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SUSPENSION OF THE SCOUNDREL:
APPLYING MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES TO
THE ACTING PROCESS

By

Nicholas Wills

B.S., Troy University, 2021

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

Department of Theatre Arts

University of Louisville

Louisville, Kentucky

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A Thesis Approved on 24 April 2024.

by the following Thesis Committee:

Dr. J. Ariadne Calvano

Professor Rachel Carter

Professor Jerry Tolson

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my mother, Melony, without whom this would never have been possible, for she is the person I have to thank for the life I have been given.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my wife, Sparsh, who makes my life an adventure every day and who I could not live without. I thank my entire family for supporting me on my scholastic journey, and I thank my cohort members, who have been like a second family to me while in graduate school. Finally, thank my professors, especially my advisor, Ari, for always trying to do what they felt would be best for me, and not just my grade. All of you have a special place in my heart.

ABSTRACT

SUSPENSION OF THE SCOUNDREL: APPLYING MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGIES TO THE ACTING PROCESS

Nicholas Wills

April 24, 2024

In this thesis, the benefits of having mental health resources, practices and/or coordinators on set or available to help mitigate the mental health challenges that actors may face when portraying complex characters or engaging in emotional experiences while acting, are examined. Actors are required to fully immerse themselves into characters to ensure a full embodiment of the role being played. Without appropriate measures in place to address the actors' feelings, emotions, and psychological state before, during, and after a production, the actor stands the risk of absorbing the impact of the character with no strategy for how to address the subsequent negative mental health impact. Embodying the character of Caesar Wilks in *Gem of the Ocean* involved confronting the beliefs, feelings, and parts of myself that existed beneath the law abiding, courteous, strong, resilient African American male mask that I present every day. This challenge supports the need for resources and coordinators to help actors navigate challenging roles and experiences in theater productions.

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INTRODUCTION: CAESAR AND I

Growing up as an African American man, I was told that societal rules were different for me than for everyone else. I was raised to understand that the system in which I lived was not created for people who looked like me to succeed. I was told that I needed to work harder and be smarter to get the opportunity to have a seat at the table. I come from a long line of educators who weren't affluent by most standards but were living an economically comfortable and stable life. My family represented the status quo in our West Coast community and much of my perspectives and perceptions were formed according to my parents' and grandparents' belief systems and lived experiences. My parents and grandparents identified ways to thrive within the confines of the political, societal, and economic systems, while simultaneously working hard to improve their social and financial standing in their communities and to minimize risk to their and their future generations' well-being. The ideal in my family was to walk a safe path, with minimal risk to avoid distraction from the end goal of a financially comfortable future. Criminal activities were discouraged because of the threat of landing in jail and damaging prospects of a financially stable future. Entering the field of entertainment was discouraged because it was an unpredictable career choice, filled with ethical and moral landmines, according to my family. The medical or legal fields were a goal, but the income that it would take to finance those goals was out of reach. My families' mantra was "low risks would generate moderate to high returns". That mantra set the tone for my internal guilt (if I engaged in more risky behaviors), a anxiety, (as I didn't want to disappoint my family), and mild depression, (as I was expected to be resilient

and power ahead for my future and that of my family). These symptoms of mental health existed long before I enrolled in graduate school but manifested as I dove deeper into characters that were mired in their own emotional, physical, and psychological crises. Looking back at my family, ideals, and belief systems, I now understand how biases are formed and perpetuated throughout familial histories. The American Psychological Association defines implicit bias as a negative attitude of which one is not consciously aware, against a specific social group (2018). One bias I feel was indirectly ingrained in me from a young age is my shame when I see African Americans involved in social disturbances or crime. As a Black man, I acknowledge that I sometimes feel personally ashamed when I see people of my race acting idiotically. Not only do I believe that as African Americans, our mistakes sometimes cast a larger shadow over ourselves than our Caucasian counterparts, but personally I feel like it can reflect negatively on my image, as there is still a tendency in the country (U.S.A) to familiarize and stereotype based on skin color and tone. At the same time, I feel that there are biases towards me for being the shade of black that I am. Even among African Americans, there are stigmas that attribute certain characteristics like intelligence, more mild temperament, and attractiveness, based on pigment. Examples of this stretch all the way back to slavery, where the lighter slaves would sometimes be working inside the house as opposed to the darker slaves, who would be forced to stay outside. In the modern day, there are other examples, such as the Brown Bag Test, which reasons that if you are not darker than a generic brown paper lunch bag, you were “not black”. I myself have failed the Brown Bag Test a few times in the winter. One opinion held is that light-skinned black people tend to be more docile, while the darker skinned are more aggressive, hence the term,

“angry black men or women”. While I admit that some racial stereotypical jokes made by those of that race can be made to poke lighthearted fun at oneself or those close to them, there is a level of seriousness and truth behind them all and, if on the wrong end of that bias, it can start to have a negative impact. The biases which shape thoughts, behaviors, and perspectives come from personal lived experiences and experiences of ancestors.

The biases are neither good nor bad and the ability to identify, acknowledge, and address biases help to affect behavior change positively and, in turn, lead to societal change for the better.

Following high school there was not much of a debate about what educational path I was going to take. I was going to college, no matter what. I experienced a change of heart about what I wanted to major in while pursuing my bachelor’s degree. I had become disillusioned with my former degree and career path in music composition, and felt I would never be able to get back on track. I searched for a new calling that could sustain me financially, as well as feed me spiritually. However, this was not as simple as submitting a request to the admissions office. I was confused about what I wanted to do and what would feed my soul. The amount of stress and depression that I experienced overwhelmed me, and I felt hopeless. However, I discovered the world of theatre and developed a passion for making and being a part of quality performance art. That intensity drove me to want to study theatre and performance further, leading to my application and admission to graduate school for theatre performance.

I am grateful to have been offered the opportunity to attend graduate school and earn my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree. I was offered the chance to learn in a

department that emphasized an importance on practicing self-care strategies and well-being techniques to ensure I was engaging in self-care. Graduate school is challenging regardless of the course content, and the life of an actor can present a unique kind of stress when one considers the kinds of roles and actions that actors are asked to perform. The stresses and traumas that occur in everyday life, can make for challenging life conditions (difficulty forming bonds with other students, detachment, being overwhelmed with work load) over the length of a graduate program if the actor–student does not take measures (using resources, consulting with a mental health professional) to take care of their health.

In speaking about general well-being and mental health, it is critical to distinguish terms and their definitions to avoid confusion or misinterpretation going forward. Per the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH), “Mental Health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being, and self-care can play a role in maintaining your mental health and help support your recovery if you have a mental illness”. The NIMH further describes self-care as “taking the time to do things that help you live well and improve both your mental and physical health” (NIMH). When I apply these terms throughout the paper, I do so using the aforementioned definitions. Anxiety, mild depression, angst, and frustration were all conditions that showed up more frequently and intensely for me, while enrolled in graduate school. There would be periods when I felt disconnected from my family, my partner, and friends due to the immense stress and responsibility I felt weighing down on me to be successful. The pressure of classes, shows, teaching, touring, and being a graduate assistant contributed to the gradual decline of my mental health status. I was unaware at the time of resources

that I could access to help alleviate some of the effects of the pressures. When I was cast as Caesar Wilks from August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* the negative impacts of those pressures were amplified. The pressure impacted my ability to study, to sleep, and to enjoy my daily life. Those feelings became the foundation for this thesis. Actors who are not consciously letting go of their characters will unconsciously hold them in, which can be detrimental to their mental health and well-being. The people responsible for guiding and teaching the actor's to be aware of, and care for their mental health will be addressed in this paper as self-care facilitators, a term I created to coincide with the NIMH's definition of self-care. The presence of self-care facilitators on set and the access to mental health resources, help actors to identify, acknowledge, and implement strategies to reduce the occurrence of mental health crises before, during, and after portraying challenging characters.

In his ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle, Wilson chronicled the experiences of African Americans living in his real-life hometown of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Each play is set in one decade of the 20th century, with the whole cycle enveloping the 1900s from the perspective of the Hill District, a small, predominantly Black portion of Pittsburgh. The plays in the cycle are not direct sequels to each other, but some commonalities that provide a link between the plays are the location and a 285-year-old spiritually-focused anchor character named Aunt Ester.

Gem of the Ocean introduces a small, intimate group of characters, all of whom are connected through Aunt Ester. Citizen Barlow, a young African American man in his twenties, feels he has sinned and has come to Aunt Ester, having heard that she has the ability to "wash people's souls" (Wilson, 22). He is taken on a journey of self-discovery

and must decide what kind of man he is going to be and how he is going to live in the aftermath of a choice he made that led to a man's death. Bearing witness and taking part in this journey with Citizen, are Aunt Ester's trusted ensemble of helpers and friends, which includes Solly, Eli, and Black Mary, her protégé. They are also joined by Selig, a traveling peddler who provides goods and services, as well as information from the surrounding cities. Rounding up the cast is Caesar, Black Mary's half-brother and the local constable in the Hill District.

I played Caesar Wilks, an emancipated slave who achieved wealth and was granted authority over Black people in his community, by the white mayor. A self-proclaimed "boss man", Caesar engaged in behaviors that I considered to be immoral and unethical (Wilson, 33). The behaviors included evicting families who were late on their overpriced rent with insufficient notice, unlawful arrests, overcharging on essential goods, and murder. The role of Caesar was my thesis role and final role in graduate school. In being cast and choosing to play this role, I committed to embarking on what would become an uncomfortable yet revelatory journey to discover not only who this character is at the core, but also to find what parts of myself lie within him and which of his characteristics lie within me. I came to accept that this character has flaws, just as I accept that I have character flaws, too. I initially disparaged the character of Caesar Wilks as a selfish villain who abused his authority, disrespected his ancestors, and benefited from policies that embrace colorism. Examples of his cruelty such as the killing and abuse of multiple black men both on and off the job as a constable, and the inflated rates he charged for food and housing in his community, will be identified and examined in the following chapters. The injustices Caesar committed among his people

made it seem as though he had no empathy for his people and no remorse for his abuses of power. The most painful part of playing Caesar was identifying and confronting Caesar's characteristics that I resented and that I have felt, experienced, or demonstrated in my own life. Caesar's behaviors caused some emotional and psychological discomfort for me because I could relate to them. Due to the demands of a role like this, directors need to be trained, or incentivized, to offer resources and to create a safe space for all actors before, during, and after the production of a play. It is unrealistic to expect directors to be able to identify or recognize when mental health issues occur in each actor. Many signs of mental health are underreported because actors are so good at camouflaging their distress, despair, depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges which could be detrimental during the course of and following the curtain call of the play (Taylor). A study published by the

Johns Hopkins University Press associates this kind of detriment to a theory referred to as "Boundary Blurring", which suggests that "the blurring of boundaries between actor and character may be a significant condition for impact, and that the actor's ability to control that blurring may influence whether an acting experience leads to growth or emotional distress" (Burgoyne, 157). The authors of the study, director Suzanne Burgoyne and psychologist Karen Poulin, also argued that "since some inside-out approaches to acting encourage the actor to use her own personal experience in building a character, thus facilitating boundary blurring, this theory has major implications for theatre pedagogy" (157).

Character traits of Caesar Wilks from August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* reside in many African American men, although those traits range in depth and complexity.

Opportunism, pride, shame of the past, and bigotry are all facets of the human condition that must be addressed and are exemplified in the extreme in Caesar. When speaking to African Americans in my peer group who are familiar with the character, the general opinion around Caesar Wilks tends to be the same, “I don’t like him” and “I would never do that.” Although the character could be labeled, as Aunt Ester calls him, “a scoundrel” (Wilson 80), many of Caesar’s actions and views are merely a personification of a skewed societal representation of African Americans—taken to extremes. The representation for this production, at least initially, left people with the impression of an amoral, unethical, imposing, angry, Black man.

The Black experience is shaped by socio-economic, political, religious, and familial influences in the world. Caesar Wilks is a representation of how those influences negatively affected one Black man’s world view and the consequences that followed both for himself and for others as a part of that worldview. Caesar’s desire to achieve wealth came at the expense of the well-being of his community when he was given a position of authority which he then used to rule over and abuse African American citizens. Caesar refused to acknowledge the moral implications of his heinous crimes at the expense of being able to gain spiritual insight and pursue his own journey to the City of Bones to wash his soul and gain spiritual wisdom and forgiveness. He asserts that “God decide who done right or wrong”, using this sentiment as a would-be shield to defend against those who would accuse him of his wrongdoings, as multiple characters do throughout the play (Wilson, 41). Caesar broke up families by displacing them through unlawful evictions, yet actively sought a relationship with his own sister which could never materialize due to his abuses of power. *Gem of the Ocean* exposes

many of the dark parts of the African American experience such as racism, reduced representation or authority in law enforcement, broken familial units, and a distrust of religion or faith-based structures. I propose that, when African Americans feel disgust or anger with the character of Caesar without taking time to engage in introspection and reflection, it creates distance, denial, and a disconnection from the perceived negative traits of Caesar.

The disconnection is made larger by a failure to acknowledge unconscious biases and the impact of how these characteristics affect mental health. The disconnect (from Caesar's character) prevents self-awareness and the ability to identify how people might embody similar characteristics, stereotypes, and the willingness to reconcile those behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Identifying, acknowledging, and creating opportunities to remediate behaviors and create new thought patterns are critical to addressing unconscious biases, which are a function of each person's brain, to order their world and create connections according to the speed at which the brain processes information. It is hard to grow up without acquiring unconscious bias, for so many things around us perpetuate both positive and negative stereotypes which further affect our mental state (Wilson and Brekke). The internal discomfort stirred up by Caesar's character, comes from a combination of the generational impact of the socioeconomic, political, religious, and familial circumstances and influences lived by African Americans, not just of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but today as well.

The creation, rapid growth, and popularity of television, radio, and print news (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) were instrumental in crafting society's false and

negative perception of African Americans, which is inundated with stereotypes that influence thinking and television news, which is more negative about Black Americans (Entman). In the media, nonwhite Americans tend to be overrepresented as perpetrators and underrepresented as victims of crime (Peffley et al.). As the recipients of racism and toxicity in society, unfair business and economic practices, corrupt political systems, discontent or misalignment with spiritualism, and shifting familial structures, I expect African Americans will leave the theater with a need (conscious or unconscious) to examine and process their own tendencies and explore what about Caesar makes him a more sympathetic character. The portrayal of each character will resonate with audience members who are connected to the topics (slavery, racism, sociopolitical systems, faith, and family) through generational storytelling or personal experiences. The themes in *Gem of the Ocean* will cause discomfort as a change in perception takes place. The way that individuals cope with their changes can play a role in their overall mental well-being, including how they feel about their life. If they are struggling to cope with a change, they might be left with feelings of negativity, bitterness, or regret (Cherry). The same is true for actors portraying the characters in *Gem of the Ocean*.

Caesar is a product of generations of lived experiences, traumas, joys, and challenges. His worldview, opinions, biases, and actions can be connected to the political, social, spiritual, and familial experiences of his lifetime. The socio-political dynamics in the early 20th century facilitated Caesar's complicated relationship with law enforcement and authority. As a former slave Caesar was exposed to unimaginable horrors by authority figures. Once he was emancipated, he worked hard to build himself up and become an authority figure himself. Although his appointment to a constable was

admirable, it also put him in the position of the oppressor as he became an extension of the White authority's domination over the Black citizens and community. I can relate to this situation, for my relationship with law enforcement was orchestrated at birth with the constant warnings from my parents and grandparents "to keep my eyes ahead, don't talk back, keep my hands on the steering wheel, and don't be defiant if ever stopped by law enforcement." Although this sentiment might seem hyper-exaggerated, it was reinforced throughout my childhood, early adolescence, young adulthood, and continues today.

Images on television and social media that showed police brutality and the death of Black citizens at the hands of authority figures and law enforcement became ingrained in my consciousness and are a part of my daily reality. DeVlyder et al. asserts that law enforcement is a societal institution that many African Americans have come to rely on for help when a threat emerges. When police perpetrate violence, this belief is shattered, for the police are no longer protectors but are rather the threat that needs to be addressed. Additionally, police violence is a threat that feels normalized because of the frequency of violent events (especially) in the quarter century that have been broadcast across the world and have led to the erosion of public trust in the police. I decided to portray Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean* by combining Caesar's motivations and my lived experiences. I often felt conflicted while playing Caesar because of my worldview of law enforcement, yet I used that discomfort to drive the character's actions because I felt that Caesar was conflicted as well. The discomfort of playing this character led to stress, which had a negative effect on my psychological well-being, which turned into mental health challenges. I feel that law enforcement is an honorable career and that officers are

and have always faced challenges that put their own lives at stake every day. However, I also recognize that I could become the victim of an overzealous officer one day, simply for existing as an African American man in America. This complicated dynamic has been echoed throughout time and can be traced back as early as the 1700s. The foundation of the relationship is based on racial profiling, inequitable enforcement of laws, and the perceptions of African Americans about Black law enforcement. Chan asserts that racial profiling, the use of race as the principal or key factor used by the police for stopping, questioning, searching, or arresting someone, rather than the use of “reasonable suspicion” creates a foundation for generations of distrust between the African American communities, police, law enforcement entities, and judicial systems and practices (76).

Historically, some police managers turned a blind eye to known instances of improper conduct in this regard, which only served to strengthen the distrust of authorities in law enforcement (Wilson and Wilson, 123-133). Although there appears to be a general belief within minority communities that racial profiling is perpetrated singularly by White police officers, studies have indicated that some African American police officers themselves have been found to use bias-based procedures for stopping motorists, further deepening distrust in the system of law enforcement (Cochran and Warren). Racial profiling is the use of race as the principal or key factor used by the police for stopping, questioning, searching, or arresting someone, rather than the use of “reasonable suspicion” (Chan, 76). Some police managers might have turned a blind eye to any known instances of improper conduct in this regard (Wilson and Wilson 123–133). Some have determined that a trend toward media depictions of African American

police officers as comedic fodder or sell outs to their community exists. In an analysis of more than 500 police genre films over a period of four decades, it was determined that African American law enforcement officers were portrayed in a comedic light, being the target of jokes of all natures (Wilson and Henderson, 45–67.) When I portrayed Caesar, I became acutely aware of the responsibility to examine my own motivations on how I felt about the character and give the audience the space to form their opinions and examine their own lived experiences pertaining to Caesar. The research demonstrates the complicated history some Black Americans have with authority figures in a systemically racist society. The disparity and inequity created from generational abuse can cause depression, distrust of others, heightened anxiety, and paranoia in Black communities, which all negatively impact mental health. I am now acutely aware of the importance of using strategies to negate the long-lasting impact of playing such a challenging character and simultaneously preserving my mental health.

African American males who portray Caesar Wilks might feel driven to address their own biases in an effort to understand and embody the character and motivations of Caesar. Dr. Dotun Ogunyemi, Associate Dean of Graduate Medical Studies at Drew University of Medicine and Science, referred to unconscious or implicit biases as attitudes or stereotypes that arise from preformed mental associations, which influence our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (189-194). However, he also asserts that these biases have been shown to be “malleable and correctable with training,” leaving the door open to speculation about how to start the process of getting rid of these biases (Ogunyemi, 9). Approaching the topic from a similar stance, Bucknor Ferron and Zagaja formulated five strategies for combating

these kinds of attitudes within people and, while the strategies discussed were devised for the medical field, they can be useful in a variety of fields, including performance. The five strategies come in the form of personal awareness, acknowledgement, empathy, advocacy, and education, and without applying these strategies in the medical field they claim that “unrecognized, unmanaged bias can lead to health disparities which result in potentially negative consequences for the patients” (Bucknor-Ferron and Zagaja, 62). Actors who are unable to identify, acknowledge, and accept how those biases might color their perception, attitudes, and actions, face playing the role a disservice by ignoring a vital part of character analysis. They also make themselves more susceptible to the same tendencies that Caesar displays in the play through their personal lives, even if they have not taken the role to such drastic extremes.

In trying to humanize and connect with Caesar, I have identified and acknowledged some of my personal biases and I assert that the lessons learned from the realization produced a more truthful and engaging version of the character onstage. The lessons that I learned were, first, that I have a bias against the alpha male stereotypes prescribed to African American men. Caesar is the embodiment of this stereotype, which I have always thought of as a bully, who has little regard for other’s feelings or emotions. Additionally, Caesar’s abuse of power and authority in the Black community in which he was to serve, tapped into my feelings about the “Uncle Tom” caricature. An “Uncle Tom” is considered to be a race traitor who is overeager to win the approval of White people, often at the expense of his Black community¹. Stepping into the role of Caesar with these biases was challenging for me mentally because I found instances in

¹ Character in the novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1852.

which I felt that Caesar was just trying to improve his life with the resources or opportunities he had been given, and I found myself considering if that was a bad thing. The method in which Caesar doled out punishment was harsh, but breaking the law required consequences. I found myself wondering whether Caesar should be more lenient on law breakers just because they come from the Black community and had already been subjected to an unjust policing system. This misalignment, combined with my biases or preconceived stereotypes, weighed on me mentally. I found that I was taking the role of Caesar home with me each night and boundary blurring, or failing to separate a fictional character from myself, by engaging in circular conversations to justify my feelings, or replaying scenes and dialogue to be sure I wasn't leaning too far one way or the other I lacked the ability to separate from Caesar and the strategies or boundary management to decrease the negative feelings and mental confusion I experienced while portraying Caesar ((Burgoyne, 157-159). Caesar believes God will be the only judge of his behaviors, but he does not follow the law of God; he follows his own laws without fear of consequence. Spiritualism in the African American community is defined by Black Christians as feeling that the most important roles for churches are to offer a sense of community, spiritual comfort, and moral guidance. Slaves consistently experienced severe and inhumane treatment, including humiliation, exploitation, intense suffering, and even death so it stands to reason why slaves generally—and those who embraced Christianity specifically resonated with the hope for freedom against the backdrop of oppression. As Lincoln stated, “Black religion, like every other, has a cultural context. It is set in human history; and while its critical reference is to God, it reflects the peculiar experience, concerns, and exigencies of the human condition” (as

cited in Chandler 161). This is why Caesar both repelled and clung to the themes in Spirituality and Christianity. Caesar was surrounded by spiritualists and women of great faith, but this belief system was not aligned and could not be reconciled with Caesar's experiences and achievements, especially those that were ill-gained. Although Black churches provided a sense of community, resilience, and faith in a merciful God, it didn't provide job or skills training or increase knowledge about financial literacy which Caesar learned independently to improve his circumstances in life (Muhammed). While some Black Christians feel that the most important roles for churches are to offer a sense of community, spiritual comfort, and moral guidance, they are less likely to say that it is essential that houses of worship engage in activities like offering help with finances, teaching job skills, providing a sense of racial affirmation, or addressing political topics, all characteristics important to Caesar which may explain his discontent in the church system.

The Grace Theological Seminary, specializing in spiritual formation at the collegiate level, stated that the church also failed and continues to fail to offer support for or mental health resources to its flock, believing that Christians could rise above those issues with God's grace. There is still a stigma about mental health and a lack of resources and counsel for church members suffering with mental health challenges. Historically, slaves experienced severe and inhumane treatment including humiliation, exploitation, intense suffering, and even death, thus, faith and spirituality served as their salvation and their place of refuge in times of crisis. Deep faith in a higher power resonated with the hope for freedom against the backdrop of oppression and death

(Chandler). However, the unresolved issues that remain as a part of generational hurt, and current challenges navigating societal pressures today, converge to make mental health awareness and treatment more challenging. As an actor, relying on a faith-based program or a religious entity, like a church, has never been a priority as there is shame and a lack of resources or support available for me to address my mental health concerns. This absence will continue to be a challenge until churches and mental health experts come together to embrace a community and culture of caring, transparency, and empathy for people who experience mental health challenges.

Economics and the onset of the industrial age were factors which greatly affected Caesar as a Black man and a contributor to society. African Americans strove to gain a living against steep odds imposed by discrimination of governments, White employers and unions, and White violence. Jaynes cited three major events in the 20th century which greatly affected Black incomes: World War I started the Great Migration that saw many African Americans move to cities, the Great Depression sent African Americans into economic spirals, and World War II started a resurgence of African American prosperity (experienced in some geographies), even though their primary industry was agricultural, which failed because of low wages and hard times. During his time, the rapid growth of iron and steel mills after the Civil War, and the tremendous economic growth as catalysts of potential wealth were the foundation for Caesar recognizing the potential that an African American could have in the world if they applied themselves and worked hard. “Industry is what drive the country. Without industry, wouldn’t nobody be working. That tin put people to work doing other things. These niggers can’t see that” (Wilson, 36). What Caesar didn’t fully grasp was the political inequality,

violent repression, and lack of opportunity that still existed for Black Americans. Martin Obschonka, PhD. identified that “while massive industrialization brought unprecedented technological and economic progress, it also left a psychological legacy that continues to shape the personality traits and wellbeing of people” (6). Although there was recognition of the positive financial impact of the Industrial Age, very little attention or resources were dedicated to the lack of self-care which still continues to plague families. African Americans strove to gain a living against steep odds imposed by discrimination of governments, White employers and unions, and White violence (Bobo et al.). Caesar was a realist who worked within the confines of a racist system to take advantage of every opportunity that would elevate both his standing in the community and him personally, regardless of who he hurt along the way. Caesar considered anyone who didn’t take advantage of these opportunities as lazy and deserving of their position in life. Ultimately, he was left with nothing but himself to celebrate and honor these accomplishments.

Finally, the construct of family was a critical factor in how Caesar viewed the world and his responsibility to others. “Family is important . . . You give up on family, and you ain’t got nothin’ left” (Wilson, 41–42). Slavery was a destructive system of repression whose economic and emotional impact on families is still felt today, in the twenty-first century (Frazier). In many cases, and as Frederick Douglass once suggested, slave owners separated women and children from fathers to ensure that any development of affection within families was stunted because of the forced separation. Women and children became dependent on each other, and the role of the Black father was diminished over time and because of his extended and forced absence. Throughout *Gem*

of the Ocean, Caesar always seeks out the comfort, relationship, and familial love that he didn't experience growing up as a slave. Even when emancipated, Caesar intrinsically sought out that which eluded him: a relationship with his sister, Black Mary. Black Mary, who had found a redefined family in Aunt Esther, Solly, and Citizen determines that Caesar can no longer be the brother she once needed because of his views, actions, and lack of faith in the world. The demise of the familial relationship and connection was Caesar's great loss and the one thing he couldn't buy with money, influence, or power. Portraying Caesar, I had to imagine what it would feel like to lose the connection, support, and security of my family. The possibility of a lack of a familial bond was challenging and distressing for me, as I come from a very tight-knit family. Strategies to address mental health hurdles are necessary tools that actors can use to try to navigate the challenging themes that resonate most with their experience. The self-care needs of the individual, when approaching difficult work, are unique, and no two actors, even if playing the same production or the same role in a different adaptation, will engage in the exact same process of mental and physical preparation for their performance. The strategies that I applied during the process of *Gem of the Ocean* will be further discussed in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I will analyze the effects that a lack of these kind of strategies can result in for the actor.

The racist socio-political, economic, spiritual, and familial systems of the early 20th and 21st centuries were instrumental in framing who Caesar Wilks became as an adult. Although Caesar learned resilience, financial independence, and an understanding of how to leverage systems of authority, he lacked the self-awareness to acknowledge the biases that prevented him from finding a sense of community among African

Americans, a sense of spiritual comfort that would enable him to journey on the *Gem of the Ocean* to cleanse his soul, and the connection of family with his only living relative, Black Mary, which was his greatest tragedy.

Actors who do not consciously let go of their characters will unconsciously hold them in, which can be detrimental to their well-being. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I will explore the character of Caesar Wilks by examining the major influences on his origin in the play, as well as the real-world inspirations that inspired Wilson's creation of this character. His violent past, familial influences, and socioeconomic rise to police constable will be explored, as well as the origins of his name, providing both historical context and a thorough understanding of both the grizzly character I stepped into and harsh world he inhabited in the production of this show. In Chapter 2, I will transition the work into an exploration of the process in embodying the character of Caesar Wilks for a performance, as well as the techniques and mental preparation that go along with that embodiment. I will be referencing several journal entries I recorded from rehearsals in *Gem of the Ocean's* process to reflect on personal growth, as well as director's notes, and blocking charts. I will elaborate on everything from my rehearsal warm up routine to the props and make-up for their use in helping me to transform and speak truthfully as Caesar, as well as discuss my personal reasoning for emphasizing the importance of the of this work in the field. Chapter 3 will dive into statistics covering mental health in actors specifically, and begins to discuss solutions for the lack of resources available to actors in regard to self-care and mental health and well-being practices.

CHAPTER 1: THE SCOUNDREL

Author and August Wilson researcher Joyce Hope Scott refers to *Gem of the Ocean*, and the entirety of August Wilson's ten-play cycle as being "created to commemorate the experiences of African Americans in the decades following Reconstruction" and asserted that it "underscores the role imaginative, artistic representations have in reconstructing contested pasts" (17). The plays are considered *Historiographies*, which examine "the changing interpretations of past events through historians' eyes" (NMU). Scott asserts that Wilson's plays "reconstruct cultural memory using physical space" and considers them as "historical revisions that serve to impact the collective African American and National memory" (16). *Gem of the Ocean* takes place, like all of August Wilson's plays, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, yet Wilson's depictions of the characters are connected to Africa, with each member of the play being deeply rooted in ancient Yoruba archetypes. Wilson drew inspiration from five main archetypes whom Green discussed in relation to the characters: Olarosa, Ògún, Òṣun, Şàngó, and Òṣósí (144).

The story centers around Citizen Barlow, a young Black man from Alabama who has come to Pittsburg looking for work. Citizen represents Ogún, the deity known as "the guardian of truth" and who is associated with "clearing internal and external obstacles that would impede spiritual growth" (Green, 145). After being taken advantage of while in a desperate search for a job, Citizen goes to find Aunt Ester, a woman said to

be 285 years old and able to “wash people’s souls” (Wilson 22). Through the washing of people’s souls and the freeing of the weight of past indiscretions, each individual is allowed to experience spiritual growth. Aunt Ester acts as the anchor of the play. and, although Wilson has not given her a formal archetype, Green believes that Aunt Ester has been classified as “the physical embodiment of the ancestors” (153). Aunt Ester has shed her former name, Ester Tyler, to become the amalgamation of many women passed down through generations. She is wise beyond her years and carries the weight of the souls of generations of women (Bhalerao, 2017). Although she is not in every scene, the other members of the cast constantly feel her presence and influence, and she essentially has a hand in every character’s business. Aunt Ester’s house is the primary setting of the play and acts as a sanctuary for a plethora of characters in the play. The first of these characters is Eli, a former slave, and Aunt Ester’s right-hand man and caretaker. Embodying the deity of “Olarosa, or the god who stands at the door/guardian of homes,” Eli watches over Aunt Ester and her house and often acts as a protector of her and the spiritual wisdom she possesses (Green, 144). Working alongside Eli is Black Mary, the only other character that lives in the house, and Aunt Ester’s apprentice. She does most of the household chores such as cleaning and cooking, and she absorbs all of the wisdom and experience Aunt Ester has to offer, even if she is reluctant sometimes to do so. Black Mary embodies the deity of Oṣún, who is noted as being “crucial to the sustenance of life no order on earth” (Green, 150). Black Mary will assume the role of Aunt Ester and carry on the generations-old practice of being the spiritual guide for Black people who are seeking redemption. Black Mary is also Caesar’s half-sister and serves as the only real human connection he has in the entire play. She is well-known and respected by

practically all of the characters in the play and plays a large role in the transformation of both Citizen and Caesar's characters. Coming in and out of the house with familiarity are Selig and Solly. Selig is the only character in the play whom Green has not given an archetype, which is understandable, for he is also the only White character in the play. As a traveling salesman, Selig delivers household goods and appliances (dustpans, skillets), as well as information that he has collected on his travels. Solly, or Solly Two Kings as he named himself, is another former slave and a good personal friend of Aunt Ester's, even being portrayed as a love interest for her. Solly personifies the Yoruba archetype of "Şángó, lover of dogs and women" (Green, 151). Solly's main source of income is providing nutrient-rich excrement to Black residents for fertilization of plants and crops. He also embodied Şángó as he courted many women, but the only woman he considers settling down for is Aunt Ester. Solly is a former slave turned conductor on the Underground Railroad, having led 62 people to freedom before Emancipation. The tragedy with Solly is the fact that he was able to assist many Black slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad, but he could never free his sister who continued to suffer from all the indignities the South had to offer Black citizens, freed or not. Additionally, Solly's name was a representation of the freedom that his previous name Alfred Jackson could not provide. Alfred, in the eyes of the law, was a criminal because he was an escaped slave, while Solly was a former slave in search of a new life in the North after slavery. All of these characters except Selig and Caesar, assist in taking Citizen to the City of Bones, a spiritual destination in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, so he may apologize and atone for his deeds.

Rounding up the cast of the play, as well as the Yoruba archetypal characters is Caesar, who embodies the deity “Osósi, guardian of the forest and protector of the environment. He is known as the enforcer of the law and guardian of the path of ethical behavior” (Green, 153).

Although Caesar is the enforcer of the law, he ends it to suit his needs and his ideals of justice. Caesar Wilks is the most tragic character in *Gem of the Ocean*. Throughout the play, Caesar is consumed and driven by fear, a lack of self-awareness, bias, trauma, and a misguided sense of familial and faith-based convictions. By the end of *Gem of the Ocean*, Caesar is all alone. With the exception of Selig, Caesar is the only character who never sees or visits the City of Bones, which demonstrates that he is unprepared and/or unwilling to face the judgment of those he has wronged. Regardless of being freed from slavery, amassing wealth, and being given a position of authority over Blacks by Whites, Caesar remains unfulfilled and driven by a sense of selfpreservation that isolates him from both his community and his family. Green asserted that, much like Caesar, “Osósi's end goal of righteousness did not justify the means he employed to enforce it” (153).

Caesar never outwardly displays remorse for his actions. “I got to play the hand that was dealt to me.” These words precede most of Caesar’s dialogue and provide the most transparent view of his mentality and motives in the entire script. Caesar accepts that he cannot change the circumstances of the life he was born into, but he absolves himself from blame for the actions he has taken to improve it. In the two-page monologue following this line, Caesar details to Black Mary the circumstances through

which he gained his wealth and position as constable, defending objectively immoral actions with a dangerously opportunistic lens. Caesar is an opportunist. Opportunism is not a bad thing in itself, but anything taken to an extreme can become dangerous and misguided. The innate need to chase opportunity is a result of his slave upbringing and poor quality of life in his youth. Caesar believed that the end of slavery was the beginning of opportunities for everyone. This also meant that anyone unwilling to seize their own opportunities or infringe on the opportunities of others was undeserving of empathy or aid. In some ways, Caesar was living in a different form of slavery than even he realized, still performing dirty jobs for the oppressors who were either too lazy or could not be bothered with them themselves.

Solly Two Kings largely serves as both Caesar's foil and a negative reflection of Caesar's aspirations throughout *Gem of the Ocean*. Solly and Caesar were both shaped by the promise of opportunity after enslavement. Solly was older when freed so his pathway to opportunity looked different than that provided to Caesar. Although Solly's opportunities, shoveling and providing excrement for fuel to the community, fell short of Caesar's ideal of success, Solly's contributions were appreciated by the community in which he served and belonged. Community connection continues to elude Caesar throughout the play. Solly and Caesar both had a foundation in faith or religion; however, although Solly experienced the journey on the titular *Gem of the Ocean* to wash his soul and find redemption, Caesar was the only Black character who was unable to humble himself and embark on the soul washing journey to redemption, and felt only God, the Christian version of God, would be able to judge him in the end. This sentiment kept Caesar from fully embracing faith and spiritualism in his life, and was a leading

factor, along with his violent disposition, in his inability to embrace his community and for his community to embrace him. Solly's life journey ended at the hands of Caesar. Caesar killed all that Solly represented and sabotaged any opportunity at a relationship with Black Mary because of it. Although Caesar experienced the successes of opportunity with authority over Blacks, wealth, and a position of power, his losses of family, faith or religion, and community connection were all cemented with the death of Solly, which sealed Caesar's fate in *Gem of the Ocean*.

There is meaning in a name. Solly mentioned to Citizen, regarding his name, that his mother is "trying to tell you something. She put a heavy load on you. It's hard to be a Citizen. You gonna have to fight to get that" (Wilson 29). With this statement, we can assume that Caesar's name carried a heavy load as well. The origin of Caesar's name carried significant meaning both in the world of the play, as well as outside it. August Wilson asserted that Caesar's name recalled the legacy of slave naming. Southern masters often gave their slaves Ancient Greek and Roman names as a means of ridiculing slave pretensions and belittling them, preemptively satirizing Black attempts at dignity or pride. (Elam Jr., 82). Unlike many other slaves, Caesar chose to keep his name, which was a way of defying his former masters and claiming his destiny for himself, or a means of distancing himself from the tendencies and norms of his community.

Much like Julius Caesar, Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean* displayed an abuse of power, and a betrayal by those thought to be closest to him. Caesar's decision to keep and embrace his slave name was the catalyst for his eventual demise in the form of his last genuine human connection being severed. However, it was not only the Roman ruler

who influenced the naming of Caesar. It was commonly thought that August Wilson used the 1973 blaxploitation film, *Black Caesar*, as an inspiration as well. In the film, Caesar's decision to become a police constable resulted from an understanding that he could not prosper in his community performing the jobs that were typically performed by Black people. Instead, he decided to accept a profession seen not only as the enemy, but as a legal evolution of the slave masters from which they had been so desperate to escape. In all these references, the spectator can see an overstepping of moral and ethical boundaries which isolated the character of Caesar from the community.

Researching a character's background is a necessary step in the character development process that plays a large part in bringing truth to that character. Human beings are incredibly complex social creatures who are molded by a myriad of experiences and when adopting the persona of another person for a performance onstage, it is vital to identify the key components that helped to create that character and bring it to life in the world of the play. The role of Caesar became a study of how socio economic, religious, familial, and political factors impacted the character and by extension, the actor who portrayed him. Boundary blurring became more prominent as the ability to separate from the character and his experiences, became more challenging to do as the play wore on. The blurring then negatively impacted my cognitive state and mental well-being to the point that self-care strategies had to be employed to resolve the struggles of anxiety, mild depression, and detachment. Chapter two will examine how I managed to avert blurring the boundaries too greatly between Caesar and me during the production of *Gem of the Ocean*.

CHAPTER 2: MY PROCESS

Stepping into the shoes of a fifty-two-year-old, former slave turned police officer living almost 100 years before I was born was a daunting task. Initially, questions that surfaced were, “What does that lived experience look like? What does it sound like? How can I safely push past the boundaries of my comfort level to truthfully engage with a character whom many would consider unlikable?” In this context, comfort level refers to the mental strain I would be under in portraying a character like Caesar. I recognized after reading the role of Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean*, that portraying the character of Caesar would mean confronting topics like slavery, racism, faith, unchecked authority, socioeconomic systems steeped in racism, and evolving and generational family dynamics. I became more concerned about what measures could or would be put in place to ensure my mental health was protected and nurtured. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identify mental health as including emotional, psychological, and social well-being, that affects how we think, feel, and act. Mental health also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices. (World Health Organization). Too often, actors portray complicated characters without consideration for the impact that the portrayal of the character will leave on their psyche. A 2015 study published from University of Sydney by author Luke O’Neill found that in a survey of 782 actors, respondent experiences had higher rates of mental illness than

the general population. O'Neill also noted that almost 40 percent of actors had difficulty in relaxing or "letting go" after performing an emotionally and physically demanding role. The World Health Organization, in its fact sheet about mental health, asserted that mental health is determined by a complex interplay of individual, social, and structural stresses and vulnerabilities. Self-care facilitators, professionals who provide and monitor resources and implement strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing on set, are a critical component in helping to ensure that actors are not being consumed by their own social and structural stresses, as well as that of their character by offering strategies and techniques for selfcare before, during, and after the play. As I move further in depth into my process, I will discuss the people who helped to provide me with self-care strategies even before I knew them to be essential, as well as how those strategies became permanently intertwined in my acting process.

In the process of transforming and acting truthfully as another character, it is important to understand not only the world in which they exist, but also the role they play in the world. Their thought process and attitude are manifested physically in their speech and movement mannerisms, so it becomes imperative to understand how they feel, making educated assumptions according to dramaturgical research about each person and topic encountered in the play. My training as an actor has featured a focus on Actor and Pedagogue Uta Hagen's work, as discussed by Ates, specifically on her itemized list to get a basic, yet detailed account of a character's persona: The Nine Questions. As a student, performer, and teacher, I have found value in using the Nine Questions as part of my character study. Although it is not the only way to investigate

character identity and motivation effectively, I find it to be a great introduction in the process of finding the core of each character. Hagen's Nine Questions are as follows:

“Who am I, Where am I, What time is it, What is around me, What are my relationships, What are the given circumstances, What do I want, What is in the way of what I want, and What do I do to get around it?” (152).

The questions help the actor to understand better the character by homing in on the character's location, relationships, personal motivation, and desires. The questions provide a foundation on which to add personal feelings, experiences, and emotions to portray a character through their own personal lens. However, that lens is unique because it includes the actor's perspective and lived experiences on the portrayal of the character, which also makes it special. For me, that lens contains all my emotional, social, and mental baggage that affect me as an African American male actor. During this physically and emotionally taxing production, I participated in private lessons with University of Louisville Voice and Acting Professor Rachel Carter, working together to identify personal tendencies in myself that could be reinforced or let go in my work as is needed. Leading up to the premier of the show, a large part of the work Professor Carter and I did together was focused on finding the areas that were affected by tension in my body and working to undo those habits.

In two months of work together, physical results had already begun to show, for my body would unconsciously respond to many of the guided lessons through the release of tears. My initial reaction was to push the tears away and apologize for becoming emotional during the practice. Although not wrong, this emotional response proved to be unhelpful in self-analyzing, so I began training in the practice of letting that

tendency go. I say “letting go” because this term helped me to align myself with the thought of undoing. Borrowing from a journal entry logged after one of my lessons on February 15, 2024, “I have a disaster-based mind. I desperately start rushing to fix something I have deemed to be a problem, which causes more tension and pulls me away from reaching whatever conclusion I am looking for.” I often asked myself what I could do to gradually release this state of mind from my everyday life. The lessons from meeting with Professor Carter did not always connect immediately, but the exercises have been physically beneficial in my everyday life. I learned that it’s about the dedication to practice and to build the muscle memory for the exercises to have long-standing positive effects. The challenge for me continues to be applying to my mental health the strategies and exercises that I learned.

In my personal experience, I not only have felt, but also have witnessed my fellow cast mates struggle in this show and in others in the hours and days after exhaustive performances and rehearsals, for they were unable to let go of the process fully. Not only this, but I, as well as a few of my friends could not help but recite lines to ourselves and each other for weeks after the show had ended. We literally could not get the text out of our bodies. From displaying signs of physical fatigue, as well as emotional and psychological stress, the difference is tangible when an actor continues to carry a role with once the performance has ended.

With Professor Carter as my voice and acting coach during the time of the production, I could feel how her intentional focus on integrating and understanding how physicality affected performance was beneficial before, during, and after the play. University of Minnesota Medical School professor, Sherman, asserted, “When actors

really get into character, their blood pressure goes up, their heart rate increases, and their mind and body can't differentiate between reality and acting". Those interactions further strengthened my belief and assertion that a mental health coordinator with an intentional focus on helping actors (who need it) to identify, acknowledge, address, and reduce mental health challenges during the portrayal of complex characters is critical to supporting and protecting the actors long after the play has concluded.

There can be confusion when identifying the official titles of the people performing this work. To reiterate, the term that has been created for the purposes of this paper and is being applied to individuals who take part in the awareness and teaching of these mental health techniques is selfcare facilitator. I would refer to both Professor Carter and Dr. Calvano as self-care facilitators, as each is specially trained in a specific field (Dr. Calvano is an IDC certified intimacy director and Professor Carter is a certified Alexander teacher), and they each offered me an array of solutions for dealing with stress in the body from both physical and psychological standpoints, both in shows and outside of them. The important part is having knowledgeable individuals available in the space to prevent unnecessary damage being done to the actor.

Earlier in my acting career, I had long, curly, fluffy hair that differentiated me from other actors. I was told my long hair gave people the impression that I had a laid back, more relaxed, and welcoming personality. I learned early in the production process that my hair was going to have to be cut, because it made it more challenging for me as an actor to disappear into the physical representation of a character when my hair was a character all by itself. Cutting my hair removed the obstacle of me having difficulty stepping into characters that were more mature, for cutting my long hair de-aged me. In

short order, I determined that my facial hair needed to be addressed as well to better fit the look of a man who “keep[s] order” (Wilson 36). The only facial hair that remained was a well-trimmed mustache to help the audience buy in to the persona of a committed and domineering Black constable in the Hill District.

Cutting my hair was a big change for my psychologically, as well as appearance-wise. At the time, I was spiraling mentally, and I was unsure if I would remain in school. I had recently suffered the loss of a family member and experiencing the most stressful school year of my life which caused me to be frustrated and depressed. I woke up one morning in before the semester started, walked into my bathroom, and cut off roughly three-fourths of my hair in less than ten minutes. I looked in the mirror and didn't feel better, but I did feel lighter. In retrospect I feel like the act itself was that of an unstable and impulsive person, I felt like I had let go of some metaphysical weight that had been there for years. The initial reactions from my friends and family made me feel as if I was a different person and as time went on, I realized I had changed. I wasn't better, I was different. While I think I am still unpacking the shift in my mindset even today, I can assuredly say that the physical change in my appearance for this role took me on an emotional rollercoaster at the time. Around the same time I cut my hair off and was sitting with the weight of that decision, I started to come into a more holistic sense of who Caesar Wilks was and how I personally could approach playing him.

Caesar is a man who has achieved wealth and power. He owned the bakery, and the building in which Hill District citizens rented apartments for housing. Caesar is the constable of the Hill District, giving him control over the citizen's food and housing, and he wielded the power to legally use violence to enforce the policies instituted by his

White employers. Caesar held the keys to almost every gate needed to live in the Hill District for an African American. However, Caesar does not hold the key to the “Twelve Gates to the City,” referencing the “City of Bones,” that Citizen and the entirety of Aunt Ester’s inner circle have visited (Wilson 71). Looking again at the foil relationship between Caesar and Solly, the latter mentions being a gatekeeper as “all I’ve ever wanted to be. A Keeper of the Gate” (Wilson 60). This, in addition to Caesar not believing in the “City of Bones” and Solly asserting “That’s where I’m going when I die,” further strengthens the dichotomy of the two characters, and that difference can be seen also in the costuming of the characters.

In costuming Caesar, Zhanna Goldentul and Melissa Shepard, the University of Louisville costume designers and professors, devised a three-piece suit, using the constables of the period and place. Caesar’s character earns the ire of his community for “getting a hold of a little something,” and we can see part of that “little something” in his attire (Wilson 41). He takes care of the way he dresses and talks, especially in front of the White community to further distinguish himself from the rest of “these niggers” who have no way of lifting themselves up without first putting themselves in Caesar’s pocket. Caesar is dressed in a style that is leagues above those around in him in terms of quality and price, and goes as far as making verbal comparisons between himself and Solly to demonstrate the difference in their appearances, saying “I see you got a new coat Solly[...] I got a new coat too. I’m gonna wear it tomorrow” (Wilson 34). In costuming him, the designers draped Caesar in tailored layers of authority, whereas characters like Citizen and Solly are given sparse, loose fitting, well-worn, and battered clothing.

During my second year of graduate school, there was a period where I was struggling so bad mentally, I thought of dropping out of school entirely, giving up acting, and even thought about ending my life on multiple occasions. Around this period, I would wake up in the morning and cry before class, I wouldn't eat or leave the house if I could, and I was truly miserable in everyday life. I felt in complete isolation, despite having incredibly supportive family and friends.

In my head, I felt like I was causing my own misery and that people shouldn't be bothered with it. I figured they had their own problems, why should they have to deal with mine? I just knew that as long as I could avoid missing too many classes or rehearsals, nobody would raise questions and I could try and work it out for myself. This was also the same period when I had been cast as the male lead in Dominique Morriseau's *Blood at the Root*, which examines the real-life story of six black high school boys facing prison time after seeing nooses hung around campus and beating up a white student. When I look back on that period of time and think about the work I did to *truthfully* portray a fifteen year-old student who has lost his mother, grown up around violence and drugs, been profiled and harassed by the police, and is now fighting to avoid going to jail after being on the receiving end of a hate crime, and *then* think about how I was doing mentally while not taking any steps to undo that work, I began to form correlations in my head.

For most of the Gem of the Ocean rehearsal process, I would spend the majority of a four hour rehearsal in a separate rehearsal room by myself; just me and Caesar. I was of course always allowed to enter the main rehearsal room and did take advantage of this a few times, but in my mind I saw it as an opportunity for personal character study and

repetition. The character of Caesar, while not in many scenes in the play, has some of the longest monologues and one of the larger amounts of lines in the text. Looking back, I am sure that I must have said those lines at least 100 different ways while isolated in that room that no one would ever hear or be aware of from watching a performance. I know however, that those repetitions not only made the lines stick in my head better, but helped me discover who the character was behind all the hatred and rage, and loneliness. Moving from feeling a sense of devastation to almost crying from laughing at a comedic delivery while rehearsing alone, I explored the entire spectrum of emotions resonating in this man in his mere three-and-a-half scenes. The effects of that exploration paid off in the sense that I am proud of the shows performed, but they also took their toll on me personally while in the rehearsal and performance process.

At the end of the play, Black Mary, Caesar's baby sister and one remaining friendly tie to the community he tyrannically oversees, cuts all ties with him, coldly telling him, "you not my brother" (Wilson, 88). I was fortunate enough to work with an extremely talented actress and friend who embodied the character of Black Mary that many nights, both in rehearsal and in performances, that moment would bring me to tears shortly after it ended. I was simultaneously aware though, that this wasn't just Caesar crying or a random reaction to a great performance. This was me experiencing the recoil of investing so much emotionally and psychologically into a character and his relationships that I feel his pain now *outside* of that performance. After the last scene on the day of the final performance I walked offstage and stood still in the dark while my colleagues delivered the play's final lines. Tears began to stream from my face and I soon realized I had to quickly compose myself for stage bows. In that time standing still

though, I thought to myself how I had just finished my final show in graduate school, and as a student. While that sentimentality was overwhelming enough, I was nervous at the same time that this character might stay end up staying with me in some ways for a long time.

During the entire run, there was cast integrity and camaraderie, likely because of the small cast size and all of us being graduate students. Every rehearsal would begin with a group warm up and with all of us checking in with any cast mates with whom we had intimate or intense scenes. However, I failed to ask the cast or crew (during both the rehearsal process and during the first weekend of the *Gem of the Ocean* run) if they would be interested in a group cool *down*, as a way to collectively allow the characters and the work put into them to leave their bodies and stay in the theatre. Actors often engage in warm up exercises which prepare them for the rigors of a performance, but fail to develop or practice cool down strategies or exercises to release the stress, lower the adrenaline, and address the emotions experienced as a result of the performance (Panoutsos, 555). Some of the roles in *Gem of the Ocean* were very intense and rooted in themes that could be triggering for the actors based on their lived experiences. While challenging, it was the norm to keep those feelings and emotions bottled up until the end of the production. This common practice, for the sake of the art, negatively impacts how actors relate to others, process emotions, and work toward resuming their daily lives. Actors are prone to experience lingering emotions following the close of a production which can affect the capacity to control behavior (Ridder, et al, 2014). It was not surprising that most of the actors did not appreciate the idea of adding more “work” to their list of things to do once the show had concluded, but some of the cast did offer to

do a release with me individually. Some actors are less affected mentally by the characters they play and feel they do not need to practice the warmup and cool down techniques, however, it is important to educate all actors about the resources, techniques, and strategies available to address mental health symptoms before, during, and after productions so actors can access the resources if they need them at any time.

In the aftermath of the *Gem of the Ocean*'s production run, I felt a little conflicted internally. On one hand I was feeling relieved and a bit bittersweet that my last show in graduate school had ended and I was one step closer to graduation, yet on the other I felt as if the weight of the show, and all the work that I and the entire company had done, was still lingering in my body even a week after the last run had ended. The general goal of the actors is to perform their role in a way that serves the overall story and helps to realize the director's, as well as the playwright's, vision as best as possible. Months, or potentially years could be devoted to the study and preparation of a role that in the end, may only be performed a few times or even just once. I personally started my work on the *Gem of the Ocean* process in October of the year prior to the performance, which ran from the last weekend of February through the first weekend of March. Especially given how much time I spent isolated in rehearsals, rehearsing at my house, and the intensity of the work, it becomes easier to understand why this process lingered with me after the show ended. I was not alone in this either, as my castmates (some of whom who were also my classmates) had some difficulties transitioning out of the process as well. The cast member who played Citizen, the character who arguably confronts the most intimate and traumatic moments in the entire play, notably had a hard time refraining from repeatedly saying his lines out loud to

himself in class and even at home sometimes. While we thought this comical at first, I realized that it's not solely the words that are lingering in our heads, but the emotional weight that come with them as well.

In theatre, after a show has concluded, there is sometimes what is known as a "PostMortem Meeting". This is a common term used to describe a meeting between the designers, director, and sometimes the actors to assess the high and lowlights of the production run and come to a consensus on how the show went overall for each department. While actors may be included or invited to share, the usual focus of the meetings do not specifically focus on actor performance or feedback. This only adds to the hanging feeling of a job not being finished in the eyes of a performer at the end of a show run. While some companies are taking the time to make the beginning of production processes easier to navigate through methods like clear consent training and boundary discussions, acknowledging sensitive subject matter early-on and approaching at a moderate pace, and actively building trust in the cast through exercises or games, there needs to be an equally thorough transition out of processes as well. The absence of these kinds of practices constitutes a large part of what leaves some actors feeling "kicked to the curb" after productions finish, and others carrying the baggage of one character on top of another as they bounce from their last show to their next one.

I wanted to emphasize how important this work is, as well as how many people may be positively influenced by the implementation of this, even if unseen at first. It is hard to express a need for personal assistance on matters dealing in mental health or self-care in a field where it has historically been unavailable or unthought of. It is easy to bottle it inside and try to just forget about it, especially in a career that makes it

imperative to constantly shift personas and mask real emotions. There need to be options for actors to access, whether in private or publicly, to address and relieve the psychological burdens they carry with them due in large part to their work. In the next chapter I will discuss possible solutions to the mental health crisis threatening actors. Precedents and statistics for this kind of work will be discussed, as well as how it could be further implemented to spark change in the right direction, and how to begin implementing pieces of the work into artistic practices immediately.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYTICS

Actors are expected to expose themselves and to make themselves vulnerable so that they can dive deeply into the characters whom they are going to portray. However, the toll on the actors' mental state and psychological well-being is difficult to measure, for the consequence of portraying complex characters can have long lasting, negative effects on the actors. Sherman, a professor in the University of Minnesota Medical School's Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, said:

When you really get into character, your blood pressure goes up, your heart rate increases and your mind and body can't differentiate between reality and acting. Your body goes through this emotional experience in intense ways, and that's hard to just turn off.

When the role ends and the curtains close, the actor can be left with unresolved feelings, emotions, and issues that surfaced during the portrayal of a challenging character. Self-care facilitation and strategies before, during, and after, a theatrical production address the mental health and psychological challenges that may come to light for the actors. The goal of self-care facilitation is to give actors the space to identify, confront, and resolve feelings of depression, anxiety, anger, and fear (to name a

few emotions) that they are experiencing when portraying a character. Not every theatre will be equipped to have all of the teachers or directors become intimacy and mental health professionals, however there are actions which can be taken to affect change in the field that will benefit actors and their mental well-being. Some examples are instructors taking a free mental health first aid training course to support students, hosting warm up and cool down sessions for student actors to prepare for and separate from complex characters and situations, and helping student actors not only journal their feelings, but reflect on their journal entries and identify where intervention is needed, if at all. (National Council for Mental Wellbeing).

Physical intimacy is a part of acting and should not be taken lightly. How to move, where to move, and when to move, especially with a partner must be a well-choreographed dance in which everyone is respected and consents. Traditionally having intimacy direction or an intimacy director or coordinator allowed for physical, emotional, and even sexual contact and closeness to occur with the safest measures and in the safest environment to ensure every actor feels protected. This is an instance where a self-help facilitator would be beneficial as intimacy connects to each actor's psyche and may need to be addressed. It should be noted that intimacy is not just referring to sexuality, but also closeness that comes from exposing oneself emotionally, psychologically, and physically. Intimacy direction is one of the mental health strategies that should be employed when engaging in productions involving sensitive subject matter because they will minimize the risk of long lasting and detrimental effects that might occur when playing a challenging character. In an article discussing intimate exchanges, reporter, author, and theater critic, Carey Purcell described the nature of

movement pedagogy, pertaining to mime and clowning by saying, “There is a flow and a method to moving with purpose to garner a response similarly, physical or fighting choreography requires the same level of commitment to intensive training to ensure that no one gets hurt (2018)”. Another strategy called the Alexander Technique, includes movement and is classified as a psychological and physical complementary approach to health when paired with other strategies (Bloch, 2024). Author and Alexander Technique Professor Betsy Polatin describes the five main principles of The Alexander Technique, which can “become integral to the acting process, and in general for increased bodymind awareness in daily life: The primary control, The power of habit, Inhibition, Faulty Sensory Perception, and Direction” (25). Using these principles as tools for the actor to become completely self-aware and grounded, Polatin establishes “the mechanism that governs our total pattern of coordination” (Primary control), “the habitual traits we naturally carry with us in our daily and acting careers” (Power of habit), “the means by which we can become aware of these habits and inhibit them should we wish” (inhibition), “the difference between what we think we are doing and what we are actually doing” (Faulty sensory perception), and the “prevention of faulty use of the body” (Directions) (26-40). Intimacy direction and the Alexander Technique are two strategies that mental health coordinators can use to support actors in challenging physical, psychological, and emotional scenes. Scenes requiring heightened emotional expression and release, puts actors in an emotionally and psychologically vulnerable state and requires direction to ensure that movements and intentions are carefully choreographed, discussed, planned, and rehearsed for the actor’s safety. It is important to empower performers, use ethical interactions, level-set power imbalances,

and implement consent-based practices that allow actors the power to set boundaries. These boundaries are critical to intimacy direction, a mental health strategy, and to support the actors and the production (Villareal, 2022)

Portraying Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean* forced me to confront deep seated feelings about topics like slavery, faith, opportunism, racism, societal discrimination, and greed, which in turn caused me discomfort as an actor and as an African American man. When I read the play, I felt discomfort that I would be portraying a character to whom I felt that I could not relate or whom to relate to too closely would be hazardous in my real life. I felt this discomfort in large part because of his broken family relationships, his disconnect with his faith, his abuse of authority, his concessions to White authority at the time, and his apparent disdain for his community. I struggled with having to dive into a character and make the performance believable, when I myself, had difficulty connecting. I read the play several times to determine whether I could put a spin on it to make the character portrayal more palatable. The internal battle with this character was profound and caused distress. Consulting with my parents, friends, and school colleagues helped me to identify why I felt the way that I did and forced me to admit that there were some characteristics that I could connect with, which caused some shame. I lost a connection with the structure of religion which made me feel disconnected from my faith, like Caesar. I also harbored resentment from being grouped under the negative stereotypes of African American men, yet I make similar assumptions when watching stereotypes on television or social media, like Caesar (through news articles). I asked myself, “Is Caesar more like me than I want to admit?” The shame and guilt were yet more feelings and emotions that caused me mental health distress. While I

was embarrassed at some similarities, though, I also realized that the feelings I experienced were a part of the examination of human nature and not a reflection on my worth as a human being. The ability to distance myself came from the mental health strategy of managing and not blurring the boundaries between acting and living.

After the emancipation of slaves, Caesar was cunning and smart enough not only to take advantage of the opportunities that were presented to him, but also to thrive. The drive to succeed, the commitment, the resilience, and ultimate success are admirable qualities. Caesar's strained and fractured relationship with Black Mary was foreign to me because it was so far removed from my close-knit familial experience. Portraying Caesar took a heavy toll on my mental state. Many days, I would come home after rehearsals or shows and sit quietly, alone in my house. I could still feel the intense weight of the character, the hatred towards him, as well as the hatred he expelled, flooding out of me with nowhere to direct it. When the weight would become too much, I would experience fits of anger or sadness with no ambition to examine the problem, only to wallow in self-despair.

Finally, slavery and racism presented themes that were difficult to confront all at once. Although slavery was technically abolished with the Emancipation Proclamation, racism is systemic with deep roots and generational consequences for African Americans. Confronting these themes affected my mental health and psychological well-being. I experienced lethargy, mild depression, guilt, and feelings of inadequacy because I wanted to give the performance of a lifetime when portraying Caesar. All of these factors and symptoms felt compounded because of the stress of trying to finish graduate school at the same time. Implementing strategies (warm ups, cool downs, breathing

exercises, meditation/mindfulness practices) that helped me identify, acknowledge, and reduce mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and stress helped me to be vulnerable and to construct boundaries when needed to ensure my psychological safety and mental well-being long after the curtain closed on *Gem of the Ocean* and Caesar Wilks.

The strategies that would benefit actors on the stage also have the potential of benefiting students off the stage. Although I am a graduate student in the theater program at the University of Louisville and have access to well-being resources, I experienced several bouts of deep depression and questioned my enrollment in the program as well as my own existence multiple times. Although advised by a select few faculty members to seek professional help in the form of therapy, I did not. I struggled for many days by myself and felt like I had no one to talk to, despite knowing how supportive my colleagues, family, and friend group were. I would occasionally attempt yogic poses and guided meditations that I learned from my voice and movement classes as I thought that practicing mindfulness would help me to recognize and *undo* the depression I was feeling. The idea of “undoing” has been one of the most beneficial self-help aids in my process of relieving tension while in a production, as well as in daily life.

There is a need for release in an actor’s life. The honest manifestation of a character is a taxing process both on the mind and the body, and going through that process every night for weeks or months on end without release carries the risk of emotional and psychological damage over time. This chronic emotional state was identical to what I was experiencing through the run of *Gem of the Ocean*, as well as

several other emotionally intense shows while in graduate school. I did not have access to intimacy or mental health practices regarding theater before coming to graduate school. Prior to graduate school, the work I had done in preparation for a role, was a typical component of every rehearsal and performance. Although I did not feel the weight or impact of the work in the undergraduate experience (likely because I was new to the field), I felt the emotional strain during rehearsals and after every performance of *Gem of the Ocean*. The university taught me techniques that I currently use to relieve the weight and burden of my characters and to avoid feeling stressed or depressed if I didn't use the techniques to unburden myself from the characters and themes in the production.

When delving into a character like Caesar (or any character) being honest and vulnerable were necessary tools for self-preservation. Vulnerability is the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity and a large part of the process to express vulnerability depended on the people I was working with and the task to accomplish. In my graduate experience, we were placed in small, intimate cohorts with no more than four people and, over the span of three years, I grew to achieve a level of comfort with my cohort that enabled me to feel ready to tackle any acting challenge with the cohort's support. Since my cohort was featured in the play, I could be vulnerable with them as we had already established a trusting relationship. The cohort model encourages and supports the inclusion of group check-ins/outs, discussions about consent, and self-care strategies like meditation and yoga. The cohort model and well-being strategies could potentially elongate the lifespan of current and future actors' careers. I do understand that in most situations actors are not in the company of someone they are familiar with,

especially as familiar as a three-to-four-person cohort might be. I think this adds to the argument to incentivize the inclusion of group check-ins/outs, discussions about consent, and self-care strategies like meditation and yoga. Creating an environment for just a few of these practices to be voiced for those who may need them, without judgment, could potentially elongate the lifespan of an innumerable amount of current and future actors' careers, as well as develop comfortability among casts at an increased rate.

CONCLUSION: AMENDING THE DAMAGE

Coming into my own as an adult and as a serious artist has been challenging. While I struggled with bouts of depression, as well as suicidal thoughts, I also discovered the world of theatre where I found a source of emotional release. Fully immersing myself into the intricacies of a character, their environment, and the supporting cast, helped me to become a more accomplished performer. It also exposed me to the challenges of stepping away from a character when the production was concluded. It became harder to escape the problems of the real world while inside the world of the character. Having conscious awareness of the problem is the first step to addressing it, but support from self-help facilitators, mental health and well-being strategies and practices, and reflection are ways to overcome mental health challenges. Additionally, making new students aware of resources, conducting mid-production check-ins, and supporting actors following the close of a production further serve to create a healthy theater environment for all student actors.

In the process of approaching Caesar Wilks from August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, I had to first allow myself to be vulnerable enough to succumb to the ideas that Caesar embodied, while still being self-aware enough not to let them overtake or overwhelm me. Once I got over the mental hurdle that I was not right for the role and that I would bring the rest of the cast down, I was ready to engage in the work with my castmates. I had to ensure that I could rely on my scene partners to provide me what I needed to portray the character effectively and they expected the same from me. We could support one another emotionally when the play would reach its more provocative

moments. We approached this work by communicating extensively and establishing boundaries for ourselves, as well as for the group. The entire production process was preceded by a meeting establishing consent and its modern meaning in the theatre space, and

each rehearsal would only start after a thorough check-in and warm up had been done by the group, and again between scene partners with highly intimate moments. Every actor was provided ample time to warm themselves up physically and vocally and mentally. When the general energy of the rehearsal space felt lethargic and slow, the director would engage the cast in games and fun exercises to help the actors get re-focused on the production and character portrayals. The benefits of bringing the rehearsal space and its participants to a place of good standing before every rehearsal and run of *Gem of the Ocean*, were clear and highly successful in preparing the actors to perform. There was a decrease in the efforts taken to help the actors relieve the stress of preparation and performance after the rehearsals and show ended. Although the job is technically completed when the curtain falls on the show, the body and mind of the actor cannot be switched on and off as easily as that. There is an internal imbalance created when the actor does not take the time consciously to “step out” of the headspace and physicality that they have constructed for their character. The actor might have spent anywhere from ten minutes to more than an hour “stepping into” their character every night for the rehearsal or run they are preparing for, and every night they will neglect to let go of or even to address the experiences through which they just went, resulting in a “camel’s back” that is waiting for that proverbial straw to come along and break it.

Researcher and creator of Alba Emoting Susana Bloch asserts that “safe and effective pattern work begins with learning the neutral state and the "step out" technique, which allows a practitioner to quickly and thoroughly bring the body and mind into a state of calm alertness” (Bloch, 2017). Alba Emoting was created to help train actors to better express emotion on stage, stemming from earlier physiological research in which Bloch had concluded that “subjects taught to reproduce emotional effector patterns were, in fact, found to experience the corresponding emotions; they were also able to neutralize both the subjective and physiological arousal using the neutral, non-emotional pattern” (Bloch & Lemeignan, 1992).

Shortly after beginning to implement this technique with actors, Bloch discovered that “when actors worked on the patterns, the emotions induced tended to linger after the exercise was over”. She then, along with two other founding researchers of the technique Pedro Orthous and Guy Santibáñez, “developed a specific technique to break the emotional bodily patterns through specific behaviors. Called the step-out, it “allows persons to end an emotional state at will and enter a non-emotional state. Bloch, Orthous, and Santibáñez named the whole procedure for working with emotions the BOS Method” (Bloch, Orthous & Santibáñez, 1987).

While a method like this sounds like the answer to the issues I have addressed in my work there are two crucial problems with Alba Emoting: difficulty and scarcity. Created more than thirty years ago, this method still has a limited number of practitioners and certified teachers capable of passing on the work safely, and opportunities to learn in person are scarce as of yet. Demonstrating how truly powerful and potentially hazardous working intensely on

one's physiological state can be Bloch published a personal plea in her book *Alba Emoting*, telling the reader:

I insist, it is essential that this learning be done under the guidance of an expert. In spite of the fact that the method deals with a technique that is apparently very simple, it requires precise adjustments of the facial muscles, the body posture, and especially of the breathing. This cannot be learned by simply reading an article about the procedure, or vicariously from the experience of another person who learned it during a workshop. Since the reproduction of the patterns triggers genuine emotions, an inexperienced person doing the exercises, without expert guidance could enter into an uncontrolled state of anxiety or depression, especially when using the patterns of fear and sadness. This is why I insist on the need to first learn the step-out technique so as to avoid possible uncontrolled emotional reactions. With practice, *Alba Emoting* makes it possible to learn to induce controlled emotional states and to be able to leave them consciously at any moment. On the other hand, in order to avoid robotic use of the emotional patterns, the expert teacher must not only have experience with the method, but must also teach it with a strong ethical conscience. This is equally true for the learner.

While *Alba Emoting* is unique in its approach and complexity, there are facets of the technique that young, inexperienced actors deal with all the time without even being aware of it. The statistics on mental health that differentiate actors' long-term

psychological stability from others is almost enough to act as a deterrent from the field for those preparing to enter. In my opinion, the biggest problem the field is currently facing is the same problem that causes actors to burn out from compiling the weight and stress of their characters: a lack of awareness.

There are many ways to approach letting go of, or stepping out of a character, and the methods which might work for one actor might be useless for the most part in helping to relieve another actor of their characters. Physical practices, including elements from The Alexander Technique and yogic practices, can be a great way to absolve oneself of tension and stress in the body and, similar to the way that physical games would uplift our spirits before rehearsal, strain held within the mind can be amended through playful exercises with others as well. Collective breathing, physical warm downs, and a personalized visualization of the character leaving one's body can all have beneficial effects when trying to relieve the physical and mental burdens of the character being played onstage. However, the most important piece in this relief effort is making sure that an outlet for these methods is presented to the actors. A person cannot fix a problem of which they are unaware and, as stated repeatedly throughout the work, a keen understanding of self-awareness is vital for any actor.

There is a plethora of options in beginning the process of creating a theatre space which emphasizes awareness and care for the self-care and mental well-being of its actors, some of which are easily implementable and require little to no cost: The addition of Cast Deputies, introducing group cool-downs to rehearsals and performances, and the application of formal intimacy and consent training/policies with all cast and crew in every production process. These are baseline practices which encourage and inform

actors in the space that, while they are in an intimate environment in potentially dangerous or traumatic situations with their castmates, there are avenues available to them to help ensure their well-being and sustainability. While the introduction of these options is undoubtedly a step in the right direction, it cannot be the only step taken.

The cost, either financially or in means of time, could be a large component of what might deter a company from introducing positions or practices dedicated to the self-care and mental well-being of its members. These components are as vital to the company's long-term success as are departments and roles dedicated to sound, costume, and lighting design. In each of these, the company makes long term-investments in equipment and tools to help improve their productions, and they hire knowledgeable professionals to maintain and get this equipment to yield incredible results for their shows. There is essentially no difference here. A company producing quality work who is also investing in the long-term well-being of its cast and crew will outlast those who do not almost every time. Aside from building a reputation and attractions as one that cares about its employees, the theatre that takes care of its actors stands a better chance at increasing their longevity, thereby increasing the likelihood that they will be able, as well as want to work longer for them in the end.

Some professors would say, "Theatre is not Therapy", but it is easy to understand why many actors may feel that way. The rush of being swept into an unimaginable or all-too-relatable character, sharing an intimate or exciting moment with your scene partner, is powerful. While rehearsing or performing theatre and adopting the life of a new character can feel cathartic however, that same process can have the opposite effect on some people and, the negative effects could be long-lasting or permanent. The

effects of neglecting to let go of a character can go unnoticed. The resulting emotional buildup is not something that will make its presence known immediately but can pile up until it is too large to be addressed in the moment and will become overwhelming, potentially resulting in serious mental or physical damage to the actor. Creating positions specifically dedicated to offering self-care facilitation, mental health and well-being techniques and practices, as well as creating space before and after rehearsals for strategies to take place, may seem excessive. However, the rapidly changing field of theatre and the long-term well-being of the actors playing challenging roles, dictate that a focus on mental health and wellness must be made. Self-care facilitators foster environments and strategies to create a workforce of healthy performers, which improves the theater experience for audiences and creates a pipeline of healthy actors to contribute and excel in the industry and future of theater.

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CURRICULUM VITA

NAME: Nicholas Wills

ADDRESS: 230 Miracle Lane,
Fayetteville GA,
30215

DOB: Los Angeles, CA - 09/10/1999

EDUCATION & TRAINING: B.S., Communication Studies
Troy University

M.F.A, Theatre Arts
University of Louisville

AWARDS: Warren Oates Memorial Scholarship Award, 2024