

IMPROVISED POWER: FINDING AN AUTHENTIC ACTING AESTHETIC IN AN  
ADAPTION OF MOWATT'S *FASHION*

By

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B.F.A., West Liberty University, 2017

A Thesis

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A Thesis Approved on

April 8, 2021

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## DEDICATION

To my parents, Brian and Valleri Gordon.

For being my home away from home.

## ABSTRACT

### IMPROVISED POWER: FINDING AN AUTHENTIC ACTING AESTHETIC IN AN ADAPTION OF MOWATT'S *FASHION*

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This thesis elaborates on how my process, which I call Mindsets, was developed and utilized to play Count Jolimaitre in the Spring 2021 UofL Department of Theatre Arts online production of *[Re]Fashion*, an adaptation of Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion* by Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano, Dr. Janna Segal, and Blair Potter. I used improvisatory acting techniques to develop this character from Mowatt's mid-19th-century play, as crafted and produced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this thesis, I explore how continuous physical exploration enabled me to navigate a new rehearsal process. I will explain how I attempted to create a character that was stylistically realistic, yet rooted in the original era of *Fashion*. This thesis is a resource for other actors, who can use Mindsets to authentically develop characters from canonized non-contemporary plays.

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## INTRODUCTION

Characters from non-contemporary plays may seem one-dimensional, however, by developing a personal process, actors can reveal the authentic emotional depth underneath the text. I define authenticity for an actor as what is perceived by the audience to be relevant, and feels alive in the body of the actor. In this thesis, I will be using the words authentic and realistic in relation to this definition interchangeably. However, unless noted, this is related to audience perception, not to be confused with a historical style. During my time at the University of Louisville's MFA in Performance program, I became increasingly eager to find methods of making my characters more authentic. The greater the acting challenge, the more eager I became. In her *Autobiography*, the playwright Anna Cora Mowatt declares she made no attempt at "fine writing" in penning *Fashion* (203). Furthermore, the University of Louisville's production was an adaptation of *Fashion*, called *[Re]Fashion*, which broke the traditional convention of casting during Mowatt's time to make the play more relevant to today. With the production mounted amidst a global pandemic, and rehearsed and performed entirely online through web cameras and green screens, playing the Count Jolimaitre in the adaptation was an enticing challenge.

My desire to meet the challenges of acting began in my Junior year of my Undergraduate study, when I first auditioned in the theatre at West Liberty University. However, I was in the process of completing a degree in Music, not acting. This separated my experience from other actors who had had acting and theatre training before I began performing on stage. Because of this, I was constantly required to make up

cumulative theatre knowledge by investing in my own personal process and study.

Throughout the final years of my undergraduate training into Graduate school, I realized that this investment enabled me to cultivate a personal understanding of acting. It helped me to trust in my ability to independently solve upcoming challenges.

An additional challenge placed on my thesis performance was the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. This led to the cancellation of the show that I had planned to do, *Hedda Gabler*, and eventually resulted in the creation of *[Re]Fashion*. Furthermore, as a result of mandated social distancing and masks, it was understood that the rehearsal and performance process would be an evolving process. It became evident that my thesis role would not be a conventional one and would require a significant amount of independent development. I collected resources from my current classes in order to find an acting process that would endure amidst mounting challenges, like the pandemic.

I encountered several different contemporary acting techniques in Graduate School, and each one seemed to contain some element of physical exploration, either as a separate entity, or to be used in rehearsal of a play. I pondered how to achieve physical embodiment, the full bodily expression of character, which is an expectation of authentic acting. I tried several techniques to achieve embodiment in other characters before I played the Count, but it was not until I encountered Stephen Book's Improvisation Technique in my 2020 Fall acting class that I gained a new method of working. Spontaneity was missing from my work, and to implement that, I needed to be self sufficient in trusting my instincts (Book XIII). While Book's technique was one of the primary ones I engaged with for this performance, I also blended the teachings of several

others. I did this by creating my own acting process relevant for this performance, called Mindsets, which focused on uninhibited physical doing.

As theatre artists, we should avoid what director Peter Brook calls “deadly theatre which is theatre that may be historically accurate, but not currently relevant or alive (9). Recreating past art is never the ideal; rather, we must also strive to make art that is relevant to the present. For actors, this means interpreting the script through character creation. If actors focus on spontaneity and discovery of personal process, everyday from day one of the rehearsal, to the final performance, the characters are changing, lines are reimagined, and our knowledge of our own work is discovered in the present day. For *[Re]Fashion*, we were encouraged by the director to explore our own “personal approach to performance” (Calvano 1).

This thesis focuses on my own personal approach to performance playing Count Jolimaitre, a.k.a. Peter Gus Treadmill, in *[Re]Fashion*. Working on this show, I found one method for rediscovering non-realistic characters, and adding elements of authenticity. This work was one of discovery, in a rapidly changing environment. I was searching for presence, impulsivity, and nuance. What I had to surrender was fear of failure, wrong choices, shame, imposter syndrome, and non-planning. Coincidentally, Count Jolimaitre is an imposter who is out to redefine his low-status life through manipulation of others, and feels he has the improvisatory power to do so.

The creation of the Mindsets coincided with several phases of the character creation process. Before I began physical rehearsals, I was already exploring the text through Stanislavski-based script analysis, but felt the Count was one-dimensional. Additionally, I was exploring the physicality of the character in Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano’s

movement class, which offered insight's in portraying an authentic dual nature of the Count that I observed from my initial script work. Also at this time, I began engaging with several acting techniques to serve my portrayal, which included Stephen Book's *Improvisation Technique*, Stephen Wangh's *Acrobat of the Heart*, Larry Moss's *Intent to Live*, Harold Guskin's *How to Stop Acting*, and the Atlantic Theatre Groups' *Practical Handbook for the Actor*. I will thoroughly introduce all of these techniques in greater depth in Chapter One. In this thesis, I will elaborate the formulation of my own process, called Mindsets, which combined the important similarities of each technique. I will discuss how I implemented Mindsets into the rehearsal process, and gauged their effectiveness through my own actor awareness and feedback from various sources. In turn, I continued to allow myself to physically explore an authentic aesthetic in the performance of *[Re]Fashion*, I evaluated the key takeaways and successes from the application of Mindsets through my own self-assessment and a critical review of the performance. In conclusion, I detail how another actor may adapt my process onto another non-contemporary character in order to portray that character authentically for a contemporary audience.

Now, what we all want to know is the reveal. As famous pianist George Gershwin said, "Life is a lot like jazz, it's best when you improvise" (Pollack 3). Stephen Book defines *Improvisation Technique* as "never knowing what is going to happen next" and says, "there is always more to do" (26). This is how I approached the character of Count Jolimaitre, not knowing what was going to happen for certain, but faithfully choosing to make an actionable choice. I am hopeful that my discoveries during this process can also

be reimagined onto other characters, and that other actors will be enabled to embrace the challenge of bringing a non-contemporary character to authenticity.

The main points thesis will be made in the order of the show's production. In Chapter One, I will detail how I was inspired to develop my personal approach by researching the script, history of the play, and several different acting techniques. In Chapter Two, I will lay out how I managed incorporating that research into my work pre-rehearsal. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the rehearsal phase, and the method of trial and error that led to physical discoveries. In the fourth Chapter, I will elaborate the effectiveness of Mindsets in the performance run of the show and the feedback I received at that phase. Finally, in the Conclusion, I will offer an example of how another actor could incorporate Mindsets onto a character, Iago, from another classical play, *Othello*.

## CHAPTER I

### ASSUMING THE MINDSETS OF AN IMPROVISER

The role of Count Jolimaitre in *[Re]Fashion* required an improvised acting process in order to develop the character into an authentic aesthetic. I justified my process through the script, and made connections to contemporary acting techniques I had been studying at the time. Count Jolimaitre is described in *Fashion* as having “extraordinary talents for improvisation” and creating “invention” (Mowatt 37). At the time the rehearsal process for *[Re]Fashion* began in Fall 2020, I had already been studying contemporary acting techniques in classes that focused on improvisation and impulse. These included: Stephen Book’s *Book on Acting: Improvisation Technique*; Harold Guskin’s *How to Stop Acting*; Stephen Wangh’s *Acrobat of the Heart*; Larry Moss’s *Intent to Live*; and Melissa Bruder’s *A Practical Guide for the Actor*. I blended these techniques and my own acting discoveries into a process that can be learned from by other actors searching for authentic acting in this setting. In this chapter, I will argue that text from *[re]Fashion* justifies the acting techniques I chose to engage with in my process. I will briefly summarize the performance conventions popular when the play was written. I will argue that the dialogue of *[Re]Fashion* as well as the director’s concept encourages an authentic style of acting. Then I will discuss the main aspects of my chosen acting techniques, and how they applied to my work on the Count. I will then elaborate how I combined and truncated these techniques into my personal acting

process, called Mindsets, and why this process could be used by other actors working on non-contemporary characters.

### **Acting in Fashion (1845)**

These approaches to acting were not in circulation when Anna Cora Mowatt wrote *Fashion* (1845). In fact, what might now be described as a more rigid approach to acting was used for the first production of the play. Eric Wollencott Barnes writes, “The whole effect was that of a formal dance in which every step is measured, with the figures forming and dissolving to a set pattern.” (116). However, the playwright realized that *Fashion*, “did not lend itself to this traditional style of acting” (116). The play’s subject and dialogue lend it to a more contemporary, realistic style, as the play was more closely modeled after real life (117). Contemporary drama based on the social realities of the time was not what the original actors who performed Mowatt’s play were accustomed to, but connects well to realistic acting techniques used today.

When *Fashion* was written, the predominant acting genres were developed to suit the conventions of performing Shakespeare’s plays, comedies of manners, and farce. The actors cast in *Fashion* were used to “rhetorical prose” and “heavily accented metre of blank verse”, and had to adjust to the naturalistic dialogue of the play (Barnes 117). *Fashion* seems to follow most conventions of a Comedy of Manners, as it is concerned with the “social manners and attitude of groups or classes of people who define themselves as superior” (Harrop 90). Usually in this style, actors play a mask, or conventionalized character, rather than following their own internal feelings and impulses (Harrop 111). However, this can be problematic for contemporary actors only trained in realism and when they perform for audiences accustomed to authenticity. I was required

to improvise a new acting process, inspired by the subject and dialogue, in order to play this non-realistic character.

At the time of the writing of the play, naturalistic dialogue was not common on the stage. Constant Coquelin, the most famous actor of the mid 1800s, argued that during his time that “no attempt at natural, everyday speech should be attempted” (Benedetti 94). Later, I will present an example of how naturalistic speech of *Fashion* could lend itself to realistic style of acting, rather than conventionalized acting of the time. Realism, derived from Romanticism and naturalism, freed actors to act out of “individual desires and feelings” (Harrop 170). It also encourages actors to remove “all restrictions upon his or her freedom of self-expression” (Harrop 171). Because of the comedic style of the play, and the naturalistic pattern of the dialogue noted by Barnes, I needed a new personal acting process to combine all dramatic elements. I began my character creation process of Count Jolimaitre by looking for textual evidence of authenticity that would influence a choice of acting technique.

### **Dialogue and Concept**

There is correlation between the Count’s primary tactics, speech patterns, and realistic acting techniques. I found that the Count uses improvisation as a primary tactic to advance his social position in the play’s world. His improvisatory moments occur in scenes when he is found alone with one of his three potential seduction targets: Seraphina, Gertrude, and Millinette. The voiced, “aw” and “demme” that the character frequently uses is an indication that the character is using his flair for improvisation. For example, when caught in a compromising position, he says to Mrs. Tiffany, “My dear Madam, demme, permit me to explain. It would be unbecoming--demme--particularly

unbecoming of you--aw--aw--to pay any attention to this ignorant person. Anything that he says concerning a man of my standing--aw--the truth is, Madam—” (Calvano et al 22). The “demme” and “aw”, part of the character’s speech, reflect natural speaking pauses. These pauses occur because the character needs mental time to improvise the story he is about to tell. This occurs throughout the play as the Count improvises several attempts at “truth”. It is spontaneous. In some realistic acting styles spontaneity, exploration, and improvisation are seen as the most important aspects of the actors craft (Book XII)..

Additionally, the director’s concept for the production supported my application of realistic acting techniques to a character from this non-realistic play. The concept for this version of the play was focused around the prefix “re”, so as to focus on innovation. The narrator character Professor Reddi Turner explains this adaption as a “re-tell” and “re-work”, that will “reflect our present” (Calvano et al 2). My choice of contemporary techniques, instead of those congruent with when the play was written, could be used to more accurately “reflect the present.” In the director’s project statement, Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano writes that they chose to make the play, “speak more directly to the present moment” (Calvano 1). They also write that they hope the performers will, “further develop their own personal approach to performance” (Calvano 1). With this evidence from the prologue and concept, it is clear a new type of acting process was welcome. I decided that hallmarks of my process would be innovation, exploration, and relevance to a contemporary audience.

The history of the acting style used for the play's premiere, character’s pattern of speech, and director’s concept illuminated a path forward to developing a new personal acting process. This acting process was pieced together from techniques I was learning in

my classes. This suggests that they are fashionable for my time, that is, that they are currently accepted techniques for the actor. However, acting techniques are always being molded by an actor's own personal process. Peter Brook writes, "Life is moving, influences are playing on actor, and audience, and other plays, other arts, the cinema, television, current events, join in the constant rewriting of history and the amending of the daily truth" (16). Thus, whether consciously or unconsciously, an actor is always adapting a character in a play from its initial context to today. Subsequently, another actor who plays the same role again is performing a new exploration and adaptation relevant to their time. Later Brook writes, "A living theatre that thinks it can stand aloof from anything so trivial as fashion will wilt" (16). Acting styles and processes can be considered fashions, and should be pieced together new each time a play is performed. Cultural items that are considered in fashion are socially relevant to the moment. I wished to create a fully alive, embodied, and relevant Count Jolimaitre, and thus began the fashioning of my personal approach.

### **Techniques**

One of the contemporary acting techniques I utilized to create the Count was Stephen Book's Improvisation Technique, which focuses on spontaneity of performance. Book writes that through his Improvisation Technique, the actor can "bypass our limited frames of reference and go to areas beyond our imagination" (XVI). In *[Re]Fashion*, there are limited given circumstances of how the Count feels about his past life. Also, there is limited mention of how Peter Gus Treadmill, a lowly cook, went from working around aristocracy to behaving convincingly as the Count. I wanted to use Book's technique, which focuses on physical exploration through improvisation, to fully craft the

unmentioned feelings and improvised tactics of the Count. I did this by incorporating some of the primary facets of the Improvisation Technique into my personal process.

By incorporating aspects of the Improvisation Technique into my work, I began to apply a realistic acting style to the character. I adapted several techniques of Book including spontaneity and inner doings. Spontaneity is the ability to “improvise acting while speaking scripted lines” (Book XIII). I employed this by making every scene improvisational, an exploration. “Inner doings” are the way the character is active in their thinking and feeling (Book 107). In exploring the Count’s relationships to other characters, my acting focus was how the Count was pursuing his own thoughts. I was concerned with how he actively felt and thought about each character each time I performed a scene. For both spontaneity and inner doings, the most important aspect was that each scene was new and improvised. This is the primary notion of Book’s technique.

Another acting concept of Book’s work that served an authentic portrayal is the idea of play. Book writes, “Playing keeps you in a state of becoming. You never know what’s going to happen next. Play creates spontaneity” (5). As I will detail in Chapter 2, one of the key takeaways I had from Book’s work was that there is always more to do as the actor (7). This relates to how a scene is performed differently every time, and how acting challenges are embraced and solved. For the Count, I entered each scene knowing that I would play to see how the scene would unfold differently. If there was a specific physical challenge, or visual challenge as related to the Zoom performance aspect of the play, I would use play to do something about it. In addition to being a relevant acting technique, play is also related to the Count’s ability to improvise his way out of difficult situations.

In order to authentically represent the Count's improvised choices on stage, I found that I needed to trust my acting impulses. In order to do so, I utilized Harold Guskin's techniques to explore the text and philosophy on how to allow my instincts to take over. Guskin writes that "the more they (actors) trust their instinct, the more inspired and inspiring their performances become. That is when they surprise us, even startle us" (239). In performing the Count, I found that trusting an instinct is the first part of making improvisational choices. There are also several moments in the script when the Count is forced to trust his own instinct to come up with improvised responses. Trust in my abilities, as well as being content with failed improvisation, became an essential part of creating Count Jolimaitre as I will detail in subsequent chapters.

Engaging with Guskin's work allowed me to explore authentic acting impulses from the dialogue. Guskin's primary exercise is to take the text off the page. To do this, the actor reads a line of text while breathing in and out, and then allows the text to be spoken instinctually (259). I did this for every line of the Count over hundreds of times outside of rehearsal. Not only did it become a springboard for my own personal rehearsal, but it was also my primary method of line memorization. I found that memorization came easier to me as it was connected to instinctual physical improvisation. This is precisely what Guskin writes, that "once the actor connects the physical to the specific image and thought in a way that is freeing, his imagination and instinct will take over" (543). I found that this method of taking the text off the page brought me out of my head as the actor, and into physical doing.

To flesh out the natural range of the Count's movement, I engaged with physical exploration work of Stephen Wangh in Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano's Fall 2020 period

movement class. Wangh's work is primarily inspired by Jerzy Grotowski, who employed the exercise of the River. In the River, an actor will move physically within a set of rules, or containers, however they feel inclined to move. Rivers can be influenced by art, text, or sound. In Dr. Calvano's movement class, we worked with art of the mid-nineteenth century, text from literature of that time, and on speaking lines of text from the adaptation of Mowatt's play while in a River. We also had moments of exploring the use of cameras and space within Zoom. Since I was using my own present body to explore, I was translating the material from the mid-nineteenth century into a contemporary spectrum of natural movement.

Another acting technique that I engaged with to infuse the Count with authenticity was *Intent to Live*, by Larry Moss. Moss writes, "To be moment to moment, you have to be available to your one impulses and to what the other person gives you. This means to be without an inner censor, to be wide open" (187). Moment to moment acting, similarly to Improvisation Technique, is congruent to authentic acting. I primarily followed Moss's directions on figuring out given circumstances and moment to moment listening. For given circumstances I followed Moss's questionnaire, which included questions such as "What do I know about the other characters in the scene", and "What are my relationships with them emotionally?" (14). For moment to moment listening, I used other actors' performances as impulses for my improvisational choices. These two directions moved my character creation process to authenticity by focusing on internal emotion and spontaneous performances of other actors.

I also engaged with the *Practical Handbook for the Actor* to personalize the character, and therefore more authentic. I analyzed the scenes according to the method

described by The Atlantic Theatre Group. This book instructs the actor to ask three questions of each scene; “What is the character literally doing?”, “What is the essential action of the scene?” and “What does this action mean to me...it’s as if” (23 - 26). For example, for the entrance scene of the Count I wrote, “The Count is introducing himself to the Tiffanies”, “He is impressing Mrs. Tiffany and Seraphina so that they are enthralled by him”, “It’s as if I am trying to impress old church ladies” (Gordon 6). I did this analysis for each scene, and I found this personalized the scenes and helped connect the Count to my own emotional history and responses.

However, the ultimate purpose of this type of scene analysis was to inspire an authentic physical action that arouses emotional response in the character. The Group writes, “Once you’ve learned to commit fully to a physical action, your only task concerning emotions will be to learn to work through them, to let them exist as they will, for they are beyond your control and will come to you quite unbidden” (73). Therefore, in physical action comes authentic emotional freedom, which is what I sought for in my portrayal. This connects well to Guskin, Book, and Wangh in that all four teachers advocate for actors to trust in instinctual physical action. Through my research of these texts, I discovered that this was one of the primary mindsets for an authentic actor.

The process for incorporating all of these techniques was one of the defining aspects of my work on the Count. Since I used multiple techniques, feedback during the process, and my own judgement about their effectiveness, the character creation process for the Count became unique. Each of these techniques had similarities and subtle differences to each other that needed to be explored and managed in rehearsal. The similarities were great enough to fashion them into one singular set of realism-based

Mindsets that I could habitually call on during rehearsal. While some of the justification for the development of these Mindsets is in the improvisational nature of the Count, they could be used by another actor wishing to perform a character from non-contemporary play with an authentic aesthetic. To that end, another actor could utilize the same Mindsets onto the right character, or be inspired by my process to create their own.

### **Primary Mindsets**

I developed the following Mindsets and processes from the techniques above, to use immediately in rehearsal. Similarly to the River, these were containers that I could call upon in my work whenever I wanted to explore the character. While I did follow specific exercises from different techniques, these are the fundamental five guiding principles, based on my research, that I used for Count Jolimaitre. Yet, these Mindsets could be translated onto any character from a non-realistic play, especially those with limited emotional backstory or who have a flair for improvisation. These Mindsets allow the actor to improvise and explore the emotional life of the character when this life is perhaps historically distant or not clearly defined. Before the advent of authenticity, emotional truth and naturalistic speech was not typically written into the script (Harrop 111). So in order to translate a non-realistic character into an authentic aesthetic, a contemporary actor must create their own process of physical action and exploration.

Mindset 1: There is always more to be done physically.

The overarching theme of the authenticity acting techniques I chose to engage with was physical doing. Stephen Book writes, “Acting is doing”, describing the physical improvisation that should take place in realistic acting (XIX). My researched techniques

collectively affirmed that acting is mostly physical, rather than cognitive. I used Mindset 1 to make acting choices for Count Jolimaitre, especially during problems of non-defined relationships, entrances, and physical violence. At times, the choices I made were big yet incorrect, and I used the process of elimination to get closer to choices the director thought were appropriate. Guskin defines the act of making impulsive choices, wrong and right, and finding the character as “illogical conclusion” (Location 1150). Even during the performances, I allowed myself to do more physically at times as a result of spontaneity. One example of using Mindset 1 in my process for the Count was when I had to explore a challenging physical entrance in the Conservatory scene multiple times. I will further elaborate this scene in the rehearsal section of this thesis. Each time I decided to discover the new thing that I could do, until the entrance was more authentic.

Mindset 2: Breathe and allow the physical impulse to be completed fully.

In order to allow an authentic improvisational response, my researched techniques advocated for the response to be completed and explored fully. This is a primary aspect of Guskin’s technique, but ties in with both the Improvisation Technique and River in the priority placed on exploring physical doing. With Mindset 2, I was to explore physically any impulse that was created from pulling the text off the page, and experience it to the end. This was done without expectation, or playwriting (according to Book), which could lead to end-gaining, having the perfect example in mind, or presenting rather than acting and discovery (57). The goal of Mindset 2 was to allow the physical choices found from Mindset 1 to fully manifest on stage. Only after the choice had occurred and fully manifested on stage could I determine whether or not it was authentic through feedback. An example of this occurred again when I was exploring the challenging Conservatory

entrance, and allowed myself to explore different ways of entering whether or not the physical impulse seemed appropriate to the scene.

Mindset 3: Do not judge the impulse intellectually.

Judgement of an attempt at authentic impulse can hinder the acting process. In movement classes, Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano taught us the concept of Judges. As I interpreted them, they are internal repetitive thoughts that can damage your ability to act freely and impulsively. Therefore, it is important to allow the physical impulse to occur, and trust your actor instinct in the doing. If there is always more to be done, then there are an unlimited amount of choices to explore, and judging intellectually can create resistance. In terms of the entrance example, I relied on feedback from the director and my own physical sensations, instead of judgment from my intellect, to dictate which attempt at the entrance was the most effective.

Mindset 4: Record all choices and feedback.

Journaling was an effective part of my process for recording feedback on my attempts at authenticity. Without it, it would be difficult to remember the choices I made in scenes every rehearsal, since they are often rehearsed multiple times. In keeping with the Improvisation Technique, I did not wish to recreate the same choices over and over again. I realized that acknowledgement of the physical sensations and feedback from the director could lead to new choices. Book advocates for students to describe their choices as physical sensations to develop the muscle of awareness (13). Journaling was a continuation of the awareness aspect of the process. For the entrance example, I wrote down every attempt I made and described how I felt while doing it. I also recorded the

director's feedback. I then would re-read that journal entry when I knew we were to rehearse that scene again, and allow myself to have entirely new impulsive responses. I did this to find the most authentic and effective entrance I could.

Mindset 5: Sustainability.

In order to improvise new authentic choices indefinitely, it became apparent that I needed to sustain my body and mind. Aspects such as mental health, physical well-being, and time management became crucial. Stephen Wangh writes, "the personal habits and the care you take of your body will affect your art" (307). This means that during the performance, and especially after, I needed to create a Mindset around sustainability to consistently be at my best. As I will detail in the final chapter, I had to improvise new strategies for sustainability during the rehearsal process and immediately after the performances. An example of this Mindset in action is that when a performance was over, I meditated for at least 15 minutes. I would find at least one self-care practice to do after every performance for sustainability.

## **Process**

I developed my own processes of physical improvisation from several techniques, which was justified by a style of acting that could be implied for *[Re]Fashion*, and textual evidence of the character. A key element of my process was that it allowed for physical forms of emotional exploration and discovery. These two elements are vital for an authentic actor's process, especially while working on characters from non-contemporary play who may not be written for authentic emotional displays or naturalistic speech. Yet, there is a chance, as in the case of *[Re]Fashion*, that a

non-contemporary play may have authentic elements, such as dialogue that serve's a corresponding process. By allowing physical invention and improvisation to occur at every point of rehearsal and performance, the emotional life of the character is reimagined for a contemporary audience. My Mindsets, developed with these ideas in mind, showed their effectiveness through the rehearsal and performance as evident by feedback I received from several sources that I will present in later chapters.

## CHAPTER II

### WHAT TO DO WITH PERIOD RESEARCH

Some actors feel that analysis of a script's history and of a character's movement will bring authenticity to a character in a period play. Typical actor questions might be: How do characters of the time period in which this play was first produced move? What social rules would a character of this period have to follow? What is the history of the play's time period? All of this information can be valuable; however, this initial work is only the beginning "alchemy" from which to pull from for character embodiment. Embodiment of a character in authentic acting is accomplished through "physical experience and activity, imagination, language, (and) non-verbal communication" (Kemp 197). So, to achieve each of these elements, the physical body needs to become activated from the research. By alchemy, I mean the process by which I analyzed, remembered, and trusted research to be present and available for improvisatory response. Successful and appropriate application of the research, required activating it in rehearsal, and trusting in your ability to retain the research not only intellectually but corporeally. Thus, by treating research as alchemy, a living entity of research, it was more useful for authentic physical expression.

While some acting techniques advocate for a departure from historical research, I found that, if incorporated as alchemy, it was productive. Yet, historical analysis and pre-planned physical traits of a character also can have a negative effect towards acting

authentically. Guskin writes, “In fact, analysis tends to make the actor afraid of trusting his instinct. It leads to doubts about whether his mind is crisp enough to grasp quickly enough the character’s central needs in life or his desires in a particular scene, as Stanislavski instructs. Analysis weakens the actor” (232). If an actor does not trust their instinct and activates their body over their mind, it works against physical embodiment. Before rehearsals began, I explored methods of script analysis work and did physical exploration of period research. The most effective way I found to explore was to treat my analysis and research as alchemic information to be used in physical exploration. Alchemic information is fluid, is not clearly defined, yet it is always available to the actor if they need it. Its use can be conscious or unconscious. The physical response to the research is what mattered the most, and occurred when I was focused on deep exploration of the physical actions.

The use of research as alchemy incorporated with Mindsets was a key discovery I made in the path to authenticity. In this chapter, I will discuss how my initial phase of Stanislavski based script analysis *[Re]Fashion* fell short before I began a process of using it for physical exploration. I will outline how after the script analysis phase I developed a process of embodying the research in Movement class. Then, I will elaborate the discoveries I made in Movement class that led me to the discovery of treating script analysis and period research as alchemic information. These discoveries eventually led to the creation of the Mindsets, and served my process of finding authenticity for Count Jolimaitre.

## **Initial phase of Script Analysis**

The first part of script analysis was to find descriptors that could be turned into authentic actionable characteristics for Count Jolimaitre. The script offered a few descriptors of the Count, such as “foreign” (12) and “fashionable” (14). Later, we learn that the Count has a “flair for Improvisation” (37), and he is called an “Impostor” (38) and “Rank villain” (22). More physical descriptions occur in the script such as the Count having a mustache (8), and having “nothing of the man about him” (31). All of these given circumstances, Konstantin Stanislavski’s term for information in a script about a character, seem to suggest a conventional mustache-twirling villain, who will eventually be found out and put in his place. While these were my first clues to the character, I made a determination that these descriptors should be physically explored through improvisation to avoid a caricature.

I searched for key lines that would give me a clue to the Count’s “essential action” or “super objective” (Stanislavski 12), that is, his primary goal from the start of the action to the resolution. In the method of script analysis initially proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski, an actor must identify a character’s super objective, which shapes a character’s journey, or dramatic arc. The line, “I hope you will pardon my conduct, but I learned quickly in America that Fashion makes the basest coin current” offers the Count’s rationale for his actions, and gives the primary clues towards his super objective (62). I noted in my journal the Count is someone who believes in the present, who wanted to use his “current” actions to “Fashion” a new life in the now. He was a self-made man (Gordon 9). Assuming this positive objective was the first step in creating a character with the kind of emotional depth expected of a character performed with

authenticity. It also allowed the Count to place trust in his physical impulses, his “flair for Improvisation” (37), and gave him a tactic of using conventions as tools rather than as rules to follow.

I also began to map out key setups and payoffs that happened in the Count’s journey, that would provide insight to how the Count would authentically pursue his objective. This would be the alchemic foundation for how I would interpret the role. One major setup and payoff that occurs is with Miss Seraphina. The Count comes to call on her as one of her suitors. This ultimately leads to him proposing to her, in order for them to elope with some of her jewels. Other key moments include Millinette recognizing him as his former identity, and the Count’s attempt to woo Gertrude. This attempt with Gertrude nearly leads to his downfall, but his talent for improvisation, and Mrs. Tiffany's desire to believe in him, enables him to get away. By doing this kind of script analysis, I found the moments of emotionality I needed to explore. These moments had interesting intellectual questions: What does the Count gain emotionally by winning over Seraphina? Does he have true feelings for Millinette? Why is he particularly interested in Gertrude, and how does he feel emotionally after she sees through his disguise? Asking these questions allowed me to explore intellectually, and later physically, the important moments I needed to portray authentically.

One way I tried to intellectually activate authenticity for the character was through an exercise from the *Intent to Live*. Moss asks the actor to describe the character’s point of view. Moss dictates the format for this exercise as, “My name is [character's name], and the world is [six descriptive words or phrases]” (13). Already, I had found the Count’s most telling line, but I completed the exercise and I came up with

this character point of view: “My name is Count Jolimaitre, formerly Peter Gus Treadmill, and the world is open, hostile, unfair, and is mine for the taking, the rules made in this world are mine for the breaking, and it is up to me to become the man I want to be through my fashion and sexual conquests” (Gordon 11). I also listed all of the given circumstances, including relationships, knowledge at the time, discoveries, and the lies that I told as the Count. I then journaled that it had become clear that the Count was not a person who believed in a society of rules or conventions. He sought to make something new for himself, making it up as he went along.

However, since I was only exploring the text intellectually, I noted that the character still felt somewhat one dimensional emotionally (Gordon 12). The director, Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano, and the assistant director, Blair Potter, had a discussion with me that the Count needed to have a duality and depth of emotional character. For example, the Peter Gus Treadmill is deceptively playing a Count, but is really a cook. Additionally, in order for the audience to feel anything for the Count, he needed to be “vulnerable” (Gordon 14), not just a conventional villain. It was difficult to tell while reading the script, unvoiced, if there were any lines or moments of sincerity. We also discussed the Count’s relationship with Millinette, a chamber maid who had a previous romantic history with the Count. At this time, I had yet to physically explore these script discoveries and the character’s relationships, and felt that I had not found an authentic amount of emotional depth in the character. I also wished to physically explore elements of the play’s era, in hopes that would contribute to authentic depth and audience understanding.

## **Movement**

One of the first readings we had in Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano's Period Movement class in Fall 2020 was *Is History Fiction?* It is noted that, "the doubleness of history, in the space between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources, and history as part of the world of literary forms, gives it ample room for uncertainty, disagreement and creativity" (Curthoys et al 11). The physical creativity and exploration that I utilized while working on *[Re]Fashion* as historical literature, is what transformed the history to character embodiment. While I found my intellectual script analysis work did provide creative threads to follow, the Count did not become real until he became physicalized. In the class work I engaged with pieces of historical literature and art of the period, which led to a process of physical exploration. This exploration occurred before I created my Mindsets, and partially led to their discovery.

Historical research and physical work combined led me to discover how the Count's physicality relates to his duality of status. Dr. Calvano's Period Movement class (Fall 2020) included a Period Timeline project that outlined the historical context within which Mowatt's play was written. This activity consisted of creating a list of important historical events that occurred during the 1800s. Anna Cora Mowatt set *Fashion* in 1845, New York, the year the play was written; however, the adaptation *[Re]Fashion* was set in 1860 before the Civil War. I noted in my project the adaptation of play occurred before the United States entered a period of Civil War followed by Reconstruction. Leading up to the Civil War, The United States was in a period of forging a national identity, and some people were looking to European traditions to establish this identity. This is evident most prominently by the characters of the Count, and Mrs. Tiffany, who wish to portray

themselves as high class and French, even though their national class and background is not congruent with this. From this historical research, I noted that one aspect of the physical embodiment of the Count should be a duality of identity. Also, I noted that the lower status reality of the Count could be a point of emotional vulnerability (Gordon 14). While Count is of lower social background as evident by the script, his physical action portrays him as high status.

I explored this physical duality in the class's Pinterest Art Project. This project consisted of finding paintings within a time period of the late 1800s, and assembling them onto a Pinterest Board where they would be saved for viewing. This project, coupled with *Is History Fiction*, enabled me to physically engage with other historical works of art contemporary to *Fashion*. In my art research, I wrote descriptions of what I noticed or interested me about each piece of art, and how it related to text from *[Re]Fashion*. The primary question I asked from this project was: What are the main physical differences between Peter Gus Treadmill and Count Jolimaitre, and was that duality? (Gordon 15). Furthermore, I asked: What dramatic movements in the art I found could be reinterpreted into the physical life of the character? Both of these questions served as starting points for physical exploration.

One image that I found that sparked physical creativity for rendering duality was "The Desperate Man" (1843-45) by French Painter Gustave Courbet. This painting shows a gentleman with a crazed look, who seems to be sculpting his own face around his hands. His face is theatrical, like he has just placed a Greek mask over his existing face. This process of mask improvisation is ongoing in the Count's emotional journey, and the primary tactic that he utilizes. What I became interested in as the actor is: What is

underneath the mask, and how is the mask physically improvised? I completed several Rivers, exercises of physical exploration, inspired by “The Desperate Man”, and I found that one way of portraying the mask was changing the physical actions of the character. To improvise the high status mask, the Count could heavily animate his face, and use piercing eye contact. To authentically show the Count’s true self, this over-animation could drop, and his attention could focus inward (Gordon 14).

Another activity from Movement class that created physical discoveries was the Tall-tale project. In this assignment, I found different tall-tales from the era of *Fashion*, and pulled visually interesting and descriptive text into a separate document. I then used those lines of text to inspire physical exploration within Rivers. I engaged with several tall-tales from the era of the play, but the two that sparked the most creativity was *A quarter race in Kentucky* (1845), and *Simon Suggs attends a camp Meeting* (1845). From these two pieces I pulled the text, “so cross eyed he could look at his own head”, and “stood silent, or answered the incessant stream of exhortations with only a sneer”, respectfully. Both of these text examples were highly descriptive, and implied physical action.

In my Rivers, I found that the tall-tale text was extremely useful in creating improvisational physical response. When I engaged with the text from *Kentucky*, I first explored what the Count would emotionally feel if he were actually cross-eyed. I then explored what it would be like to hold eye contact with another character, but keep tension in the area around the eyes, to hold a state of disconnect and concealment. From a *River* I did with the *Simon Suggs* text, I played with different types of smiles. I found that it felt emotionally right to smile profusely at other characters, as a way to hide the ulterior

truth of the Count (Gordon 14). Not only did I discover physical actions that could be used at my disposal, their direct implementation in the physical body of the character was fluid enough that they could be explored spontaneously in rehearsal.

### **Initial Phase Conclusion**

While I was able to make intellectual discoveries from my script analysis of *[Re]Fashion*, it was my physical exploration of the script and other texts that moved the Count closer to authentic emotional truth pre-rehearsal (Gordon 15). The act of physical doing, is what propelled the character creation into a state I felt could be worked on in rehearsal. Particularly, the dual nature of the Count, expressed as vulnerability when the mask of the count is falling, did not come into focus from an analysis of the script alone. Moss writes that in order to reveal a character, an actor must do so, “by the way they try to achieve their objectives” (34). Thus, it makes sense that only through the act of physical doing, working to achieve an objective, could vulnerability be revealed under a false persona like the Count’s. In order for the character portrayal to be authentic, the audience must be able perceive that vulnerability. Thus It is not enough for an actor to only build choices from analyzing the script. They must be practiced utilizing the whole body, which was formed into Mindset 1.

With the progress I felt in discovering the dual nature of the Count in Rivers, I was inspired to further unpack the role of physical improvisation in character creation during rehearsal. Ultimately, this led to the creation of the Mindsets, after I observed the connections between my acting techniques. Mindset 1 is specifically focused around the act of physically doing. The subsequent Mindsets all relate to allowing the physical doing

and exploration to be completed fully, and repetitively. Physical improvisation became my primary method for finding authenticity for Count Jolimaitre in rehearsal.

## CHAPTER III

### APPLIED RESEARCH IN REHEARSAL

Throughout the rehearsal process I furthered my study of physical improvisation in bringing about an authentic aesthetic for Count Jolimaitre. I developed and utilized my Mindsets in this pursuit. Based upon recorded feedback from the director, as well as my own internal awareness recorded through journaling, this process was mostly effective and laden with discovery. The rehearsal process was when my process of Mindsets reached the height of its practical discovery. The historical analysis and preliminary physical exploration was molded through working with directors and other actors. In turn, the feedback I received helped spark new physical doings. My Mindsets enabled a process of trial and error, as I strived to find the ways the Count improvised authentically. By discovering this process in rehearsal, I found a new way of reinterpreting this non-contemporary character to be performed for a contemporary audience. This chapter will show that Mindsets incorporated with alchemic research allowed for spontaneity during the rehearsal process.

In this chapter, I will elaborate the successes of specific applied research in rehearsal, through physical exploration and Improvisation Technique. Since this improvisatory process was enacted through trial and error, I will discuss the strongest applications of my process, and how acting challenges were overcome. The effectiveness of the Mindsets in rehearsal will be evaluated by feedback I received from the directors. I will specifically elaborate my applied research in action within the rehearsal of the

character's entrances, relationships with the characters of Millinette and Gertrude, and the characters duality. I will further talk about how I strengthened my improvisatory process leading into the performance through journaling and incorporating feedback to inspire new physical choices. Also, I will elaborate how I managed discrepancies between the methodology of my chosen texts, such as Guskin's dismissal of analysis, by returning to the Mindsets. I will share the key discoveries about my developed process during rehearsal that I believe another actor could utilize as techniques in playing a character from a non-contemporary play with authenticity.

### **Enter the Count**

The entrances of the character became a primary point of focus of my rehearsal work in order to develop an authentic essence of the Count. In order to make these entrances as authentic as possible, I sought to find authentic physical action through physical improvisation. Mindset 1 states that there is always more to do physically, and I found that the doing must be a physical action, not simply a movement. Kemp writes that physical action occurs, "not through movement alone, but through the effect that movement has on the actor" (181). I utilized a considerable amount of improvisatory exploration, a process of utilizing Mindsets, in order to discover what seemed to be both natural movement and psychologically motivated action.

The Count's first entrance in the *[Re]Fashion* is one example of where I discovered a need for authentic physical action. During the entrance, the Tiffany family appears to be overwhelmed by his status, as Mrs. Tiffany remarks, "Oh, Count, this unexpected honor..." and Seraphina speaks, "Count this inexpressible pleasure..." (Calvano et al 8). I interpreted it to mean that the Count's high status mask must be in full

effect at this moment. For this entrance, I implemented Mindset 1, “there is always more to do physically”, and entered the first time with “grace” and a quote I recorded from the tall-tale project, “eye’s so cross-eyed they could look at his own head” as inspiration (Gordon 12) (Meine 290). Since my physical exploration this time included reactions from other characters, rather than a solo River, it needed to be shaped into new physical action. During the first trial of the entrance, I intentionally asked, “what is actionable ‘grace’ for the Count?”, and “what does this quote mean in this moment to the other characters?” (Gordon 16). Another way I explored physically was in relation to the technology being used to record. The next time I worked this entrance, I came from the other side of the camera on the computer screen, and carefully bowed my hat. At this point, the entrance seemed stale, and I considered, “what more is there to do?” (Gordon 20). I then entered relaxed and casual, which was counter to how I thought the Count should enter. This choice departed from what I assumed to be the intention of the script. It showed me that while the Count might not be that casual, he was afforded a freedom of physicality due to his perceived status. As per Mindset 3, “Do not judge the impulse intellectually”, I allowed myself to fully explore what Guskin calls “wrong choices,” those that one does not think intellectually make sense (Location 920). Guskin writes, “Always explore a wrong choice that strikes you in some way...and if by chance this ‘wrong’ choice works it will probably be...a great choice” (Location 920). In rehearsals, the physicality of this entrance always incorporated an intention of relaxation while still indicating the Count’s status to the other characters. For example, I could still enter with graceful relaxation, or relaxation of everything in the body except tension around the

eyes. This moment of discovery found the balance between historical script intention and authentic physicality that gave the actionable, revealing depth to the entrance.

The next entrance that I focused on authentic embodiment was the entrance in the Conservatory scene with Gertrude, Seraphina's governess (19). In this scene, the Count enters, finds Gertrude alone, and immediately tries to seduce her. For this entrance, I primarily engaged with Mindset 4 of my process, "Record all choices and feedback" (Gordon 22). I had the impulse to enter the scene from above as if I were hanging from another railing in the Conservatory. This impulse had partly come from an exploration I did in Dr. Calvano's movement class, where I discovered I could make it look like I was hanging from above through Zoom. However, after I did this in rehearsal for the show, the director stated that they did not know where the character was coming from, and the acting choice was engaging but not clear (Gordon 23). At this moment, I evaluated what was not working, but allowed the choice to "influence another catalyst choice" (Book 307). The problem was that because the online production necessitated working without a fully erected stage set, I needed to more clearly articulate where the character truthfully believed themselves to be. The next time, I came in from below the camera from the side, hoping to subdue the vagueness of the physical location from the previous choice, but again got the same note from the director. During one specific rehearsal, we worked this entrance about five times. As per my Mindsets, I chose to explore the impulses I received doing the entrances, and not judge them intellectually. I did not allow myself time to cognitively judge or plan what I was going to do beforehand. I made a conscious effort to try and find the "physical emotional logic, without interference from the mind" (Wangh 181). Eventually, I chose to walk, creeping, into the conservatory from the stage right

side and then make the emotional discovery that Gertrude was present in the same room. This choice was vastly different than the one that I began with. However, because I allowed myself to follow the impulsive physical choice, the final choice was more intentional, and had greater clarity. The director stated, “That works” (Gordon 19). As I moved towards a more focused and clear entrance in rehearsal, I continuously allowed freedom to explore the space and actionable movement of the rest of the scene.

The most challenging entrance logistically that I sought to perform with authenticity was the closet scene. In this scene, the Count hides away from the posse of guests at the ball at the Tiffany’s home, to hide the fact he was trying to meet his former lover, the maid Millinette, whom Gertrude is masquerading as to reveal the Count as a lothario. However, he is discovered, and comes flying out of a closet. This scene benefitted from my process for a number of reasons. Because the show was performed on Zoom it was difficult to cognitively create the action of the Count falling out of a closet without a set. Yet, it still needed to appear natural and not staged. While the falling out of the closet was an accidental movement, and not an intentional action of the character, it still benefitted from physical exploration and play. Without thinking, I allowed myself to follow the first physical impulse that I had. The process during rehearsal before it takes place, can be described as me, standing on stage, breathing in and out, and simply moving my body towards an impulse. The first time, I came through the railings in the Department’s Thrust Stage space. Next, I went into the actual closet area of the Thrust Theatre. Next, I fell from above the camera and did a roll. The director gave feedback by stating that they thought I was “getting close” to the right choice (Gordon 30). The director suggested that I do a back roll, from above the camera onto the floor. This was

the chosen choice for the performance. However, when it came time to perform this online production, we had a new element of the stage to work with, which was the green screen. So, I had to follow a completely new impulse, and do the roll from behind the green screen, and find a way to be placed in front of the camera and visible to the audience. Again, the director stated that the choice was acceptable (Gordon 32). My improvisatory process allowed me to adjust quickly, to the changing performance environment, without a great deal of anxiety, and the choice was still as intentful and natural.

### **Interacting with the Count**

My improvisatory process also helped to realize and flesh out character relationships that were not fully articulated in the script. Wangh writes that when the “intentions of the characters are not obvious at first, if you allow the text to play upon you...it will reveal itself in your impulses” (187). I interpreted Wangh’s use of “play” to mean the act of physical exploration of the text through actionable doing. The two main character relationships that I desired to portray authentically were between Millinette and with Gertrude. By choosing to follow my Mindsets, and allowing for a process of trial and error and experimentation, I began to collect insight into these relationships.

Though the Count pursues Seraphina, the most prevalent character with a complex romantic history with the Count is Millinette. However, it is not clear from the script how the Count feels emotionally about Millinette, and to what extent the Count was invested in their previous relationship. In the beginning rehearsals, I was asked by the director what the Count’s feelings were towards Millinette, and what the history might be (Gordon 13). Rather than document a historical backstory for this relationship, I

instead chose to explore the relationship through my Mindsets. Over the course of the rehearsal process, I explored Act III Scene 2 a variety of ways. The scene unfolded a few times impulsively as indifference towards the relationship. Physically, this manifested as a lack of eye contact, relaxed posture, and impatience. However, a character's indifference may indicate underlying emotional stake (Moss 118). Thus, I kept with the process of finding more to do in this scene to find this stake. Other times the scene was played as two highly dramatic and romantic lovers. The Count mirrored the dramatic speech of Millinette, and made sweeping melodramatic movements. My ultimate physical goal was usually to sedate Millinette's mood, and give them a sense of trust through mirroring their language. Ultimately, the character choice that seemed to keep rising was that of a shallow, but complex relationship between them. In dealing with complex character relationships, Moss advocated using an exercise called "In-Character Improvisation" (Moss 111). For the exercise, I began to imagine what some past moments between the Count and this Millinette could be, right before we rehearsed the scene. I also continuously directed myself to follow Mindset 2, and allow the impulses that arrived from my imagination to manifest fully in physical action. After doing that before one run through in rehearsal, the director noted that that scene went particularly well (Gordon 33).

My improvisatory process also brought the character relationship with Gertrude closer to authenticity. In the script, the Count is so attracted to Gertrude that he chooses to make himself vulnerable by outlining his plan of "keeping her in the family". This occurs before he actually attempts to marry Seraphina (52). While this can be seen as the Count functioning as a lothario, I needed to find an authentic, emotional justification to make

that clear to the audience. I explored this relationship using my Mindset process to find an inner driving desire that required the Count to pursue Gertrude. I explored the primary scenes several different ways. In the initial rehearsals for the conservatory scene, I felt as if I had the desire to be physically dominating: talking with a loud volume, being physically unreactive, while instructing Gertrude how things would be between us. In later exploration, I used condescending and belittling tones. Without judging the impulse, I also explored what the relationship could be like if he had genuine interest in a romantic relationship with Gertrude. I instinctively used prolonged eye contact, shallow breathing, and reactive body language . The final performance became a subconscious amalgamation of all of these explorations, which added depth and varying stakes to the relationship. The director noted that the Count “had depth” (Gordon 41). This depth came from the different authentic physical ways I could pursue my objective. I discovered that a authentic relationship between the Count and Gertrude would not be a one-dimensional villain attempting to seduce a helpless woman. On a deeper level, the Count needed emotional validation from Gertrude which he expressed through dominating, condescending and romantic behavior. Moss writes that the most effective way to reveal your character is “by the ways they try to achieve their objective” (34). With a variety of tactics and reasons to physically pursue Gertrude, and allowing the impulses to manifest freely, an authentic complexity of the character was revealed.

### **Documenting the Count**

In order to track my application of my Mindsets 1 and 2 in rehearsal and the progress towards the authentic performance of the character, I reflected heavily in my journal up through the production’s run. Since the Mindset process was heavily reliant

upon trial and error, documenting discoveries and failures was essential. After each rehearsal, I noted in my journal the ways in which I attempted to find new things to do in a scene. I also recorded my own self-assessment of actions that occurred during rehearsal exploration, as well as any feedback I received from the director. Journaling led to new choices and authentic impulses by articulating what was already done in rehearsal, in order to find more to do. Since my primary tactic in finding authenticity with the Count was physical doing and exploration, journaling was a necessary aspect of implementing my process.

One of the key successes of my journaling process, Mindset 3 “Record all choices and feedback”, was the ability to identify acting problems and choices that were not authentic. By documenting these moments, I was enabled to take physical action towards finding solutions. Guskin suggests that one “see acting as an exploration of the character rather than a definition of the character” (Location 384). Thus, I never sought to define the character through journaling, but rather only identify areas that still needed physical exploration. I would then proceed to address these problems by trying a new physical action, sometimes inspired by engaging with my research texts. For example, once I had identified that the relationship with Millinette felt incomplete in my journal, I engaged with Moss’s In-Character Improvisation to find more to do. Thus, journaling became a crucial way of engaging with my research texts, and translating them through my Mindsets into physical doing during rehearsal.

### **Balancing Techniques with Mindsets**

The Mindsets applied in the rehearsal stage of my process also allowed me to find a common ground between competing acting techniques I was using. As noted

previously, there were times during the rehearsal process where I became aware of disconnections between my research texts. This occurred primarily between the Guskin impulse technique, and Moss's and Wangh's techniques that relied upon a level of analysis of the script and other relevant art. In Dr. Calvano's Wangh inspired movement class, we did an ample amount of historical research into the era of the play, as well as paintings and literary texts. We then moved our bodies impulsively, inspired by the either analysis of the historical research or other materials. Also, as noted in Chapter One, I utilized Moss's and The Group Theatre's Stanislavski-based script analysis to gather given circumstances and discover a character arc. Yet in Guskin's book, he advocates for drawing most exploratory imagery through the text alone, and in the moment, as "Analysis weakens the actor" (Guskin Location 236).

This contradiction was solved by incorporating a balance of techniques through my Mindsets. For the Mindsets, I chose principles that all of my chosen techniques agreed upon. For example, all of my chosen acting techniques advocated for following impulses fully. Thus, what my Mindsets enabled me to do was to decide where the physical impulse came from. My research texts advocated for this to come in different areas: script analysis, analysis and research of the era of the play, physical exploration, textual exploration. Since I took ownership over my process by creating the Mindsets, I had access to all of these resources for physical impulses. What was important was finding what seemed to work authentically for the Count in rehearsal, and not relying on one acting technique over another. Moss instructs actors to, "get past even thinking that there's one right answer" (76). However, the right answer for Count Jolimaitre was to focus on physical improvisation inspired by many different resources through the

development of my own technique. The Mindsets were effective for me in rehearsal and into performance because they encouraged continued authentic physical exploration and troubleshooting at every step of the character creation process.

## CHAPTER IV

### PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

During the online performances of *[Re]Fashion* in Spring 2021, I committed to exploring physical actions and improvisation to further discover authenticity in portraying Count Jolimaitre. Though these performance choices were more acutely focused, my Mindsets allowed for more physical freedom, not less, in adding authenticity to the character. It is my hope that another actor, after reading the Mindsets and my entire description of character creation, could adapt my process onto another character in a non-realistic play if they sought authenticity. This chapter serves as the articulation of the success of the Mindsets in performance, as evident by the director's notes, self-assessment, and critical review. This success in performance was brought about through the continued practice of a blend of realistic acting techniques and physical exploration of alchemic research. I will discuss each performance night consecutively and key discoveries through the implementation of my Mindsets. Then I will divulge the ultimate discoveries from the process of playing Count Joliamtatre and how this information may be useful to another actor.

#### **Performances**

For the first night of performance, I developed a physical, vocal, and mental warm-up routine, knowing that the Mindsets required full use of the physical body. I began by doing a fifteen minute session of Yoga, from the Asana Rebel Yoga app. I then sat and did The Release Exercise from *Intent to Live* for fifteen minutes (Moss 199). For

this relaxation exercise, while seated in a chair, I brought my attention from my toes to my head, slowly checking each part of the body for tension. I would breathe into any places of tension, and invite them to release (Gordon 42). I would do several cycles of this, since going through one time did not fill the whole fifteen minutes. While I was doing this, I would audibly release the tension through a vocal sigh as I was breathing into it. After fifteen minutes, I slowly came back to my surroundings by bringing my focus away from my body and into my environment. Then I moved into a vocal warm-up, practicing the Count's RP (Standard British) dialect. I would remind myself of the resonance of my voice forward and round, with active lips and tall vowels, such as "ah". I would speak several lines of the character until I reminded myself of this vocal placement, which is the physical changes in my voice I made to speak the dialect. I would then look over my highlighted sections of Guskin's *How to Stop Acting* to give myself an intention for the performance. For this first night of performance, the quotation I felt emotionally drawn to was, "the actor who only concerns himself with being free and available to his responses, is the one who will be watched" (Guskin Location 1366). I wanted the Count to be seen, to attract attention, and so I set off with the intention of being as "free and available to my responses" as much as possible (Gordon 42). The warm up process I developed for that first night's preparation process was my own, and to what I needed as an actor at the time. Creating my own warm up process was one aspect of finding more to do, and getting my actor body ready to experience impulses fully.

The first performance had a few unexpected events, which fortified my reason for using improvisation techniques for authentic performance. For most of the performance, I

was free and available to my responses. Bodily tension was minimized, as I was less concerned with recreating what had happened in rehearsal and more focused on exploring new ways of responding to the other characters (Gordon 43). Such responses also happened spontaneously by accident at the end of the performance. For example, when the Count says, “But I learned quickly...,” and he is supposed to be cut off by the Professor’s, “What exactly did you learn?” (Calvano et al 62). However, the other actor did not cut me off. While this may have posed a problem if I was concerned with replicating what happened in rehearsal, because I was focused on exploring and being available to new responses, I found that improvising the next line was spontaneous. I said instead, “If a man owns his clothes, then he owns his life,” after which the other actor remembered the cue, and I moved on to my real line, “In America, Fashion makes the basest coin current” (62). While this may not have been necessarily the best ad lib, I was able to come up with a line that made relative sense very quickly, and without completely breaking the style of the play. This is because I was already focused on the improvisational, truthful ways of responding to the other characters.

I made several key takeaways related to authentic portrayal from the first night of performance, to direct into the preparation for the second night. I found that my warmup had been effective at putting my actor body in a state of relaxation and availability to respond. I felt physically warm and able to move, and reminded of the dialect of the character. Also, that working on a new intention was helpful because it gave me a focus to explore. I discovered a new intention every night, to keep my focus new and compelling. I found that for the majority of the performance I was able to stay on my acting focus, and not allow any bodily tension to creep in and affect my improvisation.

This was key in allowing by body to still physically explore the character on the first night of the performance. In my past work, I found that anxiety and adrenaline can affect performances, especially on opening night. If I focused on developing the character using non-realistic acting techniques this would not have been the case.

Since I felt that warm up routine had been effective in assisting authentic acting, I retained majority of it for the second night of performance, but added The Breathing Thing from Guskin's *How to Stop Acting* (Location 2215). The breathing thing is described as taking deep breaths in and out from the diaphragm, allowing the chest to shake, and focusing on a certain type of emotion, while allowing the imagination to wander around that emotion. I incorporated this technique because I thought it would help with the playing the moments when the disguise of the Count, hiding Peter Gus Treadmill was challenged. I wondered what it would be like to explore keeping an undercurrent of anxiety and fear throughout the whole performance. So, during my preparation phase, after I had completed my yoga, relaxation exercise, and vocal centering, I did a few rounds of The Breathing Thing. I found that this exercise did in fact trigger an authentic emotional response that I was aware of when the performance began.

I discovered that intense focus on utilization of the Mindset's led to an authentic portrayal of the emotional duality in one moment of performance. It was noted during rehearsals that this closet scene was one moment where the mask of the Count was significantly being challenged. Mrs. Tiffany expresses her one moment of disbelief in the character of the Count when she says, "Oh, Count, I hope it ain't a French custom for the nobility to shut themselves up in the dark with young women?" (Calvano et al 44). Previously, when we rehearsed this scene, I felt a little bit like I was putting on an

anxiousness after Mrs. Tiffany's line. The emotion provoking my following lines, "Demme—aw—hear what I have to say..." was not fully being explored or embodied (Gordon 48). After I incorporated *The Breathing Thing*, I found that my monologue following Mrs. Tiffany's lines exploded out in fearful argument. The way that it happened in this performance was completely new and fresh as compared to how it was during rehearsal. My ability to find a new way of exploring this monologue came from an availability to explore, in addition to incorporating the Guskin exercise. Without a focus on physical exploration and improvisation, I would not have even dared to try a new exercise for a performance, or allow the monologue to be something different than it was. Yet, I am also aware that this monologue performance, while fresh and new, was not completely disconnected from the rehearsal work, and the choice I made for that performance was also justified by the feedback I had been receiving from the directors. This feedback centered on this moment as being a "dropping of the mask" and a vulnerable moment from which the Count intended to quickly recover (Gordon 37). Therefore, I found a way to explore the monologue with new responses, while still connecting it to my previous work.

I made a few new discoveries towards authenticity of portrayal from the second night of performance that impacted the third and final performance. My preparation was sufficient for both the first performance and the second. Guskin's *The Breathing Thing* assisted me in portraying the underlying anxiety under the Count's nobility mask. Incorporating this exercise directly stemmed from the mindset of always finding more to do physically with the character. Since I was still receiving feedback that the dropping of the mask was better, but not fully realized during dress rehearsals, I intended to continue

physical exploration through performance (Gordon 48). I decided that I would continue to incorporate the entirety of the warmup for the third and final performance. I would also continue to use Guskin's *The Breathing Thing*, potentially before specific scenes in addition to being a part of the warm up. I would be setting myself up again for the final night of performance to be as much of an exploration as the first and second night's of performance.

I retained the majority of the preparation routine from the past two nights of performance, but had greater confidence in displaying the Count authentically on closing night. For the last performance, I decided to do a longer yoga practice when I first arrived at the theater, completing twenty minutes instead of fifteen minutes. I chose a practice that focused more on balance rather than physical strenuation. After this was complete, I decided to do my vocal centering before I did my physical relaxation exercise. I did this, because I specifically wanted to explore if I could lessen my vocal tension by doing the physical relaxation after I had warmed up my voice. I then found a new intention from the Guskin book. This time, I utilized the quote, "being in the moment without censoring yourself" (Location 2198). For me, reading the quote in my head had the effect of removing tension within my bodying, and lessing the judgmental voices in my head. It meant that I would cease to interpret a physical response as good or bad, because it would be solely focused on an appropriate response to another character. As long as I continued to listen, there could be no "uncensored" response that was inappropriate. The only response would be the most intuitive. I again did the *The Breathing Thing*, right before the performance. This time, I did it with three different emotional focuses. One time, I focused on anxiety, the next anger, and the next surprise. Each of these emotional

responses happened at one point in the play, and at the very least The Breathing Thing would warm my body up for each of those responses.

During the third performance, one major discovery happened in creating a truthful connection in the relationship between the Count and Millinette. As noted before in Chapter III this relationship was a focus for me throughout the whole performance. On the third night of performance, I allowed myself to focus solely on what the actor playing Millinette was giving me. This night, I noted that this was noticeably different to what I had been receiving in the previous performances. Millinette's character was a bit quicker and more dramatized than previous iterations (Gordon 52). Since I focused on allowing my intuitive responses without censorship, I simply allowed this to influence the type of relationship between the characters. Perhaps the relationship between Millinette and the Count was as much covered with a mask as the Count himself, and that allowed for more dramatization. Perhaps the relationship had more heightened emotion, and that made the lines quicker. I was able to come up with these interpretations after the performance, because I went into the performance allowing the relationship to not be fully defined, but explored. Thus all aspects of the performance of the relationship, from night to night, were fair game to explore and be different, allowing each performance to be new and energized. However, even though they were new, I was still aware of the fact that the rehearsal process influenced the new responses and new relationships that happened.

### **Performance Conclusion**

Physical improvisation is necessary in performance in order to manifest an authentic range of choices that is identified on stage. The one example of tangible evidence I have that my Mindsets were effective in performance was through a review

written by Keith Waits, *Things that Should be Remade*. In it, Waits praises the entire ensemble of *[Re]Fashion*, and notes several characters, including the Count Jolimaitre, as having “nicely realized” “broadly” played performances (1). The important word in this review is “realized”, that is, that the reviewer believed that some aspect of the performance was real, effective, and relevant. The primary goal of the Mindsets was always to “real”-ize, that is to play realistically, the character of the Count, literally through realistic acting techniques, found through physical action and a process of discovery. If another actor chooses to authentically portray a character from a play that predates realism in this way, the Mindsets would be a method that I have found to be effective.

## CONCLUSION

The full landscape of this performance was a prime example of how an actor's reliance on personal process can positively shape the creation stages. I had been looking for a challenge that would help me grow as an artist, and to do so I had to enter into work in which I felt inexperienced. When I first began working on the script, the role of historical research in the acting process was a question that was unanswered for me. However, during the rehearsal period I began to see progress in using that research as alchemy, within physical exploration through Mindsets. I furthered this development by increasing the rate of trial and error in rehearsal and the performances. Ultimately, with keen awareness of allowing impulses to occur, historical research was able to unfold with physical presence. This led to a depthful performance, that was a difficult challenge in an uncharted area of work, but yet a joy to perform.

The Mindsets and character creation process for Count Jolimatire could be adapted by an actor for other non-realistic characters, in order to make them fit an authentic aesthetic. For example the character of Iago, from William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604), predates the style of realistic acting. The character of Iago also uses some similar tactics compared to the Count, such as deception, lying, and seducing, and is an improviser. Thus, the use of the improvisation could be justified as well. He has disdain for Othello, whom he believes to be gullible: "That thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are" (1.3.399-402). Yet Iago still performs through a deceptive mask as a friend. While another actor who plays Iago could

choose how far they wish to model the exact character creation of the Count, the Mindset would serve a process of authentic exploration.

The actor who plays Iago who would like to find authenticity would begin with Mindset 1, the belief that there is always more to do physically. While the initial phase of adapting a Shakespearean character to this way could be challenging, by engaging in a constant process of new physical doing in search of appropriate choice, the actor would inevitably find some ways of doing so effectively. The actor could explore all the physical ways to insinuate to Othello that Cassio and Desdemonda, Othello's wife, are having an affair in Act III Scene iii. The actor might try hinting at this idea with a playful expression, or concernedly observe the reactions of Othello with each question to convey seriousness. The actor may have the physical impulse to incorporate a mix of the two actions, or follow any other set of impulses. Up through the performance of the play, the actor who plays Iago would continuously search for more to do in utilizing Mindset 1.

The actor could also employ Mindset 2 and 3 to find an authentic range of actions in this scene, which would allow the actor complete either playfulness or concern fully without judgement. This would allow the actor to perform any range of these actions depending on the impulse. The actor could also explore fully any other physical impulse they had for the scene, whether or not they viewed the impulse as right or wrong. Again, the important aspect of the Mindsets is the actor engages in physical doing, to find what choices feel right and receive positive feedback from the director. Mindsets 2 and 3 primarily ensure that no choice is left unexplored if the impulse to perform it occurs.

Lastly, the actor who plays Iago could use Mindset 4, to record all choice and feedback, so as to inspire new physical choices. If playful hinting at an affair did not

convince Othello, the actor might record that feedback in their journal. Later, the actor could determine through rehearsal that playful hinting was not authentic, but extremely sarcastic insinuation, through a monotone voice with rising inflection and body that constantly turns away, is. Or the actor could note their choice was not working, and choose to pick an exercise from *Intent to Live* to serve as an intention for authentic physical exploration. Once the actor received and noted positive feedback from the director, they could use that choice as the starting point for further physical improvisation.

The Mindsets can also be adapted by an actor to fit their own process or their preferred acting technique texts. As long as the actor believes that “to act means to do”, they discover all the ways of doing realistically (Bruder et al 13). My personal experience and interpretation of the Count was the inspiration for creating the Mindsets. I began rehearsing Count Jolimaitre by having a collection of techniques I thought might work, and through their experimentation, determined which ones did suit my goals. If anything can be learned from this thesis, it is that a desire to continuously explore and trust in one’s ability to create processes can accomplish the desired result.

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