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# Finding exuberance for the role Shelby in Baltimore.

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FINDING EXUBERANCE FOR THE ROLE  
SHELBY IN *BALTIMORE*

By

Danielle Smart  
B.F.A., North Carolina, 2014

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

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Arts

Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2017



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A Thesis Approved on

May 23, 2017

by the following Thesis Committee:

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Dr. Jenn Calvano

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Dr. Ann Hall

## DEDICATION

First, my thesis is dedicated to my Lord and savior Jesus Christ, whose principles have taught me discipline and eloquence. Also, to my ancestors and parents who have paved my path through their sacrifices. Finally, this thesis should serve as an inspiration to the artist who has had to struggle for any advancement they have made. Through great persistence, pure will and determination to forge their own destiny. When no one else sees in you, what you know is there- FIGHT!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my graduate committee, especially Nefertiti Burton.

ABSTRACT

FINDING EXUBERANCE FOR THE ROLE SHELBY IN *BALTIMORE*

Danielle Smart

May 23, 2017

This thesis documents my discovery of exuberance as the key to a successful performance and reveals the challenges I faced in developing a character whose major actions in the play fall into the category of masking (i.e. hiding, avoiding, dodging).

I define exuberance and discuss how I came to understand that sustaining exuberance requires a great deal of technical expertise specifically in acting, movement and voice in order to accommodate the demands of the character. I contend that exuberance also requires commitment and nurturing of the actor's personal artistic vision. This thesis will discuss some of the difficulties I faced in building the character, Shelby Wilson; the application of class work that served me best in rehearsal; and the evolution of trust needed in the text, the ensemble and myself.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I document the challenges faced in developing Shelby Wilson, a character whose major actions in the play, *Baltimore*, fall into the category of masking (e.g. hiding, avoiding and dodging). I detail my discovery of exuberance as the key to a successful performance in order to provide a guide for the ongoing development of my artistic process.

This thesis consists of four chapters: Pre-rehearsal; Rehearsal; Performance; and Reflection. Chapter One discusses my initial attitude toward the role I was given, my response to the dialogue and the themes in the play, and my analysis of the character, Shelby Wilson. Chapter Two discusses my explorations in the areas of movement and voice, and the acting choices I made during the development of my character. I also layout the challenges I encountered with the role due to my lack of trust in the text, the ensemble and myself. Chapter Three details the discoveries I made about my character in performance, the confidence I gained from approving audiences and the conditions that helped me to channel exuberance in a way that I never really could in rehearsal. Chapter Four examines what I could have done better in the process. I mention certain elements of performance that I found later in research for my thesis that would have been beneficial to know in rehearsal or even before embarking on *Baltimore*. I also reference Patsy Rodenburg's research in *Second Circle*, to determine how I should move forward in my approach to professional theatrical performance.

Identifying what led to my lack of exuberance is important in determining how I eventually found the energy needed for the role. My first encounter with the term “exuberance” as it relates to theatre came during my second year of graduate school when I began teaching Acting for Non-Majors using the text *Acting One* by Robert Cohen.

Cohen’s writings are rooted in the teaching of Konstantine Stanislavski, a famous theatre practitioner and theorist who built an acting system meant to inform the actor’s full transformation into a character. Exuberance is a necessary component in an actor’s ability to embody a role. Cohen describes exuberance as a mixture of performance energy and a positive uncritical attitude (Cohen, 9). I take his definition a step further and define exuberance as the vibrancy or heightened level of energy an actor must bring to a performance. Too little exuberance is pedestrian, while too much can border on over-acting. Exuberance encompasses many terms such as energy, attentiveness, liveliness and presence.

The imbalance of exuberance for a performer is indicative of many things. Too little or too much energy could be the result of not fully understanding the character, misuse of the body, deficit of technical expertise, lack of confidence, or the actor’s personal baggage.

### **A Brief Summary of Baltimore**

*Baltimore*, written by Kirsten Greenidge, tells the story of Shelby Wilson, a twenty-year old African-American college student who strives to achieve academic and social excellence at the fictional Sudbury University in New England. Shelby, a sports medicine major, is employed by the university as a Resident Advisor for freshmen in an on-campus housing facility.

The conflict of the play arises when Shelby receives word that one of her residents has defaced another resident's door with racist graffiti. Instead of going back to her dorm, Shelby hides out on campus and pleads with others to help her handle the situation. Eventually, Shelby is lured out of hiding by her best friend, Grace, and returns to her dorm to confront her residents. However, by that time they have developed a great deal of resentment towards her and are no longer interested in her advice. In a last effort to gain control of the situation, Shelby goes to Dean Hernandez's office to appeal for guidance, but she is told that this is her moment to grow and that she must rise to the occasion and address the problem herself.

### **Determining My Thesis Approach**

When I first read *Baltimore*, I was thrilled that the playwright purposely included so many races on one stage. It enhanced the story and made the narratives more believable. These elements made the play attractive to me but that wasn't always the case.

Before beginning this academic school year I had an idea of what I wanted to explore as a thesis topic and that had nothing to do with *Baltimore*. I was having issues with tackling romantic intimacy and vulnerability on stage. This was a challenge I realized I needed to overcome before leaving the University of Louisville's MFA program. I had a plan for my third year and had pinpointed exactly what challenge I thought would serve me best. When I was assigned to perform in *Baltimore*, I noted that I was going to have to alter my goal for writing my thesis. The play didn't lend itself to the type of exploration I had in mind. Coming to terms with the fact that my thesis wasn't going to be about what I wanted was the first complication I faced; it affected my moral.

Time constraints surrounding the Christmas holiday and turnover time for a completed thesis posed another set of concerns for me. I can laugh now at how prepared I was for something that wasn't going to come to pass, but it definitely wasn't humorous then. I learned then that some things are "un-plannable".

The decision of what character was thesis "worthy" was obvious for me. Between Leigh and Shelby, the two African American female characters, only Shelby has a transformation in the play. She also required the greatest stretch for me as an actress. I considered the discipline it would require to step into a character that has a completely different point of view than me. Although the role didn't call for romantic intimacy, I found that physical development could prove equally useful to explore.

The first thing I did to prepare for the role was to read the play several times. I read the first time for leisure, again to identify the major action of the play, and another time to get a sense of how Shelby interacted with other characters.

I began to think a great deal about what discoveries I could work towards in *Baltimore*. I was compelled by the idea of hiding and constraint. My guiding questions were: How does the actor use their body to influence the language and work towards their goals? How can a character use physicality to inform their emotions? How do I incorporate all of the intricate physical work I'd learned in movement classes? These fueled the beginning of my rehearsal process. I had to feel that I'd done something innovative like the acting greats. I wrote out the actions for the scenes that included Shelby. I scaled them from least to most active. Having done some character analysis and having gotten a feel for Shelby, about three weeks before rehearsals began I decided that

I wanted to write my thesis on physicality. I was sold on the idea of exploring the effect of body language on stage.

## CHAPTER ONE: PRE-REHEARSAL

### **Diversity Training/ Cultural Awareness**

The racially motivated theme was the most compelling part of the play for me. Aside from being conscious in the delivery of the text to audiences, there was a need to be careful of the psychological and emotional well being of the artists involved due to the sensitive nature of the show. Everyone's comfort was essential in the building of ensemble and confidence in performance. The director, Nefertiti Burton, arranged for Marian Vasser, from the office of the Vice Provost of Diversity and International Programs to begin a dialogue about racial tolerance with the cast and other faculty involved in the production. First, Vasser taught us the effective ways to listen to a person in regular conversation. This was an ingenious concept with which to begin our session because the play required compassion that can only be achieved by listening to and "seeing" the experiences of others. Later, we broke into groups of two or three and spent time focusing on our different backgrounds as artists. We discussed stereotypes surrounding race that we have heard and some that we even felt were true.

The conversations that stemmed from Vasser's workshop built a strong base for trust within the ensemble. Robert Cohen describes trust as one of the necessary starting places of acting. He notes in his experience as an acting instructor and director that "trust develops first out of self-confidence and out of shared activities among the acting group...because acting is something you do with, and in front of, other people...trust is a

mutual relationship between you and your fellow actor, a relationship marked by giving, sharing and common concerns” (Cohen, 20). The most striking part about that quote for me is the acknowledgement of mutual concerns amongst the group being necessary.

Because everyone has their own experiences and perspectives of the world, individuals in a group are hardly ever of the same accord on any given issue. However, there is something comforting in knowing that we don’t have to share the same sentiments about everything in order to form an artistic collaboration. For the sake of clarification, this is not to say there shouldn’t be a regard for the themes of a show amongst involved parties. But it is hard to imagine having done the show with individuals who weren’t passionate about the themes of the play.

In relation to the training we received that day, part of its effectiveness for me lies in the fact that I was able to immediately recognize one of the negative habits I have in communication that developed over time. When a person is speaking to me I tend to nod my head and fill in their pauses with inaudible agreements or disagreements. This can be problematic because I may be subconsciously giving off cues of disinterest to the individual I’m communicating with. This is important to note especially dealing with heavy topics such as race and LGBTQ rights. I noted this habit in my rehearsal journals and started working to implement a more effective alternative in my everyday life. For the first time, I recall listening with a heightened awareness of what my face was expressing. I paid close attention to the non-verbal energy I was producing.

Robert Benedetti is the author of *The Actor at Work*. When discussing trust within the ensemble he claims that the goal of an ensemble should be alignment and states that there are three conditions that should be met to achieve this objective: “First commitment

[...] Second, support for your partner [...] finally, free and open communication” (Benedetti 68). In the case of our diversity workshop, the second step to unification amongst ensemble is most applicable. In regards to supporting the partner Benedetti notes, “we all have different reasons for acting, different reasons for doing particular roles; whatever our reasons, we must support each other’s objectives, even if we do not share them” (Benedetti 68).

The bond we forged by the end of the process was in wide contrast to how we began the production. I had no prior relationships with any of the other students in the show. As the rehearsals ensued, we became more comfortable with each other. In fact, a few of the cast members shared stories of racism they had encountered from outside of the theatre, some had even occurred since starting work on the play. The confidence my cast mates had in sharing their experiences with us solidified the meaningfulness of the work we were doing and helped me to remain focused and diligent in the work. This healthy growth is attributed to the solid foundation that was established through our cultural awareness session.

### **Text Supported Script Analysis**

In the beginning of my theatre training in high school, I was taught that every character has a goal and uses tactics to achieve it. Therefore, the first thing I do when I get a script is to identify what my character wants. The character may have many things they desire, and those may vary from scene to scene but all the character’s “wants” must fit inside a larger goal, referred to as the “super objective.” In each scene the character employs tactics to manipulate other characters and/or the audience, all as a means to achieve their goal. Goals and tactics should be active. They may require vocal variety,



physical gestures or even silence to achieve. Shelby's super objective in *Baltimore* is to get someone to help her address the racial conflict between her residents in order to diffuse the situation in her dorm. She finds herself in a test of her maturity and leadership abilities. The tactics I used for her were "to plead," "to charm," and "to appease". My challenge was finding the goals that propelled me into each scene. The script makes it clear that Shelby is hiding; she is avoiding the conflict she desperately needs to solve for her own personal and professional advancement. By the end of the play Shelby comes to understand that seeing race has a dual meaning- acknowledging the race of others and making the choice to agree that they have worth despite what you can see. In the penultimate scene, Dean Hernandez tells Shelby "You have the ability to reshape all this mess. You, indeed own it [...] It is not about labels it is about seeing, really seeing and saying 'I see.' I see and I agree you have worth" (Greenidge 63).

The character analysis is one of the first steps an actor must take to understand the role. Shelby was a complex character to analyze; it was very difficult for me to identify what she wanted in the play. Going through the script and supporting my analysis solely by means of the text, I gathered some answers that indicated who Shelby was. It was important for me to catalog what was in the script before setting my imagination loose.

These are my text-based findings:

**Overall Goal:** Shelby's super objective in the play is to persuade someone to help her address the racial conflict between her residents in order to diffuse the situation in her dorm.

**Tactics:** In order to accomplish the goal she hides, agonizes and pleads.

Conflict: The fear of confronting race is standing in the way of Shelby achieving her overall objective. In Shelby's history she has been scorned for feeling sympathy for others solely based on race. The other characters, with the exception of her resident, Carson, claim to "see" race. The severity of the situation resonates with Shelby because she does feel a great deal of compassion for Alyssa, the resident whose door was defaced. Thus she desperately tries to set a platform for Alyssa to express her feelings. Scene 13 (p. 54-57) is a sequence of all of the residents confronting Shelby. In this scene Shelby tries to bring attention to the real victim of the events.

Will: It takes Shelby the whole play to realize that she has the tools inside of her to resolve the tension in her dorm. Courage ignites in Shelby in the final scene with Dean Hernandez. It enables her to see the perspectives of the individuals involved. She opens her heart to the idea that race is something everyone must face at some point. Much of Shelby's time is spent reflecting in the play. Before coming into contact with the residents Shelby's need to re-obtain normalcy and neutrality in her life over-ride the need to actually come up with a solution to race matters around her. But after hearing her residents' stories and listening to them in scene 13 she has a change of heart.

Values: Shelby values friendship and accomplishments. She doesn't enjoy being a Resident Advisor but she knows there is value in the details of the job. "RA looks good on paper" (*Baltimore* 15). An RA offers advice to students, is respected and is a leader of the individuals she serves. This is why she doesn't mind going above and beyond for her residents who are homesick and struggling with their course loads early in the semester. Shelby has no real interest in journalism; however, working for the newspaper is something that can also lead to her professional advancement. "I want, I really need this

story for my resume” (Greenidge 13). Shelby believes that if she does well enough on her interview with Dean Hernandez she can be promoted to assistant editor of the University’s newspaper, *The Sentinel*. “I’m assistant editor, sort of, I mean I could be. This article could help me to be, by the end of the semester anyway”(Greenidge 10).

**Physical Description:** Shelby is 20 years old. She exhibits a false confidence, therefore, I imagine that she leads from her chest. She slouches her shoulders a bit due to the weight of the messenger bag that she wears daily. When first reading the script I imagined a more relaxed-tomboyish individual, wearing a polo or button down top with the school’s logo and maybe some khakis. Shelby is dark skinned, full figured and wears her hair straight.

**Personality:** Shelby is serious and stern. She does joke with Grace but all of her other interactions are cold and almost rude. As a black female with hopes of going into the medical field. Shelby keeps a serious tone.

**Complexity:** Shelby is not a complex character; her cultural outlook is quite shallow. She is hurt by the events that occur in her hall, and saddened because her students were the ones that caused the trouble. Just because she thinks people should not focus on race doesn’t necessarily mean she condones the mistreatment of individuals. She doesn’t realize that choosing to ignore the race of others is mistreatment. Shelby believes a conversation about race would be a waste of time because it never changes anything and the more that race is discussed the more we find things that divide us. Shelby has quite a few “slow” moments where things that are said to her go over her head or she says something completely naïve: “How would my mom know if Dean Hernandez smokes weed? You think my mom smokes weed?” (Greenidge 18).

Relationships: Shelby's interactions with others are full of speeches and theories about how she believes the world works. In her first scene, during the interview with Dean Hernandez, she is immediately at odds with the dean because of conflicting ideas on race relations and personal values. In the very next scene, she is seen with her best friend Grace. They're on great terms; Grace is extremely supportive and encouraging when needed. Another key relationship that is portrayed in the play is the one with Shelby's mother. Based on the text, Shelby's mother seems too preoccupied with other things to offer sound advice in Shelby's time of need. The relationship Shelby has with her residents is another important factor in the show. The residents are just becoming acclimated to the collegiate climate. Based on the dialogue and their actions in the early scenes they expect Shelby to handle all of their problems instead of taking the initiative to work out their own differences.

When the show opens Shelby is in high spirits. She is in the dean's office interviewing the dean for the school newspaper. After a failed interview Shelby is found in a defeated mood, in an outside area on campus with Grace. Here she learns of the racist graffiti on her resident's door. This makes Shelby even more upset. The next time Shelby is seen, she is walking through campus on the phone with her mom pleading for help; she feels ignored and helpless. Then the hiding sequence or "the progression of defeat" accelerates as she moves from place to place to avoid bumping into her residents on campus. Finally, she migrates one last time across the stage and slumps on the ground like a ragdoll where she is found by Grace and confronted for hiding. She forces herself out of hiding for the sake of saving her friendship and goes to her dorm to face her residents. In the subsequent scene she is scolded by all of the residents and succumbs

again to defeat. After an encouraging conversation with the dean, Shelby returns to her dorm. Having realized that problems related to race cannot be ignored, she prepares to address the crisis her residents are facing with courage, empathy, and optimism.

## CHAPTER TWO: REHEARSALS

Physical actions and body language speak louder than words, especially for Shelby Wilson, the-main character in *Baltimore*. Shelby holds fast to the laissez-faire philosophy many Millennials exhibit regarding race relations and the efforts put forth by the civil rights activists of previous generations. Creating her character required layers of technical attention on my part, not only in terms of acting, but in movement and voice as well. Therefore, in every rehearsal I focused on the development of each of those specific areas.

Successfully portraying Shelby came with many difficulties that stemmed from my initial singular focus on “technique” and my struggle with finding a way to trust the text. However, the exploration of a variety of methods proved useful in the development of my own process. Also, the challenges I met in each category led to a much needed investigation of exuberance in acting. Specific difficulties I faced in voice, acting, and movement were: physically building Shelby, using my voice to fill the space, perfecting the dialect and memorizing the text.

### **Challenges Involved In Physically Building Shelby**

As previously mentioned, approaching this rehearsal process, I had ideas of exploring physicality, specifically the influence of body language on the emotional development of a character and how it could be used throughout the course of the play to aid in telling the story. In a broader sense, I was interested in how the external anatomical

functions would motivate internal emotional shifts. Earlier in this writing I discussed how I developed a character analysis by using only the given circumstances laid out by the playwright. My “in rehearsal” process differs from the character analysis; at this point I carefully combed the script again looking for even more given circumstances that alluded to Shelby’s personality and character. As Cohen writes:

The exciting actor differs from the unexciting actor chiefly because of the quality of her or his choices [...] for these are choices, not givens, and they demand the actor’s own imagination as much as they require script analysis and research. The actor’s choices are not always apparent in the lines of a play. In fact, sometimes the choices are not even mentioned in the lines (Cohen 92).

I paid close attention to the playwright’s stage directions and built some of my own choices. In *An Actor’s Work*, Konstantin Stanislavski claims that the actor’s fountain of choices stems from the vividness of their imagination:

We know the ...stage directions the dramatist provides: stands, walks about animatedly, smiles, dies. We are given cryptic descriptions of characters, such as: a young man of pleasing appearance. Smokes a lot. But is that sufficient to create fully what a character looks like, his mannerisms, his walk, his personal habits? And what about his dialogue? Are we supposed to learn it by heart and speak it parrot-fashion? And what about all the author’s stage directions? The director’s demands, the moves, the mise-en-scenes and the whole production? [...] No, all of this has to be filled out and given depth by the actor. Only then can everything given us by the author and the rest of the production team stir the

innermost recesses of the heart, in actors and audiences alike, to life  
(Stanislavski 62).

Stanislavski makes it clear that the actor's work is to fill in what the playwright has left out. This is the glory of acting, for no two interpretations of a character can ever be the same.

An instance during which I put my interpretation to the test was when I used my imagination to conclude that due to Shelby's ambitions to become assistant editor of the university's newspaper she spends hours in front of computers daily. I used this knowledge to inform my posture (tension in the neck and curved back when sitting). Another example is that I gathered Shelby to be a prideful person based on the way she blatantly speaks to Dean Hernandez, a person of authority, so I imagined that when she walked she led from her chest. This meant that in order to support her chest when sitting comfortably she was hoisted on her elbows to alleviate the tension she'd applied to her back. I became curious about how I could make adjustments to Shelby's posture as the action of the play progressed, so that when she finally exclaims, "I am so tired" the actual physicality matched the declaration (Greenidge 76). These are not details given by Kirsten Greenidge in the stage directions, rather they are characteristics I inserted because I felt they could be beneficial in making Shelby a stronger presence on stage.

In my initial attempt at making the character's physicality different from my own, I started with comparing the difference between my own body language and how I thought Shelby might communicate through her body. When being myself, in casual conversation I am physically large and expressive. My gestures are bold. I find myself moving my hands more when I'm searching for words. My fingers spread wide apart



when I'm describing something I'm excited about. I use mostly horizontal lines that seldom go lower than my chest region and rarely rise above my eye level. When I am sincere in speech I feel the need to cover the frontal thoracic between heart and throat. Based on my analysis, Shelby Wilson didn't do those things. She didn't speak like me; she's more guarded and calculated and her gestures are minimal. This made it even harder to portray her. I began to think there is a necessary exuberance that is required of stage actors in order to accommodate the visual and emotional demands of audiences. Often times through the rehearsal process when I wanted to become bigger I questioned the honesty of my performance. It always seemed to be a compromise between the honest delivery of lines and the visual expectations set for the stage.

Deeper into rehearsal, I realized that the physical choices I was making were traps for me that eventually began to overshadow my exuberance. Meaning that all of the slouching and constricting I was doing with my body was inhibiting me from finding the vocal variety, stronger tactics for the character and honest reactions to stimuli from the other characters. I noticed that my energy was down when I got into character; Shelby started the show with hope, but in the text she is faced so early with the inciting incident that my struggle became finding tactics that wouldn't cause Shelby to seem defeated through the entire show. I had to find ways to insert hope into the character's emotional journey.

Greenidge made it very clear that Shelby had no intentions of going back to the dorm and she saw herself as helpless. This meant that as an actor I was going to have to challenge myself to look for moments to move in rehearsal. I recall one early rehearsal when we blocked the opening scene. I had ideas of possibly moving around Dean

Hernandez's office or viewing plaques that the dean might've had on display. I asked the director if I could experiment with these ideas but once we tried them, we could tell immediately that it would not serve the play well, mostly because of the many phone cues and the pacing necessary to deliver so many lines. As Cohen notes, "Movement is not essential in any scene, and movement inserted in a scene merely to liven things up does more harm than good" (87).

Finding the initiative to act on an impulse requires courage and trust in the individuals around one. The fear of making the "wrong" choice is the actor's greatest enemy. In times of rehearsing alone I came to understand that the impulses I had could work for Shelby if I allowed myself to bring more of myself into the role. Of course the actor's movement is usually at the jurisdiction of the director; however, I think there is something to be said about the actor's impulse that suggests from within when they should move. Noted movement instructor and practitioner Stephen Wangh wrote in *Acrobat of the Heart*, "...having an impulse doesn't mean out of control. It just means allowing energy to flow through the body" (Wangh 35).

He continues, saying, "How you use the energy is something else [...] it is true that if you stifle an impulse, you may undermine the very freedom that you are learning to achieve..." (Wangh 35). When portraying Shelby I always felt that I was blocking impulses, mostly because I questioned whether or not they served the character. There is always the thought that resonates with the actor that questions "how much of this is me?" or "would the character actually do that?" I didn't always feel comfortable exploring every impulse I had for Shelby after a while simply because of the number of failed attempts and the fact that I was struggling with memorizing my lines.

After plenty of trial and error following my impulse movement work in some of the solitary scenes, I found myself in a place that Twyla Tharpe, the author of *The Creative Habit* describes as a “rut.” “A rut is when you’re spinning your wheels and staying in place; the only progress you make is in digging yourself a deeper rut” (Tharpe 185). Suddenly, I had the idea that I could go back to the text, this time for physicality clues that I could implement in my restriction. The hints I was able to find influenced not only my movement but voice work as well and eventually offered emotional clarity. Stanislavski speaks on the impact of finding the right approach to the character,

‘You can’t master a role right away. There is always something in it you don’t understand clearly, something that resists you. So start with what is clearest, most accessible, that is easy to set. Try to discover the truth of the simplest physical actions which are obvious to you. The truth of physical actions will lead you to belief and then to the ‘I am being’ and finally to a flood of creative action” (qtd.in Toporkov 112).

At this point in the process I analyzed every moment of avoidance Shelby has in various scenes. I noticed that her avoidance was ingrained in conversation more so than in her movement, she joked as a tactic to avoid the situation at hand. She also demeaned others as a means to deflect from her own issues. I revisited the character analysis and made it more detailed. The first question of any character analysis is “Who?”. This is essentially asking the actor to offer a description (solely based on what is written) about who the character is and what their basic beliefs are. If the script can answer it for you then, that’s one less thing to figure out. The question “Who?” also reveals what the other characters say and think about the character that could possibly affect their

presentation. Getting more specific with what Shelby wanted from Dean Hernandez made the scene more thrilling; it gave it energy that was hard to find on the surface.

In the second scene with Shelby and her best friend, Grace, I found more freedom to explore Shelby's movement. As a result, the scene felt less "acted" and more purposeful. "Natural movement that comes out of a scene's situation, and out of the interplay of the characters, can evoke stronger, fuller, and deeper acting from both partners" (Cohen 87). I also found that the lines in the second scene were easier to memorize and came to me with less hesitation.

In regards to the phone cues, they remained complicated to work through even though there were a lot less of them in my scene with Grace than in the opening with Dean Hernandez. The key to being physically affected by the phone was to allow the frustration that I was feeling from having to remember the sequence of lines to manifest every time the phone broke my concentration. The phone sequences required intense concentration. Unfortunately, I didn't have experience rehearsing with the phone for the show until a week before opening night. I had the interruptions of the phone that were mentioned in the stage directions memorized. During technical rehearsals the actual phone cues provided another stimulus to the energy I was able to produce on stage. The sound of the phone was designed to make the vibrations seem to grow in volume and resonance. It affected me as an actor in such an organic way, I recall feeling flustered when the phone wouldn't stop vibrating. It challenged my physical reactions as well. I had to be expressive enough for individuals facing my back to understand the action. Unfortunately, as I became accustomed to the sound the cues made I began to anticipate them, the frustration didn't resonate with me the way it had originally. The best way I

found to combat the anticipation was to concentrate on the need to get my line out. If that was my central focus I could always count on being shocked by the amount of sounds that interrupted me. Along with the actual sound cues, the blocking involved in the use of the phone was another relationship that required special awareness. Always being aware of the location of a prop was a task that entailed specific attention to its placement whether in my bag, my pocket or on the steps where I hid. In all of the hiding scenes the phone alternates between vibrating and ringing. In order to react to the notifications it was import to adjust my body to the phone's location.

To add to the challenge of the phone, our opening night was cancelled due to a campus-wide power outage. The outage supposedly caused a surge in the charger the phone was connected to resulting in the phone's demise. Therefore on our first night of performance not only was I reacting to phone cues but I was also imagining using an dysfunctional phone. I became really self-conscious about the audience being able to see that the phone wasn't actually working. It added to my fear of what the audience would think of my performance and the play as a whole. This was the perfect example of the "un-plannable" and another cause to channel my exuberance to pull off a convincing show.

### **Voice**

After establishing that Shelby's movement was constricted, the work became about finding a way to push my energy through this character's movement constraints. Using only vocal projection and dialogue, I depended heavily on the weight of the words, taking long pauses and finding words to "color," or define. Rate, tempo and pitch are also tools I relied on because they broke the monotonous tone of the dialogue. Our instruction

in Voice class was influenced by the technique of F.M. Alexander, a theatre practitioner who specialized in teaching artists to recognize their habits and find the best way to get the maximum use from their habitual mannerisms.

When working with Rachel Hillmer, vocal coach for *Baltimore*, much of the instruction I received was to increase my volume and use imagery to send my vocal energy to every direction. I was told to speak louder in order to ensure that everyone in the audience could clearly understand what was being said. This was a complicated direction to practice because it required a heightened awareness of the entire theatre space, and in the absence of an audience it is difficult to know just how much effort you may need to apply. Rehearsing before an audience of five people demands less vocally than the accommodations needed for a full theatre. In order to find a resolution to this element of performance, I found that when warming up before a rehearsal and eventually performances, the more I challenged myself to use the voice from my chest, the more I could feel a vibration in the back of my throat that signaled I was using my full voice. If I was able to feel that vibration, I knew that I was speaking as loud as I could while exercising good use.

The moment that was hardest to activate full voice was in the monologue speaking to Grace, after having been sulking in the dark and staying still for so long. In this particular scene, the playwright requires that Shelby stuff her mouth with chips in the scene before, therefore, I had to find new ways to chew in my stillness that wouldn't distract from the action playing out on the other side of the stage. It wasn't until later in the rehearsal process that I was able to practice with the chips. They posed a serious vocal threat. Even in performance, I never actually found a formula for that part of the

show, and it would usually end with me having to clear my mouth and take small swallows during my monologue. Although this particular instance deals with both movement and voice, I classify it as voice because avoiding spitting up food was a real struggle in that scene and would surely have distracted the audience and my acting partner. It's one of the many things that I had to bring awareness to long before the actual moment in order to pull off effectively. I had to think about that moment two scenes prior when I first opened the bag of chips. This was an exciting part of the show for me. I always looked forward to it.

### **Line Memorization**

Besides making choices about Shelby's vocal quality, the most challenging part of the pre-performance process was the memorization of lines. Line struggles are not new to me but for *Baltimore* I didn't begin learning my lines prior to the rehearsal process.

For many actors memorizing their lines is the first step to becoming the character. Other actors don't begin learning lines until they are getting into the character's movement and blocking. The latter is my preferred method. In previous productions I found it easier to retain the lines when I am able to associate the speech with a movement. The impulse to move, quite often cues the actor to speak, so if I'm able to associate a word with my motion it becomes connected in my muscle memory. In fact, Stanislavski advises the actor to become acquainted with the sequences of action before attempting to learn their lines, comparing it to a painter and his art, he says:

Before a painter can move on to the more subtle, complex psychological elements in his picture, he must sketch his ideas on to the canvas and make his subjects 'sit', 'stand' or 'lie down' in such a way we believe they are actually 'sitting',

‘standing’ or ‘laying down’. That is the layout of the picture he will paint. No matter what subtleties he includes in it, if the pose breaks the laws of nature, if there is no truth in it, if the person he has represented as sitting in not really ‘sitting’, no other subtleties will make it successful” (qtd.in Toporkov 112). 111.

However I was soon faced with the challenge of discovering how to embody a character who doesn’t physically exert herself throughout the greater majority of play.

When I went home for the Christmas break, I studied my lines independently. For monologues, I went through the lines one thought at a time, repeating the content a minimum of seven times until I could recite each line without looking. Then I’d add the next thought. By the seventh time reciting it I would combine it with the previous lines and go through the entire passage. I found that this worked temporarily, but when I would revisit the scene days later the information would have left me. I stopped working on monologues and tried to focus on just the scenes. My logic was that I could continue to work on the monologues on my own but I couldn’t afford to confuse my scene partners. I used the voice recorder on my phone to first record the whole scene. Then I recorded just my scene partner’s lines. Listening to the whole scene enabled me to get familiar with the rhythm of the scene and the exchange between the characters. Also, it served to help me memorize the sequence of topics in the conversations. Using just my partner’s lines allowed me to focus on filling in my responses as fast as possible. I listened to the lines on repeat in my car, using headphones and before going to sleep each night. The call and response method was very effective but its results were temporary as well.

When I arrived back to formal rehearsals, I noticed that the addition of other characters and the sound of another person’s voice with their beats and intentions



sometimes caught me off guard. The fear of making mistakes and the stress of knowing the lines but not being able to access them when I needed them contributed to my lack of exuberance. Every missed line took a large toll on me. I became my own critic. If I missed two lines in my first scene at the beginning of rehearsal, I would hold on to that sense of failure throughout the whole rehearsal.

I made the most discoveries with Shelby on the days when I reminded myself that I knew my lines and felt confident. Unfortunately, I didn't trust myself until the beginning of performance when I finally told myself "it is what it is".

### **Acting**

When I teach my students in Acting for Non Majors, I always start in the first chapter of Robert Cohen's book *Acting One*. Each semester, I am reminded of how much of this craft is about the basics. Cohen creates detailed descriptions of the necessary tools an actor needs to begin acting. He lists relaxation, trust, exuberance, discipline, a playful attitude, preparation and criticism. Each word is a separate concept that means something completely different but an actor who combines and applies them during rehearsal is a ready worker. The student of acting learns these terms and their meanings early on and we are constantly working to cultivate them. But they can vary by production and can lose their poignancy based on whatever is going on in the actor's personal life.

I once attended the Humana Festival of New Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville and saw a play called *The Glory of the World* written by Charles Mee and directed by Les Waters. It was the strangest play, full of rapid movement and vibrancy. Although the play had a ton of action, no part stood out more to me than the opening of the show where a single man sat in a chair, frozen, and looked out into the audience for at least ten minutes.

The audience was mesmerized, and I distinctly recall feeling many emotions from discomfort for him to admiration. How could one man, doing nothing, be so compelling? Ever since then, I have sought to understand the fine line of acting. When is subtlety too much versus not enough and how close can actor get to “real” on stage? I have an idea for a style of acting in theatre that mirrors the likes of cinematic acting. Its beauty is in its subtleness and minimalistic features. I have toiled with this conception of style since it first occurred to me in my second year of graduate school. How do you strip away the grandeur of the theatre and manage to still accommodate the needs of the audience? My exploration has taken place in acting classes and in main stage productions. I have gotten plenty of feedback on my attempts at cultivating the style. Some of it has been disdain. The subtleness can appear as a lack of immersion into the character. Other times I’ve had people comment that it felt so natural or they may exclaim that they didn’t realize I was acting (which I have always thought of as the ultimate compliment in the theatre).

When attempting to use my new natural approach in *Baltimore*, I found for a number of reasons that the style was perfect for parts of the show but it simply did not work for other parts. One of the reasons it was great was because Shelby spends a great majority of the show “hiding” on stage while other scenes are happening simultaneously. In an effort not to steal focus but remain “in the moments” my practice of subtlety was perfect. People came to me after performances and commended me for my ability to stay in the moments when in hiding. Those were the hardest parts of the play to accomplish.

An example of why the method was not always effective was due to the fact that although it demands a stripping of self or a blank slate from the actor. It requires an astute

attention to physical attributes of the character and a release of the actor's psychological and emotional baggage.

In many cases I do believe that my inability to "act" some days stemmed from being weighed down by personal life issues, being diagnosed with depression and becoming increasingly sensitive to the political climate of the United States. Konstantine Stanislavski was recorded discussing the importance of factors outside of the theatre that affect actors. In Vasali's account of working with Stanislavski he notes Stanislavski's concern for the confines of the theatre. "He understood the importance of the influence of everything on an actor's being and his creative powers..." (qtd.in Toporkov 140).

In any given moment I could feel myself not being able to capture the essence of the character, but it felt like there was nothing I could do. Often times Shelby's hiding instincts worked because they were frighteningly relatable, but became problematic when I had to snap out of that mood. Finding exuberance for a character who is experiencing great sadness is a skill I've yet to master. The "stripping of self" is a concept that I'd learned in acting class using three to five minute scenes but I hadn't practiced it through the length of an entire play.

Before I'd read *Acrobat of the Heart*, I didn't realize that there were studies exploring how the things we bring into the rehearsal space, such as jewelry and accessories were proven to affect the performer. I don't wear much jewelry. I have a gold necklace that has my birthstone that I have worn daily for years. I take it off at night and put it back on every single morning. It has become a ritual for me and holds great significance to what I believe is a part of my appearance. Another accessory that I wear daily, and is close to me, is my waist beads. I handpicked each set and am attached to

them as if they hold the essence of my belief system. Before I began to apply the blocking and physicality of Shelby in my body, I realized that the beads were going to constrict me physically, emotionally and psychologically. It caused me to feel the need to remove all traces of myself before entering into rehearsal. The jewelry represented comfort and familiarity to me. After removing my jewelry I found that some of my “actor habits” disappeared. The idea that the psychology and emotions tied into the things we wear inhibits us from fully embracing the character is not new to me. In fact, the absence of labels in my movement class at U of L is our uniform. The labels subconsciously affect our images in devising and may become a hindrance when creating, but I had given little consideration to the fact that just the weight and feeling of something unfamiliar to the character could keep me from accessing Shelby. In other words, I considered it from the performer’s perspective as opposed to the viewer’s. I experienced this same sensation with clothes as well. I have been told in class that a habit of mine in performance is to cross my arms or shield my chest when wearing cardigan. It’s a fidgeting habit that is easily identifiable as me and not the character. With this in mind, later in the process, during dress rehearsals I was given a sweater and I was very conscious about my habits. What other accessories or emotions were blocking me in rehearsal? Removing my jewelry was difficult but not nearly as hard as removing my doubt and skepticism about the text and its reception.

### **Engaging with Scene Partners**

Because of the need for specificity and the sensitive nature of the show, a collaborative spirit amongst the cast was important. Although I had stage time with all of the actors, the two I worked with most were Kristi Papailler and Hazel Barnett, who both

played Dean Hernandez. I also worked a lot with Bridget Kim, who played Grace. Each of these actors brought something different to the stage and offered me an opportunity to master the technique of accommodating a scene partner. Discovering exuberance in partnership is a different process than making it in solo performances. I had to build, then balance exuberance with my partners, first by feeling thankful and appreciative for their willingness to partake in the show, then by establishing trust.

Kirsten Greenidge's character description for the dean in the list of characters calls for a Black and Latino male, in his 50s. She includes in the footnote that the actor doesn't have to be in their 50s. The gender change of Dean Hernandez was an idea the dramaturg and the director had for the show. Greenidge eventually approved it, although it would significantly change the dynamic of the show. Making the dean an influential black female erased the presence of an older black man from the narrative and changed the meaning of the role from what I'd initially imagined. When read alone the lines don't allude to a maternal vibe, but when acted with a woman, it suddenly has the feel of a woman chastising a child. When I'd read the play with the imagery of a man talking to Shelby, I felt as though she was truly on her own in the situation. Shelby's isolation amidst the situation truly resonated. The self-absorption that Dean Hernandez's lines were saturated in was also a stretch. I'm unable to compare the effects of changing the gender in performance because I didn't experience the whole of either scene with a male.

After auditions, I advocated for Kristi Papaviller to be cast as the dean. I knew that when I needed inspiration, I would want an actress who had professional experience. I trusted Kristi in the rehearsal process and in performance. She regularly checked in with me on the journaling of the rehearsal process and was even a beacon of support for

personal struggles outside of the process. Acting beside Kristi was stirring. She made Dean Hernandez come to life in a unique package. The role of Dean Hernandez was intended for a male actor of color, but Kristi made a seamless adaptation into the role. I was inspired to stretch my acting skills when working with Kristi. I had to use different intentions to get what I wanted from her character. Still many of Shelby's tactics to make the dean laugh or to flatter were unsuccessful. There was sternness in the delivery of all of her lines that sent Shelby reeling into defeat. It was tough to not end gain, or play the ending when working with Kristi. A distinctive quality about Kristi's style of performing is that she is consistent in her delivery, yet I had a challenge finding the freedom in responding to her lines. I relied heavily on Kristi's consistency because in rehearsal I rarely do the same thing twice (mostly in rehearsal), when I deliver a line it's almost never the same way as before. The only time that this is not the case is when I can't find anything to latch onto in the lines initially or I feel overwhelmed with the amount of lines. Again, this is something I am just learning about myself and my process in this work. Kristi's consistency forced me to explore the options available to me in regards to tactics and delivery.

We both struggled with the memorization of lines, especially the ones that had phone cues inserted between them. There were times in performance when I could feel that the timing of lines was off. Sometimes my lines were cut short and those were the moments when I was most thankful for my preparation in knowing every line in our scene. I found that the memorization of actions and thoughts was effective in getting through the scenes with Kristi. For instance, at the beginning of the show, I knew that everything Shelby said was to flatter and encourage the Dean to speak. Then the action

shifts to convincing her to continue the interview after the phone keeps interrupting the dialogue. The phone cues were difficult on Kristi (as actor and character) as well, which directly relates to the importance in trusting the cast and feeling that I would have her back if something was said out of turn.

I recall a time in tech when we were running the opening scene with the phone and inserting the lines between cues, I had created a sequence to remember those specific lines: K,D,I,I,S “Keep talking I’m getting all of this....Damn It.....I mean...It’s really nothing...See? Keep going Union, union.” If I didn’t know any other lines in the play I knew those lines and I was proud of myself. Dean Hernandez had an interjection between two of the lines and I knew exactly what and where those were too. But on that tech day the time came for me to recite those very lines and I said them perfectly, right on cue and we almost made it to the end when the stage manager Megan screams down, “we have to go back, something was wrong.” We did the scene again. It’s wrong. We stopped. The stage manager asked, “Is someone missing a line?” Kristi and I both say no. It turns out Kristi had a line mixed up, but in the time it took to figure that out I heard Jenn Calvano, sound designer, say “It’s probably Danielle. It usually is.” I saw my director shake her head in disappointment and all I could do was wait for the verdict. When the stage manager read those lines back to us and told Kristi she was messing up I can’t even describe the elation I felt. For once it wasn’t me and yet for once I saw myself for what I’d become. When this collaborative work becomes a competition the work is lost and the intentions are contaminated. On one hand that’s when I realized I knew my lines better than I thought, but I also realized that my heart was no longer in the right place. From then on I told myself my scene partner’s successes are mine as well, this attitude helped

make Dean Hernandez's scenes some of the most insightful moments in the entire play for me and made my interactions with the Dean become my favorites.

I was proud of my growth with Kristi and was gaining confidence in our scenes. About a month and a half into the rehearsal process, Kristi announced that she would have to miss a night of performance. She found another actor to understudy her role for the one performance. Hazel Barnett was the other Dean Hernandez. She found a kinder side of Dean Hernandez that affected her delivery of the text and influenced me to find new intentions through my character.

When rehearsing and performing scenes with Hazel my reactions rarely felt organic when we'd run a scene. For one, if anything was ever said in a manner that she disapproved of, Hazel would chastise me and tell me how she wanted the lines said. Somewhere along the process Hazel became an unwarranted director for only me. She was generous in the work though, in the few moments that we connected in a scene Shelby found it easy to charm this dean and use her tactics. Other times it was hard to tell if she was listening and honestly reacting making it difficult to gauge what choices were effective. Summoning exuberance and physical energy was hardest in these times because I found myself wanting to shut down. Unlike Kristi, Hazel was hardly ever consistent. On the Friday that we finally opened the show Hazel played Dean Hernandez. I recall feeling as if the scenes between us were entirely slowed down. It was more difficult to keep the sense of urgency in the first scene because there were so many unrehearsed pauses that Hazel inserted. Also, the phone that I was supposed to engage with in the entire opening of the show stopped working. We had to wait for phone cues to come through as if it was our first time practicing. I am sure this played a part in Hazel's



delayed responses to my lines. Hazel's performance wasn't poor though there were distinct differences. Eventually I found that with either dean, the key was listening and taking the cues to react from them. The alternating actors triggered my fear in some ways but for the most part I believe the experience forced me to become comfortable with change.

In preparation for our scenes I ran lines frequently with either Hazel or Kristi. Because our rehearsals were separate from the rest of the cast until the entire show was blocked, I spent a lot more time with them than any other cast members. Kristi and I met at my house to work on our scenes on the days when we weren't called to rehearsal with the director. Similarly, Hazel and I worked outside of rehearsals on lines, meeting at her home. It was important to me that I paid attention to the differences in the actors, so that when we were on stage I was conscious of the energy I was giving them. In Patsy Rodenburg's book *Second Circle*, Rodenburg claims that, "We all yearn to be present and to be met by others who are equally present [...] presence enables you to honor, understand and empathize with others" (Rodenburg 10). With this general truth in mind, I worked a lot cultivating the energy I produced. Although I couldn't tap into the character sometimes, I honestly didn't want that to negatively affect my scene partners.

When performing scenes with Bridget Kim, I never felt as though the characters were the same age. Although, based on the text, she is more mature than Shelby, Bridget brought youthfulness to the role that I could never find. I even began to wonder if I had ever been Shelby's age. That didn't stop me from trying to match her vibrancy but I did feel like a fraud some days. I think Bridget has similar perspectives on racial issues as her character, Grace, making her portrayal all the more convincing.

Grace is the first person Shelby interacts with after being isolated and consumed in her own self-deprecating thoughts. Shelby rises from darkness in that moment and begins a monologue about not ever having to see color in her family and not knowing how to manage race related conflict. Her opening lines are “There are no mirrors in our house, in my parents house we have no mirrors” (*Baltimore* 48). She continues to explain that her family acquired their money by keeping their heads low and carefully planning their professional moves. She doesn’t deny that she has experienced racism but she explains that she was taught to tell herself that she is better than her adversaries. Another important confession that Shelby makes to Grace is that even though she’d just finished degrading Dean Hernandez and her body of work, she believes in a certain theory the dean mentioned. “Dean Hernandez told me, while I was in her office this morning, that we all have a certain history lapping at our insides, and I wish I could see that vast see inside of my grandfather” (*Baltimore* 48). In order to muster the exuberance that I needed to get through this monologue, I needed Birdget to give me reactions or indicators that her character understood what my character was telling her. Shelby’s objective for that monologue was to get Grace to feel so bad for her that she would want to talk to Shelby’s students for her.

Working with Kim was impactful and to an extent was effective in drawing certain levels of exuberance from me. It did take time to build trust with her though; I had my own reservations that stemmed from not knowing her prior to casting and feeling cautious because of our different races. I’m used to working beside other African Americans in the theatre and have worked tirelessly since my time at the University of Louisville to develop trust amongst my Caucasian counterparts. I’d never worked with a

Korean woman. I never allowed myself to be too comfortable, out of fear of offending her and being unprofessional. The more time we spent together in rehearsal the closer we grew, but I noticed that as soon as we were on breaks, I always ended up congregating with the other African American women in the cast. Bridget was usually with the multi-racial group of the cast. I don't think this was on purpose; it was just comfortable. I didn't take the initiative to bond with Bridget outside of rehearsal either, and I justified it by telling myself that she was too much younger than me to hang out. If I am being completely honest with myself, I didn't think we had anything in common and wasn't interested in finding out otherwise. The gravitation of the black women in the cast towards each other was effortless and comforting, and with the hardships I was facing in rehearsal it meant more to me that I had their support than anyone else's.

### **Major Themes in Baltimore**

When I was at a loss of exuberance in my acting, voice or movement, I found that the reverence I had for the themes in the play helped me to push through. Once the show opened my need to inspire social justice through my acting gave me wings and fueled my performances. Themes of "seeing" race and the contributions of the Black Lives Matter movement are very important to me and are essential to the plot of the play.

There is injustice in this world that many people claim not to see. The fear of making waves or offending others in the workplace or school is a legitimate concern. This play is timely because the message of "seeing" another's race is important and needs to be taught consistently until everyone is made aware of the dangers of erasing cultural identity. I am passionate about the message *Baltimore* stands for and the rights of black people. Having known the importance of the work, I felt strongly that the delivery and

performance had to be authentic. I just wasn't sure of how I could make my performance the most memorable and persuasive for the cause. Also, the fact that the play would open only two weeks after the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president, made me wonder if the message would fall on deaf ears. I felt the pressure of the Movement on my shoulders and needed to find a way to motivate myself to perform.

The major issues of *Baltimore* include social movements such as Black Lives Matter, the role of technology, and “seeing race.” *Baltimore* also touches on the privilege of fatigue that isn’t extended to marginalized groups and colorism within minority groups. As a result of the technological advancements of the human race people are more connected than ever before. In many ways the easy accessibility to other cultures has made it easier to appreciate or devalue the culture of nations and races. *Baltimore* makes it clear that no amount of digital advancements can take the place of seeing others and exercising compassion through communication.

### **The New Civil Rights Movement: Black Lives Matter**

“I hear ‘shut it down’ and I don’t even know what that means. Shut down what? Go back to living in tents and mud huts? Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland...those are sad stories. They are terrible things” (Greenidge 61).

Black Lives Matter is a movement that began after George Zimmerman was acquitted in July of 2013 for the murder of Trayvon Martin. The death of that African American teenaged boy ignited a large percentage of the black community and forced the world to pay attention to the injustices that have been taking place in the black community since before the formation of the United States of America. The public’s

awareness of police brutality has been heightened by cell phones and the accessibility of technology.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that acts of police force have not increased dramatically in recent years. Their Police Public Contact Survey found that in 2008, only 1.4% of those who reported contact with police had force used or threatened against them, with no statistically significant increase since 2002. What has changed is the prevalence of cell phones equipped with cameras. Cell phone videos of alleged police misconduct have proliferated online, flooding social media websites and provoking questions about law enforcement behavior (CNN.com).

This quote supports the fact that videos of police brutality have been made mainstream by the use of social media, explaining why the impact of technology on racial injustices is a fitting addition to the themes of the play.

A week after my arrival at the University of Louisville, Michael Brown was murdered. Michael Brown was one of many black teenagers who was gunned down by an officer of the law. Brown was falsely accused of committing a robbery of a local liquor store and was approached by Officer Darren Wilson. According to a witness's account, immediately before being shot multiple times he put his hands in the air in submission to the will of the police officer. Yet he was still murdered and not given the opportunity to face a trial. After this incident I knew that I wanted to create theatre that would speak of freedom and cause people to question "the powers that be".

Black Lives Matter has since developed into both a movement and recognized organization that plays a large part of any conversation involving the mistreatment of individuals of color. The movement's presence is felt in *Baltimore*, when Shelby references names of the more prominent individuals who have been victims of police brutality and whose memories serve as driving forces behind the movement.

Greenidge was intentional in including the names of those victims in the play. Other political figures mentioned in the play are Martin Luther King, John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X who were all assassinated for their political activities and beliefs. The victims are listed at a part of the play that is used as an opportunity for Dean Hernandez to impart wisdom to Shelby. Although the play focuses on an action committed by a white person that degrades an African American, the play doesn't deal solely with black/white relations, it is inclusive of Asians and Latin minorities as well. The characters Grace and Rachel, (Grace is Vietnamese and Rachel is Latina), are both believers in the ideology of "seeing" race.

### **Seeing Race**

"Which ultimately, ultimately doesn't mean shit, right? What you say you think, what you want to say you do, what matter is, what matters is: if you can't look someone in the eye and see them, really see them, and then meet them, really meet them" (Greenidge 51).

I believe the concept of seeing race is the spine of the play *Baltimore*. It is brought up constantly in every scene, Shelby Wilson, the main character of *Baltimore* struggles with identifying with her blackness because of the selflessness the admittance requires. In *Why*

*Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, author Beverly Daniel Tatum writes:

That life is stressful for Black students and other students of color on predominantly White campuses should not come as a surprise, but it often does. White students and faculty frequently underestimate the power and presence of the overt and covert manifestations of racism on campus...Whether it is the loneliness of being routinely overlooked as a lab partner in science courses, the irritation of being continually asked by curious classmates about Black hairstyles, the discomfort of being singled out by a professor to give the “Black perspective” in class discussion, the pain of racist graffiti scrawled on dormitory room doors...Black students on predominantly white campuses must cope with ongoing affronts to their racial identity. The desire to retreat is understandable (Tatum 77-78).

It is hard to determine if Shelby is to blame for her narrow mindedness on race.

Throughout the play she proclaims that she doesn't “believe in labels”. She sees race as a distraction and thinks there are more important things. What could be more important than seeing someone if your goal is to make an impact in their life?

Not fearing the audience's reaction to the text was a serious hurdle to overcome. The content was strong but the way the characters spoke didn't always match the way I felt the characters would speak. There were moments in the play where I questioned the authenticity of the language and feared it would distract the audience. I often felt that the play would be more suitable for younger audiences. I worried that college aged students would see the show and be so unable to relate to it that they'd miss the message. It just

didn't feel raw enough for me. I'm reminded of when I participated in the staged reading of *The Syrian Monologues*. While on stage I could hear people crying in the audience. Immediately following the show we had a talk-back with many people who were refugees from Syria and I recall that they were so appreciative of the work we'd done, their only criticism was "it was too nice". The words didn't capture what they'd witnessed. These were the thoughts that led me into performance and sometimes kept me from accessing the world of the character.



## CHAPTER THREE: PERFORMANCE

### **Pre-Show Preparation**

The run of this show became a true test of my professional development as a performer. The first test involved focusing on the world of the character and becoming mentally prepared for each show. Second, during performances, I nurtured the idea of making my acting partners look good. I have come to believe that a great actor is selfless and gives. I am always working on that and I believe it manifested in *Baltimore* during performances. Another lesson was in endurance, this show was unusual for the university in that it lasted two weekends (8 shows), where traditionally we only have six performances.

The dressing room was chaotic. There was always a lot of noise and conversations coming from every direction. I knew that in order for me to have successful performances, focus was the key. I spent as little time in the dressing room as possible; I couldn't allow myself to get distracted from the work that had to be executed in the show. My recommended way to summon exuberance was to mentally, physically, vocally and emotionally prepare myself for the role in what Twyla Tharp calls "ritual of preparation", in her book *The Creative Habit*, I call it a pre-show warm-up.

It all began with the music I used to center myself: Solange's "Cranes in the Sky." This song held the key to accessing my emotional well every night. Next in my pre-show routine was a physical warm up that consisted of laying in semi-supine, thinking directions from the crown of my head and out of the posterior. The term "directions" is

used in the Alexander Technique. It is defined in Betsy Polatin's book *The Actor's Secret*. "Directions are the connector between thought and action. They are a way to move the body to function in optimal form, without excess muscular tension" (Polatin 53). In semi-supine the spine makes contact with the floor while the knees are bent and extend upward with feet on the ground. This position allows the lower back to make contact with the surface of the floor for maximum alignment of the spine and also allows me to focus on the falling of the breath into the diaphragm. The action of the breath is monitored by the hands that are allowed to rest just below the rib cage. The next part of the warm up dealt with vibrations of the vocal folds, while still lying in semi-supine, allowing the breath to be released on the sound of a hum. It was never a forceful hum and I was conscious of not extending the sound past the extension of breath. This was a gentle "wake-up call" to my voice. The vibrations also warmed up my resonators. "The resonators are a series of cavities going from big and broad at the base and gradually getting smaller and narrower toward the top" (Linklater 187). The next part of my floor work included stretching my legs, planking for 1 minute (usually on extended straight arms), and lunges. Focusing on the flexibility and circulation in my legs made it easier for me to sit in the crouched positions during the show for long periods of time. I noticed that on the days I didn't stretch well enough my legs would go to sleep, and make it impossible for me to stay focused on the acting work.

After completing floor work, I'd come to standing and begin to lightly pound and massage my chest in order to release the tension I tend to hold there. While focusing on my chest I allowed open vowel sounds to flow. "Ha" is my favorite one for the chest. Then I spoke words. I executed a variety of tongue twisters to engage the articulators,

paying special attention to sending my sound to the back wall of whatever direction I was facing. I paid special attention to my “d” and “t” sounds because in my regular southern dialect I am extremely lazy with my “t”s often changing the phonetics in a way that didn’t reflect Shelby’s New England dialect. The final part of my warm up was the recitation of all of my lines in the play. I began with monologues and short speeches, then sped through the dialogue I had with other characters. While saying lines I always incorporated organic movement and never used the actual blocking. Sometimes I’d say the lines while running up and down the steps in the theatre- if I could say the lines without thinking about what word or phrase came next then I would begin dressing for the show. If not, then I would continue until the lines were perfect. My process took a great amount of time and left me little time in the dressing room ensuring that by the time I made contact with the stage I was ready for action!

### **In Performance**

The scholar wants to analyze the character and everything they do. I tell my students all of the time “It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it.” Learning to be the character but keeping in mind that you are not the character at the same time, is the skill. The more attached you become to your characters, the harder it is to subject them to the wrath of the audiences. Shelby was not an easily “likable” character on the surface. I even had a hard time accepting her initially. It was all the more challenging to stay with her when audience members were smacking their teeth at her actions. I was relieved to strip from her clothes and remove her wig at the end of performances. This was a complete contrast in attitude from the pre-performance where I applied the costume and wig.

The evolution of Shelby Wilson from the first performance to the last was extensive. Night after night I was able to find new understanding of the text and validation through the audience's reactions to the language. One of the most important things that I was able to recognize early in the run of the show was Shelby's sense of humor. This was a valuable realization because prior to showing in front of an audience I didn't think my performance would be moving. I didn't think that I had found anything in the character that no other actor could find or that would make the role significant. I was greatly concerned, but when I heard laughter, I felt at ease thinking, at the very least, I was successful in finding the comedic timing. I didn't realize exactly how funny the character could be when rehearsing. The intensity of the stakes within the play and her strong pursuit of her specific goals made her appear more serious in my interpretation. Not recognizing the "funny," however, may have worked to my advantage initially, because I never felt the need to play up, or highlight the comedy - it simply came, and in different places each night.

I noticed during performance, that the audience was more accepting of the content than I'd imagined they would be. For instance, in the conversation Shelby has with her mom, there's a line that references living in the basement for the rest of her life as a result of not getting the interview with Dean Hernandez. The audience thought that was hilarious. I had never laughed at it and had only viewed it as a measure of the stakes. I was more intrigued by the idea that her mother was being unsupportive towards her. In fact, in rehearsal with our dialect coach, Rachel Hillmer, she encouraged me to lighten the language up in an effort to find vocal variety so, as opposed to saying the line as if Shelby were challenging her mother, I began to deliver it as though she was persuading

her. I still never found it funny but the audience did and that helped me to realize that the audience perceived more than what was stated in the dialogue. I took immense comfort in that idea. I relieved myself of all of the excess pressure I had applied to make the show a critical, “think piece” and lay out a thought provoking performance. The need to be innovative is the main force that motivates me as an actor. In contrast there are others who are motivated by the need to prove people wrong or to acquire wealth. This play brought forth the recognition that creating something new and impactful drives me.

The more certain and comfortable I became with being watched by audiences, the more I could find freedom in the role. The most freeing moments for me were the scenes when I was able to interact with the majority of the cast. I knew that a great deal of the success of my performance relied on the momentum I brought into the scenes. This pertains to exuberance directly because it speaks to the energy that we have to knowingly transfer to others. Keeping in mind that I (as the character) have something that I desperately need from them. If I am able to successfully make the circumstances real in my performance, my partner can not help but be impacted by the force I produce. This realization for any actor opens the door for the same realization in the partner, creating a confidence in exchange of what either person may need on various days of performance. In other words, the exuberance the actor finds encourages a dialogue with the other actors on stage and with the audience alike.

## CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTION

Confidence, trust and vulnerability are all key components to finding exuberance. If they are not carefully nurtured, one can grow to dread the work one is creating. The recognition that my initial vision for what I wanted to create would not come to pass was discouraging and overwhelming. My difficulty in rehearsals affected my confidence. The rehearsal process helped me to realize that there are fundamentals of acting that I hadn't serviced in a long while and that needed more attention. Some of these were: making bold choices while holding the script; finding an effective method for the memorization of lines; and sustaining exuberance throughout the course of a play.

I was unable to sustain exuberance until opening night. I attribute that to fear that was rooted in the number of things I could not control. I feared being a leading lady and the number of lines I had to recite. I was afraid of how the audience would react to an unlikeable character, the language of the play and abstract movement in the production. There was no way to forge exuberance because I could not identify a single aspect of my performance where I could root my confidence. I had a great deal of trouble avoiding the emotional pit of the character when incorporating movement and voice.

Things didn't make sense for me as an actor until I released the need to control. After experiencing so much failure in the rehearsal process, I found a way back to my artistic vision and goal for my artistry. In performance, I made great discoveries about trusting the artistic vision of those around me while finding confidence in the text and myself. Letting go of the need to control played a huge part in my ultimate success, but

more than anything the recognition of why I create was what overwhelmingly led to my ability to sustain exuberance in performance. In a way it was a struggle of vulnerability only not in the way I'd initially imagined.

One of my greatest regrets, looking back on this production was not learning my lines early enough. I harp on this skill because it is my greatest struggle and the part of the work that will surely be my downfall if I fail to find a solution. I believe that if I had been able to learn my lines more efficiently, it would have advanced my characterization and made me a lot more prepared for performance. In Pre-production I had a notion that learning lines before even hearing the other characters voices was inorganic and felt planned. I didn't want to get stuck in a way of saying it based on how I'd learned it. I wanted to match the words with the impulse to move and create a bond with the lines that would be visceral. Because I wanted to know what one of the greats had to say about learning text, I looked to Stanislavski. When directing *Tartuffe* for the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavski was quoted in *Stanislavski in Rehearsal* saying:

‘So what sequence of action do we have here? Don’t talk to me about feeling, you can not set feeling. You can only recall and set physical action’...He absolutely forbade us to learn the lines. That was an absolute condition of our work, and if suddenly, one of us began to speak Moliere’s words, he immediately stopped the rehearsal. He considered it a kind of impotence in an actor, if he clung to the script, the words, the author’s exact words. He considered it a great achievement if an actor could demonstrate the pattern of physical actions in a scene with the minimum of words. Words were to play only an ancillary role (qtd.in Toporkov 111).

Ultimately, his opinion about the memorization of text paralleled mine from pre-production. I know first hand this method won't benefit me in larger roles. Learning lines is simply something that I have to plan - the earlier I can start the better. In an interview with Jenn Calvano, the movement coach for *Baltimore*, she expressed how strongly she felt about the development of character without complete memorization. In her opinion until you have the text memorized, adding on anything else is difficult. Although the language of *Baltimore* is seemingly written to mimic the speaking patterns of a 20 year-old in 2016, the hesitancy and uncertainty written into most of the lines was often difficult to make sense of and articulate. I found myself spending a great amount of time sifting through the subtext, trying to fill in the incomplete statements and wondering what exactly Shelby wanted to say that she wasn't allowing to just come out. In many instances I felt as though she knew exactly what she was trying to say but was caught in the whirlwind of trying to defend her thoughts and actions in a manner that caused her to be incomprehensible to others. However, sometime near performance, once I was entirely comfortable with all of the lines, I grew to appreciate Shelby's rambling. The language was successful in acquainting me with her frantic emotional state. Cohen argues that the author writes using "a sense of timing and rhythmic effects [and by not learning lines the way they are written the actor] weakens the character" (Cohen 70). On those occasions that I was unable to tap into Shelby's emotional state, the text's style helped to thrust me into Shelby's anxious frenzy.

Another significant part of my research for this thesis stemmed from *Second Circle*. As I was reading Patsy Rodenburg's theories on personality and social interactions, many things stood out to me about my own engagement with ensemble. I



began to look to *Second Circle* as a means of assessing what specific qualities I could develop to improve my relationship to ensembles.

In *Second Circle*, Rodenburg explains her theory on the three circles of energy. The first circle is what she describes as “the circle of self and withdrawal”, the third being “the circle of bluff and force”. The last and optimal circle of energy that she claims we should all aspire to live in is the second circle, it is the circle that holds “the energy of connection” (Rodenburg 19). In hindsight I can see that throughout the creative process of *Baltimore*, I was operating in the first circle. “Here your focus is inward. The energy you generate falls back into you [...other people] interest you as a means to clarify yourself. By drawing energy inward, you lessen your impact on the world, but you also put yourself in danger of not fully noticing your surroundings” (Rodenburg 17).

She goes on to say,

“In Second Circle, you touch another person rather than impress or impose your will on them. You influence them by allowing them to influence you...Positive presence through Second Circle is the most powerful, creative and intimate way of interacting with the world” (Rodenburg 20)

I recognized myself in each of the circles but most in the first as it pertains to *Baltimore*. During certain points of the production, I was waiting for inspiration to come to me without having produced any to give with scene partners or audiences. There was not always an even exchange of presence. In my professional work, I hope to make a conscious effort to consistently be in the second circle.

If I had known in rehearsal what I found in performance, there is no telling where Shelby’s development could have gone. In my research and writing for this thesis, I have

grown to understand myself better as an artist. It's important to me that I grow from my experiences in *Baltimore*. As I obtain more work and am extended opportunities to be in productions, I will strive to maintain a selfless attitude that promotes devotion to the craft. This will aid in ensuring that I find ways to infuse directions into my acting for its technical advancement as opposed to allowing fear to cause me to become defensive or sedated. I'm looking forward to more experimenting!

Should I ever encounter a role that stumps my imagination again or find that life has worn me down for whatever reason, I hope that the message of the show I'm a part of overshadows any negativity I may feel and leads me back to my purpose.

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