final performance was to encompass all the techniques and tools I had aspired to gain at the beginning of my three years. I chose Professor Schultz as the director of my thesis production, and he decided on the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. Professor Schultz condensed what was originally an eight-hour, three-play performance into a fifty-minute production in which I played the roles of Clytemnestra, Electra, and Athena.

Research

I began my research for the *Oresteia* long before the actual rehearsals started. My eagerness and drive to gather as much information as possible led me to several libraries in search of historical information and critical essays. I absorbed much literature on the *Oresteia* and then made a conscious effort to “forget it” when rehearsals started, because all the historical information and opinions of essayists would not be directly applicable to the playing of the roles. However, that supporting, background knowledge of the time would provide a solid foundation for my choices.

Given the incredible opportunity of creating characters of great historical significance, I asked how I, a modern woman, would begin to relate to a queen like

Clytemnestra, a princess like Electra, and a goddess like Athena? I decided to look at each character's primary motivation and determine what emotion drove each to make the choices she had made. I wanted to find where each emotion lived in my own body and, through that, connect my emotional center to the character, and then develop the character from that center.

Clytemnestra was wife to Agamemnon and mother to Electra, Orestes, and Iphigenia. She was lover to Aegisthus, sister to Helen, and Queen of the house of Atreus. In the opening scene of *Agamemnon* the watchman lies on the roof of the palace watching for the fires that will signal that Troy has been taken and Agamemnon will soon be coming home. The watchman informs the audience that he cannot speak of the matters of the house but if the house could talk it would have a horrible story to tell.

The story it would tell would be of murder, deceit, and cunningly laid plans. It is Clytemnestra the watchman speaks of and her plans for avenging Agamemnon's sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. It is Clytemnestra who "transcends gender expectations, in a way that the original audience would have found sinister and dangerous. She exhibits "masculine" planning ability and shows at once that the initiative will lie with her."¹² For years she has planned and conspired with Aegisthus on the murder of Agamemnon. "Clytemnestra's part in the first half of *Agamemnon*, conceived in theatrical terms, as a series of rehearsals for the return of Agamemnon – a commanding performance..."¹³

Identifying each character's energy center was key to the character development and distinction of each character. I used each center as a starting point and built my character from there. Through voice class I had been taught that emotions and energy

¹² Michael Owens ED., Aischylos, *The Oresteia* (London: J.M. Dent, 1995), 129.

¹³ Michael Owens ED., Aischylos, *The Oresteia* (London: J.M. Dent, 1995), 135.

would store themselves and manifest through different parts of our bodies. I meditated on triggering where primal, raw emotions such as lust and vengeance manifest themselves. I found my own feelings of vengeance and lust in my lower belly. I pushed my thoughts down into my belly and envisioned building the sexual energy. I let this build to an almost uncontrollable pressure yet denied myself any release of this energy. I felt Clytemnestra like a red-hot burning that I could not shake off nor run away from. Through the building and suppression of this base energy I conditioned myself to trigger the character within that energy center. From there I began speaking the lines on the emotion from that energy center. Throughout the performance I never allowed Clytemnestra any release of the pent up emotion. My choice was to drive Clytemnestra to the limits of her sanity and beyond. I could feel the stress of carrying unreleased anger and it drove me as close to Clytemnestra's murderous intentions as I would have liked or needed to get.

Electra was daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, sister of Orestes and Iphigenia, and niece of Aegisthus. It was Electra who stood by silently as her sister was sacrificed, her father murdered, and her house taken over by a tyrannical mother and her lover. "On his return, Orestes finds his sister Electra in helpless subjection to the tyranny of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but passively allied with the Chorus through 'the common hatred we are nursing within the house.' They lament the pollution of the hearth—the household's altar and center of its corporate life—and long drawn-out wasting of wealth. Agamemnon's spirit is believed to haunt his tomb, and Orestes and Electra both pray to it, asking for help and intensifying the 'common hatred' which is yet

their only weapon.”¹⁴ Electra hated her mother and Aegisthus for the murder of her father and the dishonoring of the hearth. She also hated the position she was in. Yet Electra was in fear for her own life and dared not speak against her mother or her mother’s lover, nor offer sacrifice for her father.

When creating Electra I meditated on where my own feelings of suppressed hatred and fear would be stored. I discovered that my throat was where the energy built when I held back my voice. I focused my breathing into this area and could feel the tension building. I felt my throat tightening with unspoken feelings and my chest heavy with hate. As with Clytemnestra, I built the hatred inside but did not allow myself any release. Soon my throat and chest were heavy with tension. I felt as if rocks were hanging from my shoulders and pulling my movements downward. I vocalized on the emotion and found Electra’s voice. I allowed my movement to stem from the same tension and developed Electra’s movement. Only when Orestes appeared did I allow Electra any release of tension. He was the answer to her prayers, allowing her to relax her chest and throat and experience joy.

It was a challenge to find any emotion to relate to Athena. Since she was a worshipped deity I decided to draw upon my experience with the mystical to create Athena. To understand Athena is “to consider the nature of Athena and her effect on the Furies. Unlike the Delphic Apollo but like her namesake city of Athens, Athena proves able and willing to understand both parties in the dispute, the female and the male, the old and the new. Of all the deities of Olympus she is best fitted to mediate between these two parties, because, in accordance with a tradition that in part is at least as old as Homer, she

¹⁴ John Jones, , On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy “The House Of Atreus” (Chatio and Windus, LTD., 1962), 17.

partakes of the attributes of both sexes.”¹⁵ Athena has the ability to see both sides of a situation and to allow herself not to be caught personally in a dispute. She balances and teaches at the same time. She is able to persuade the furies to calm their nature through encouragement and fear. “As she talks with them, their wild outbursts of song and dance grow shorter, until ...they are calm enough at last to engage with her in spoken line-for-line dialogue. Athena meets their rage with gentle persuasion, with promises of an honored place in the human and divine community of Athens, and, at one point, with a delicate reminder that she has direct access to Zeus’s thunderbolt arsenal. In this situation, too, the principle that she shares with the Furies holds good, as it continues to hold good in most compacts, whether between individuals or between nations: there must be an element of fear, but it must not be the sole element.”¹⁶

For Athena I meditated on where in my body I housed my sense of the mystical world. I found myself drawn to the top of my head, typically a connecting point in many cultures to the divine element of heaven. I worked on grounding myself through my feet and feeling the energy of the earth flow from the soles of my feet through to the top of my head, where it burst forth in brilliant light to connect with the heavens. I allowed Athena to vocalize through all resonators, imagining shining light poring forth as she spoke. I created her movements out of my connection with heavenly energy. I imagined the support of her father Zeus and found confidence in knowing that he was guiding me. I visualized this heavenly light flowing out of me and touching the furies, Apollo, and Orestes. With these images I created a character connected both to this world and to the mystic world.

¹⁵ John Herington, “No-Man’s-Land-of-Dark-and-Light,” *Aeschylus* (Yale University Press, 1986), 143.

¹⁶ John Herington, “No-Man’s-Land-of-Dark-and-Light,” *Aeschylus* (Yale University Press, 1986), 151.

Through the research I picked one aspect of each character: Clytemnestra's vengeance, Electra's hatred, and Athena's mystical divinity. I found these aspects of the character in myself and spoke the character's lines from that center of my body. With the emotions connected to my body and my voice coming from that part of my body, I was able to build a character through my own existence.

Creating the Roles

Even before the actual rehearsals started I was home studying the world of play, the world of Greek culture, and Greek traditions. I pored over theories of scholars on the origins of the *Oresteia* and brushed up on Greek mythology. I spent Christmas break studying Professor Schultz's edited rough draft of the script and familiarized myself with the rhythm of the text. When I returned from break we began rehearsals by spending two weeks going through the script scene by scene. With the cast sitting around a table, Professor Schultz would ask us to read a line aloud then translate the line aloud into the character's subtext, imagery, and objectives. After each subtext rehearsal I would take the script home to build upon the imagery. Sitting on my sofa with script in lap, I would recall the image I had created earlier in rehearsal, close my eyes, and allow my imagination to fill in the details.

My first line in the edited script was "The Greeks have taken Troy." I chose as my subtext "the time has come for revenge." I justified this choice by the facts in the script and I spoke the following aloud as her subtext behind the line: "I have been waiting for years for the return of my husband and have spent that time plotting against him with Aegisthus. I lost my daughter Iphigenia by my husband's hand and now the time draws near to revenge my daughter's death. Therefore the time has come for revenge." I would

speaking out Clytemnestra's thoughts and then summarize them in one sentence with a single objective. For the imagery, I gave the defeat of Troy a little background. I pictured thousands of soldiers in the field as if I were looking at them from a helicopter. I then brought my focus in close to be able to see their faces. I could see the soldiers in period battle gear covered in dust and blood. As I watched I could see them begin their final charge upon the city gates, soon knocking them down. Once the gates were opened the thousands of soldiers poured in like an army of ants crawling over the debris. Swords were swinging left and right as bloody bodies fell to the ground. Women and children ran screaming while the conquering soldiers knocked them down and destroyed their homes. Agamemnon, also covered in blood and dust, sat back after leading the final charge to oversee his troops. With several weeks of creating the similar visual backgrounds such as the defeat of Troy, the motivation of each line and emotional details, I found I had a source of rich images to pull from for each scene and character.

After the two weeks of script analysis and Professor Schultz fine-tuning his editing, we began to block the show. During rehearsal I would score my script to record my vocal and rhythmic choices. At home I would play with my choice of delivery and use the next rehearsal to test new choices. Choosing the best intensity and rhythm for Clytemnestra's first sentence in the script was a difficult decision. Professor Schultz had me blocked so that my back was to the audience while the chorus spoke of the herald fires. When it came to my line, Professor Schultz asked that I turn slowly, look all of the chorus members in the eye and then speak my line. Since I was declaring the return of my husband and wanting to establish the power and drive of Clytemnestra from her first word, I decided to really pump up my opening line. I tried throwing my hands straight

toward the heavens and boomed out the line with my deepest voice with equal emphasis on each word. This did not please Professor Schultz at all and had him looking at me like I had lost my mind. “What was that?” he asked. “I was trying something new.” I replied. “Well, don’t” was his response. While this may sound harsh, I knew that Professor Schultz was using sarcasm but he also was being truthful. He had been satisfied with the delivery I had first chosen and had been rehearsing for weeks. The lesson learned: try new approaches but be prepared for them to come out badly. This did not stop me from exploring different approaches to other lines; rather, it reminded me that a production is a collaborative event. The director can see other elements of a production more easily than I can from my position on stage. I feel I gave Professor Schultz a choice and he chose the way I had been rehearsing it.

I also found internalizing Clytemnestra’s first monologue to be a welcome challenge. It is easy for my imagination to create one specific location in great detail and then memorize the lines while relating that image to the lines. Clytemnestra’s first monologue had many locations listed in rapid succession. I found that the pace of the monologue hardly allowed for time enough to pull each locale’s image in time to recall its name. I sounded either like I was making up the names or like I hadn’t studied my script.

To resolve this I created a simple image of each location, such as a single building or an identifying landmark related to the name. A huge mountain worked for one town while a desert surrounded another. Instead of filling in intricate details for each location, I left them simple and practiced running these images through my imagination like a slide show. The longer I practiced the more rapid I became at flashing the images and recalling

the names and order of the locales.

The monologue read as follows: “I ordered it done: torch to torch, horizon to horizon, rushed it to me. From Troy to Lemnos, then to Mount Athos and hurtled on to Mount Makistos; that lookout tosses the glow across the Straits of Euripos to reach Messapion’s watchman; it jumps the Plain of Asops to hit Kithairon’s crest then strikes the Peak of Aigi plankton and flaring south brings dawn to the Arna Ridge—and finally lands on the roof of the house of Atreus.” The string of locations was as follows: Troy, Lemnos, Mount Athos, Mount Makistos, Straits of Euripos, Messapion’s watchman, Plain of Asops, Kithairon’s crest, Peak of Aigi plankton, Arna Ridge, and the House of Atreus.

The first attempt I tried was to take the first letter of each location and memorize it as an acronym. Unfortunately, “TLMAMMSEMPAKPAARA” was too long to be useful. Next, I created shortened visuals for each location. Troy was easy since that was where Aegamemnon was fighting. Lemnos sounded like lemons, so I visualized a grove of lemon trees and repeated “Lemnos” as I closed my eyes and visualized lemon trees. Then I would start from Troy, see the city, then see the lemon trees and say “Troy, Lemnos.” I continued this shorthand visual memorization until I had a string of pictures that I could use as mental flashcards to recall the line.

I had identified Clytemnestra’s energy center as her desire for vengeance and her lust for Aegisthus. I meditated on my own experiences of vengeance and lust and discovered the emotions living in my lower belly. Searching for my own lustful emotions to relate to Clytemnestra took me back to memories of high school. As a young teenager I watched my one-year-older cousin date and discover her sexuality. As she became more

popular with the boys, I watched her jealousy of any other female competition grow, including myself. My cousin began spreading rumors about me and attempted to ruin my reputation. For many months I endured hearing lies and threats to damage my personal property. I turned the other cheek and strove to keep the matter out of my mind. Having met some of my cousin's boyfriends at family functions, I became friends with one ex-boyfriend and invited him on a date. When my cousin learned of this her jealousy got the best of her and I saw an opportunity to exact revenge. I seduced my cousin's ex-boyfriend and flaunted my accomplishment. It was out of this seduction that I drew my association to Clytemnestra. I meditated on the feelings I had for my cousin and her ex-boyfriend and replaced my cousin with Cassandra, the ex-boyfriend with Agamemnon, and myself with Clytemnestra. Through practice I could then easily associate the emotions in my lower belly to the character I was about to perform.

During performance, when I would have to quickly change form one character to the next, I would focus my energy on my lower belly, breathe deep into that center, and call the character forward. When vocalizing, I would project her voice from that resonating center.

Electra was located in my throat and chest resonators. I found that Electra had deep feelings of hatred for her mother and lover. But fear for her life kept her hatred from being expressed. Again I meditated on my own experience with repressed feelings of hatred. I found that my throat and chest were heavy from restraining the anger and frustration. When I would switch characters to Electra, I simply had to breathe into my throat and chest centers and speak from those resonators.

To relate to Electra's situation I recalled my childhood experience of moving

from New York to Virginia. As a yankee in a southern country town I found myself being called out as a “damn yankee” and excluded from the pre-established cliques of girls. Being only nine and coming from a school where I had been accepted, I developed deep feelings of hatred for my southern fellow students. Daily I wished for the day I could get my driver’s license and leave that stinking town. Daily I thought how much better life would be once I could get away and prove myself the better person. As I thought over these memories and found the emotions welling up in my throat and chest, I replaced the faces of my classmates with the faces of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Through practice of visualizing the characters in place of my classmates I began to associate the character with the emotion. From there I could focus my attention and breath on the tension in my throat and pull the character from that resonator.

Athena’s connection with the great abundance of universal energy filled my whole being with peace and calm. I felt elevated above mundane existence and connected to a higher level of spiritual knowledge. When I had Athena speak out of this divine energy her voice would come out calm yet firm. Every night, on the ladder where Athena was poised, I would open myself to the universe’s great energy and awaken Athena in my head.

The personal experience I used for connecting with Athena was my first mystical experience with religious practice. As a recent college graduate I found myself seeking spiritual guidance. Through a friend I was introduced to Buddhism and began practicing with the local chapter of the Soka Geiki International. It was during a session of chanting with a small group of other practitioners that I began feeling a strange sensation growing in my body. It was as if I were floating above the floor and could feel the weight of stress

and tension lift itself off of me for a brief moment. I had seldom felt so open and free since I had been a child. Many times after this experience I found I could elevate above the grind of the mundane world and touch briefly the spiritual world. Upon analyzing the sensation, I found a strong pull of energy from the top of my head connecting to the energy of the universe. It was this sensation that I recalled when playing Athena. I would imagine the top of my head opening and allowing a bright, white light to flow from the top of my head and connect to the web of universal energy.

Continuing with the challenge of quickly distinguishing one character from another, I created a short history for each to replay in my imagination before entering the stage. For Clytemnestra I would run the images of her husband going off to war and would recall the painful images of her sacrificed daughter. I recalled her endless, pleading offerings to the furies and replayed her call to vengeance. When Electra's turn came I would replay the horror of seeing Agememnon's dead and bloody body lying on the floor of his own home with his bloody wife standing over him. I imagined the daily torment of living with Clytemnestra and watching as she and Aegisthus destroyed their home. For Athena I brought forth a picture of her father Zeus and all the multitudes of gods and goddess watching her from above. I imagined Athena sitting beside her father and enjoying his pride in his daughter.

Through diligent rehearsal and intense imagination work I was able to "flashcard" through the images and emotional connections and quickly locate and recall the needed character. Each was centered and developed in a different energy center in my body. This allowed me to develop individual walks, talks, movement, gesture, inflection, delivery, and pace to make for distinctive and well-defined characters.

In reflection on my performance in the *Oresteia* I find that I am very pleased with the results. Through the challenge of performing multiple roles, performing a classic script, and performing an extremely edited script, I found I was able to employ most, if not all, of the tools I had learned through the three years at U of L.

CONCLUSION

The actual performance of the Oresteia was a great experience for me. Each night I found myself excited to be performing for an audience. I was proud of the cast and the excellent job they had done preparing for the run of the performance. My fondest memories of the show are of having fun on stage. I feel that I was fully dedicated to the research, rehearsal, and the performance process. Due to this dedication I felt I was fully prepared for the performance. This allowed me the freedom to relax and enjoy the payoff of all my hard work and commitment.

While I had a completely enjoyable time during the run of the show, I still found performance obstacles to overcome. As the lead characters, I carried a lot of the weight of the performance. I was working with three years of intense training under my belt, but I was also working side by side with actors with varying degrees of training and awareness. While everyone in the cast was committed to the rehearsal work and performance, I found it frustrating working with actors who had not yet begun to realize the different levels of awareness in acting. They had yet to learn the tools necessary for performance i.e. quieting one's criticizing inner voice, opening up one's awareness of other actors, leaving themselves open for an exchange of energy between actors. Nor had they fully developed the tools for building a character: memory association, voice

placement, movement. I see the learning process as having levels of awareness. One actor may be at a different level of knowing from another actor.

In one scene, when a chorus member should have been intimidated solely by my character's stare, I found he refused to back away from me as I directed my full attention to chastise him. It had not been directed that I touch any of the chorus but I found I had to place my hand against his chest and push him backward to make him bow to me. I felt as if Professor Schultz should have directed him to be less confrontational with his character's queen; but I can only assume that Professor Schultz wanted to see what would happen. While I did not agree with the actor's choice of standing his ground until I pushed him physically, I appreciated the immediate and true challenge of making him bow to me.

A similar situation developed between my fellow actor, Lawrence Blackwell, and me. Lawrence performed the roles of Agamemnon, my husband, and Orestes, my son. Lawrence was just finishing his first year of graduate school when we performed together in the *Oresteia*. As an actor early in the program he seemed to be very self-conscious. During rehearsal we were both comfortable in front of our peers but when we gained an audience, Lawrence's self-consciousness as an actor flared, which made it very difficult for me to make any connection with him. Realizing that he was distracted due to his inward focus, I tried my best to pull him "out of his head." I felt that, if I could force one moment of true communication with him, I might be able to pull him out of his self-conscious inner monologue and cause him to place his focus on me. Again I found myself working against a real and immediate obstacle. I tried even harder to make eye contact with him as we played out our scenes. I could feel myself pushing to get his attention. I

used this to fuel my character's goals by speaking my intentions on the line and hoping that I could overpower his inner monologue. I worked at delivering my lines so that he would hear my actor subtext of "look at me" and begin to turn his attention to me.

I do not feel that I was ever able to force a connection with Lawrence on stage. Nor was I able to convince the chorus member to back down by the sheer power of my stare. What I did learn is that there is only so much I can do with an unwilling acting partner. To attempt to overcome this obstacle I worked at keeping myself open and accessible to my fellow actors. I worked hard at making real connections with each actor on stage and used my actor obstacles and frustrations in the moment to fuel my own character's obstacles and goals.

When I started the MFA program at the University of Louisville I did not feel I had any specific approach to creating a character. I had simply depended on the director and my own instincts. I built my characters without questioning their motivations or goals. After three years of school I discovered not just one specific approach but rather a variety of techniques for building a character. What determines my approach and techniques is the style of play I am doing. I relate this to having a chest full of tools and deciding what tool is best for each job. I started the program with a list of weaknesses and fears including actor hesitation, over-analysis of the work, and a lack of self-confidence. With the direction of my professors, intense class work, and constant stage time, I was able to use my imagination and new skills to overcome my personal obstacles and develop into a proficient performer.

Five years have passed since I finished my classes at the University of Louisville. I have found that my training has opened more doors for me than just acting. I have been

very active in teaching theatre to various communities, many of which include special-needs and at risk children. Through my work as an accountant under the title of Account Services Administrator at the historic Louisville Palace Theatre I have had an opportunity to participate in the financial operations of a nationally owned professional theatre. As a board member of Squallis Puppeteers I have been able to contribute to a community of creative and driven artists interested in a more grass roots movement. Through my MFA I have been able to advance myself in the world of theatre and to give back to the community in which I live.

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