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TRANSITIONS:

STARTING THE FULL, SECOND CIRCLE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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I truly believed that the experiences, on and off stage and in and out of the classroom that I participated in here at Virginia Commonwealth University will positively inform my personal and artistic future.

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Abstract

Transitions: Starting the Second, Full Circle

By Mary Colleen Vreeland, MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Mentor: Dr Noreen C. Barnes, Director of Graduate Studies,
Department of Theatre

This thesis will focus on the transitional influences that have led me to start the second circle of my professional life. It is an open and honest exploration of the back-story of my life and the academic and professional influences that led me to seek a Master of Fine Arts Degree at Virginia Commonwealth University. With no parallels and therefore no excuses insinuated, I will be open and dissect more of myself as the whole focus of the thesis in hopes of offering clarity to myself and other mature and disabled students seeking to become a better teacher and artist.

Introduction

Many people say as they reach their mid-life years that their career or life has "come full-circle" which implies an ending. They then start to focus on retirement.

According to the MSN Encarta Encyclopedia retirement is defined as follows:

Retirement - leaving of job or career: the act of leaving a job or career at or near the usual age for doing so, or the state of having left a job or career OR time after having stopped working: the time that follows the end of somebody's working life OR being away from busy life: a state of being withdrawn from the...

Retirement (n) -departure, leaving, giving up work, stepping down, withdrawal, retreat, sequestration, seclusion

I started in school, then went into professional acting, then into teaching and recently back to school. This is the beginning of the "second full-circle."

Placed next to each other these two circles form a figure eight. One informs the other and implies a second half, a more fulfilled and realized second half of a life, career and calling, no retirement, stepping down, giving up the work I love, retreating from my art and the education/training that I hope to share with a new generation of students.

This thesis focuses on one woman's journey to discover and reach her full potential as an actor/artist by being very personal, honest and specific.

Observing the strong and most influential women who've paths I have crossed in academics, professional theater and in life, I feel they have known themselves so well and have confronted and overcome those demons that would have prevented them from achieving their goals with such honesty that their spirit and artistry shines in the classroom, on the stage and in their daily interactions with others. How else is there to be a true success in life? This is the learning curve I have come to understand in my time here as a graduate student and which I feel

would be the biggest risk to take in the form of a thesis examination. I must research myself before I start the second circle.

As teachers and actors we constantly encourage our students and colleagues to take risks in order to become more realized as artistic spirits. “To thine own self be true.” I feel I need to take the risk of putting down on paper a researched self-examination of this first circle in my artistic journey in order to become a fully realized artist and teacher in the future.

This thesis will focus on the transitional influences that have led me to starting the second circle of my professional life. It is an open and honest exploration of the back – story of my artistic life that I believe will serve as the foundation for my academic and artistic future.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the content of my thesis will offer my views, insights and examples so that others can better reflect on their own first circle journey; a journey that many “traditional” students have personally traveled but falsely believed that they are on the final leg of their journey. I offer this reflection so that may have a more fluid transition into and believe they can have a rich and rewarding second circle of artistic life.

CHAPTER ONE: THE VIEW

If one were to lie in a field and look up at the night sky on a clear night, how many stars could one see, each star being a point of light – a possibility? To look at life as a young person, there are as many options as there are stars in the sky, or so it would seem, looking back on it. This is not the way that it seemed to me when I looked up at the sky; the sky was immense and empty and had no substance. As a young girl, my future was unclear and with little hope of promise. Life was frustrating and confusing, and something not to look forward to or even imagine.

As early as elementary school, I learned that putting myself, physically, in front of other people other than my family was a bad idea. I was the little, deaf girl with absolutely an abundance of confidence. I wanted to be in the yearly school shows, but whenever I would approach the *music* teacher about it, I would get steered toward the chorus of the soon to be rejected kids, so it did not take long for it to be made clear to me that I was not fit material for public performance.

Although there was something in me that deeply wanted to perform, I steered myself toward my natural love for animals; animals don't judge on ability, and they love you as long as you treat them well. I focused my time and energy on an endless

string of pets – animals that I found as strays and brought home to heal their wounds, feed their starving bodies, and reassure their broken faith in people. My parents tolerated the animals and there must have been twenty of them in and out of my house from the time I was old enough to carry the first one home. This went on from elementary school, all the way to high school.

Although there was an assortment of animals, the creatures that soon would tap deep into my soul were dogs. These instinctive creatures would shape my view of the world. I would spend hours and hours observing their every movement, gesture, expression; all which could be defined within one word: honesty. There was no inhibition in them and curiosity and joy was displayed everyday of their life. I found myself confronting the issues of life by imagining how this noble and loyal animal would do so. I found that I could be playful, curious, and loyal. I especially discovered that I needed to respond to everything by trusting my instinct, intuition, gut feeling or however one might best express that organic and internal voice that immediately speaks to us in dramatic or sensitive situations, but we, as humans, most often ignore.

Viewing life through the eyes of a dog was freeing and gave me a power, which over time would serve me well as an actor, teacher, friend and woman. One might say that such a philosophical view is naïve and even simple-minded. Not I, for trusting one's instincts is the key to happiness and the outcome of not trusting

one's instincts is always thematically the same: pain of some kind on all levels; emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. Examples that are reflected in life and the arts of teaching and acting are, but not limited to the following:

- A dog senses danger immediately and responds accordingly and instantly with fangs showing, growls and barks of aggressive intensity and even intimidation to offer a warning to not come any nearer and even nip at the offender. The human may label such an instinct as silly, unfounded and even a sign of rudeness. They will often have their internal voices debate the merit of such a 'feeling' when by right's they knew all along to nip the encounter in the bud.
- The curiosity and immediacy learned from a dog offers seed opportunities to engage in improvisational activities that are fundamental in the theater art of performance. Many times I have heard directors ask an actor not to think but just act and react.
- Loyalty is central to a dog's existence but oh so easily abandoned by humans. It is a key to most of the relationships in dramas on the stage and off. Losing the trust in the other, meaning the other person in one's own personal life, other actor, director, agent, etc. determines how free one is to create fully and freely.

- A ‘sacred space’ is one’s own home, a classroom or stage. Dogs define their territory and guard it, make it their home and I have found that those who share the same instincts and sensibilities of a dog, be they directors, stage managers or teachers create the most sacred of theater spaces and the most trustworthy of creative and nurturing relationships.

I felt validated about my feelings as they related to dogs when I read various sections of the text, *An Acrobat of the Heart* by Stephen Wangh, especially the section on Bodily Emotions. He quotes Stanislavski at the beginning of this section, “*With faith in your physical actions you will feel emotions, akin to the external life of your part, which possess a logical bond with your soul...*” Anyone who has a dog for a companion and/or as an assistance dog knows that the external actions shared to achieve a goal or enjoy a game come from such a bonding of souls. Having taken the movement courses here at VCU, I have been able to see how my natural affinity for animals has informed me as an actor but also given me insights and vocabulary for guiding future students into the instinctual/primal aspects of their craft.

CHAPTER TWO: THE DRIVE/THE VISIT/THE LESSONS

When I first went to college for preparatory instruction in 1974, I was not ready to go at all. I had just finished 10th grade and I my father sensed that I may not wish to continue. I was pushed toward college prep school by a father who had had his fill of an unjust world and that treated him less because he was not educated but a father that never sought revenge or retaliated against those who caused him pain. My father had never had a chance to go to college; he went to into the Navy to make it a career full of adventure and as an opportunity to see the world. A severe problem with his heart cut short that dream and he had to settle for a variety of jobs where little men with little minds and no dreams drove him to a life on disability. How ironic that my father who was subjected to odd jobs and a disability check saw for his youngest daughter, a girl profoundly deaf, a world of opportunities and adventures. He was not about to let me stay home and see what he had to settle for because of a lack of education. I was to get finish my high school equivalency at Gallaudet and be prepared for college.

So he thought that it would be truly a great adventure if he and I were to go on, what I know was a stolen phrase from Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes, “a

quest.” This “quest” was actually a very long drive from the small people in our small suburb of Dearborn, Michigan who in turn sought to make others feel small for dreaming big to a city of big dreams, great history and unique educational opportunities; Washington, D.C. The impossible dream of his for me was to be accepted into the only university where I would be accepted by others and that was Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts institution of higher learning for the deaf in the United States or the world. My father felt no resentment at not going to college himself, but by-God, his little girl was going to go and go we did.

My father loved people. Being an Irishman who read over and over the works of Irish literary masters such as Yeats to Wilde (my favorite) and filled with more than his share of blarney, he would immediately engage in humorous chats with everyone from waiters to gas station attendants to men seated next to us at diners who were obviously engaged in discussions during a business lunch. But the chat we had before we would start on our quest was serious, loving, soulful and *honest*. It was a chat that forever changed our relationship but would serve to this day as a constant reminder of what life had to offer, not owed me.

On the front steps of our house my father sat me down and shared, what would be, my first real series of lessons about life and art or really, the art of life.

“Trust the journey.”

With my mother peering through the screen door and fighting back tears my father sat next to me. He knew my fear and anxiety about leaving home and exploring the possibility of me staying at a prep school over two thousand miles away. He also knew there was nothing in this town for me to center my life around and nothing that would challenge me to become a better person and self-reliant human being.

It was a hot, summer morning but sitting there I felt a chill. He put his arm around my shoulders as if he knew I was scared. He turned my face gently in order for me to read his lips. His whole face was full of confidence and absolute calm. His Irish eyes sparkled as his mouth shaped the words, "Trust the journey." He tapped my nose with his big, thick Irish forefinger and kissed my head as he stood and started for the car.

I stood as I watched him sit behind the wheel and ready the rear-view mirror that would soon reflect my mother, home and sense of security slowly fading behind me. I turned to say my good-byes to my mother but she was no longer there. Strong in her love for her children and protective, at times, to a fault, she had drifted to the interior of her empty nest. For a second I thought about rushing in through the door and beg her to change my father's mind so that I could maintain the security I had known with them but two abrupt taps on the loud horn from my father that I

heard with my cumbersome hearing aids and I found myself sitting next to him, seat-belt strapped and rolling down the highway.

Pain is good. It lets one know that there is something wrong, so fix it and do not delay.

The “quest” had begun and there were a few “windmills” along the way that needed to be overcome! First, a minefield in the form of nails and broken glass spread across our path to restrict us from continuing our journey and which resulted in the form of two flat tires. While my father was changing the first flat tire, I found myself looking across the cityscape that was Cleveland where one day I would find myself performing the lead role of Sarah in *Children of a Lesser God* at the Cleveland Play House. My name would be in lights. That was years away however and now I was just held in awe by the controlled chaos that was a big city. It was evening and all the lights were glowing in the various buildings that made up this city. I tried to picture myself at work in one of those buildings, actually in the tallest building I saw. No picture came to me. I was depressed by the fact that I could not imagine me becoming any kind of independent person and in control of my own destiny. I tried and tried but no image came. The desire, I felt was in me but no lit

image of myself could be found in the window frames of that building that reached into the dark sky.

My father approached me, wiping grease and grime from his hands as I stood at the guardrail at the side of the road. It was dark and he knew I could not read his lips or even see his face clearly. I looked at him as he looked into the same buildings that offered me no glimpse into my future. His profile was occasionally lit by the glow of headlights from the traffic that was swiftly moving by. There was a smile on his face and his profile was strong and clear. In his eyes were the reflections from the buildings before him. He pointed to the very same, tallest building that I tried to imagine myself in and put his arm around my shoulder and shook me as if he were confirming that it was a fact that such a city, somewhere in my future, would offer such a magnificent structure for me to work or make a home for myself.

After a few minutes he walked me back to the car and before he turned the key in the ignition he turned on the dome light and looked at me and asked why such a long face? I said that moving away from home was hard and that I was afraid that this trip would end in disappointment *for* me and he would end up disappointed *in* me. I quietly confided that there an excitement in *thinking* I could be in a city where one day I would be involved in something of significance that he and my mother would come and visit me and be proud that he could think back that it all

started with this trip. But such a day would was probably the dream of a little girl. He looked at me in silence for a long time until the silence became almost unbearable, then he replied. This is the pain of separation. This pain is a growing pain in a series of growing pains but each one will pass if I exercise my belief in myself while experiencing the growing pain. This is not the pain from physical growth but of emotional maturation. You are *growing* apart from your mother and I to grow into the person you must become. My only expectation is for you to be happy and I would only be disappointed if you did not explore ways to be happy. This journey is a *way*, one way but not the only way. Let us see what this way offers you, ok? I nodded my head feeling a bit relieved but not totally.

“Before you try to make others happy, make sure you are happy yourself.”

There were tests from Mother Nature in the form of heat and hail that overheated our “steed’s” radiator and caused us to take shelter. There were desperate searches for restroom facilities off the beaten path; in remote villages, and scary inns where little sleep was accomplished. The most memorable of these tests occurred while driving along the stretch of country that borders the Ohio and West Virginia border. It was like a prairie that went on and on into the distance. The monotony of this vision allowed me to daydream about my upcoming meeting with

administrators that my father had scheduled for us to meet. I was concerned that I would let him down by coming across too shy and too clumsy with my rural signing that was most certainly not going to be of the quality that these deaf professionals used to communicate with in their conversations or in classrooms.

I thought of my mother for first time since looking back at the doorway as I left home and knowing it was too painful for her to say her goodbyes. I knew she would support me if I failed and came back or decided not to attend at all but I knew even more that she wanted more for me in life and wanted me to have a life of my own. As we drove I dreamed of her dreams for me and would I be able to fulfill them for her.

All this was on my mind when darkness entered through the windshield and brought me out of my thoughts. I looked out of my passenger side window and saw the darkest clouds approaching. There were bolts of lighting flashing across them at different points in the storm ahead. I quickly glanced at my father whose knuckles were white as they gripped the wheel and his normally smiling face was now stern and focused on what we were driving into ahead. Then out of nowhere came a sheet of white marbles that covered the car so completely that we could not see an inch ahead of us or behind. I could feel the powerful vibrations from the pounding. My father pulled to the side of the road and checked my seatbelt. I found that odd as we had stopped but later he said it was in case someone would hit us from behind. This

shower of white rocks lasted for about four of the longest minutes I could remember.

Then as quickly as the darkness overcame us, it cleared to a bright, sunny and richly blue sky ahead. My father and I stepped from the car and saw other people standing near theirs and looking over the damage that the storm had caused in the form of many dents in the metal and cracks in the windshields. I stood there afraid while at the same time exhilarated by the experience. I watched as everyone who would have remained anonymous to one another had there been no storm now chatted as if they were comrades who had just survived a battle and shared their personal account of the conflict. Perhaps this is where I first realized that conflict could bring people together as well as push them apart.

I soon found myself standing there looking down at my father's car with many dents in the body and looking up and watching the clouds move behind us. I thought that if we were not going on this trip to do something for me, this would not have happened to us. I felt guilty. Ah the lifelong relationship with good old, Irish, Catholic guilt. While I wallowed, I again felt my father next to me. As if he knew what I was thinking, he smiled and expressed that this was not my fault. Then his face changed and became serious. He asked me if I was going on this trip for me or for him and his mother. "Do *you* want this?" Before I could say a word he said, "Before you try to make others happy, make sure you are happy yourself."

He told me to point in the direction I wanted to go and I pointed down the road towards East. I knew where I wanted to go.

**Let nothing stop you from your goal*

We arrived in Washington, D.C. and as we passed the various monuments and sites that I had seen on television or in books shared with me by my father, I felt the fear and doubt start to creep in to me again. We pulled into the drive that entered the Gallaudet University campus and soon we arrived at the Office of Admissions. We had not even stopped at a hotel to freshen up and I felt like a puppy being taken to a new potential owner without being groomed first. Up the many stairs we went and as my father introduced himself to the secretary in the office I sensed that something was not right about this first impression we were making. I suddenly realized that my father had not contacted the administrators at all about our visit. He had studied the program thoroughly and had just decided that this was the place for me. His 'quest' was for us to not waste the time in applying to this prestigious program and waiting for a response but to pack up my belongings and travel to this school and present me, with all his Irish assurance of my abilities, to the powers that be and they would realize that they must have me as part of their student body.

I could tell from the appalled expression on the secretary's face that this was true. After many shaking of heads and gestures from my father, the kind woman motioned for him to sit next to me and she went into an office with a very shiny name-plate and closed the door. I glared at my father without saying a word and he smiled at me as if this was the most natural courses one must take to get what one wants in life. After a long wait, a kind gentleman in a very nice suit stepped out and smiled and motioned us to his office where we sat on a very nice leather sofa. To my shock and amazement, the gentleman started signing everything that my father was saying. He was interpreting for me as if this was common practice. It was.

I watched this man's hands sign the words that my father used to try to convince him that I must attend their college. I was both moved by what my father was saying and the beauty and clarity of how this man, this hearing man, interpreted my father's words. My father did not let this man speak during his entire presentation but neither did this administrator try to interrupt. When my father had finished his oration, the man smiled, introduced himself as Mr. Greenburg and looked directly into my eyes and asked, "Is what your father telling me true, do you want to come here, do you need to come here?" Without looking at my father and without hesitation, I signed to this man that I wanted to attend his school more than anything I ever wanted. He smiled and shook his head first from side to side and then up and down and instructed his secretary to provide us the forms needed to

apply. He asked my father for the large envelope of documents that he had mentioned he brought during his speech to certify my past schooling and to verify all the guidelines that my father had researched would be needed. The gentleman approached me and said that in all his years he had never invited a student into their program in such a manner but that he had never encountered a father such as mine. He welcomed me to Gallaudet University's Summer Freshman Orientation Program.

Right road, but wrong lane

So...I went to college. Trying to figure out who I was as a deaf, young woman was a long ordeal for me. I took a variety of courses that sought to get me to a level of competency in the basics for college but I found myself being drawn to the theater events and those students who were participating in them. I thought that one day I might find myself involved in or even majoring in theater. Those thoughts created in me great anxiety and worry about such possibilities. As a little girl and young woman in a small town, I loved to perform for family and friends and they fed my need for attention – it was the basic “big fish in a very small family pond” holiday scenario. Father wanted me to playact a story for Christmas, dress up as the most outlandish character on Halloween, portray a leprechaun during Saint

Patrick's Day, and basically be the entertainment during major gatherings, because by the family artistic standards, I was really good, at least everyone in my family except my brother. I enjoyed performing; it was something that I was good at, and that gave pleasure to other people. Performing took me somewhere outside of myself, outside of that small town, and outside of my own isolated experiences. I enjoyed the freedom that creating characters brought me.

When I got into my courses of study at the university, I was quickly shocked and dismayed to find out that I was marginally good at best, but in comparing myself to others, I found myself sadly lacking. I had not had any acting lessons, I did not consider myself graceful or beautiful, I was not cultured in the least, and I didn't see any end to my mediocrity. I remember my older brother once told me when I saw a character on television that I thought I could play, "But Mary, all actors are pretty and hearing!" Although my father scolded him bitterly for his remark, that was, I thought, the beginning of the end of my great performing career.

Not long after this comment, I started having horrible stage fright in front of my family; being physically ill before and after performing my little plays in front of people. I had such anxiety about what the audience might be thinking; were they thinking that I was too ugly or silly to be in front of them? Were they laughing with me or *at* me all these years? Every time I would perform, I would think, "there is no

use in any of this, I will never be anybody...I am not pretty and hearing, and I will never be pretty and hearing.

I struggled at Gallaudet. I loved the interaction between students but the campus with its walls that protected the students from the frightening, crime-ridden area in Washington, D.C. made the atmosphere stressful for me. I realize now that I was just not as prepared for this big city way of life. Later in my career I would come to love it. I would even come back and attend American University and receive my undergraduate degree and even later perform at The Folger Theater (now known as The Shakespeare Theater) and receive the Helen Hays Award. Now, however, I was too young and too intimidated by my environment.

The way courses were taught at Gallaudet and the manner in which the majority of the faculty provided instruction was cold and removed and made me feel like a number. I loved the theater work at "Gally" but that was about it. I knew what I wanted to do and what direction I wanted to explore my life but I was not at the right place to make it happen and feel comfortable in doing so.

I then heard of another federally funded school in Rochester, New York. It was the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at The Rochester Institute of Technology. As quickly as I heard of them I found out that their nationally acclaimed touring company, SUNSHINE TOO, was going to perform at Gally. I was excited to see their work and perhaps meet the actors in the company. I went to

their performance the following week and was stunned to find out that the actors in the company were juniors and seniors at the school! They were so talented and friendly and most of all, they were creative beyond my imagination. Their signing was poetic, their gestures created characters and the stories they were telling were being directed to me, for me. They focused on issues that young deaf people were dealing with at the time and they were very honest in their telling of the stories.

After the show they were very accessible to audience members, many who crushed them for autographs and questions, expressing emotions I had not witnessed the whole time I was there at Gallaudet. After many had left, I approached them and asked them about NTID. They loved their school and spoke so passionately about all of their classes and teachers and the work they were doing. They loved small but exciting town of Rochester and how everyone in the city respected the Deaf community and sought to accommodate their needs and interests. They also shared something that would completely change my perspective on life. They said that NTID was part of a hearing institute and that many deaf students even took courses there and were welcomed! I almost felt that they were lying for it seemed so good to be true. After a few minutes of further discussion I could *feel* they were not. Their eyes were full of enthusiasm and sincerity. I knew then I would change lanes in the road I was on and head for Rochester.

CHAPTER THREE: BROADWAY BABY

I made my move to Rochester and I could not have made a better choice. My father respected my decision for he could see I was developing my own focus on where I wanted my life to go and how I would get there. To my amazement I found that he was even supportive of my majoring in theater.

My first semester was everything that the members of SUNSHINE TOO had shared with me and more. I was comfortable and I was learning at a rate and a depth that shocked and thrilled me. I was even cast in the small role of Rosaline upon arriving at NTID. Everyone was active and expected all students to study but even more importantly to activate their studies. I was a sponge. Then as quickly as I had arrived, I was about to depart.

On a Monday morning of my second semester at NTID, I walked the hallway just outside the Panara Theater. I was a second semester freshman and had just finished playing Louisa in *The Fantastiks*, my second lead in as many semesters. I was just starting to get my feet wet in theater major and feel accepted by those faculty and other students in the program. I turned the corner to head toward class and there in front of me were about sixty classmates and some faculty signing

together in a tremendous state of frenzy. Everyone was so intense and so serious but at the same time, jubilant.

Out of his office came the head of our program and told us all to calm down. Everyone feel silent but each held great tension in their bodies anticipating some great announcement. I stood at the back of the crowd so as to see our director's signs. He told us that what we had heard was true and that Broadway producers and casting people were to visit our school and search for candidates to be in a new play titled, *Children of a Lesser God*. This was exciting for the program but for the Deaf Culture as this was a play that would portray members of the Deaf Community in a positive and realistic light and not with the atmosphere of pity that most theatrical reflections of the deaf were created.

A week later, a week that seemed to pass so very slowly, we were ushered into the main theater of our college and introduced to the Broadway casting team that was there to hopefully select one or more of us to receive the honor of representing our world on a the New York stage. They asked us to read from 'sides.' We did not know why they called them that because they looked like scenes from the play but we read them anyway. They gave us feedback and we read them again. We then did a variety of exercises and they took our pictures and we left hoping that we had made an impression.

Over the next two weeks we heard nothing and then one day I was called and informed that I was cast as Lydia in this Broadway production. Next thing I knew I was in a whirlwind of activity. My father gathered me and my things from NTID and we were off to “The City”. It was just a few years earlier that I stood along the road looking at the skyline of Cleveland and feeling lost and this was just passing through Cleveland but now I was heading to New York City with a skyline known throughout the world and I was heading there to live and work. At least that is what I thought. My father shared that this was to be a big change in my life but even he had no idea as to just how big of a change.

This drive with my father was much shorter than our first together when we headed for Gallaudet and I was leaving home. I knew my father was concerned about the fact that I was only in my first year at NTID and now I was headed to Broadway. I could sense the pride he felt in my acting ability and how significant this would be in my life. Even he, however, was shocked by how big of an opportunity this was for me and how little he could offer me in the way of advice. This was new territory for all of us.

In many ways I found it more difficult to leave NTID. For it was here that I was a member of a different kind of “birth family.” I had many brothers and sisters here who spoke with their hands in such a way and ease that I could feel their depth and understand so clearly their thoughts, thoughts that were very similar to mine.

Although I had an older sister who was Deaf, she was never immersed into the Deaf college life. I loved my parents but they never learned to sign and it was only at Gallaudet and even more so here at NTID that I fully realized what I had been missing at my “hearing” home.

This is not easy to share but at NTID I saw adults, deaf and hearing communicating fully with their hands, facial expressions, gestures and full body language. All information, ideas, gossip was shared but even more important were the insecurities, hopes and dreams of my NTID brothers and sisters, insecurities, hopes and dreams that I related to very deeply. At NTID I found I was not alone.

Many at NTID did have feelings that were somewhat different than mine and most of these feelings centered on their deep resentment of hearing parents, brothers and sisters who never learned to communicate to them; never learned how to sign. A resentment that drove deep wedges in the relationships between them and their hearing family members. Classmates would tearfully and angrily share how they struggled to read lips behind moustaches, during excited exchanges of celebrating a surprise or through the sobs when bad news of losing a family member that was made known to everyone before them.

What was most telling was the fact that many at NTID preferred to spend the Holy Days or holidays at school rather than head home to celebrate with friends and family. Attending school made them painfully aware of all they had missed and

would miss were they to once again go home to sit at the family dinner-table where Grace would be *said*, past year's events *spoken* of and silly stories *told* to all but them.

“Flapping Lips” was how many referred to their family members.

Classmates would prefer lie to their parents saying that they were spending the holidays at a friends home and then rush to book a hotel room in Rochester, sleep 4 to 6 to that room, buy food from a nearby GasMart, hook up their closed caption boxes and watch movies *together*, celebrate the Holy Days with those NTID family members with whom they could say Grace with, chat about the past year's events with and talk about silliness with in a communicative way so all would be included; that being through the use of signing.

Leaving in the middle of my freshman year and the pace of Rochester, New York for Manhattan was the culture shock of my life. Although I was leaving this family of the Deaf Culture and concerned about working with professionals, most of which were hearing, I would soon find that I did not have much to fear. I was given an agent, joined the Actor's Equity Association union had an apartment found for me and basically had most every professional aspect of my life “handled.” It was very nice at the time but it was also misleading. I had not been taught how to handle my finances and how to handle my time. I soon did.

**Learning what not to do is just as important as learning what to do.*

I had just finished my first day of rehearsal. I had met the exciting cast and the leading lady of this play was Phyllis Freulich. I had never seen a more powerful, talented, articulate woman in my life; and she was Deaf! She was not shy about expressing her beliefs about the role of Sarah that she was developing nor was she intimidated by all the hearing men who debated her choices, suggested changes and presented their views. She was a woman who knew who she was and no one was going to budge her on anything if she was not willing to budge. She was not stubborn, she was sure. I was excited about being around her and learning from her but I was already in jeopardy of losing my role of Lydia in the production and I did not even know it!

In my naïve, and selfish way I entered this first rehearsal unprepared. I thought that since I had been hired from my audition at NTID and having heard that there had been many such auditions across the United States, my talent and to a few other actors and his stage manager. He spoke to the playwright, Mark Medoff, and they even glanced my way a few times. I was so clueless that I thought they were saying wonderful things about me. I was getting restless as I wanted to get back to my apartment to change and get out on the town when he approached me. He was about ten steps from me when all of a sudden Phyllis stepped in between us. I was

so upset for I felt she was now going to postpone my leaving the rehearsal hall even longer with whatever she needed to discuss with him. Her back was to me and I could not see what she was signing and he was shaking his head as if upset at what she was sharing with him. Finally, he looked as though he gave in to her and he walked away and out of the room. I was so upset that she had troubled him with her issues that she had prevented him from probably complimenting me on my first day's work.

With her back still to me, she took a big breath and waited for others to leave the hall. I thought that was my cue to leave as well and so I gathered my things and stood up to go. Suddenly Phyllis turned around with a very stern look on her face and pointed to the chair and told me to sit down. Her whole demeanor was so intimidating that I was in my chair without knowing how I got there. She proceeded to inform me that the director was upset with me. I was shocked! For the next ten minutes she scolded me as I had never been scolded before. She started by telling me that I was seven minutes late for the rehearsal and that I had not only caused the stage manager to disrupt his schedule to call me but that I had not even had the awareness to apologize to the cast when I did arrive and I did not apologize to the stage manager or director when we went on one of the union breaks. The following is a list of the points she brought to my attention during those seven minutes that seemed like seven years:

*It was obvious that I had not studied my script before this first reading.

*I had not thanked the director and writer for approving my casting.

*I did not introduce myself to the other members of the cast prior to the rehearsal starting (Again, because I was late).

*I showed little respect for the story that needed to be told.

*I was not being a good example of a young, deaf woman.

This last comment made my stomach ache. I was so embarrassed and humiliated.

Tears were streaming down my face as I shared that I was aware of none of this and *was so sorry but I did not know what I was supposed to be doing for no one shared that information with me.*

Then she sat next to me and shared, less sternly, but with little sympathy either, that she was going to guide me through this process and I was going to work harder than I could ever imagine. She then ordered me to stop crying, go out into the hallway where the director was waiting and apologize to him and then go back to my apartment and read the play cover to cover at least ten times before the next day's rehearsal and write down what each character was most afraid of in this play and how it affected their actions and statements. I did as I was told and I kept my job and I learned as I had never learned before.

I have never forgotten how being unprepared could harm a young, naïve artist. That is why the knowledge I have gained while here in graduate school has

better prepare me to prepare those young students who will one day soon be in my charge and trust me to advise them well on the transition to the profession. I would like to make special note here of my professor, Dr. Aaron Anderson.

Dr. Anderson has taken such great care to offer me guidance as I have traveled through this maze of graduate training and the pitfalls that need to be avoided or helped out of when I clumsily stumbled into them. He never wavered in offering me clear advice and guidance and his teaching technique awakened in me, many marvelous insights. Dr. Anderson has been the equal to Phyllis while I have been in training here at VCU.

**Thrive on all forms of criticism.*

During the next, days, weeks, and months I was tutored so intensely by Phyllis on every aspect of my work and life as a professional. This work impacted my professional life in ways that I am still realizing to this day. I received critical feedback from the director, the writer, and other actors about performance technique and craft. I was schooled in the backstage ethic by stage management staff and union stage-hands. The publicity office staff advised me on how to handle myself in interviews and my agent taught me aspects of the union, contracts, and self-promotion. I was in the most intensive practical workshop in my life and it was

all a crash course. I use the term, 'crash course,' for were I not to accept and apply all the criticism given me I would most certainly see my professional career crash.

Although I accepted every bit of criticism offered me, it was not without a major learning curve being developed on my part as to how to accept such information. Those who were kind in their advice made it easy for me to understand and follow their directions. Those who scolded, were abrupt, seemed condescending in their critical tutoring of me made it difficult for me to listen and apply their words of wisdom. Again, Phyllis stepped in at these moments. Rarely did she display much tenderness in her discussions with me about the various do's and don'ts of the business. She was so intensely driven to advise, guide, teach and share with me her insights and knowledge and inquire as to the littlest detail of how I was addressing issues of work, professional relationships, and my feelings about it all, that I knew she cared for me deeply. She did not care if I liked her as long as I showed her respect.

She tutored me on the most important lesson in the business of theater: lifting the seeds of truth from all criticism no matter how brutal the deliverer seems to be and no matter how much one may not even care for the deliverer of the criticism. It goes without saying that the brightest influence during this first professional stage in my artistic career has been this woman who introduced me to theater and acting – Ms Phyllis Freilich. It is hard for me to put into words what

she has done for me; not because I have to think of things, but because there are so many things that it is hard to select just a few to share. She encouraged me at a time when nobody else seemed to care what I was doing and how my actions were affecting my work and my future in theater. I was thrown an artistic life preserver by her.

Once the Broadway production ended, she started recommending classes for me to take, plays for me to read, and through my continued discussions with her, showed me ways to improve my performance and self – and she did it all without taking on any kind of superior attitude. Phyllis has helped me to see myself as an actor and an artist in so many ways – she has never lost faith in me, and has pointed me toward projects outside of the professional atmosphere so that I could broaden my scope and gain important experience. She has gone out on a limb for me by recommending me to directors in the theater community who have called her for references, and that shows incredible confidence in my abilities and commitment.

She became not only my teacher during that time of my young career, she has become a professional acting and directing icon in the Deaf community. Her commitment to pursuing her own craft and growth in the professional field of theater, while at the same time helping fledgling artists, has shown me that what I want to do is possible and how I must pass onto other young artists, not only the skills and insights I have learned through out my career but the history of how I

learned them and from whom I learned such values. To this day she is creative and supportive of the creativity of others; she will go out of her way to find ways to help her 'students' as they find their own way in life...that is the kind of teacher and actor that I wish to be. I look upon her as a role model, a teacher and a good friend – all the things that I want to be. I was thrown an artistic life preserver by her. I will be forever thankful.

CHAPTER FOUR: DRIFTING TOWARD A DEGREE

What does a not-yet-twenty year old person do when they have just finished a Broadway show? I somehow felt that I could not go back to college at that moment. I had tasted too much of the professional life and loved the intense creativity that was shared by all artists when creating a production. I wanted to apply all that these wonderful artists had taught me during this experience to other plays and in other theaters.

Soon I was being cast in a variety of national tours and regional productions of the Broadway production, playing the role for which Phyllis had received the Tony Award. This was a great series of experiences but soon I had performed the play and the role so many times that I found myself becoming bored by one producer after another wanting to catch the magic of the Broadway hit. These productions were successful but I personally needed to do more, explore more stories and characters. Then, Los Angeles called and there were made for television movies and prime-time television series opportunities. I loved them all. I learned from them all but I started to develop a sense that I was intellectually empty. It was a vague sense but it was there in the back of my mind when I would encounter a

director or writer and they spoke of theories and writings that influenced their work or that they found intellectually stimulating. When they asked me what writings interested me I felt foolish to offer magazine titles and mainstream books.

I felt I had disappointed myself immensely, and was just weary of the fact that I was on the road all the time and that I had never finished college where I would have been exposed to a solid liberal arts education. I was at loose ends, my identity was not lost in playing all these roles on the stage and on television but I had been traveling so much from city to city and performing roles in many stage stories that I had no idea about how I was supposed to live for myself. I started to think less of myself and even my acting abilities for how could I play roles with depth if I had no depth to my own life and education?

Every self-destructive urge that I had ever had was realized during this time. I did not know who I was, anymore, and instead of taking the high road to self-realization and trying to balance my work with the taking of classes, I went with all of my baser instincts and sunk into a world where I could run away from reality. I just took advantage of all the perks that were heaped on me and spent my money on things that I thought would make me look and feel better about myself. Honestly, I do not know where my head was at during that time, I remember feeling totally lost and hopeless, and like nothing that I did mattered, that nobody loved me or understood me. My sense of self in life was gone, so I just concentrated on getting

from one day to the next. I through myself into my make-believe roles that won me awards but waking up in the morning was more of an accident than it was a natural occurrence. To say that I drifted through a few years while performing roles that others would kill for would be putting it mildly.

Eventually I decided that perhaps I could channel my need for learning and developing my mind towards a deeper understanding of self with a career that called on me to be performing and presenting *me* in the form of others. So I went to a variety of schools. It did not take very long for me to figure out that studying and exchanging ideas in the classroom was the bliss that I was searching for and needed, but because I needed the funds from my acting to feed the cost of my slow course by course and school by school education I continued to travel and act, taking those opportunities where the contract was long enough for me to rehearse and perform but study at an area college.

Being in the Screen Actors Guild and Actors' Equity unions gave me a way to support myself, but it was something that enjoyed less and less. It was a job being an actor and many would find it crazy for me to speak badly of the art I want to be a part of for the rest of my life. I just did not want to be there because I was an attractive and unique young girl who was right for a big Broadway play and would eventually feel shallow of mind and spirit. There is a difference between finding a

job and finding something that you enjoy doing and my joy at the time was studying.

While spending years seeing an undergraduate degree in the distance, I was advised by a mentor at American University that if I were to focus and stay another two semesters, I would be able to touch that degree with my fingertips. I futilely searched for acting work in this city of Washington, D.C., a city that I was once afraid of but could not find anything that would allow me to focus the time and energy needed to complete my degree. I had a choice to make.

I returned to college as a full-time student. I took out loans but they were not enough to make ends meet. Now I am going to share something that I have never shared with a soul and tremble that I will put this in writing. I took a job at McDonalds. This may not seem like an emotional crisis to many but being older and working with teenagers who looked at me as a poor, pathetic, deaf woman who manly cleaned the milkshake machines was beyond humiliating. Not one of my McDonald's co-workers was working to go to college but to buy the latest basketball shoes or music tapes. Each day I suffered while at the job and consoled myself in the assigned readings from my teachers while on breaks. I could not wait to get to the sanctuary of my classes and sit with those who wanted, as I did, to advance themselves in life. Day by day that degree and all the knowledge that came with it was getting closer to being in my grasp.

I remember experiencing a feeling of elation on the day that I received that college diploma – certainly this would open up my world, and make it easier to find my elusive bliss! I had a college degree, and nothing would stop me now! Both my mother and my father attended my graduation, and the pride on their faces made me feel that I was invincible...there was nothing that I could not achieve! Time soon buffered my sharp pang of elation to a gentle ache. I still felt a sense of achievement, so I decided that I should figure out what it was that I wanted to do, and do it.

For the next few years, I worked vigilantly at acting. I found a renewed love for this art that was now my calling. I worked many jobs...from stage productions to commercials to television and film and I even continued taking occasional classes at three institutions of higher learning, all in search of fulfilling something inside that I could not quite understand. I taught sign language at a community college provided acting workshops to a variety of universities and was invited by other universities to speak on disability and women's issues. Much of the time I felt an indescribable exhilaration when I was on a college campus and I felt strangely at ease in front of students sharing the experiences and knowledge I had to offer them. The looks on their faces when something I said clicked in their minds or hearts was so satisfying. I was now not merely dithering along now; I was in the process of

finding the missing puzzle piece that would fill the void in my life completely. I thought the missing puzzle was teaching.

CHAPTER FIVE: TO BLUFF OR NOT TO BLUFF

One autumn day soon after I had graduated and while I was auditioning in New York, I received a phone call that would help me try to fit this missing piece of the puzzle, teaching, into my life. My former teacher and director who guided me into and through the initial auditions for *Children of a Lesser God* and led me to Broadway and away from my studies at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf was calling me to see if I would be interested in an opening as a full-time Teaching Guest Artist. I was shocked and excited that fate was offering me the opportunity to once again become a part of that exciting environment that I found so hard to leave as a freshman.

The position would start the following fall semester and that worked out well as I would soon be cast in a major production and be working with a major award-winning actress who shall remain unnamed. During the rehearsals of this production I became close to her and her humor and talent were enormous. During a break from a rehearsal I confided in her that I had been offered this teaching position but was a bit afraid that I may not have the skills or ability to teach semester long courses. It was one thing to engage students in a one-day workshop where they were in awe of an actor they had just seen on television or the professional stage in their city and quite another thing to sustain that interest to for four hours, three

days a week for fifteen weeks! She then said something that stunned me, “When in doubt, bluff.”

She explained that, “All great teachers act as if they know everything and are able to have great insight into every student of acting that they come across. They do not. The brilliant ones do have great ability on many levels but many times they just trust their instincts and bluff when they are stumped. Bluffing is no different than an actor dropping their lines and covering with other lines that generally offer the same information to the audience. Eventually you will get on track and, if you are good, your audience will not even know that you went up. Your audience is your class.” It seemed to make a kind of sense. I was calm about accepting the position and with my experience I would surely be a good teacher and be able to bluff my way during those few and far between times when I needed to do so. Who could that hurt?

I arrived at NTID and those few and far between times were just that, few and far between. The problem was that as I found my self sharing that acting was honest moment to moment work, I realized that those few times haunted me. I wanted to become a better teacher and a better artist. When my position ended at NTID I knew that I had one goal to rid myself from those haunting moments and that meant I needed and wanted to go back to school to fill in those voids in my teaching craft.

Attending VCU and finding and turning my inner teaching artist loose after so many years of keeping her caged up was remarkable. I did not even know this teacher was there inside me and this awareness has had some pretty phenomenal effects on my entire personality. I found that I am much more outgoing than I had ever been. For so many years I imprisoned my teaching artistic self within a wall of doubt and misery without fully realizing what I was doing to my spirit; as the doubt faded away by learning strong and empowering teaching practices, so did the walls that I had constructed to keep professional and personal life at arms reach.

Sometimes it is hard to live life in a more exposed manner than we are used to doing. I have found that if you live a lie long enough, you begin to believe it. I have spent hours in the past regretting the years that I lived hidden, but through the guidance of friends and members of the VCU theater faculty, I have learned to begin embracing the walled-off, lost, and sad person that I spent so many years protecting and nurturing.

Regret. Regret is a funny thing – it's a negative, non-productive state that gets a person nowhere, so I am endeavoring to turn my regrets into life lessons. If I had never been that person, I would not have the knowledge inside of me to use in my teaching and artistic craft. Those emotions of sadness and longing and betrayal are right under the skin and easily accessible for me in my character development and in my sensitivity when assisting young artists in the classroom. Regret is not

necessary, but having the feelings accessible to me is a very good thing; life experience is a great thing to have at my command, and something that many younger actors and teachers take years to start acquiring. It has taken me quite a while to understand that while I may not have had the teaching experience that so many have, I have something that they do not – over twenty more years of experience surviving and celebrating the gales and blows and triumphs of life.

It is strange to have finally found my teaching passion; it is very bittersweet to know that for my adult life, there has been this group of academic artists that has existed where I could learn to fit my artist self with the desire and more importantly, ability to teach. Experiencing this transition of life has been, while not always easy, like putting on a comfortable pair of slippers. Sometimes when wearing the comfortable slippers, you step on something sharp and it hurts but you know that if you were wearing your dress shoes, it would hurt even worse, because those dress shoes were not comfortable to begin with. This is what my life is like, now – things are not always smooth, but because I have finally found where I am comfortable, I am very aware that even the jagged edges will subside much quicker than they did when I was bluffing myself to try to be something that I was not. I suppose that this may be the most profound new knowledge that I have gained: I can be comfortable in this world, and in my comfort, I can be more productive than ever before, creatively, academically and personally.

CHAPTER SIX: OSCAR'S INFLUENCE

As I stated earlier, my father loved to read and Irish authors are what he loved to read most. I believe that I developed my love for reading from my father. Before I could read I would sit and watch his facial expressions change with every emotional transition that took place in the story he was reading at the time. I loved to see him smile and laugh out loud when something struck his humor. I found myself breaking into a sweat when his face would become tense with anger to the point that I felt he would burst into a violent rage! I witnessed the dramatic impact that reading had on his life through all the adventurous stories he would read.

I have always loved to read. Reading has afforded me many escapes in life; things not going right? Read. Depressed? Read. Cannot sleep? Read. It seems that I have had my nose in a book ever since I taught myself to read when I was four! There are several plays which have inspired me during this transitional period in my graduate life; one of them is *Eleemosynary*.

When I first read through the play, I had planned to just read a few pages before bed to put me to sleep. Two hours later, I was flipping back through it looking for specific incidents that I had read, and already planning to read it again.

Eleemosynary is a play that is not widely known, at least to me and I cannot figure out, for the life of me, why it is not. It is more than a story of family relations; it has lessons about diversity, individuality, youth, old age, love, despair and decision making. The play addresses social mores, how we, as people, deal with past issues, how situations get out of control, and so many other issues that are universal. It would be a great experience for me to be a major part of taking the play from text to a living, breathing production; it would enable me to understand more of my acting process. The experience is metaphorically like giving birth – nurture the play, take care of yourself to stay healthy, go through trials and tribulations, and on opening night and afterward, you see the fruits of your labor. It is a deeply intense experience, and when it is all over, most of the bad times are forgotten. I know that when our productions here at VCU were over, I mostly just wanted to do them again, birth pains and all.

Richard III was a play that I had to read. It has four great roles for women that I could conceivably play one day: Anne, Elizabeth, Richard's mother and Margaret. I had never read much Shakespeare in my life, as the plays were quite a challenge, contemporary English not being my first language, let alone the classical poetry of The Bard. On the surface, Richard seemed like a thoroughly abominable character; other people and actors that I have studied or worked with have

expressed extreme dislike for his character, but I found him to be a pitiable man and that it is why the play is actually titled, *The Tragedy of Richard the Third*.

Now, Shakespeare wrote the play not with his own view of Richard but because he was in the world of Queen Elizabeth, so of course that was that slant he needed to take in his writing for the production to be produced. Keeping that in mind, I did some research and read the play very closely to form my own opinion. I could develop my own opinion because of how I learned to research context from my courses taught by Dr. Aaron Anderson and Dr. Noreen C. Barnes. This is where I learned the importance of doing research on characters, entire plays and the history of the times plays were written in and who they might be written for.

Queen Margaret makes a small but commanding appearance in the play, and that appearance was so intense and passionate that it stirred me to one of my most powerful desires to perform this role. Doing the research on Queen Margaret led me to reading *Henry VI parts 1, 2 and 3*, and finding out why Shakespeare gave Margaret the treatment that he did. By reading the *Henry VI* plays, I developed a view of the Lancaster and York families that I would have never gotten, otherwise. Margaret has taught me lessons about sacrifice, and what it sometimes takes to realize hopes and dreams, and sometimes, no matter what the sacrifice, hopes and dreams are not realized. Margaret committed herself body and soul to what she believed in, and while she lost in the end, her lifetime was rich and abundant in

experiences. This is the lesson I have taken from *Richard III* and the *Henry VI* trilogy.

There are many other books and plays which have made quite an impression on me, such as *Jane Eyre* where Jane overcame her turbulent childhood by facing her fears and found her true love and her purpose in the end. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth learns a huge lesson about judging a person too quickly, and that is very important, especially when working with diverse groups of people. In *The Lord of the Rings* a group of culturally different people must work together in order to complete the task of taking the ring to throw into the pit of Mount Doom; this is very true of the ensemble work that theater is built on. Also, Sam Gamgee had to keep the faith, and in the end, was crucial to defeating evil even though he really wasn't a "hero" in much of any traditional sense. In Ursula K. LeGuin's poem *The Old Falling Down*, she speaks of climbing upward to her room to find that her room is empty. That is how I see my younger years in college; this is inspiring because I know that I was not alone, and that though I found many "empty rooms", I have now found a "room" where I can be myself, and there are new things everywhere that I look.

As I stated earlier in my thesis, I was always embarrassed at having to express the level of works that I was reading. English to a Deaf person is a foreign language and, I am sorry to say, many hearing people, yes, even teachers, think that

since we are labeled, “disabled,” that we are just not capable of using English well. Even worse is the belief that we are not trying hard enough. As much as I have enjoyed my time here at VCU and learned much, I must say that I have felt from a few of the faculty that when I needed extra time for writing an assignment or reading the texts that may not seem dense in the use of English for a hearing person, I was presumed dense myself for not understanding the assigned readings as well as I might.

Language skills are learned while we are very young and unfortunately I was not taught the use of the hearing language, English, as well as I might have been and, to take some responsibility, as well as I should have learned. But there was a man whose writing has constantly challenged me to examine the English language and the use of it. It is Mr. Oscar Wilde.

My father introduced me to this gentleman’s writings when I was home visiting from a tour. My father had seen the play weeks earlier. While I was expressing my dismay as to why this production I had been performing in was even produced he quoted Mr. Wilde; “All bad art is the result of good intentions.” I thought my dad had made up this statement. After all he was a witty Irishman. This statement made sense to me on a deep level. The anxiety and anger I had been carrying toward the producers, directors and even some of my acting colleagues, drained away. The play had a very important message to share but was just not

crafted well enough to share it yet. All these people rushed the play into production to get the message out to the world. This was done with good intentions. But my father told me those were the words of Oscar Wilde.

Over the years I have read many of his plays and even his works that were written while he was imprisoned for his homosexual activity, I am the first to admit that much of what he says and how he says it is still beyond my grasp but I marvel at his use of English. He has become a mentor to me. It is as if I am playing with a professional athlete in a game of words and I am a novice and most of the time I lose in understanding the meaning but when I do understand his words or make them come to life according to my understand or need to use them, I feel that I grow in this game and I become a bit more accomplished with this language of English.

The following Wilde phrases are from the Ralph Keys text, The Wit & Wisdom of Oscar Wilde: A Treasury of Quotations, Anecdotes, and Observations. They are compiled from the many works of Mr. Wilde but focus on teaching and acting and art. I provide a brief explanation of what they mean to me as a teacher and artist.

“The best that one can say of most modern creative art is that it is just a little less vulgar than reality.”

This is a great statement to share with those who consider themselves creative but have used it to create reality television.

“Whenever a community or a powerful section of community, or government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do, Art either entirely vanishes, or becomes stereotyped, or degenerates into a low and ignoble form of craft.”

This is what happens when artists and art institutions are not funded or funding is held over their heads by those who want to dictate what art should be created.

Theaters, for example, reproduce old standard but loved plays and cease to produce new plays for fear they will not sell well.

“There are two ways to dislike art....One is to dislike it. The other is to dislike it rationally.”

This is a statement for teachers. One can just tell a student that their work was not successful and leave it at that or discuss rationally the reasons why it does not work to promote growth in the student.

“The work of art is to dominate the spectator: the spectator is not to dominate the work of arts. The spectator is to be receptive. He is to be the violin on which the master is to play. And the more completely he can suppress his own silly views, his own foolish prejudices, his own absurd ideas of what Art should be, the more likely he is to understand and appreciate the work of art in question.”

Oh, if we could train the audience to let go of their biases. We can train students to be receptive and let go of their limits in order to expand their minds about art. That is the beauty of the classroom.

“Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.”

This is why masks work in the classroom. People can hide behind them and reveal their true self. They can use the mask as a rational object to expose their uninhibited self.

This statement reminds me also of the most influential, practical component to my training here at VCU. I learned so much about mask and counter mask from Dr Aaron Anderson. This work is crucial before entering any character development course for it allows one to explore and honor truth in an uninhibited manner as an artist before he/she seeks to create another truth in the form of a character.

“There is no mood or passion that Art cannot give us, and those of us who have discovered her secret can settle beforehand what our experience is going to be. We can choose our day and select our hour.”

We can choose what day and hour we go to see a movie or play or dance concert or an acting class. These are some of the places where the secrets of art and artists are revealed.

CHAPTER 7: KEYNOTE TO KEYNOTE

In March of 2000 I was invited to be the Keynote Speaker at the Southeastern Theater Conference (SETC) in Norfolk, VA and address the issue of diversity in theater arts. I was petrified. I was teaching at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at Rochester Institute of Technology in the Cultural and Creative Arts Department. As I stated earlier, while there at NTID, I felt I was “bluffing” my way through academic life. It was such an honor to be invited to give such an address on a topic I felt so strongly about and that so needed to be *shared*. The SETC Conference is the largest gathering of theater academics, professionals and students in the country and so there would be a tremendous opportunity to *share* my views and experiences on such a topic. When my chair informed me that I had been invited, I immediately declined. I was not about to risk exposing the fact that I was an intellectual imposter. The fact that I was actually not made little difference to me for that is what I *believed*.

The chair stood before me stunned that I would reject this honored invitation and was, I could clearly see, more than a little irritated. He shared that all expenses would be covered and I replied I still could not. He said that such a presentation

would not only heighten the profile of our program (a program with the congressional mission to develop a national awareness of how members of the deaf community and other disabled individuals were capable of success in whatever fields they chose to pursue) but would most certainly heighten my prospect of a merit raise that would go to the base of my salary, a base I needed of being raised, but again I respectfully refused the offer. After a long silence and his quiet intimidation, I agreed.

Wake-up call...what was I doing? I had never felt as alive as I did when I was on that stage as an actor but I felt near death when I would be asked questions about theater history, theory, and issues that related to theater by those who really appreciated my performance work but were themselves highly respected academic scholars. I would go back to my apartment always feeling that I was instinctually talented for the practical skills of stage performance but intellectually lacking as a teacher in a classroom or a presenter at conferences or seminars.

The next month was hell as I wrote what I wished to say and how to address the issues that I was called upon to share with those in the audience who hold high academic degrees. I anguished and even found myself in tears at the thought that I might be wasting their time and be the subject of ridicule during the post-keynote presentation for having fallen so short of expectations. I put together my notes and organized them as best I could and even shared a few of the ideas I was presenting

to members of Actors' Equity Association (AEA), the professional stage acting union, and who had been involved and knowledgeable of the Non-Traditional Acting Component of the AEA national office. They all assured me that my keynote address would be a success but I had my doubts. After all they were all my friends or colleagues and my experience has been that these people in one's life usually support and overlook the shortcomings for the sake of the friendship when in fact the relationships would be closer and stronger would they really offer their true perspectives.

There I was standing at the podium with my speech in front of me and a hired interpreter to my right and I did not even know how I got there. As I looked out over the audience of over 300 people I did what I always have done but not exactly proud of doing; I *performed* my speech. I *became* a character and *acted* as if I were one of them and had the right to be there. This seemed to work and as I heard laughter and applause throughout my presentation I imagined that it was for the character I was presenting them and that my points on the topic were landing with them. I held for the laughs and the applause with the professional, *practical*, skills I had learned on many professional stages. I concluded, moved to the side of the podium and even took a brief bow and then went to my place at the head table and sat as every course of the meal that was placed in front of me and taken away went untouched. I was sick to my stomach; I could not eat. I scanned the room searching

for signs in people's expressions that would hint that they knew I was a fraud and although I could not see even a glimpse of such a thought in any eye, I knew that those were the thoughts in all their minds. They were just being polite. That was my last attempt at speaking as an authority on any subject at any public gathering, no matter how small.

Now I am at Virginia Commonwealth University where I find myself in a graduate program that centers on the art of researching and teaching. What was I doing there one might ask? The practical answer was that I felt I had no choice. My position at Rochester Institute of Technology had been cut and I was without any consistent employment options. The spiritual answer was that I needed to confront my fears and insecurities about myself as teacher and start to learn to overcome the self-doubt that plagued me by asking for training and guidance from the respected members of the VCU theater faculty.

After a few weeks, I ran into Dr. Aaron Anderson outside of the classroom environment, and I asked him something like, "Do you think that I have any ability to do this kind of research study?" I was terrified to even ask him the question; I felt that I was laying it all on the line about how I deeply lacked confidence in my ability to research, theorize by even taking the chance of asking him the question. When he smiled, shook his head and answered in the affirmative, something clicked. I suppose it sounds a little crazy, but I felt the physical sensation of

something falling into place at that moment; it was like finding the last piece to a jigsaw puzzle.

Anytime a person changes course or starts something new, there are always people who inspire them – generally it is not just verbal encouragement. I know that much of my motivation is provided by seeing other people who are doing what I want to do. Seeing people who are successfully acting professionally, involved in research for an article or book, happily working in technical theater, leading acting workshops, delivering papers at conference seminars and teaching at the college level ignites one's own desire to create and share. All of these things inspire me to continue doing what I love. I see so many people who are fulfilled by their work that I know I am on the right track. Sometimes a person can get lost inside themselves, and if they are lucky, someone comes along and throws them a life preserver; that is what happened with me.

Another of my inspirations and this may come as a bit of a shock to those who read this is Ms. Elizabeth Hopper; she teaches costume design at Virginia Commonwealth University, and has been a source of information and support during my graduate training. She is a free spirit – opinionated, strong of character and immensely talented. The intense commitment that she provides to her students and her personal craft is remarkable. For her students are her “kids”, and she takes care of them accordingly. From her I have learned what has to happen behind the

stage and the control each member needs to have in order for actors to do their job on the stage. It is amazing – as actors, we sometimes take for granted the crew, the prop people, the dressers, stage managers, and lighting, sound and scenic artists, but without these people and their craft, we would not be able to do our job. It is important to understand all of the aspects of theater, not just the acting portion; it is important because we are all a team who must work together to make an event happen.

I had to be reintroduced to that ethic when my actions were misunderstood by a student stage manager and Ms. Hopper pulled me aside and mediated the situation. She showed me great respect and in no way favored her student over me. I was her student in that moment and her ability to clarify and remind me of protocols I had learned while on Broadway many years past revealed that she was only concerned about one thing: the respect for the work and all who sacrificed to make the work magical for the audience. I had to remember that I had learned to use power tools, move sets around, set up prop tables, stage manage and serve on a running crew. It is so impressive and inspiring to watch this woman work with a little bit of nothing and create something fabulous. Her kind of talent is unique and wondrous to watch; I am constantly amazed at her imagination and ingenuity. She reworked my imagination and memory of the totality of theater as an art, and allowed me to strive to accomplish more as I continue to craft my career.

The entire theater program at Virginia Commonwealth University – the students and teachers as a unit – encouraged me. It was a small department at the university, and seemed to have a much smaller budget than other programs or departments. The faculty had to work as a team in order to achieve their goals and assist us to reach our goals. They certainly did not agree and at times there seemed to be more drama off the stage than on, but they all knew how to make the differences work and we as students interested in pursuing careers in higher education learned much of what it takes to create an ensemble among a faculty. This was healthy.

When budget is not an issue, it is easy to design and build a fabulous set. Costumers can be paid; lighting and sound design is not nearly the challenge when large amounts of money can be spent on adequate technology for such things. Scavenging and recycling for sets and props doesn't become an issue because the bigger budget affords the ability to procure the needed materials. With the budget at VCU, we could watch and learn to how to work as a cooperative group from the design and technical staff and faculty. They often had to come up with creative ways to do things that departments at other schools do not even have to think about due to their sizable production budgets. I learned so much from these artists and teachers in the theater department; by example, they taught us that theater comes about because of creating within limits, dialogue and ensemble effort.

I am a person who appreciates things much more when I have had to work hard to attain them; this is something that I never realized fully about myself until I came to VCU. I feel that if I had found my “happy place” in my twenties as an actor, I would have given up on ways to improve my life, expand my mind, resolve faint and glaring doubts about my academic abilities due to the work involved, or perhaps due to the very public scrutiny that takes place when a person presents their ideas and researched perspectives.

I believe that things happen in people’s lives when they are supposed to happen. I was mentally ready for this sweeping change in my life when it happened. I was not in control of making certain people and events fall into my life. The situation of my position at NTID being cut was well timed by whatever force shapes such things. The power I did have in this situation was whether I made it all work for me, whether I took advantage of the help I was offered, whether I was willing to open myself to the experiences as they came at me. Nothing worth having comes easily; demons must be fought, minefields must be traversed, weakness must be admitted and overcome. These are the things that I have had to accept and embrace about not only this graduate school experience with theater, but with the experience of life as a whole. It has been a long road, and I am hardly at the end of it. My life really did begin in the middle of my life – and here I thought that was just a saying.

So now here I was giving a keynote address at the Region 2, 2006 Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival in New Paltz, New York. I was confident, clear, and, I was told, articulate. This remark was echoed not only my keynote address but in during the judging and feedback sessions for young actors in the Irene Ryan Acting Scholarship Competition. This time I believed them for I felt it to be true. VCU has given me more confidence in my abilities and expanded my teaching skills and the manner I articulate them.

CHAPTER EIGHT: MY PEDOGOGY, MY PHILOSOPHY

Recently I wrote a paper as a response to the book, *Master Teachers of Theatre Observations on Teaching Theatre by Nine American Masters*. This book, along with my own experiences, has helped shape my idea of teaching. One of the ideas that stuck with me the most is that theatre is not a static entity, so why should it be taught as if it is? Many teachers in so many disciplines get stuck in a rut and teach the same classes in the same way year after year, and that simply cannot work with art that is ever-changing. Every day there are new writers on the scene who are making huge impacts on our art form. There are new actors, directors, teachers, producers, audiences, issues...and the list goes on and on!

So how can I use my experience to best influence the students to come? After all of the years of being myself as a student, it is a bit of a shock to my system to start viewing myself as a teacher. I have elected to go on from my undergraduate degree into a Master of Fine Arts program in hopes of becoming a better teacher as well as an actor. Teaching is not something that I have decided to do with a wave of my hand; I see teaching as a serious responsibility, and at that, a responsibility that I want to take. I've had so many teachers in my life – poor ones, good ones,

and exceptional ones – I feel that I’ve learned something from each and every one. From the poor ones I’ve learned what not to do, from the good ones I’ve learned what to do, and from the exceptional ones I’ve learned about thinking outside of the box. All of my experiences are valuable in one way or another, even if they did not seem to be so at the time.

So, the question is: How would I use my experiences and knowledge to teach other people? I have found, through my experiences that my best, most exceptional teachers have been the ones that kept themselves open and available to me. As a student, it is imperative to not blindly leap into a situation where knowledge is scanty – that’s where an exceptional teacher can help guide and inform students. The exceptional teacher does not close up shop when the class period is over; being available to share knowledge and experience is invaluable to a student who is seeking help.

I find it interesting to note that teachers, role models and schools can hinder students as much as help them when they try to reduce performance pressure and give the student “the right to fail”. In my own experience with theater, the reduction of performance pressure made me lackadaisical in my pursuit of my goals. This has only happened once, but the incident has stuck with me. It was an outside-of-school, *professional* theater situation/event where all of the actors (of which I was one) were left to their own timeline of getting off-book by a director.

Everyone moved at a snail's pace, which made me impatient and irritable with my co-actors. I was not off-book as quickly as I should have been, which led me to not being able to develop my character as early in the process as I would have liked, which led to frustration with myself. This frustration led to a kind of self-awareness that was very bad for me, and I had to fight myself on a daily basis to do the work that I needed to do. This impact on my intrinsic motivation, my personal motivation for doing my work, was extremely negative; this is the sort of thing that must be avoided at all costs, because for an actor, intrinsic motivation is the driving force behind the art!

As a teacher or role model, giving a student or someone who looks up to one the necessary guidance is crucial. In a teaching situation, the intrinsic motivation must be balanced with the extrinsic motivation of "getting a grade". Balance is so very important in this; a teacher must be able to encourage a person with an artistic temperament to find their own reasons for doing the work, and to express themselves through their character, not work solely for the grade or to win a competition. Yes, grades and competitions must exist, but there must be balance. Grades and competitions are subjective, but the love of the craft must be there to engage the actor.

Balance is so very important in people's lives. It is not just the teacher that must have balance, but students definitely need balance. Time after time I have

seen my young, fellow-students burn out because they go full-steam into their major, and forget that there is anything else in life. It's important to realize that while your interest is new and shiny, it is not all encompassing. I find that balance in all things is the best route to take, balancing theater and nature is the best way to keep oneself grounded. For someone else it may be another outside interest, but there has to be something besides theater...or biology, or whatever a person may be in pursuit of in life. I find that it is the earmark of a good teacher to bring this balance question to the attention of students. Having no balance and going all-theater-all-the-time is a sure recipe for disaster.

This is where I interject about teachers not always having the answer. There is always going to be the time when a student asks a question that you, the teacher, do not know the answer to. It happens! What does a teacher do in this instance? I have had teachers mumble and stumble their way through what definitely was not an answer just so they have something to say. Why is it so important for the teacher to always know everything? Teachers are only human, so when I have been in this position, I like to think that I would answer honestly, that I did not know the answer, but that I would be more than glad to help the student find the answer. Oscar Brockett says that teachers should not be afraid to admit when they do not know the answer, and that helping the student to find the answer is the best thing to

do; that theatre history (his subject) is not fixed, and that all of the answers have not been found. I think that this is a good approach to take with any subject.

Teachers are human, and being such, do not have an infinite storehouse of knowledge in their heads. It is good for students to see that their teachers are human, and that the answers are out there, if time is taken to find them. I hope that when I am a teacher once again, I will continue to learn – to keep active with my learning – to stay in touch with the joy and excitement of the work. I hope that I will love my work, and make the love and excitement ingredients in my teaching. Growing bored is poison; bored teachers teach boring classes and turn out bored, dissatisfied students. I never want to grow bored with helping people find and develop their passion.

Some teachers follow the discipline that the more information and projects they cram into a class, the more successful the class is. It is my way of thinking that it is not the number of projects or tasks completed that makes for a great educational experience; it is the thoroughness each project is treated with and the depth of the work done that indicate whether the educational experience will be a success – or not. This is in the philosophy of the director, Carl Weber. It does not matter how many projects are undertaken if they are undertaken halfheartedly or with only partial information. Students learn to do their work based on the model put before them. I have learned over the years that investing fully in tasks and

projects is really the only way to make them the best they can be. One does the best one can in the time one has to do it. This leads to internal satisfaction, and to a well conceived, well carried out project. I would like to be able to pass this philosophy on to students – that it feels good to do something well and for the right reasons. If I, as a teacher am positive about what my job gives me, I can then commit to passing those things on to my students so that they too can see the beauty of theater, the harmony that can be reached, and the joy they can gain from learning. I have received this affirmative reinforcement from my best teachers, and it is a role that I must endeavor to fill, myself.

EPILOGUE

It is often thought that passion is for the young; I came here to VCU to dispel that myth! My passion for theater does not come from youth and abandon; my passion comes from finding the piece that has been missing for so long. I exult in my relief and in finding a target to focus my energies on. I hope to follow the signposts that my role models have put in place for me, and to be able to set signposts for others so that they can experience the freedom that I have found at last. I find that as an older student, my passion is quieter than that of my younger counterparts; I am more focused on living for and enjoying this day to the fullest. I want to pack all I can into every experience so that it will be meaningful and so that I can learn from it. I want to break the chain of unhappiness that has snaked its way down the maternal side of my family; I want to not only break it, but to turn events around and help other people find their bliss. I don't only want to help them find their bliss, but to help them attain the satisfaction and the joy that I have found. By getting my M.F.A. in Acting with a very strong Teaching component, I will be able to realize this dream. I will be able to carry on the legacy which has been so carefully shared with me, and that is my reward.

As I close out my time here at Virginia Commonwealth University, I would like to make note of the fact that during this past year I lost two of my friends and

supporters. It was my father who past on to me his love of all animals and particularly the love of dogs. He taught me how to read their body language and expressions and how I could better befriend them. He past away last year and left me to grieve his passing with my dear friend, Beulah, who loved him dearly. She was my close companion and consoled me during my move to and during my time here in Richmond, when the transition to graduate school was difficult. I lost her this past Christmas. I will take the lessons learned from them and from those here at VCU who have guided me to a better understanding of myself as I start the second circle of my life and profession.

In Memory of my Father and Sweet Beulah

2006

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let soft animal of your body

love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean air,

are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting-

over and over announcing your place

in the family of things.

-Mary Oliver

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VITA

Mary Colleen Vreeland was born in Dearborn, Michigan. She attended various colleges and universities while working as a professional actor. She attended American University in Washington, D.C., earning her Bachelors of Arts in Theatre on May 21st, 1991. Upon completing her undergraduate studies and after various professional opportunities were completed she relocated to Rochester, NY where she joined the faculty of the Performing Arts Department at Rochester Institute of Technology. Searching to expand her teaching opportunities and develop her teaching craft she was thankful to be introduced to the theatre pedagogy program at Virginia Commonwealth University and their talented and diverse faculty of professionals. Here she was afforded the opportunity to continue to act, examine her motives for returning to advanced training, to have her processes challenged and constructively criticized and further explore herself as a theatre artist. She anticipates completing her MFA in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond Virginia May 2007.