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DEVELOPING ACTOR EXPERTISE: THE PRESENTATION AND
REPRESENTATION OF MAN IN WILL ENO'S *THE FLU SEASON*

By

Conrad Harding Newman
B.A., University of Kentucky, 2007

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

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

May 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

April 6, 2012

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I would like to thank my mother and father, Karen Newman and Rick Newman, for their unwavering support of my educational pursuit and dreams of success. I would also like to thank Professor Tompkins for teaching me the craft of acting and demanding artistic excellence – your sense of humor and passion for the work is a testament to the tradition and legacy of theatre.

ABSTRACT

DEVELOPING ACTOR EXPERTISE: THE PRESENTATION AND REPRESENTATION OF MAN IN WILL ENO'S *THE FLU SEASON*

Conrad Newman

April 6, 2012

This thesis examines my work on the role of Man in the University of Louisville's 2011 production of Will Eno's *The Flu Season* directed by James Tompkins. It is composed of three primary chapters: rehearsal process, character development, and performance. The rehearsal chapter compares and contrasts my experiences working with Dr. Amy Steiger on Charles Mee's *A Perfect Wedding* and Professor James Tompkins on *The Flu Season*, highlighting the value of both collaborative and individual aspects in rehearsal. The styles of the directors are observed and discussed concerning their effect upon my acting process and development. In character development I discuss and investigate the potential sources of Man's anxiety through self-observation, textual research, and script analysis. The performance chapter analyzes the dual importance of audience awareness and focus on character, acknowledging growth and establishment as an actor. The thesis concludes with personal insights into the nature of acting and the importance of technique in performance.

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INTRODUCTION

It has always been my preference to work internally, both in life and performance, and my acting process strongly reflected this prior to arriving at the University of Louisville's Department of Theatre Arts Graduate Program in August of 2009. Having come from a primarily literary and mathematically based pursuit in education, I approached scripts and roles the same way I would work in other disciplines – intellectually. This method, however useful in memorization and script analysis, did not adequately prepare one for interaction upon a stage. Timidity, self-criticism, and anxiety in undergraduate acting, both at the University of Kentucky and early work at the University of Louisville, crippled any ability to relax and make bold choices in auditions. This led to not being cast in desired roles. I had never been chosen for a romantic lead, especially in a main-stage production, and it was by far the greatest challenge that awaited me as an actor. The subtleties and nuance of tactics required in performing such a role were beyond my skillset, but this was before I had completed two of three years in pursuit of an MFA in Performance.

Acting and theatre were never at the forefront of my life's pursuit. As a child I did play the lead 'Tony the Turkey' in my fourth grade play and 'Simba' in a musical medley in the fifth. Tony was the first real attempt as a lead performer, with a full-bodied turkey costume including feathers to support the spectacle. He had lost his gobble and was on a journey to recover it. Tony, ironically similar to my future thesis role, visited a psychiatrist, as did I in that fourth grade year. As Simba I performed a duet with

childhood friend and fellow churchgoer Carrie Joyce Reed as ‘Nala’ – my first attempt at romance in theatre. Again, a full-bodied lion suit with a tail and headpiece were adorned to support our performance.

Acting became primary as I was hired each summer to perform roles in outdoor dramas. The summers of 2004, 2005, and 2006 were spent in Mansfield and Xenia, OH, where I worked as a professional actor in Johnny Appleseed Outdoor Drama and Blue Jacket Outdoor Drama. Performing Daniel Boone for sixty performances involving horses, black powder rifles, flame torches, arrows, advanced stage combat techniques, and the third largest amount of dialogue, I learned the value of consistency and skill in executing the run of a production. A love of history was satisfied in portraying a legendary figure in Kentucky history. This was followed by a move to Los Angeles in September of 2007. Acting classes were constant, and the art of the fine-tuned performance for the camera grew daily in California. After performing at agent showcases, as an extra in television and film, and for managers and commercials, my ambition dwindled. The pursuit of a film and television career ebbed as the writer’s strike of 2008 minimized opportunities for newcomers, providing further motivation to return to Kentucky in August of 2009 and further pursuit of live theatre in academia.

The thesis performance was the role of ‘Man’ in Will Eno’s *The Flu Season*. This was the romantic lead I had needed in order to make significant strides forward in acting. The playing of qualities rather than objectives, limited vocal patterns, and restricted movements had tarnished past roles, despite having the inherent physical capability of an advanced stage combatant and the vocal capacity of an intermediate singer.

Director/Professor James Tompkins and I both hoped to strengthen stage presence, as

well as abilities in the areas of vocal variety and physical technique, and still stay within the grounds of realism, truth and economy. The portrayal of Man had to be more than a display of neuroses and anxieties – an acting trap since Man is a patient in the Crossroads Psychiatric Retreat Center. A performer could easily get caught in playing qualities such as “to be disturbed”, “to be weird” or “to be crazy.” Although they are at times present in the text of the role, these qualities should never motivate the action or delivery of the lines. Man’s goal is certainly *not* to be crazy; it is not even to recover. He, like every human being, has desires and needs – experiencing life in the moment. He wants understanding of his mental illness and ruminates about potential reasons for his instability. He experiences happiness, and is invigorated, seen in his pursuit of ‘Woman.’ And yet he also wants her to leave and tells her of his interest for another woman, making him seem fickle at best. Qualities are present in a romantic lead, but only as the product of a character’s intention and action. It is only through the execution of positive tactics such as “to flirt, to impress, to entertain, and to challenge,” that Man gains dignity and fosters nobility. He becomes equally displeasing and forgivable, as he dismisses, ignores, and yells to make her leave, only then to visit in her pain.

Creation of a character should not come from perceiving their emotional states throughout a play, but rather through acute analysis of what a character wants and pursues in the script. Emotion is a consequence of interaction, and psychology is the product of experience. Playing positive tactics to engage an acting partner rather than negative tactics such as ‘to not displease Woman,’ gains reality and believability, rather than overly emotional, self-indulgent portrayals that are diluted by sentimentality and the playing of qualities. When the actor firmly grasps the technical aspects of stage

physicality and vocal inflection, he is able to create performance that arouses and engages an audience. This comes from the varied and climactic emotional experiences a trained actor brings to a production.

I have grown tremendously since beginning my work in May of 2011, and having completed my thesis performance, am now fully capable of creatively contributing to the physical business and vocal delivery of a performance. Through a contrasting and comparative analysis of both the rehearsal and performance processes for *The Flu Season* and *A Perfect Wedding* (role of Frank, directed by Dr. Amy Steiger: Spring 2011), as well as an analysis of Will Eno's *The Flu Season*, I offer my insights into the development of the role Man. The progression I have made as a physically and vocally capable actor, alongside a textual examination of psychological and internal aspects of the character's development, both provide the basis for a stronger acting process. I am beginning to place primary emphasis on connection to the scene partner and pursuit of objectives in performance. Bold acting choices are the result, leading to a deeper connection between audience and performer. This approach stimulates productive rehearsals, understanding of complex characterization, and more refined performances.

CHAPTER 1

REHEARSAL PROCESS

Finding the Play

It is rarely the opportunity of the actor to have a say in which role he will be cast. It is even less common for him to have options presented regarding the choice of a production. The early bird gets the worm, and this was the case in the selection of my thesis role. Having discussed with professor Tompkins working on my thesis role in the fall semester of 2010, we were able to consider choices over the following spring 2011 semester together. Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* was the strongest competitor, but Will Eno's *The Flu Season* would be the choice. Tompkins and I both admired the wit of the text and its insights into life. Its postmodern style allowed opportunities for creativity on a theatrical level and was quickly chosen. Of course both the final decision of the role I was to play and the production were the director's, but never before had I felt so involved in the work I would undertake. The sense of power, responsibility, and joy that came from this high level of involvement from beginning to end in the maturation of this production was revelatory, and it made an immense contribution to the growth and establishment of my acting process.

We could not wait for fall to begin interpreting the script, and we were fortunate enough to have Deana Gillispie already cast in the role of 'Woman' by late April. She would be doing this production as part of her completion of an undergraduate honors

thesis role, and her presence allowed us to pursue the rehearsal process early and with an exceptional degree of exploration of choices. She and I did auditions as Man and Woman together in April of 2011, and our parts were given that same day. We were able to laugh and interact freely at the auditions, directly influencing my future acting with her. The audition had proved that Deana would be receptive to try different vocal and physical acting choices. Keeping her from a telephone in one audition scene demonstrated our instant compatibility to do physical scene work, as well as our mutual sense of comedic timing. To have an acting partner with whom you feel comfortable exploring choices is crucial – to have her six months early is a blessing. This provided more than adequate time for the two of us to become comfortable working together – of particular importance in the execution of this production as Man and Woman are on a journey of both physical and emotional intimacy and vulnerability.

Thus the choice was made, and by the end of May 2011 we had decided to meet throughout the summer once a week on Saturday mornings, for two to three hours, occasionally resorting to a Friday (and one Thursday I missed unintentionally) now and then in order to rehearse the scenes between Man and Woman. Seeing that the majority of my dialogue was with her, I garnered a major advantage in that a large part of my stage business and dialogue would be familiar once the other four cast members could join the process in the fall. It seemed my summer would not be absent acting work, and for this I was grateful, not only for the results in performance but the learning that would take place in less rushed circumstances.

The Other Side of the Table

Tompkins asked Deana and me to watch all of the auditions for the other four parts in the production. We also acted with those who auditioned and instantly gained a sense of who fit the roles best. This strengthened our connection to the script and to those actors who ended up being cast, because it forced familiarity and new perspective about the other characters within the play. It also made future auditions a less frightening prospect. Assisting Tompkins make casting decisions proved that the people on the other side of the table hope for your success, because they too have problems to be solved. Casting a role is not an easy task, and an actor fitting a part does not always provide a solution. A director must look at the show from a larger perspective, placing actors strategically so as to best serve the play.

We were fortunate to have many talented actors audition, and this experience lent invaluable insight into the techniques of auditioning. For example, an actor may choose to move onstage before, during, or after the delivery of a line. Being on the casting side of the audition allowed me to observe the different physical choices of actors throughout different scenes. An understanding of timing and pacing grew as a director's sense also developed, and I noted the value and power of *when* an actor makes a physical action. Crossing the legs may be a simple gesture, but the actor empowers it by placing emphasis on how and when it occurs. Listening to the different vocal choices proved the importance of an actor's specificity in pitch and rhythm. The dialogue often harbors musical qualities, and it behooves the actor to explore and discover them both in auditions and performances.

Actor Expertise

The first rehearsal consisted of professor Tompkins and me working a telephone monologue on a Saturday morning in May of 2011, and I'll never forget the term he used in describing what rehearsing, performing, and developing this character would grant me: '*actor expertise*.' To define this term: the technical skills through which an actor effectively creates a character, both physically and verbally, in order to develop a more exciting, yet nuanced performance. They are the skills that garner one the ability to enter the theater again and again, providing both consistency and stability to performance, while simultaneously protecting the emotional/physical state of the actor's body and mind. This protection refers to both the mental and physical stress actors are susceptible to in performing emotionally volatile material. This skillset, in support of the traditional Stanislavski method, would begin to form the foundation of my acting process.

The focus of our early work was on my ability to manipulate and utilize inflection. "The word *inflection*, which comes from the Latin word for 'turn,' refers to the voice's rise and fall in pitch, from syllable to syllable."¹ It is only through mastery of inflection that an actor is able to achieve vocal variety in performance. "Try taking that line up," Tompkins would say, or "it might work better going down..." Never before have I had a director approach vocal work in such a technical manner, and it was this technical style of directing that allowed me to further evolve.

Speaking statements as questions and questions as statements, most often at Tompkins request, often introduced new understanding of potential meaning and subtext for the dialogue. At times I felt as though the early rehearsals were musical in nature,

¹ Robert Cohen, *Acting One* 5th edition. (McGraw-Hill: New York, 2008) 183.

due to our focus on pitch and tone in line delivery – the key elements in composing sound vocal technique. Incipiently it seemed as though I were singing the lines, seeing that my primary pursuit was hitting the correct pitch; it was only upon finding the proper note that an understanding of intention was gained. Here Tompkins introduced me to a term coined by former University of Louisville MFA recipient Douglas Wayne James: *Intention Inflection Analysis*.² I was already beginning to see that intention could be more acutely explored and understood by using a variety of inflections in experimenting with line delivery during the rehearsal process. Now I could begin to merge my understanding of Stanislavski with the tangible technique of *intention-inflection*.

This technique requires the actor to possess the correct Stanislavskian acting applications and keep dramatic tension present from moment-to-moment. ...By controlling the pitch inflection of lines in conjunction with correct intention, the actor has the ability to bring the text to life.³

I had worked with professor Tompkins on Christopher Durang's *Betty's Summer Vacation* in the spring semester of 2010, and he did introduce me to the technical use of inflection. However, a new approach highlighting an emphasis I place on intention – the pursuit of what my character wants within the play – and how this informs the way in which my character speaks (my use of pitch and tone to inform inflection), takes the use of inflection to a more artistic and complex level.

My vocal work of the past had focused on connecting the internal action of the character to external truth of the play – meaning I must understand the psychology of the

² Douglas Wayne James, *Reaching for the Horizon*. (University of Louisville Theatre Arts MFA Thesis; May 2008) 24.

³ Douglas Wayne James, *Reaching for the Horizon*. 24.

characters in order to develop and work the vocal characteristics. The earlier approach would have led to a soft and shaky voice used to portray nervousness and uncertainty. This was a by-product of the internal nature maintained in my early acting process: “When we have connected an external action with the internal action that motivates it, Stanislavski would say that we have *justified* the action.”⁴ This is not to say the Stanislavsky method is invalid, but as the *Intention Inflection Analysis* proposes, it may be interlaced with sound physical and vocal technique in order to vitalize a text and make clear to both the audience and the scene partner the motivation.

Creating a vocal performance solely upon the inner workings of the character limited an ability to not only create vocal variety in performance but also the vocal exploration and discoveries inside the rehearsal process. My voice, although emotionally and psychologically motivated, had lacked the technical specificity of an experienced actor.

Furthermore, placing emphasis on working from the ‘inside-out’ restricted an understanding and execution of physicality upon the stage. Developing *actor expertise* would require relinquishing the notion that acting is derived from the emotional and psychological conditions of the character, thus inherently pulling the actor into the moment of interaction. “Trust your instincts,” Tompkins said as we began blocking scenes in early June. Landing in new territory is truly exhilarating as an actor, but to have a director place the responsibility of discovering new physicality upon you is both invigorating and terrifying. For the first time in my theatre experience, I would be a

⁴ Robert Benedetti, *The Actor in You* 4th edition. (Pearson Education Inc., 2009) 15.

primary source of input in informing the blocking and stage business of each scene containing Man.

Throughout rehearsals I battled a juvenile and apprehensive physicality. Initial instincts as Man were to keep tension in the body and restrict any extraneous movements in order to portray apprehension and uncertainty, but this was wrong in that it was derived from a purely psychological standpoint. “Walking that way makes you look like a little boy, and you’re not,” Tompkins stated in July. I was not placing enough emphasis on moving in a way that would achieve what I, as Man, wanted from Woman. To try and achieve apprehension was an attempt to reach a state of existence – a mistake because it internalized the acting, prevented physical contact with Woman, and promoted the false idea that disconnectedness would serve the portrayal of this character. Man was a romantic lead, and in order for Woman to fall in love with him, I must impress, inspire, and excite – achieved with physical confidence, not reluctance. Only then would I captivate the audience through realistic interaction with my scene partner.

As the rehearsals progressed and Tompkins continuously emphasized an understanding of intention and inflection, I realized that the physical actions did not coordinate with the chosen intentions. Man clearly wants to become sexually involved with Woman, and though he may have some reserved moments of interaction, he, like anyone in pursuit of another, strategically employs tactics to achieve his goal. Instead of trying to be physically awkward and timid (a state of existence unlikely to attract sexual attention), the emphasis moved towards physical activity, like exercise and stretching, in order to impress and attract her sexually. Movements and posture began to shift dramatically as the desire to show off for Woman increased, as did my confidence. No

longer were the steps shortened and arms restrained; energy and freedom of movement were the results. It took many hours of rehearsal to discover Man's outgoing physical nature. In one hundred wrong attempts we found the perfect choice, avoiding many of my personal attitudes and doubts, which would be at odds with the dramatic needs of the play.

Metaphoric Physicality

In late September of 2011, about six weeks before the opening of *The Flu Season*, we began to fine tune the stage business and compose moments of metaphoric physicality. These were moments of physical interaction that had powerful implications regarding the characters and the story – moments that helped the audience understand their psychology and interaction. It was during the construction of such instances that I learned the importance of an actor's technical ability to execute choreography – it was as fundamental as line memorization. Developing the stage business and blocking for this show was essential, so much so that we forwent a traditional table reading of the script at the first group rehearsal. This instantly developed ensemble and we were able to get through the entire script on our feet in the amount of time we had scheduled. We garnered invaluable understanding of the play from the experience, as well as immediate connection to the physicality of the characters – Man liked his hands in his pockets.

In scene three of act one the Doctor and Nurse delivered long-winded monologues on their experiences of life and love, during which Man and Woman lay on psychiatric couches. It became evident that motionlessness would not assist the energy and drive of the scene, nor would it engage the audience. The opportunity for Man's outgoing

physicality arose, and I began to explore different physical choices while resting. “Work the foot and don’t be afraid to shift on the couch – you’ll know if it’s too much,” Tompkins suggested in mid-October. Physically repositioning while working the foot became the performance choice, and it made the character more human and accessible. It also helped communicate the internal aspects of Man’s anxiety to the audience, inspiring laughter regularly in performances.

At the end of scene seven in act one, Tompkins choreographed an interchange between Man and Woman as she attempted to exit on her line: “I should go.”⁵ His instructions were to pull her by the hand and then to lean away as I attempt to pull her back. She countered by pulling away, and I labeled this action the ‘metaphoric lean,’ because it represented a fundamental objective and conflict: Man’s want of Woman, and Woman’s timidity in engaging. The moment foreshadowed a kiss to come and built hope and suspense surrounding the pending relationship. This was by far the most powerful visual metaphor of the production, and though it was indeed a choreographed moment, it strengthened the acting by resonating within the objectives of the characters and the plot development of romance. It was incredible to experience the freedom to act within this artful composition, and the ‘metaphoric lean’ not only strengthened the context of the scene and production, but it also allowed for greater connection to scene partner and framed Man’s discovery of the desire to make love with Woman. By merging my own abilities with the director’s vision for the play, I was able to achieve a nuanced performance. According to Peter Brook, “The true actor recognizes that real freedom

⁵ This and all subsequent quotations from the playscript are from: Will Eno, *The Flu Season* (Dramatists Play Service, Inc.: New York, 2005) 24. For future citations only page numbers will be noted at the end of the sentence.

occurs at the moment when what comes from the outside and what is brought from within make a perfect blending.”⁶

More general concepts that the entire cast embodied were the ideas of sickness and cold. Outside of participating in an audible group cough in response to Epilogue’s decision of a title for the play, Man expressed his own discomfort through dialogue and physicality. “Oh good. I’m glad. I still feel bad. (Pause) Not because of anything to do with you.” (19) Here, after having run around Woman three times in circles to get exercise, I held the stomach, not only implying discomfort internally, but also indicating a metaphor for Man’s general disquiet. Tompkins also suggested to work the hands together, both reinforcing the many references in the script to it being cold and Will Eno’s witty abstract claiming to be pulled from the nonexistent film (invented by the playwright for the play) *By Dint of the Bridge’s Collapse*: “We trudge on, into the winter, losing ground, looking back, trying, telling a tale of summer, a sinking feeling amid the leaving geese and slush. It’s coming, little one. Truth. Real cold. Now, where’s my shoes?”⁷ This abstract set the tone for the arc of this tragic romance by highlighting the existential truths of loss and persistence while simultaneously embodying the concepts within what I’ve called ‘metaphoric physicality’ – it also offers a glimpse of the play’s comic nature.

⁶ Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1993) 69.

⁷ Will Eno, *The Flu Season* (from Abstract)

Collaborative Creativity

My rehearsal work on Charles Mee's *A Perfect Wedding* in the spring of 2011 with Dr. Steiger had a more communal process in which the blocking was informed by collaborative decisions between cast members and the director. Choreographer Mary Overlie created the 'Viewpoints' for movement purposes, and director Anne Bogart played a large part in developing/advocating their theatrical utility. The Viewpoints – defined (Overlie) through terms of space, time, shape, emotion, movement, and story – were directly applied. Of particular interest were space, time, and movement. Like Scott Cummings says of Bogart, Dr. Steiger “directs plays with the mind of a choreographer, scoring motion of bodies in time and space with a keen eye towards rhythm, visual composition, and other formal principles.”⁸

First the actors as a group found three major beats, or thought shifts within the scene to be blocked, to encourage ensemble development as well as an understanding of the visual and physical progression of the scene. Each production is a series of images, and Dr. Steiger helped us to experience how one image flows into the next; in essence, we were allowed to work through all of the awkward attempts in order to better understand the most efficient patterns of transitioning from one stage arrangement to the next.

After deciding on three beats, the actors within the scene collectively formed three stage pictures, or compositions, to apply to the beats marked. Following the formation of the three stage images the actors were asked to shift, from picture to picture, upon Dr. Steiger clapping her hands together. Here she engaged Bogart's adapted terms,

⁸ Scott T. Cummings. *Remaking American Theatre: Charles Mee, Anne Bogart, and the SITI Company*. (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2006) 6.

such as topography, rhythm, and tempo, so that we could explore and determine the most effective and interesting methods of transition and movement within scenes. This provided group unity in construction and understanding, as well as a variety of inputs since control was given to the cast; however, it did not place primary emphasis on individual development of vocal and physical technique regarding one's character.

Seeing that there were many actors upon the stage at most given moments during my scenes in *A Perfect Wedding*, the physical choices as Frank were made primarily to pull focus for my next line of dialogue. Furthermore, I moved and spoke in a way that allowed the relationships upon the stage to remain clear, because with so many actors onstage, knowing to whom a character is speaking and what they are speaking is of equal importance to how they are speaking to them. This unfortunately did not introduce the importance of inflection-awareness during the rehearsal process, although I am certain different pitch and tones were worked in scene rehearsals.

A Perfect Wedding involved many hours of rehearsal being devoted to learning a Bollywood dance piece as well as a burial procession similar to that of a Tibetan ritual. I also helped construct a chaotic mud-fight onstage, working directly with other cast members and the director in showing them how to be safe in executing their throws and combat moves. This responsibility was given to me on account of my experience with the Society of American Fight Directors: an organization that houses actors, teachers and fight masters responsible for promoting safe and proper technique in the execution of choreographed stage violence throughout the country. This was a great honor, and choreographing and adapting the fight to the set helped further my capacity to both

instruct and create theatre. Although the acting work was physical, some skills gained in this part of the process were directorial.

These large-scale events that took place dominated the mindset throughout rehearsals, and I am the first to admit Frank's complexity suffered. It was a mechanical performance at times, mainly due to a lack of intention and my personal choice to use emotion memory in working and performing the scene where Frank hears of his mother's sudden death. The moment required more than any memory of mine could fill, not to mention the technique disconnected from the moment, and it was never made clear what I, as Frank, wanted after hearing the tragic news.

The process highly encouraged ensemble building, yet I never felt as though I fully created a believable character in Frank. Dr. Vandenbroucke, a professor in Theatre Arts at the University of Louisville, stated of my performance, "I don't see you taking the stage forcefully enough. The character may have some qualities of a milquetoast, but the actor can't or Frank seems to disappear, as he does."⁹ This was clear evidence of a need to further develop the craft in order to successfully define character and sustain his presence throughout the entirety of performance. However, without the experiences in performing Frank in *A Perfect Wedding*, this issue of maintaining presence would not have been brought to attention, and I would not have been able to experience the power of collaborative creation in rehearsal.

Great individual achievements were made rehearsing *A Perfect Wedding*; learning to collaborate creatively amongst an ensemble would be the most fundamental lesson I learned at the University of Louisville, and it came to the forefront of my process while

⁹ Dr. Russell Vandenbroucke, "Graduate Student Evaluation". (University of Louisville Theatre Arts MFA Program; Apr. 25, 2011)

working on *A Perfect Wedding*. Dr. Steiger said of the effort, “Conrad is a remarkably hard worker and has been really helpful in keeping the rest of the cast on task. ...His willingness to be a mentor to the younger actors and lead by example has been fantastic.”¹⁰ I had established myself as a leading presence in the rehearsal room, and also the firm belief that great actors live for rehearsal. As Tompkins often quipped, “The British always say: rehearsals are interesting, performing is a bore.” To act by nature is to collaborate, and the joy comes from problem-solving and discovering choices within the rehearsal process.

Therefore I must state that both the rehearsal process for *A Perfect Wedding* and *The Flu Season* made significant contributions to growth as an actor. By learning to both create collaboratively and support the role independently, I could better produce an effective and realistic portrayal. The rehearsal room is the actor’s safe-haven, and it is the responsibility of every actor to utilize this space as a sanctuary for both internal and external discovery of character. This leads to truthful action and clarity of intention in performance, allowing an audience to fully enjoy the arc of the character’s progression. By mastering the technical aspects of theatre creation via the rehearsal process, one supplies greater inclination for an entertaining and dynamic performance.

¹⁰ Dr. Amy Steiger, “Graduate Student Evaluation”. (University of Louisville Theatre Arts MFA Program; Apr. 25, 2011)

CHAPTER 2

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Ambiguity in Art

In most cases I begin work by simply analyzing the name the author has chosen for the character; however, in the case of Will Eno's *The Flu Season*, the name 'Man' does little to guide the research and exploration of the character, other than declaring the obvious truth that I biologically fit the role and am born with an understanding of what it is to be male. To inform the character development, I turn to the dialogue and circumstances of the story: two patients, Man and Woman, falling in and then out of love within the Crossroads Psychiatric Retreat Center.

The story of Man and Woman coexists alongside the journey of the Doctor and Nurse, who also aspire to love one another as they attempt to help Man and Woman work through their psychological and emotional issues via group therapy sessions. While these four characters interact, two outside characters, Epilogue and Prologue, set the scenes via dialogue, while also questioning both the actions of the story and the obstacles authors face in creating a play – both Epilogue and Prologue have direct interaction with the audience. They represent contradicting perspectives of the author, with Prologue proposing positive reinforcement and humor as the plot propels toward romance, and Epilogue offering a cynical outlook on the prospect of success in life and love: both between Man and Woman, and an author and his work. The conflict of Epilogue and

Prologue represents a conscious duality the author maintains concerning the creation of the play and the notion that it should promote the idea of a benevolent world of positivity. Epilogue suggests an ambiguous world open to observation and variety of interpretation. This world-view is essential to any actor hoping to nourish the theatrical skills and non-judgmental attitude necessary to pursue an array of characters.

The title of the play is as ambiguous as the characters' names, seeing that the story is not about getting the Flu or any other particular illness. Rather it is a metaphor, one that does not foreshadow a happy ending. It is Epilogue who, in the second speech of the script, establishes the actual title: "The new title stands for the fatigue, for all the sick-days, the sick years, wasted in coming up with a title at all. *The Flu Season*." (11) Since this replaces Prologue's previously posed "*The Snow Romance*," (11) the play structurally establishes a systematic presentation of positive to negative. It is in this structure of optimism to pessimism that Man and Woman's journey is reflected. Act one culminates with Man and Woman falling in love and assumedly having sex, only to resolve with an abortion and the suicide of Woman near the end of act two.

No Judgment

I cannot fully emphasize the importance of approaching man nonjudgmentally. Discarding any judgment of dialogue and actions is key in beginning to understand the workings of Man, or any character, which allows an actor to develop the role with a capacity for change and development. It is extremely hard to justify the emotional distance between Man and Woman that is evident at the beginning of act two because of the physical/emotional intimacy of the romantic pursuit in act one and the culminating

sexual encounter in the bedroom scene at its close. Here Man's focus is primarily placed upon the pursuit of Woman, but in act two the future becomes vague as he becomes internal and fixated on his own clinical condition and the apparent arrival of a new 'woman' in his life.

He begins facing psychiatric evaluations, and these in turn intensify Man's hypochondria and irritability. "I took a Spielberger Rage and Anger Index, a Van Beck Depression Composite, a Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale, ...a Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory." (32) It is upon completion of these tests that Man starts reading the dictionary and completely fabricates a disease and definition in conversation with Woman – only after several attempts to research the disease did I confirm it was nonexistent. He says, "Hilaktia: Disorder named for Greek ruler whose vivid nightmares of winter caused him to die and his body to manifest all signs of having frozen, despite the season being summer..." (32) The systematic treatment launches him into a world of confusion, and this distracts Man from his moral responsibilities to Woman and the unborn baby he created.

Besides the frustration and anger created by fluctuating social values many people also experience inner hostility that is derived from a sense of rootlessness. This is partially the result of value conflict, but it is also due to the increased isolation of the individual in our society.¹¹

This transition, from act one to two, provides the basis for conflict between Man and Woman, as well as powerful insight for the actor regarding Man's social anxiety, naivety, sexual and artistic needs, and inability to connect with Woman in act two. His desires

¹¹ Elizabeth R. Skoglund, *To Anger, With Love* (Harper and Row: New York, 1977) 19.

control his thoughts and actions, not his sense of logic or position in the universe, and though he may appear selfish, it is better described as neurotic, isolated and unaware. His true nature is honorable, and he is just as much a victim of the effects of societal anxiety. It is these negative qualities that would be too easy to play and thus turn him into a villain – let the audience make up its own mind.

Man's Battle is My Own

Anxiety is something that many people face on a daily basis, yet most people are not being admitted to psychiatric retreat centers. It is safe to venture that Man experienced varied levels of anxiety throughout the story of *The Flu Season*, but the reason why he experienced this anxiety is of more importance. Again, it is through technique and an understanding of a character's intention that one properly defines a performance, yet past experiences of a character also influence the portrayal. There is indication in the script, although brief, to Man having experienced the loss of someone personal: "There's enough room in the ocean for everyone in the world to have room to drown in. Do you see? ...But don't leave me, don't leave me, ...please don't leave me, please – " (27) This subtle outbreak and powerful moment in the script makes Man's battle my own.

I too knew the power of loss. When I was a sophomore at the University of Kentucky in 2005, my major had just been switched from civil engineering to theatre – a decision that the family both supported and questioned. The interrogation I most remember took place one spring morning around 5:30AM in Dad's Toyota SUV; we

were on the way to fish below Kentucky Dam. He asked why acting had been the choice, and it was a question I still seek to answer today.

My parents had divorced during in my fourth grade year at Greenville Elementary School, only to be followed in the sixth grade by the murder of my sister's childhood friend. She and I had done church plays together, and this trauma, on top of the recent divorce, relocation, and distance from my father, was more than enough damage to send an introvert spiraling further inwards. Anxiety, isolation, and a pessimistic outlook took control of my young mind, and the saying within the family that I was "born a little old man," began to truly resonate in the world.

Immediately after the divorce of my parents, particularly my mother thought it best that I visit a psychiatrist. This provided, outside of the emotional discomfort from the childhood experience, invaluable insight into the mind and emotions of someone like Man in a psychiatric situation. The actor was born, for within several sessions' time I had developed the ability to play the psychiatrist – I convinced her of my sanity by pretending to be well. She later told my mother she had never seen a child handle a divorce so well, although sadness overwhelmed me. All of the efforts were to minimize her concern for my mental health and the number of times I would have to visit. Performance got me out of the therapist's office, but to merely satisfy the system was not ample help. The emotions had been put in a bottle and corked.

After high school, a lack of organized sports deprived me of physical competition – something that had been a habitual part of life since childhood. Whether it was swimming, golf, basketball, tennis, or baseball, I was always participating on an athletic level alongside the academic. Not until adulthood did I realize that they had been outlets

for stress and mental anxiety. Being part of a competitive team gave purpose and identity, thus fostering a sense of both individual and social value. I was able to continue playing sports recreationally, but it did not fully satisfy the need to perform and have group identity. The search for an outlet led to the pursuit of theatre – a place where both my individual and communal efforts could flourish. It was an artistic home where my love of literature, history, and storytelling would be utilized and embraced, offering me maximum potential for happiness.

“It brings me great joy and purpose, and more importantly, performing is the only time in my life where I let go – escaping my own neurosis,” I told my fifty-three year old father as we cruised down the Western Kentucky Parkway that April morning in 2005. He nodded his head with a closed mouth indicating his understanding. This was the first time in my adult life that I had openly discussed any inclination of mental imbalance and admitting it to Dad bolstered my confidence. By using the negative perception of my own self-criticism and insecurity as the retort to Dad’s acting inquisition, I had freed myself of any doubt regarding the new chosen craft. This freedom would prove essential in having the confidence needed to perform, leading to the role of Man.

The divorce, psychiatrist, and life-long involvement with sports all influenced an understanding of Man. The divorce of my parents established deep resentment for the insistence of social structure like families, supporting comprehension of his dissatisfaction. He says, “And I see you wander through life in a social architecture called the family, the rubble remains of which we build our new relations on.” (15) The psychiatrist provided firsthand experience in being questioned by a mental health professional, while the sports provided accessibility in physicalizing the characterization.

The circumstances of the character were similar to the experiences of my life and therefore aided in developing the performance of Man. Firsthand experience is beneficial in that it helps you understand and define the world of the character and play.

CHAPTER 3

PERFORMANCE

Theatrical Therapy and the Need to Perform

Hardly a seat was left in the house on November 16, 2011, opening night for our production of *The Flu Season*. A process that had started five months earlier had finally reached its destination, and we were ready to present our work to a live audience. The countless hours spent rehearsing and creating the performance allowed the cast to minimize anxiety, essential in consummating this production, because nervous actors cannot portray the world of the Crossroads Psychiatric Retreat Center – tension is the enemy. There was great potential for comedy in this production, and our efforts to play for realism proved to be advantageous in promoting audience laughter, as well as their silent contemplation. It was upon completing our first show and successfully moving the audience that the epiphany occurred: performing is not just fun – it is necessary. Perhaps Tompkins and the British had it wrong.

The typical insult that someone was not paid enough attention to as a child applies truthfully, for I do indeed find the required/desired level of attention that is given to me via performance – I refuse to feel guilty about it. Not only does it give affirmation, it provides the opportunity to create a bond with immediate response. The art of performing is adaptation, for by nature you interact and adjust with the audience; therefore theatre, an art usually involving instant criticism/approval, is my

psychiatric session. To act in the theatre brings me focus and inner peace; it is simultaneously creation, performance, and therapy.

You Have to Keep It Going

“Keep the energy up. You can feel it – you’ll know when you’re losing them. You have to be able to turn it up, and then down – just the right amount,” Tompkins advised after our opening success. Adaptation had been the method of survival, and I was now learning that it would be the key ingredient in my acting success.

The ability to adapt could only come from experience and technique, for in order to have an awareness of the audience, you must also have an acute awareness of self. Because of our extended rehearsal period and time with the script, memorization and blocking were sound, granting the first true experience with “dual consciousness.”

The two levels of consciousness, then, are that of the *character* pursuing his or her objective and that of the *actor* observing and adjusting the performance for the sake of the spectators... Different performance situations may require more or less emphasis on one level of consciousness or the other.¹²

As mentioned previously, early Stanislavskian theory dominated my mindset as a beginning actor, and I firmly believed in his notion of “public solitude” and its power in connecting an audience to a “realistic” performance. “He calls this psychophysical state *public solitude*. In it, actors tune out anything external to the world of the play. They behave in public as if in private.”¹³ The single greatest development as an actor at the University of Louisville comes from my newly developed ability to maintain a “dual

¹² Robert Benedetti, *The Actor in You*, 49.

¹³ Alison Hodge, *Actor Training*, 9.

consciousness” in performances for the entirety of the run, and the easing of the grip upon public solitude. Performance is for an audience, and this production marked my realization of audience awareness.

Beware the Doldrums

The Flu Season ran from Nov. 16 through Nov. 20, 2011, and five of six performances were at 8:00PM nightly. All of our night showings had substantial audience numbers; however, one show was scheduled for Saturday Nov. 19 at 3:00PM, different from the usual 3:00PM Sunday matinee that had been typical of past University of Louisville productions. Being a third year MFA student, I was aware of this difference and the potentially small audience that a Saturday afternoon would attract – my suspicions were frightfully accurate.

Approximately twenty to thirty people attended the Saturday afternoon performance, and the greatest challenge of my theatrical career was overcome. A quiet and minimally responsive audience made it incredibly difficult to maintain the energy and tempo of the performance. Without the support of audience laughter, it felt as if I were a sailor, caught in the windless doldrums – there was simply no wind to help me get the ship moving. It became evident that “keeping it going,” was as important as any lesson I had learned, for this audience demanded a brisk pace and tight transitions – hard to accomplish once the momentum had slowed. Yet we overcame the drought and stayed true to the show we had built; we were proud and committed to the work we had done. Upon my expressing concern after a lackluster response to our first scene together, Deana responded, “Don’t worry – we’ll give the same effort and do the same show – nothing is

different. We play our intentions.” To hear such wisdom from my undergraduate colleague imbued the performance with pride and energy, making me realize how lucky I had been to have such a professional experience in an academic setting. With rising energy and intent upon one another in the moment, we succeeded in entertaining the small group. No audience was more important than another.

The Reviews

It was only through the progression of the acting technique in rehearsal that true understanding of timing, intention, and inflection were realized. The role was so much a part of existence that the performance came naturally, and I was honored by the comments of professors who confirmed the instinct that my acting process had evolved. I was able to develop a more complex, creative, and refined performance than they had seen in the past.

It’s really lovely to see an actor put so many pieces together after two plus years of study, practice, application, and dedication. He seems to have integrated everything in this part... he is “real” and “believable” as a human being and also as a patient in a psychiatric hospital. ...I like his physicality when, for example, he runs around the table stage left a couple of times or when he zooms in with the little airplane.¹⁴

Dr. Vandenbroucke’s words were rewarding in that they confirmed my pursuit of truth and realism in performance and the specific moments of physicality which Tompkins and I had worked so hard to discover. It was also a complete turn-around from the previous

¹⁴ Dr. Russell Vandenbroucke, “Graduate Student Evaluation”. (University of Louisville Theatre Arts MFA Program; Dec. 2, 2011)

review of Frank, acknowledging growth and success as an actor with presence. “It looks like fun, but it is a lot of work. They don’t see the work nor should they,” Tompkins would say throughout rehearsals. It took an extraordinary amount of work and to have that recognized is fulfilling.

It was important to create an arc in performance, so that the audience feels as though the characters have completed a journey and arrived at a new point. This was achieved, despite the risk of producing a disconnected portrayal of a psychiatric hospital and Epilogue’s closing lines insisting, “It was a pile of words,” (43) and that “There is no end.” (44) There was a clear progression, and the audience followed the development and unraveling of Man and Woman’s time together, as well as the stories of the Doctor, Nurse, Prologue and Epilogue through to the end.

The character as written has an odd hollowness that might risk being played as a sort of “disaffected hipster” type, but I didn’t get that from Conrad at all. I loved the sweetness and naiveté with which he played the character in the beginning, as well as the fact that he didn’t overdo his transformation into the “bad guy” at the end. It was as if he was simply unaware he had done anything hurtful.¹⁵

Dr. Steiger’s discussion of my approach and effect upon the character again fostered feelings of satisfaction, for in them I found evidence of my process’s evolution. The “disaffected hipster” she spoke of directly addressed the concerns of playing qualities within the performance, and the avoidance of such a portrayal was a testament to my working process in developing the role.

¹⁵ Dr. Amy Steiger, “Graduate Student Evaluation”. (University of Louisville Theatre Arts MFA Program; Dec. 2, 2011)

The most powerful insight she offered was that of Man's transformation from act one to act two. The notion that Man was "unaware" of his harmful actions towards Woman was exactly how I had hoped the audience to perceive the character, because it was never his intention to cause Woman pain. It was his neurosis and self-obsession that created distance between him and Woman, not his malevolent nature or hatred for her. Because of the newly established technique of intention-inflection and capacity for dual-consciousness I was able to distinguish between performing a quality and pursuing an objective – the mark of a trained actor. "I thought he was very successful at the role, and I hope that this completely clears up his notions of what acting, rather than qualities, is all about."¹⁶ These were words I'd hoped to hear for the past three years – words of congratulations and acknowledgement of improvement. From mentor to mentee, the knowledge had been handed down, and with it came the power and responsibility to produce high quality theatre. The confidence needed to audition and work professionally had been attained, and the passion for lead acting established.

Letting Go and Looking Back

Like the athlete at the end of his season, the actor too feels sorrow and contemplates moments in his mind repeatedly, as if able to change the outcome. Such is the life of any artist, moving from the creation of one work to the next, and the trick to existing in this manner is to let go of that which you have created. This does not mean that the experience of past roles is forgotten; it continues to inform each and every performance of a career.

¹⁶ Prof. James Tompkins, "Graduate Student Evaluation". (University of Louisville Theatre Arts MFA Program; Dec 2, 2011)

The dialogue and nature of Man is very much a part of my psyche, long after the production has ended, and it is important that it not invade other work. As a member of the University of Louisville's Children's Repertory Company, my acting mindset shifts across a large range of ages. This brings great joy, a reason to get out of bed early, and makes moving forward easier by shifting the focus to a different performance. I am also currently rehearsing the role of 'Leo Szilard' in Dr. Russell Vandenbroucke's play titled *Atomic Bombers*; it is this type of prolific acting I hope to do throughout my career, in film, television, and theatre. It is empowering to be at a stage as an artist where the process of creation and experience of the product grant equal satisfaction.

The progression of Man supports other work in that it has helped me become a more technically sound actor. The long rehearsal process is similar to the extended run of performances I have with the Children's Repertory Company, and intention-inflection awareness improves the rate of laughter and communication within elementary schools. An understanding of gesture and metaphoric expression continues to inform the physical work on Leo Szilard, strengthening the attempt to capture the essence of an actual man of history who hoped to raise awareness and prevent the use of nuclear weaponry before, during and after the World War II era.

Acting, like life, is a process – one that inherently transforms over time. Each role in a career reflects an actor's past, present, and future, for in the live performance of character one observes the aura of an individual and the specific interpretation he applies to the universal circumstances of a play and life. To act is to do, and in doing one affects the world and environment within which he lives. To improve upon that which has been done is the work of the actor, as well as humanity.

...your sense of purpose is what will give you courage and power as an actor. It grows from your respect for your own talent, your love for the specific material you are performing, and your desire to use both to serve your audience. It is this drive to be *at service* through your art that will finally overcome the self-consciousness of your ego and carry you beyond yourself, giving you a transcendent purpose from which comes dignity, fulfillment, and ongoing artistic vitality.¹⁷

The Burden of Being Man

It was a tremendous burden playing a character representative of nearly half the human population, and equally frightening to know his words and actions harbored potential offense to the other half. Man displayed fickle nature and admitted his abandonment of Woman, “Her, I loved. Unlike you and the woman I’m now leaving you for.” (35) It was an early fear that Man seemed like a jerk, simply abandoning Woman for the next available date, but he has his reasons and Eno gives him his due – he is not simply a villain. Woman forgave Man for the pain he had caused, “Consider yourself forgiven, your almost pretty eyes forgotten” (40). This released him from their union but not from the burden of guilt after her death. “What should I say?” (42) This effort of Man trying to connect signified honorable intent and a desire to understand why such a thing has happened. To portray men as caring creatures, although they sometimes bring about emotional damage as well as joy through the pursuit of their desires, was both a burden and honor.

¹⁷ Robert Benedetti, *The Actor in You*, 117.

CHAPTER 4

RETROSPECTIVE

In completing the thesis work on the role of Man I have matured as both an actor and human being. My ability to collaborate within the group while simultaneously creating an individually nuanced performance has grown exponentially, making me forever grateful to professor Tompkins and Dr. Steiger for the invaluable performance opportunities granted. With higher understanding of theatrical tactic and utility, via *actor expertise* and *collaborative creativity*, my likelihood of success is undoubtedly improved. The questions an artist must propose are: how does this process contribute to the study of acting, what are its limitations, and how does it further progress? Successful performance is not terminal; it is the foundation on which future successes are built. The actor's process, as well as the character variety, needs to be challenged and broadened constantly in order to sharpen already existent techniques and hone new methods of character development.

This study will help any beginning to intermediate actor discover the power and joy of exploring vocal and physical variety in the rehearsal process, as well the need for intention-based action in the portrayal of a character. The notes and suggestions of a director might be technical, and the task of the actor is to explore their validity in performance. If you feel insecure about such exploration, bravery is essential. Without a willingness to try a variety of vocal deliveries and imaginative physical choices

you miss the opportunities to bring detail to your acting and discover more nuance in performance. This technical method, when applied with the traditional teachings of Stanislavski, provides an emotional/physical structure for an actor. By coordinating the inflection of the voice to the intention of the character, one procures the freedom to play spontaneously with the scene partner and the audience. The fear of losing a line vanishes; the anxiety turns to adrenaline. A dual-consciousness is born and the actor gains control, captivating the audience with his wit, craft, and ability to perform. At the same time the audience manipulates the actor into doing what is exciting and makes sense.

Acting is the combination of mental and physical, literary and athletic – to perform well one must practice with intent, while promoting the humility and humor becoming of a good humanist, always open to suggestion and criticism. We tell the stories of men and women in society, often imbuing performance with the experiences of our own life, yet these personal memories are not to be taken lightly or given to the public. The art and respect comes from the technique, and love and work are the results of commitment and passion – always evident in the performance. I share personal experiences to display how an actor may effectively apply personal history and an acting process.

The future is uncertain regarding performance work, although I will be teaching drama at the Bellarmine campus for the Governor's Scholar Program in the summer of 2012. My own creativity is again summoned and the curriculum is my responsibility. It is an honor to be part of this program as a faculty member, especially since the summer

of 2012 will be a decade after my participation and completion of the program in July of 2002 at Center campus as a drama student.

The return to the stage came as a complete renewal of spirit and ethic. My social interest has been stirred and my stage presence confirmed strong. A newly established acting process developed in academic and performance classes, as well as rehearsals, provided intention and technique in performance as well as character development. Singing a song on key and hitting the right pitch is not enough to sway emotions – the song must be supported with passion and feeling, once the performer has reached a certain level of skill. As Tompkins says, “Technique and truth go together.”

Having the proper inflection repeated night after night is not as valuable as trying a line on an audience one way this night, and discovering it works better a different way the next. You never alter the business of the production to the point of confusing/endangering fellow cast members, but spontaneity and the ability to exist and react vulnerably in the moment are priceless assets to the actor. You work as hard as possible creating the limits of performance, unleashing the ability to define it from within or adjust it from without when the signals from the audience tell you they do not understand.

Acting is doing. By nature any acting is representational and presentational, and when the imaginations of directors and committed actors combine, it is also theatrically beautiful. The result is a satisfied and entertained audience, accomplished through the actor’s trained and passionate pursuit of a character’s wants, alongside an awareness of audience reception. As Sanford Meisner said, “Let there be no question about what I’m saying here. If you do something, you really do it! Did you walk up the steps to this

classroom this morning? ...You didn't skip up, right? You didn't' ballet pirouette? You really walked up those steps."¹⁸

You have to go for it.

¹⁸ S. Meisner and D. Longwell, *Meisner on Acting* (New York: Vintage, 1987) 17.

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