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PEDAGOGICAL FUSION

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA in
Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

DAVID MAURICE WHITE

BA in Theatre Performance and Design, University of Maryland, College Park, 2003

Director: DR. NOREEN BARNES

DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDIES, DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Acknowledgement

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my family for all their support and love during my many, many years in academia. I would also like to thank Dr. Noreen Barnes, Dr. Aaron Anderson, Janet Rodgers, Lorri Lindberg, and Barry Bell for all that they taught me in my classes here at VCU. I would also like to thank Randy Houston Mercer for all those little extra lessons about this business and life at large. Thank you all!

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Abstract

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By David White, MFA in Theatre Pedagogy

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Major Director: Dr Noreen Barnes
Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Theatre, School of the Arts

During the five semesters that I have been at VCU I have learned a great deal from the courses that I have been enrolled in but I have learned the most through my experiences as a Teaching Assistant. These experiences have been so valuable because of the wide range of subject areas in which I have been involved and the diverse instructors that I have assisted.

Although I hesitate to use the word “problem” I feel that there is a tendency in teacher training for a student to latch onto one professor and model their teaching practices after that one mentor. While this is not always a bad thing I feel that it can lead some students down a dead-end path of self-exploration and individualization of their personal teaching style. I feel that I have been given a rare and invaluable opportunity in that I have been permitted to assist so many different teachers in such a wide array of subjects.

In this thesis, I propose to examine the widely varied experiences that I have had here at VCU as a Teacher and Teaching Assistant. I will look at the teaching styles that I have witnessed, the methodologies and approaches of each course, and most importantly I will put forth my personal teaching philosophy that I have developed from my experiences here at VCU.

Introduction

In one of my brainstorming sessions on how to approach this thesis I began pondering the oft-discussed “process versus product” argument and which approach my thesis would reflect. While considering the various possibilities I had an epiphany of sorts that I felt quite succinctly fused all of my concepts for this thesis. The epiphany itself is succinct but the explanation and elaboration will take the following sixty pages to work out. So for those readers that are faint of heart and short on time here is the abridged version:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{A Good Product} &= \text{A Good Process} = \text{A Good Education} \\ \text{Ergo} \\ \text{A Good Product} &= \text{A Good Education} \end{aligned}$$

Aside from a little use of the transitive property of mathematics you can’t get much more succinct than that. But for this to work I must define each of these three terms as I understand them and also explain the reason why the math reference is so important.

A Good Product in theatre is that ever-elusive “success”. It is a show that makes money for the company as well as accomplishing any additional goals that the company may have intended such as artistic appeal, delivering a social/political message, or reaching out to the community. In an academic situation this should also include the students

involved in the production having learned something about theatre and life. I use “should” in that last sentence because I’ve found that university theatre programs often lose sight of this last goal or at the very least that it is overshadowed by the need to make good impressions on the community or those elements of the community that buy season tickets. In many situations the learning aspect is written off to a portion of “A Good Process”.

A Good Process is often mistakenly viewed as one all-encompassing idea when in fact it is composed up of many individual processes that serve as facets of the whole. Part of the problem is the word “process”. I think a better, if slightly mystical, word would be “journey”. I choose journey because that is really what each of the facets represents. Every individual involved in the production has a journey from the moment they are brought onboard to the moment the set is struck and only the ghost light is left onstage. The designers, directors, dramaturges, stage managers, actors, understudies, assistants, run-crew, and even house managers and box office staff all play a part in creating an overall Good Process. This is not to say that there won’t be problems along these journeys but many can be avoided by properly educating the practitioners before they are placed in an unfamiliar or stressful situation. And even if a problem can’t be avoided it must be used to teach a lesson thereby making the future journeys far less hazardous to the individual and the ensemble.

A Good Education is a well-rounded and balanced curriculum designed not to narrow the student’s explorations but to broaden and enlighten the outlook of the student both as an artist and as a person. Far too often I see programs that attempt to teach an actor how to act and speak and move as a character in a play but rarely do they address *why* they

should move and act that way. VCU is ahead of many schools in that they offer a business of acting class for their seniors so that they leave college with some knowledge of how to survive as a person and as an actor. But I still feel that more needs to be done.

Finally, the reason why the math reference was so important is that it represents the balanced education. So many artists pursue art and nothing but the art refraining from all studies of math and science beyond the bare minimum required by the university and never thinking about it again once they leave the collegiate atmosphere. Now I know that there are people who aren't good at mathematics or traditional sciences like chemistry or biology, but for an actor not to pursue English, History, Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology or a designer not study Physics and Psychology is simply a travesty of the educational system. Not only do these subjects greatly inform one another but in their study they exercise the opposing sides of the human brain and stretch the thought processes of the student forcing them to engage in a higher level of cognition than they otherwise would. And even acknowledging the fact that I personally think too much, thinking is no bad thing.

Chapter 1

On History

*'If you knew Time as well as I do,' said the Hatter,
'you wouldn't talk about wasting IT. It's HIM.'*

It was Tuesday, January 18, 2005 and I'd just finished my first class of my second semester at VCU. Being the first day of classes my graduate voice class had finished early, around 10 am, and I found myself lounging around outside the main theatre office chatting with other graduate students, catching up on our holidays. Dr. Noreen Barnes wandered up and joined us and the talk shifted to her undergraduate Theatre History course. The possibility was voiced that one of the four TAs would not be returning leaving an opening in a class that was set to begin in 45 minutes. I mentioned my interest and asked Noreen to let me know whenever she found out definitively if she needed a new TA. With a cheery wave I wandered off across the street to my apartment.

No sooner had I changed out of my acting blacks and begun making breakfast than I heard a knock at my door. Curious, I wandered to the door, frying pan in hand and was greeted by one of the graduate TAs for theatre history. It was 10:55 and time for class. And so it was that I was pulled, eager and nervous (and a little hungry), into the world of being a Teaching Assistant for Theatre History and my first encounters with teaching.

This story needed to be told because it was a milestone for my education and professional development. As I stated in my introduction, I believe that Theatre History is the cornerstone to developing a successful curriculum for a theatre program. It is also the only course that I knew in my soul that I needed to teach.

During the four semesters that I have been a Teaching Assistant for Theatre History I have learned more about the art of teaching than in all of my other teaching experiences combined. Noreen had structured the class in such a way so that the four TAs were given the opportunity to present one lecture a semester. So in the course of the four semesters I have seen lectures from Dr. Noreen Barnes, Dr. Aaron Anderson, and eight different TAs. In that mix of teaching styles I have witnessed many successes and more than one failure. As is often the case, the failures were often far more beneficial than the successes.

I will spend the remainder of this chapter looking back at the four semesters I spent in theatre history paying particular attention to several key areas. First, I will look discuss my observations of watching Dr. Noreen Barnes and her approach to the material and the students. Next, I will discuss the semester that Dr. Aaron Anderson was the nominal instructor for the course while it was in actuality taught by the two senior TAs, Brian Vrtis and Shaun McCracken. Thirdly, I will look at the lectures given by the other TAs as an example of teaching styles in development. Lastly, I will look at my three lectures, how the class received them and how my preparation and delivery have developed over the past two years. I can't say enough how crucial this class has been to the development of my current philosophy towards teaching because while other courses have come and gone with each semester, theatre history has been a constant.

This chapter also begins my analysis of one of the most important and surprising facets of being a teacher: Reputation. Had I been asked about this before hand I would have written it off with a laugh and a roll of eyes. Reputation returns me to grade school memories when an upper classman would whisper “nightmarish tales” about the teachers they knew we had not had yet and grin with delight at the terror in our young, and naïve eyes. Of course most of these ghoulish tales were proven to be gross exaggerations within the first few days of class, but we made sure to pass the stories on to our descendants since some traditions are too good to let go of.

Today the situation is a little more technologically devious but still as flimsy on matters of accuracy. With a few minutes at a computer with Internet access a student may surf to any number of websites that host a database of ratings for professors at major universities. Most sites offer ratings on ease of classes and tests, cost of supplies, tediousness of lectures, and one or two even offer a chance to say whether or not your professor is pleasing to the eyes if not to the ears. But these systems are unchecked and unsupervised and most don’t even require a membership to weed-out unwanted members, allowing individuals who aren’t even students to leave comments and critiques about professors. Even in the best of situations when an actual student leaves a comment about a professor that they have worked with, the comments are often skewed based on the grade earned by the student and any disagreements that student may have had with the professor. It is easy to see how reputation was always so easy for me to dismiss...until I encountered Dr. Noreen Barnes.

When students reach Theatre History in what is normally their Junior year, they usually enter the class both anxious and excited. They have heard the stories from the upperclassmen about the tests and the readings about how much material is covered about Dead Diva projects and Commedia scenes. More importantly, they've heard stories about Noreen. Most students have no encounters with Noreen until they reach her class in their third year at VCU and all that they know is based on these hard-to-believe stories and I've heard more than one voice the question, "How cool can a history teacher actually be?"

On the first day of class Noreen doesn't hesitate and begins the semester with a lecture on early theatrical history and the students don't even have time to get a first impression because they are already taking notes furiously and listening. When they do get around to that first impression it has to include a great deal. Noreen is completely unassuming in her demeanor. She is relatively small in stature but makes up for it with a personality that bubbles up to fill whatever space she's in. She's obviously an intellectual and yet she's often to be found in beautiful and eccentric outfits that show off a wrap-around tattoo. It is such a strange amalgamation of facts that no mold could possibly fit her. The students listen to her because she fascinates them as they sit and think, "She's even cooler than they said."

The other element of Dr. Barnes' reputation that comes to the forefront is her experience outside the collegiate environment. Her look and attitude affirm the students' belief that Noreen has not always been a college professor and she is more than happy to prove them right. But she doesn't do this on the first day of class as so many professors are prone to do. She tells stories now and again over the course of the two semesters but

she saves the best up until the very end of the journey. In my two years of being a Teaching Assistant there is no day that is more enjoyable than in the end of the second semester of Theatre History when Noreen tells about her life and reflections on modern theatre. Every eye is turned towards her and every jaw hits the floor at least once. Sometimes it happens when she mentions working on “Angels in America” or perhaps when she talks about leaving her girlfriends in San Francisco to marry her college sweetheart. On this day Noreen fulfills two semesters of curiosity and solidifies her place in their memories.

These observations on reputation and experience are crucial in my belief in teaching and the creation of my teaching philosophy. That gravitas that Noreen possesses is a quality that I think every teacher desires. The trap that I find so many inexperienced teachers falling into is that they expect that authority as soon as they begin. They walk into a classroom and try to emulate their professors from graduate school who they respected and do not achieve the same effect. When they see that the students are not automatically giving respect they resort to harsher discipline and punishments that serve only to further alienate the student body and destroy any respect or credibility they may have been building. Experience and reputation, as in Noreen’s case must be earned and in return, they earn her the immediate respect of students entering her class. I find this to be a rarity.

As a student myself I can vouch for the sense of wariness I feel whenever I enter into a new relationship with an unknown teacher. This is not to say I don’t offer my respect to that teacher but it is the respect of position not person. Many students don’t

even choose to offer that much. In most situations, particularly with undergraduates, the teacher/student relationship is a strange beast. Teachers are put into positions of authority over a group of students with the power to punish and reward whereas the students are given very little power, if any at all. Even though this is an established and age-old system, it is still difficult for many students to accept. The hallmark of a good teacher is to not abuse that power structure and a good student is one that does not rebel immediately but allows the teacher to prove that he or she is worthy of the respect of person as well as respect of position.

Although I believe Noreen enters into this relationship of teacher/student with that respect already established, she works as hard as anyone I've ever seen to maintain that respect throughout the semester. While working on this thesis I've attempted to classify all the lecturers that I have witnessed and their approaches and Noreen's is the most difficult to classify. Noreen isn't standoffish at all and encourages and enjoys when the students talk with her. She is also the most supportive of student work and is one of the only faculty members that I consistently see at student productions. On the other hand there is an air of professionalism that she exudes that keeps many students at a friendly level without ever attempt to cross into a more personal relationship with her. Noreen manages a balance that is enviable and I can only credit towards the years of experience that she possesses and this allows her to be a professional figure in an academic environment but also appear as the faculty member that would most enjoy hanging out with the students and having fun. I think that complicated balance achieved in that most students would love to hang out with her outside the classroom, and her acknowledging that she'd enjoy it too, but

with the unspoken fine print that no one actually steps across the line to ask her. It is an art in and of itself.

I've discussed Noreen's relationship with the students but her success also lies in her relationship to the material. I have never encountered anyone so well versed in their chosen field and so confident in the classroom. Some portion of this confidence can be attributed to the number of years that Noreen has taught this material but I feel that simply doesn't do her justice.

Another element of Noreen's personality that is so successful in the classroom is her confidence. Noreen teaches with a surety born of having taught this material many times before (successfully and unsuccessfully it is important to note) and even with this wealth of teaching experience she still allows herself to learn from each course that she teaches and to adapt her curriculums and experiment with new methods and practices. Noreen's willingness to grow and develop is a trait that I respect greatly and always hope to embody. But I believe it all comes back to her love and passion for the subject matter and her desire to share her wealth of knowledge and experience with her students.

Because of Noreen's ever adapting approach to undergraduate theatre history it is somewhat difficult to go into extreme detail about any one way that she teaches the course. So instead of an attempt to overanalyze the minutia of the material that she covers I will instead look at the overall structuring of the course and how it is being reshaped even now.

The overall structure of the course is a fairly traditional approach to western theatre history beginning with Ancient Greece and progressing through the first semester to the Renaissance and picking up the next semester with the Restoration and proceeding through

the spring with Russian theatre and then a look at all the “Isms” that arose in the first half of the 20th century and finally a quick discussion of modern theatre as we know it today. This is very similar to the way it was taught at College Park with very little focus being given to Modern theatre or to non-Western theatrical forms.

One of the most important considerations of any teacher when approaching their subject matter concerns the details. With any topic there is a plethora of details to choose from. The responsibility therefore falls on the teacher’s shoulders to carefully select which details to embrace for a particular semester or class. The difference between good and bad classes (and teachers) can often be narrowed down to their ability to select the details. I could spend an entire chapter ranting about this subject because I am rather passionate about it having witnessed so many bad examples. But instead, I’ll spend a paragraph or two analyzing it using theatre history at VCU as my primary example.

A great example to begin this discussion of details emerges from my Fall 2006 speech class. A young woman from India wished to do an informative speech about her national sport of cricket. I am fascinated with the sport and often bemoan the fact that it receives such short shrift in this country and so encouraged her to pursue this speech topic. Anyone who has watched a cricket match without any prior instruction on the rules of the game can attest to a sense of utter bewilderment at precisely what is going on. So the topic “how to play cricket” for a 3 minute informative speech...well, I wanted her to figure it out for herself. And she did. She returned to me next class in a panic because she had managed to narrow the “how to” portion of her speech to roughly 15 minutes. We shared a laugh about the complexity of the game and I then guided her towards the area of history

and importance, and audience enjoyment. She already had those sections worked out (An amazing student) and gave an excellent and informative speech deserving an ‘A+’...if VCU acknowledged ‘+’s and ‘-’s.

In this example the restriction was time that made the detail selection so important but that is often the case with theatre history as well when you are trying to cram 4000 years of history into a three-six month window. Apart from these time considerations there are also issues of relevancy and importance. If your school were doing a production of *Lysistrata* then as a history teacher you would be remiss in your duties if you didn’t spend at least a class period talking about the production history, playwright, and historical context surrounding that play. Even if it is a lesser known work than *Lysistrata* it should still present ample opportunities to directly connect a 21st century classroom to 2000+ year old history—these connections are rare enough to not be seized at every chance.

So stepping forward once again from this example of Greek theatre, let us fine-tune our details once more. Whether or not a Greek play is being produced what details of Greek theatre are worth regurgitating to the students? Dates? Vocabulary? Playwrights? Cities? What truly matters to a class of college juniors and seniors? Does the average run-of-the-mill college junior really need to know what a *periaktoi* is? Will it really help a senior that is looking with 85% of his/her brain towards May to know how many of Sophocles’ plays survive today? This is really the question isn’t it? And this is applicable to any subject taught across the field of academia with the rare exceptions of some fields in engineering and medicine that require board certification and have a precise list of what MUST be taught to pass the exams. For the arts especially there is a huge gray area that

we frolic in that, arguably, has little to no relevance on anyone else. But we return to the same question time and time again: What details do we teach?

Here is where I start to get a little hot under the collar because too often this question is answered by teachers of two categories:

- 1) I'm a lazy teacher, what takes the least work for me to teach them?
- 2) The students aren't that bright, what's the *easiest* thing to teach them?

Yes. I realize that these are sweeping generalizations but if you're reading this then you're in this profession and you know it abounds. The idea of "dumbing-down" subject matter for students is nothing new nor is the lazy professor. To play devil's advocate for a brief moment...is there anything REALLY wrong with these positions? The lazy teacher is oftentimes a professional teaching on the side who really does have another fulltime career that they are attempting to balance; or they are a tenured professor that is far more interested in research but need the backing of a University and are therefore required to teach a class a semester. These are valid arguments. Except they're not. To take on the mantle of "teacher" is no light responsibility that can simply be shrugged off. Avoiding the astronomical sums that students are paying to receive an education, the relationship of teacher and student, the very heart of the concept of Pedagogy, is one of trust and mutual endeavor. If one side does not fulfill the bargain and put forth equal work then it is not shared and not true to its definition. Be a teacher or don't be a teacher. This doesn't mean that other careers and interest can't be pursued but the classroom must always hold 100% of your interest otherwise you need to reconsider your profession.

The second category of “dumbing-down” material infuriates me even more. And I know that I have already bitched about this in this thesis but it is valid and deserves further comment. By “dumbing-down” material we are automatically breaking the pact between student and teacher because we are not even offering the students the CHANCE to prove themselves as capable of learning what we know. In any master/apprentice relationship the whole point of the process is that someday the student might surpass the master. I often try to write off a large part of the blame onto the high schools and grade schools and the Standards of Learning exams, and in many ways they do hold initial fault. But we often perpetuate the condition in higher learning and that MUST NOT be tolerated. It might mean that we have to offer more classes so that those who desire a more stringent and rigorous course load can find what they require and those that seek a cursory examination of a subject can still take such a class and do well. But to teach to the lowest common denominator in a class composed of students who might, given the chance by an optimistic teacher, excel beyond our wildest dreams...is simply criminal. And once again we return to our choices as teachers—and our details.

Tangent addressed. We continue with theatre history. I am a self-proclaimed (and oft commented) geek. It covers a wide array of subject matters but theatre history rises quickly to the top of the list. My undergraduate theatre history grades were a little painful because of my preoccupation with productions but my love for the subject matter was constant. College Park is a scholarly program that had a majority of graduate students working on history degrees. This filtered its way down to the undergraduate theatre history courses as well. Some of the professors couldn't always be bothered to tailor their

graduate theatre history notes down to the level of undergraduate theatre history students and so the lectures were almost identical even if the grading was a little (very little) bit lighter. For general theatre history graduate students from the design side of the curriculum were often advised to take the undergraduate offering and were simply held to an 'A-B' grading scale for passing. Even when the Ph.D. students taught undergraduate theatre history (as was the case for both of my semesters) the workload was created as seemed appropriate for a Ph.D. candidate that had suffered through weekly readings of 1,000+ pages over the last 3-7 years. In short...we got ALL the details.

But even as I type that and smile at the memories of notebook after notebook of hastily penciled outlines and notes and aids to memory I know that we still didn't get ALL the details; although at the time it felt like we were getting them all and some from a few other courses as well. But theatre at VCU is not a scholar's theatre program. We have no Ph.D. program and the concern is far more on the actors than on creating the next generation of Ph.D. candidates, and the theatre history curriculum reflects this. I don't say this in a negative way although deep inside me there is a heavy sigh of sadness that these students don't have as deep an understanding and respect for the history of this craft as I had cultivated in me. But even at College Park the undergraduates were primarily actors (history is interesting if I might play that part someday) and designers (how did they make that trap door in *The Vampire?*). The details are unimportant for 99% of the students that I took history classes with and their grades reflected that disinterest. College Park had an atrocious history of failed history classes because the workload was so excessive. An actor that has a monologue to memorize for an audition is far more likely to spend their evening

reciting lines than reading about restoration costuming. I was guilty of it myself and I WAS interested in the subject. Were there too many details in the Brockett-Hildy textbook for that class? Were the tests too loaded with minutia of dates and names and playhouses? Were the details too much? Perhaps...but students in those classes realized (eventually), if only for the sake of their grades, how much work was required and most of them stepped up to do it. They may not remember every last date and name that they studied in those two, grueling semesters but they know it better than almost any other actor or designer going out into the industry today and they know where to go SHOULD they ever need to know more for a role they have to play or a set they have to design. Maybe the details were too much for everyone and it ruined some otherwise high GPAs, but maybe it asked the students to step above the Standards of Learning and to set some Standards of Excelling.

Having said (or ranted) all of this, I must add this addendum. Everyone is not a history “geek” and I accept that happily. If every student leaves a history class with the simple knowledge of where to go to find out more should they ever need to, then all is not lost. Noreen takes this approach in a lot of ways in that she focuses less on the details of the period and more on the fun facts that separate a particular period in history from another. Knowing the precise dates during which Medieval passion plays and cycle plays were performed is really not terribly interesting and is not very likely to remain with the students once the test has been taken. However, knowing that they would burn cats in effigy as part of their celebrations and used them in hammer-powered keyboards...those details stick with you as memorable events of a period in history.

These random factoids make for far more interesting classes than a simple rundown of an outline that lays out all the people, places, and events of a period as so many history classes are wont to do. What bothers me, to some extent, is that it is such a divergence from a typical theatre history course that I do feel that sometimes details are left out that might be valuable to the class. On the other hand, a class that meets twice a week for 1.25 hours with a roster of 45-50 students only allows for so much information to be imparted. Noreen has chosen material that she knows will stick with her students and that might give them further insight into the period that they are studying and this is a very effective method. Textbooks can be relied upon for cold, clinical facts but the “gossip” of the period and the social intrigues are rarely found in your run-of-the-mill text.

I think part of my interest/dissatisfaction with this method is that I know that I can't quite carry it off myself just yet. This ties back into the idea of reputation and gravitas that takes time to develop. Students have a natural tendency to distrust (perhaps too strong a word) student or graduate teaching assistants. At VCU there is an exceptionally strong undercurrent in the undergraduate population because so many of the classes are being tossed off to graduate students, especially in the performance disciplines. When a student is spending between \$4,000 and \$8,000 dollars per semester for professional instruction it can be remarkably dissatisfying to be foisted off on a first or second year graduate student scarcely older than the students themselves. With acting there is some leeway because of the variety of methods to be taught but with history there is a definite sense of facts vs. folly and graduate TAs often feel a need to overload on the facts when they lecture because they don't feel they've earned the right to joke with the student body, yet. Or, they do

nothing BUT joke and the lecture is little more than a farce done to entertain the students but typically leaves the class feeling dissatisfied and having had their time wasted. The semester that two graduate students were the primary instructors the class complained long and loud at the end of the semester and I still feel this was because the TA's attempted to emulate Noreen rather than find their own path. Noreen has earned the right to share these amusing peccadilloes of historical intrigue because she balances it with fact and functionality and graduate students have a long way to go to fully earn that right.

As I mentioned, the textbook often serves as the balance of the fun/fact equation and so a good text is critical. Once again Noreen and I have discussed the matter of textbooks and its one of the few areas I feel dissatisfied. I was brought into theatre history with the Brockett-Hildy text and I find it to be so heavily laden with facts that it can be near impossible to wade through at first. But using it also taught me to refine my thinking and to become far more adept at narrowing out critical facts from minor facts. It is also written for scholars and scholars-in-training to have as a reference for general theatre history. This can be a little dense for undergraduates but the Goldfarb book seems to be the opposite evil. While the Goldfarb book is far easier to read and much simpler to comprehend, it is written at a level that feels most at home for an advanced high school drama class. The writing is comparable to other high school history books as is the use of pictures and the vaguely patronizing tone used when explaining key terms and themes. It does not feel at home when set beside a college level history textbook from any other area of study. And while I am the first to deride "scholarly writing" as being far too wind-

baggy for its own good, there is a level of professionalism and tone of address that is needed when dealing with the environment of higher education.

I would say its just me being snobbish in my geekdom but having read the student comments about the text many of them feel the same way. Admittedly, they were very aware of patronizing tones from the way in which the graduate teaching assistants were addressing them that semester but they were clearly perturbed by the style of the text. I wish there were an easy answer to this dilemma or a better midrange text to put forth but I don't know of any. I'll address this issue further at the end of the chapter when I present my ideas for improvement.

Textbook aside, the other course readings are critical in a theatre history course and this is the area that I feel the VCU program is at its weakest. I hate to harp back to my own experiences because I'm reminded, quite obnoxiously, of the old "hiking to school uphill in the snow 13 hours both ways" stories that make me cringe; but this is one area in which I feel the College Park program was clearly moving in the right direction. I was reading between two and four plays a week during those two semesters of theatre history and at least one from each of the major periods or movements or playwrights that we studied. Okay, so I didn't get a lot of sleep during those semesters but I did know a lot of plays. I say College Park was in the right direction (but not right) because I feel that two to four plays is actually excessive since I'm still trying to make up for lost sleep spent on bad plays. However, one play a week is not too much to ask. I know that VCU has encouraged our history/literature program to cut back on readings because of how busy our

students are with acting/designing/etc... but reading plays is the foundation of everything we do.

Apart from the fact that plays are often direct reflections of the period in which they were written and much can be gleaned about a country or a time from simply studying the plays; apart from that, there are thousands of plays written every year that are done once or not at all and never heard from again, but the classics are being restaged on a daily basis around the world. For every new play produced on Broadway, how many restagings of Shakespeare are done in this country? If an actor or a designer is familiar with the classics they can make a career doing nothing but those classics and never have to look far from work. The undergraduates read two to three plays a semester in theatre history and while they have snippets from other works it is simply not enough. This is not to say that all of these old plays are good by any means but they are done on a regular basis and they do have value. New adaptations of old plays and old stories are always being done; and even more prevalent are the references to old material in new works. It once again comes back to the details and in this case it is often out of the teacher's hands and in those of the administration who decides that performing in the now is more important than knowing about what you're performing.

Another area of theatre history that I feel is often lacking in programs is the exposure to non-western art forms. I had never been exposed to these forms to a great extent outside of an occasional cultural anthropology class and a brief reference to Julie Taymor at the end of my theatre history class at College Park until I took Aaron's Asian Theatre class for Graduate Students. I can honestly say that no class has had so profound

an effect on my aesthetic as an artist or on my personal development as that class. Being exposed to styles so different from what I'd been taught and yet finding the similarities within was life changing. From a historical standpoint, looking back down divergent timelines of cultural growth and seeing what was occurring at the same time thousands of miles apart gave me a totally new appreciation for history and for this craft. I wish more students had a chance to share in those experiences and to witness those videos and to broaden their horizons beyond the limited scope that American acting typically embodies. Again, this is an issue of details and of time and of weeding out what can be reasonably taught in a semester. I'll address this at the end.

The last detail that needs to be covered is that of modern theatre. So often, theatre history classes make it up to the 1960s and simply run out of time. The last 30-40 years are barely touched upon and what is happening today is almost never mentioned. There is so much history to cover in one, even two semesters that it is understandable that some parts must be left behind and I suppose that the students will soon be out working in the contemporary theatre world and will learn on their own about what's going on in the industry. But somehow it seems negligent to not find some time to address this more completely. I was overjoyed that Noreen found a way this semester to work in more time for contemporary theatre and wish I were still a teaching assistant so that I might sit in and see exactly how much material was covered and more importantly, how the students embraced this material that is the living, breathing heart and soul of theatre today.

Now that I have addressed the subjects of what is wrong with theatre history or at least the many divergent paths I've witnessed it take, I'd like to spend the remainder of this

chapter addressing a few possibilities that I feel would make for a more complete history/literary curriculum for an undergraduate theatre program. The problem with almost all of these improvements is that they require more money, more space, and more instructors to make a reality and all of these are in short supply. But I'm a dreamer and I hope that some of these ideas might trickle through someday.

The first problem is the teaching space and the class size. 50 students might be acceptable for a freshman, 100-level lecture class but for a 300-level course it is simply irresponsible. Even if the class were held in a hall or the theatre where there were seats for everyone it would still be too many students; let alone in a room where people sit on the floor, on tables, or in each other's laps! The maximum size for a theatre history class should be 24 students allowing two groups of 12 or 3 groups of 8 for a little more diversity if desired. At the moment the only way to address this would be to offer two classes a semester which means (as things stand now) that Aaron would have to pick up one section while Noreen picked up the other. Alternatively, if they were to take turns they could each teach both sections and focus on the areas that most interested them. The other option would be to allow graduate students to take a more active hand in instruction but that is a dangerous path to travel unless there are tried and trusted assistants that had served as general TA's for at least two semesters previously. This clearly would be more work for Aaron and Noreen as the primary history teachers at VCU be in a teaching or supervisory capacity. But the class size needs reduction to improve the overall environment of the classroom.

There is an alternative to this split class of basic theatre history and that is to offer two distinct theatre history courses. The first could follow the current approach and use the Goldfarb textbook and be a more broadbased survey of theatre history aimed at your average Actor/Designer/Technician or B.A. student. The second course would be a more rigorous investigation of the subject matter with more involved readings and utilizing the Brockett-Hildy textbook. Packets of readings selected by the instructors and tailored to handle the needs of each class individually would also supplement both courses. The Brockett-Hildy course would be targeted at the Education majors who should have a more solid grounding in all aspects of theatre and theatre history as well as any other student desiring a deeper knowledge of the subject and willing to take on the additional coursework.

This split would allow the first class to be more specifically fine-tuned to accentuate the details that are most beneficial to the actors and designers in the class. Special projects on the acting styles and the designing techniques of the varying periods could be introduced to further the interests of all students involved.

Once again, this would require the development of entirely new curricula and most likely the introduction of additional staff. The benefits, I feel, would greatly outweigh the disadvantages. The class sizes would be split because I estimate 1/3 of the students might migrate to the more strenuous class leaving 30+ for the survey course. While this is higher than desired it is still more reasonable than 50. Other theatre students might also be lured to the advanced course if it doubled as a literature requirement.

In this period of interdisciplinary studies I propose the new class as an IS class with History and English but under the auspices of theatre so that students from all three departments might have the option to take it for history and literature fulfillments especially if there was a play a week to be read for discussion. Specialists in selected periods of history or particular types of literature could be brought in for discussions on particular plays and eras. Giving the students a far greater reach in their understanding of the subject matter and of theatre history as it exists: Part performance, part literature, part history, part life. It is in this fusion of areas and disciplines that theatre might find its future. By merging with all these fields that have such a deep tie with theatre and finding and rekindling those ancient, primal connections. Theatre was at the dawn of history and has been intertwined with it for millennia in any culture you can name. Literature began as spoken word, oral traditions which were theatre and then they were written down. The ties go back as far as mankind and maybe now is the time to breathe new life into them again.

Since I'm creating new classes I have a few more proposals. Under the leadership of Aaron, I suggest the graduate students that have completed his Asian theatre course be allowed to offer an Asian studies course to the undergraduates. When I took Aaron's class each student presented on two distinct forms of Asian theatre. If these graduate students were brought in to present those same (or even enhanced versions) of those same lectures then the work load would largely be lifted from Aaron's shoulders and it would allow the graduate pedagogy majors a chance to enhance their teaching ability in a practical setting. It is unreasonable to assume that these graduate students, having only taken one semester of Asian theatre themselves, are fully qualified to teach an entire course on the subject by

themselves but in a group teaching environment with Aaron's guiding hand, I feel it would open a world of new horizons to our undergraduates and breathe new life into their art and personal aesthetic.

Additionally, I would suggest a class in modern/contemporary theatre. I would like this class to meet twice a week; once for a discussion with the set teacher and once for a discussion with a guest artist. Contemporary theatre and modern history are oft bemoaned because there are no texts from which to teach but the truth of the matter is that it is still LIVING history. At VCU we have Patti D'Beck who has worked on Broadway for 30 years with some of the most famous people (that most of our students have never heard of). Randy Houston Mercer has worked for 20 years in the industry doing fashion and makeup and had done film and television and stage and has more stories and insights to share than a semester could contain. Noreen Barnes lived in San Francisco during the height of its theatre and worked on *Angels in America* and *Hidden: A Gender*, two of the most important pieces of theatre in the last 30 years. Aaron Anderson has worked and been published in more books and journals than I care to count. David Leong has choreographed all over the world with industry leaders. Janet Rodgers has traveled the world and worked with some of the most remarkable theatre troupes in existence today. Barry Bell and Lorri Lindberg have lived in New York and made a living as actors in film and stage. These are just a few of the people that are currently at VCU. There is no need to go looking for them. What about our Alumni? Raynor Scheine? Drew Fracher? People living and breathing theatre and film as we speak. If one of those people came in once a week to talk with the class about their experiences and what it is really like to be a

part of this behemoth that our students all aspire to be a part of, those students would leave that class at the end of the semester truly aware of what was going on in this industry over the last 20-50 years. But this needs to start now because every day death steals another voice that can tell the history. The last of the vaudeville/burlesque artists are passing away but there are still one or two that could be brought in to describe what it was like. That's the true living history of theatre and film and to not embrace it while we have the chance is a tragedy.

All of these changes take time to make happen and money and people, etc...But most of all they take a desire for the details. What do we really want for our students? Do all of them need to know theatre history inside and out? No. Do some of them want to? Yes. What about them? Are they ignored in favor for the easiest, simplest, lowest common denominator path or are they given a chance and an environment to make a leap forward. We give them all they need to go out and look up more and to discover more. Some of them will do this. More of them will talk about doing it. But so many of them never will. The real world doesn't allow a great deal of time for an actor to sit back and read up on history or to catch up on all the old plays that helped forge the way for the Pinter, Stoppard, Durang, Ives, Churchill, Fornes, Henley, etc... But while they are at school they can be given that time to learn and to expand their horizons and perhaps even to awaken a deep-seated love that they never even suspected. There will always be those exceptional students that will fight their way to the top and will search for knowledge on their own. They are the geeks that we love to have in our classes. But the other students, the ones that don't have that drive, that ambition, that inherent need for knowledge, they

are what separate the good teachers from the bad. They are the details that are so easy to forget and to set aside. And they are the details that make the difference.

On Camera...

*I think if I were to go back on stage
I might be in great danger of acting.
-Ben Kingsley*

I have always had an interest with film and TV work but until I came to VCU my experience had been limited to two student short films that died untimely deaths in the land of post-production. When I heard of the summer Acting for the Camera class that Barry Bell was teaching I was excited to enroll but was unable due to conflicts during my first summer. However, Lorri snapped me up as the TA for her section that she taught in the Fall of 2005. This was the beginning of an excellent working relationship that has led me back to TA for her during three separate semesters and multiple classes. It was also the beginning of my passion for film work—in front of and behind the camera.

Acting for the Camera is one of the most important courses that the performance students will take while at this university because doing film/commercial work is how many of them will survive. In an ideal world there would be money and opportunity for actors to pursue the art of theatre and make a living doing so but in reality the theatre opportunities are not as prevalent as film and TV work and the salaries are so dissimilar as to be almost incomparable. Even as a star of an Equity show on Broadway the scale is barely high enough to maintain a decent standard of living in a costly city like New York. Through film, TV, and commercial work the stage actor can supplement their income in

such a way that they can spend three months doing a run of an Off-Off-Broadway show making \$350 a week. If we look at Broadway over the last decade we can see the number of Hollywood celebrities that have either returned to Broadway or shifted to Broadway for a show because they desired that outlet for their artistry rather than simply producing another generic Hollywood script. For these reasons Acting for the Camera is a class that deserves a great deal of attention and concern and Lorri and Barry should be commended for bringing it to this program.

Beyond the merit for the students, this class is also a perfect example of an ideal teaching environment for me because while my primary role is as cameraman I have learned as much or more about film acting and production as the students taking the class. After three semesters there has not been a single day of that class where I haven't made learned a new technique for acting, directing, or cinematography for film or made observations from watching the seniors at work in the class that have furthered my knowledge of this craft. For any teacher or TA this should be the personal goal of any class. To educate most effectively the teacher must be willing to go on the journey with the students and experiment with new ideas and acknowledge that even as the instructor they can still learn. Without this new exploration there is the risk of stagnation and no real learning can occur in a stagnant environment because the flow of ideas is impeded and a real connection cannot be made.

Another factor that makes this class so important is that acting for camera is a very different side of the craft than what the performance students have been taught in their first three years at VCU. In the first weeks there is a tremendous focus on "reining them in"

from this grand, theatrical delivery that they have adopted over three years of stage training. It is of personal amusement to me that while realism is the bread-and-butter of today's theatre and supposedly what is being taught, there is no connection with the sense of realism and, more to the point, naturalism that is required when working in front of the camera. I know this observation is not new by any means but it is one that always strikes me pointedly during the first few weeks of each semester. It is truly shocking to see how unnatural they appear when placed beneath the lens.

Teaching speech has been a fascinating weekly visit back to real people and it gives me a strong basis for comparison between what might be called average college students and the theatre students that I am usually teaching. Their speech is often unclear, too slow or too fast, full of dialects and colloquialisms but they seem far more real and honest than many of the theatre students. This is why it is possible for untrained people to step into film work and not into theatre. The camera does not lie and so it becomes very clear when the person in front of the camera is lying. But when a person is being honest and not forcing a persona or a theatrical delivery of the lines the scene reads true and it is far easier to connect to that human being because they appear far more real than the "actor".

Perhaps it is because I am fascinated by human behavior and mannerisms on a daily basis and pay too much attention to the little nuances of physicality, tonality, and "tells" that people possess. But when I walk across campus it is usually possible to pick the acting students apart from the general populace simply by their exaggerated mannerisms or over-trained voices. It is worrisome to me to an extent because it appears that through teaching them to "act" we have made them forget how to simply be. The

largeness of persona and gesture and the over-enunciation and projection that are required for stage filter through into their daily lives. Now, is over-enunciating really such a problem? Well, no, but I do feel that these “symptoms of an actor” are a curious side effect that the students pick-up along with their education.

The point of this little tangent is that Acting for Camera also serves as a checkpoint for the actor before they venture into the professional world. When they see themselves for the first time on film they are usually mortified by how bizarre their mannerisms actually seem. For many it is the facial expressions that cause the most distress. The overactive eyebrows, the flaring nostrils, the wide-eyed looks, the twitches in muscles, jaw-tension, etc... all of these are brought to the forefront and there is a moment of realization. Most of the actors begin to work on these mannerisms and it reflects in their daily life. It grounds many of them back to a place of balance between the extremes of “normal people” and theatre performers and this makes them far more attractive and gives them the appearance of being much more in control of themselves and therefore more hireable and easier to work with. Now that we’ve examined the reasons why this class should be taught let’s look at how it is taught and structured here at VCU.

The course is taught once a week in a four-hour class period using whatever classrooms, offices, hallways, etc... are necessary for the scene being filmed that day. During my first two semesters of Acting for the Camera we utilized two VHS camcorders so that we possessed the versatility to do a double shot or use a single take to capture close-ups and a master or both sets of close-ups for an acting team. A month into the third semester both of the VHS camcorders suffered wiring faults/shorts and we substituted my

personal Mini DV camera for the remainder of the semester. This resulted in a mixture of good and bad situations that I will discuss later in the chapter when I look at the technology necessary to optimally teach this course.

Syllabus and Exercises

The students spend the first month of class doing a series of exercises designed to help initiate them into the world of camera acting in a gradual manner. Following these exercises are several open-dialogue or “blank” scenes. The focus for these scenes is to work on reactions and to introduce the concepts of blocking, business, and hitting the mark. Once the students have the fundamentals of camera work they progress onto scenes from films and television shows. If the class has an even number of students then the scenes are almost always done with pairs of talent with the remaining students working as crew, acting coaches, stand-ins, or extras. On occasions when there is an odd number of senior performance majors (as in this past semester, Fall 2006) it is necessary to have a team of three or to have the same actor do the same scene with different partners. While this may seem unfair to make one actor do more work, I have yet to see a student who hasn’t been excited about a few extra minutes in front of the camera.

Barry and Lorri both use this same basic formula of exercises and scenes when they teach *Acting for the Camera* although they each have one or two specific exercises or scenes that they prefer to utilize to teach certain aspects of the techniques. They also share a similar belief in what I feel is the most important aspect of the course—Feedback. Whenever it is a student’s week to be talent they must watch all filmed rehearsals and takes

and respond via email within 24-48 hours to the teacher and the TA. We encourage them to get together with their partners for the reviewing of the dailies so that they can see the entirety of the process and see how the work changes over the day. For the exercises and early scenes we normally begin by putting a master shot on each tape and then shooting an over-the-shoulder close-up of each actor. But since we typically shoot one person entirely before moving onto their partner, the second person usually has a more polished and practiced feel to their shots because they've had longer to rehearse. Hence the benefit of watching all the footage shot in a day so that the full arc of the rehearsal and takes can be seen.

The feedback is invaluable for both the teacher and the student. And while this is one of the great paradoxes of performance, the key to great film acting is honesty. One way to judge the level of an actor's honesty is through his or her responses to the shooting. If an actor is spending all his time on superficial details and refusing to look at the actual work and meat of the scene then it is clear to the teacher and TA that there is a wall of some sort remaining that needs to be worked on so that the student can grow and develop this portion of his craft. It is also very clear when a student is faking the responses because there will be no change in the quality of performance when they next step in front of the camera. It is true in all acting and even more so for camera that to be a great actor you always need to be working on improving and learning and the feedback is a vital step. It is astounding to see the difference a week can make after an actor watches his or her tape and has a revelation about what they are doing or not doing as the case may be. I wish this

practice could be applied more easily to the stage acting that our students do because I feel that a drastic improvement in their work would be inevitable.

Before looking at the individual exercises chosen by Barry and Lorri I'd like to spend a paragraph or two looking at how they differ in their approach to the class. Barry approaches the course as if he were teaching an acting styles class. The goal of any styles class is to teach the students the difference from what they are used to and the finer points of performing in this new medium. While he does move them into offices and hallways as needed for certain shots, he could just as easily create every set within one of the classrooms downstairs. For Barry the focus is really about the process and giving the students a chance to practice the fundamentals. For Lorri it is really about the product and that is where they differ.

Lorri spends the exercise portion of the course in much the same way as Barry, never leaving the classroom and simply working on the fundamentals. But once she has gotten the students through business, blocking, and hitting-the-mark she treats the class as if it were a film studio and every week the studio turns out two or three scenes ready to go to post-production. Lorri is far more concerned and attentive to the lights and the surroundings, rarely choosing to use the classrooms unless it is appropriate to the environs of the scene. This last semester we shot in Gary's office, David's office, Patty's office, Lorri's office, Barry's office and the guest artist's office, the hallways outside of B-53 and B-57, and the 1st and 2nd floor lobbies. Because the old cameras had such minimal lighting controls I brought in additional clip on lamps and homemade dimmer switches so that we would have portable and versatile lighting controls in any space. The reason behind this

wasn't just to create a higher quality tape, but more importantly to give the actor's the feeling of being on a hectic set for a day of shooting. I find this to be an excellent technique so that should any of our students be cast in a film they will not feel like deer in headlights – just in another kind of lights.

This is not to say that Lorri is right and Barry is wrong but it does illustrate an interesting difference in approaches to the same subject matter. With Barry's class being taught in the summer there is enough stress on the students already to memorize lengthy scenes in a day without the added stress of that "film-set" atmosphere. Barry's approach works better in a three week summer session than Lorri's would for that very reason, but in a full semester I think it is a necessity for the students to pickup at least a taste of what it might be like on a set doing an intimate scene with an intense warming light 12 inches from your face, a microphone dangling dangerously close to your head, three cameras pointing at you from various angles, an assistant director 10 feet away from you staring at his watch and mumbling about "over-time" and a makeup artist telling you not to sweat. Now that's cinema...gotta love it!

But moving away from their differences let's look at the exercises that they both utilize. Exercise one is shot on the very first day of class and consists of a 10-12 minute interview conducted by the instructor. The topics range all over the place depending on how well the teacher knows the student. The goal of the interviews is to hit on all sides of the emotional spectrum so that the student has a taped example of what they look like when they're being themselves and honestly laughing, smiling, frowning, blushing, etc... Oftentimes this can only be achieved by catching them by surprise. It is actually an art

how Lorri and Barry can pop seemingly random questions in such a way as to elicit the needed responses in the students. The benefit of this initial exercise is in showing the students when they are being honest. Most of the students have never been in front of a video camera before so it can be very unnerving. Some respond by tensing, tapping, playing with their hair or hands and other visible signs of nervousness and anxiety. Others put on their stage masks and try to hide behind a caricature of who they really are, choosing to portray who they want everyone to see. More still choose to try and show what they think the teacher *expects* them to be. And when they see the tape they realize that all that shows through are the lies.

Lorri and Barry also make this entertaining for the rest of the class by assigning each person to be a casting director for a particular variety of TV show or film genre. They represent sit-coms, soap operas, TV commercials, industrials, sci-fi/horror, romantic comedies, period pieces, HBO specials, etc... and they look at the person as they appear on the screen and attempt to find a place for them in each of these genres. It is highly enjoyable to see how excited the students get when they realize *just* how to cast someone or they make a connection of “that’s who they remind me of!” Either way, this serves to make the other students part of this process and to keep them focused on increasing their own powers of observation for onscreen work.

Besides being a great deal of fun, the interviews are a tremendously telling way to begin a semester and one of the hardest aspects for the students to face. On one hand the camera doesn’t lie but on the other it can add 10-15 pounds in a heartbeat. Sometimes the actors considered “beautiful” in person lose that luster in a close-up and the average actor

is suddenly shown to have the longest eyelashes or the cutest dimples, the details we miss on stage but that the camera brings to life. The subtlest changes in the tilt of their heads, the raising of the eyebrows, the slightest tension in their jaws and mouth can completely change the emotion that they are expressing. None of this reads onstage and so for the first time they see the power of subtlety and they then have to figure out what to do with it. Barry and Lorry both allow them one post in which they can complain about the little imperfections or the bad hair day or the makeup or the weight but after that it is all about the subtle ways of showing the truth and how they reflect upon their work. And nothing tells us more about their expressions than the listening exercise.

The next two exercises are about reactions. Often times in film the editors need to cut to the listener because of a bad take or a flubbed line or simply because the information being told is less important than the way it is received. This is a skill that is crucial on film and stage and is usually one of the most obvious flaws in a weak actor in both mediums. Onstage it is the actor that might have a grasp of the character's mind but no sense of his body or even worse no sense of the character at all. And the nightmarish performance reaches its climax when the weak actor is forced to stand onstage and react to someone else's monologue all the time screaming in his head is a voice saying "what do I do with my hands?!?!". While there is a certain sadistic joy to witnessing an actor onstage battle with this age old question the pain of the obvious lack of training usually overwhelms it. On film it is even worse because there isn't a whole body to utilize when the camera is in for a close-up; there is only the face and the students must learn to control it.

The first of the two reaction exercises that they do is called “Finding the Letter”. The premise is that the character enters a setting looking for something when they stumble across a letter. For the character the letter may be new and played as if it were their first time seeing it or it could be an old letter that they’ve kept for one reason or other. The most important aspect of this exercise is that the material in the letter be real. The students are instructed to bring in a letter from their lives that caused them to feel a great deal of emotion, good or bad, and incorporate that letter into the scene. The purpose of this is to allow the actor to focus solely on honest reactions to something real rather than divide their thoughts between reacting and remaining in character to an imagined device. Once the letters have been discovered the students sit down and read the letter with a close-up camera shot of just their face. The first take is almost always a stage interpretation verging on “schmacting” but with some careful direction from the instructor the actor begins dropping the walls and barriers that have been erected and revealing an honest response to the text of the letter.

As always Barry and Lorri have sought ways of incorporating all the students into these early exercises. While the talent is reading his letter and reacting the remaining students are trying to interpret whom the letter is from and how the talent feels about it based solely on his responses. This teaches very quickly how specificity is crucial with film acting because any general or unspecific gesture or expression can confuse the audience and send mixed signals. After the first read through the students make their guesses and then the talent reads the letter again trying to find more effective ways of portraying his emotion so that the next round of guesses hits closer to the mark.

This exercise is also very informative for the teacher based on the material the student has chosen to use. From romantic relationships we've seen those very early "I like you" notes to the final hate-filled break-up letters. We've seen letters telling of the deaths of loved ones and letters from family members that just say "I love you." While it typically makes for better work when the material does have this sort of emotional connection there is always the chance of the student not being ready to deal with it and falling apart. This rarely happens but it is one of the dangers of any exercise like this where Method style techniques are employed. Both Barry and Lorri are on top of this and are explicit in their instructions to only choose material that *has* been dealt with so that the chances for a problem are very low.

Once the students have shown a proficiency in reacting to the written words they then move onto reacting to spoken words in the second of the reaction exercises that I call "Cancellation". This is the first two person scene but the dialogue is really just a monologue with the primary talent being framed up in a close-up and capturing his reactions. The premise for the scene is that the primary talent has shown up to meet someone and that person proceeds to tell him that they can't go through with their holiday plans. Because it is an open scene with no specified relationships it allows for an infinite number of possibilities in how the characters greet and treat one another. The students are allowed to select an initial back-story and once again the other students attempt to guess the scenario that has been chosen.

This exercise is always fascinating to observe after "Finding the Letter" because the only addition is another human being that is in essence reading a letter to the talent. What

makes this so interesting is seeing who fairs better and who fairs worse. Logically it seems that reacting to another person would be easier because we do it every day but how often do we sit down and read poignant letters while reacting in a manner that is natural and yet appealing/interesting to the camera? But I'll counter logic by asking when was the last time that you really stopped and thought about how you react when someone is speaking?

Lorri brought up some wonderful material in class at this time from when she used to teach speech/communication regarding the concept of active and passive listening.

When we are having a conversation with someone our minds are sometimes tuned into what they're saying and sometimes we're thinking about what to say next. Sometimes our brains are spinning to such an extent from what we've just heard that we actually miss a whole section of what was said. All of these things that happen subconsciously on a day-to-day basis are conscious choices that a good actor must be aware of. What makes this even more fun is that this is all inside the head and we haven't even talked about what the body is doing, especially the eyes.

Physically speaking we are constantly moving and reacting even if only in the smallest of ways. Posture, stance, set of the jaw, tilt of the head, placement of the eyebrows, clenched fists, etc... All of these things happen naturally when we listen to someone and as soon as think about them the tendency is to freeze up and few things look more unnatural on camera than an actor who has more in common with a statue in Central Park than a human being. All of the other body reactions aside the eyes play a major role in reactions with another person. At the Moliere workshop that I attended last year the point was raised that when a person thinks about a question they very rarely ever look into

the other person's eyes but instead glance away. Maintaining direct eye contact with someone is a very unusual behavior and tells a great deal when a character does this and yet that is often what people do when they are not actively listening but are instead pretending to listen for the sake of the camera.

The last portion of this exercise that I want to mention has to do with the idea of active listening, cold/blank memorization of text, and illusion of the first time. Stage actors are used to having a long rehearsal period where they can keep trying new ideas as they spring up but eventually they are looking to narrow down their choices so that by opening night (and hopefully a little bit before) the show is consistent, repeatable and a composite of all the different choices made over the weeks of rehearsal. In film there is rarely any rehearsal period before the day of shooting and certainly none with your actual costars. The director will tell you on the day of shooting what she wants the actor to do and the actor had better be able to deliver the goods. The next take the director may ask for something completely different and the actor must take that direction effectively. So what does this have to do with the listening exercises? Most actors that I've seen in these classes memorize the text with delivery of the lines and reactions mapped out in advance. This means that when they should be listening for the way the text is being delivered they are instead thinking if it's time to raise the left eyebrow or tap their fingers on the table. If an actor is actively listening then they will be cued into any changes in delivery from their partners and will be able to react to how the lines are being delivered in the moment thereby preserving that illusion of the first time that is so crucial in film and onstage. Nothing destroys a moment more than to see an actor react exactly the same way time after

time, night after night and remaining completely oblivious to the world of the story around them. In these exercises even though the primary talent has no lines to speak, the old adage that an action speaks a thousand words is proved true in that every gesture and motion or shift in facial expression speaks volumes to an observant audience and can be more moving and telling than any words could ever be. But as often as not, the actor has to become aware of that weakness before they can fix it and this exercise is usually where that discovery is first made.

The next technique that is taught is hitting-the-mark and Lorri and Barry both use the same scene that I call “Where Are My Keys?” This is another wonderful blank scene in which one person has lost the keys and frantically searches for them whilst all along they are in the possession of the other character. Relationships are again up for grabs and the students usually have a very fun time creating complicated back-stories to help make the scenes more interesting. The actors get to play both characters in this scene since the character that is hiding the keys is actually sitting on a sofa/chair for the majority of the scene while key-quest is going on.

It may sound strange at first to be doing blocking exercises with senior performance majors but this is another example of a huge difference in definitions between stage and camera. If you break down a standard proscenium stage with dimensions of 37’x30’ you end up with nine roughly equal playing areas broken up into up/center/down stage and stage left/center/right. Each of those playing areas would be approximately 12’x10’ which is actually larger than many of the dormitory rooms on this campus. So when an actor is told to play a scene from center stage or down stage center there is still a

huge but acceptable variance in where they can play. The only exceptions being when there are furniture pieces in the way or a particularly narrow focused light is being used for spotlight or special effect. Otherwise the stage actor has a little room to wander each night.

In film, I have seen an actor sit on the opposite buttock and take himself completely out of frame in a tight focus. If a shot has been locked in then it doesn't take a matter of feet and barely a matter of inches to completely ruin a shot and make a take worthless. These blocking exercises are as crucial and as fundamental to film acting as knowing the lines. The most challenging thing for the students to learn is how to use their peripheral vision to see the spike marks without actually glancing down in an obvious manner and once again ruining a take. What we try to teach is to look one mark ahead and place landmarks around it that can serve as guides rather than relying on the tape itself. One of the greatest things to notice in their feedback is that they think they can get away with quick glances at the floor when in fact those quick looks are far more obvious than using a moment of looking at the floor as a reaction or as a pause to gather thoughts. The camera captures every detail and the flash of motion caused by the whites of the eyes is so obvious that it really takes a lot of students by surprise.

Briefly I want to discuss the problem of peripheral awareness. I only bring this up because I have noticed it more and more lately. There is a feeling in society that we should isolate ourselves from one another and not be concerned with what is going on around us. This lesson is consciously or subconsciously making its way into the minds of our students. People develop a tunnel vision for when they're walking down the street or in a strange environment but it becomes such a habit that they don't stop. Walking across

campus every day I pass countless people who are completely oblivious to the world around them and don't notice what or who they are walking past. I would hope that in the theatre department where observation of the world and the human experience is the heart and soul of what we do that this problem wouldn't be so prevalent—but it is. It takes some of our students a great deal of time to get through this initial blocking exercise and many of them only get it in the end by repetition and are unable to replicate the accuracy of hitting-the-mark in the scenes that follow. This is something that is teachable and something that should be taught. The world we live in and share with billions of people and animals and experiences is a source of endless inspiration and education if we only can teach people to open their eyes.

Once they have learned the basic techniques for hitting-the-mark we move them onto the matter of business and introduce the concept of continuity. The ephemeral nature of theatre is the antithesis of continuity and is a very difficult concept for the students to come to terms with. In theatre it rarely matters which hand you use to pick up a cup or pull out a chair and if one night you forget to wear a hat or bring in a prop it goes in the stage manager's notes and is remembered the next night. But with camera work and the compression of an entire run of a show into a single day of shooting everything must be repeated exactly in each and every take so that the editing process does not require large amounts of time and alcohol.

The idea of business is any action that the character has that is not specifically scripted. This could be washing dishes, folding clothes, shuffling cards, getting dressed, etc... any activity that is done on stage or that involves a property item is business and

once the scene has been shot, that business is set. The scene that is used to teach business varies from semester to semester and in some cases it is simply incorporated into the first TV scene. This last semester Lorri introduced a scene involving a recovering alcoholic in the presence of someone wanting to drink a glass of wine. It is another open scene so the talent can select whatever back story they desire but the blocking is set for all of the acting pairs so that all they need to worry about is the business.

The first mistake that most of them want to make is over-complication. The natural instinct is that the more you do the more “real” it will work. And while adding in business does bring life to a scene, the more business that is added the more business that the actor has to then remember and be able to replicate. Once this initial instinct is brought under control we can begin focusing the business down to what really makes the scene work.

Since every student participates will film their version of this scene we have them in the room with us getting involved with the production. One person is on book giving lines through the rehearsals; another person is in charge of restoring the set between takes; a third is responsible for refilling the wine bottle when it gets too low; and the last person is on continuity. By the end of the semester everyone will have been the continuity person on at least one scene so that they will have a better understanding of why it is so crucial as an actor to always get things right. The continuity person has the grueling job of keeping track of any changes in the script that the director decides to keep, any improvised lines that may be added, which hand is used to pick up the glass, when the person takes a sip, when they touch their hair, etc... While I find this position fun and fascinating most students want to shoot themselves by the end. The minutiae can become very tedious but

when the alternative is having a movie plagued with little continuity errors...I'll take tedious.

The one additional exercise that Lorri sometimes uses involves monologues. More precisely it is the conversion of a theatrical monologue into a viable film piece. This one is also interesting because even in monologues that are usually performed in smaller venues there is still that sense of "larger-than-life" theatricality that will not work in film. This exercise was interesting because it really brings to life the difference between the two mediums and helps to illustrate the point by using a monologue that each student has a personal connection to in terms of theatre. I would have loved to watch auditions this semester and see if there were any changes from cattle call in the seniors' work. I can almost guarantee that there were changes for the better because film brings things back to a more real and grounded place that makes the work better all around.

After that we move straight into the first portion of scenes which are taken from the TV show *Sportsnight*. Every student gets to do at least one scene from that show so that they get the feel for what shooting a sitcom is like. The rapid pace of the dialogue and the removal of those ever popular stage pauses are the really challenges that they have to overcome. Fortunately, *Sportsnight* was a well-written show and really helps facilitate this transition into film/TV acting as well as assisting in the learning process. Most of the scenes were shot as a master shot as well as with individual close-ups. We would typically shoot two or three of these scenes each class which meant we were there until 5:00pm most days but we could leave with the feeling of accomplishment and the knowledge that if it had been a real shoot it would have been an 8-12 hour day as opposed to just four.

The students who were not talent for the day would get to fill in as extras, stand-ins, grips, acting coaches, and continuity while the on-deck scene partners and their acting coaches would rehearse in another room. The *Sportsnight* scripts are a great way to begin the heavy-duty scene work that fills up the remainder of the semester. Even though the scripts are a little old, they are relatively generic in setting and time so that they don't feel outdated.

The final part of the semester is a series of scripts from films and TV movies that allow the students to get a feel for a wide variety of shooting styles. *Chasing Amy* reinforces the idea of suppression of emotion and working crowd scenes. *Body Heat* sets up a sexy dialogue in a very close and intimate atmosphere while being surrounded by people. A series of scripts from Hallmark Channel movies and after-school specials shows that good acting can and sometimes must save bad writing. The list goes on and Barry and Lorri both have personal favorites that they like to use to illustrate various points and to reinforce the fundamentals of this craft.

There are two more exercises that I first saw Barry use when he guest lectured for Lorri one day in my first semester TAing Acting for the Camera. The first was a blocking exercise I affectionately call "The Sitcom Squish" in which we film a commercial for a new sitcom where the entire cast walks into a prearranged mass of bodies. It's a very tricky blocking exercise with marks that leave no room for error. It was also an absolute blast to shoot because the students loved the idea of playing these bizarre, stock sitcom characters, if only for 10 minutes.

The second exercise that Lorri adopted this past semester was called “The Soap Opera Look”. This is that horribly cliché and very recognizable three-point glance that they use in soap operas as they cut into commercial. It is a three-point non-verbal reaction usually given to some earth-shattering piece of news. It sounds easy but it is one of the most difficult exercises that I have witnessed in my three semesters. It is far too easy to go to cheesy and ham up the looks rather than simply living in the moment and being honest. Admittedly, soap operas have a rather bad reputation for their acting as it is so there wasn’t a great deal of incentive for good acting. But the students loved it and I think they might have gained a little more respect for that besmirched industry.

That is the class as it stands now and as you can tell from my excitement and the fact that I kept returning for more, I’m fairly pleased with the course and love the work I’ve been able to do there. But there are some problems with the class that I’ve noticed and a few changes that could be instituted to make it even more beneficial for the students. Many of these I have spoken to Lorri and Barry about and they share my concerns. Others are ones that I have come to on my own or through talking with the students or simply because I’m young and naïve and want to try new things. But the problem areas range from the spaces, the technology, the script material, and the time restriction, and I’ll go over my ideal solution to each of these problems as I see them.

Knowing that the theatre department is restricted to two buildings it is a matter of the lesser of two evils. In this case Shafer Street lacks a good, versatile classroom environment as well as enough good lights and electrical outlets. This leaves us in the basement of Singleton. Between the sounds of the pep band practicing and the pipes and

machines banging and gurgling it is next to impossible to get a consistent and bearable quality of recording in those rooms. We shot a great deal upstairs in the offices and that made a huge difference but some scenes need larger spaces or simply different interiors that the offices can't provide. There was one day in particular where we were shooting in the upstairs lobby and a guitar quintet was practicing next to us at very high volumes and the audio quality was poor at best. Space is an issue for all the theatre department not simply Acting for the Camera but that makes it all the more pressing because it is felt across the board.

Speaking of horrible sound quality moves us into the realm of technology. It is here that the class suffers most. With luck, this will be less of a problem next year because there will hopefully be a few grants coming in earmarked for the purchasing of new camera equipment but in the mean time I will address the here and the now. The camera the department purchased for this class was a nice if old and used camcorder with adjustable white balance and manual focus. Barry's camera was newer but was designed for home use and everything was automatic. We chose to shoot on VHS although it was never a recording medium for film because all the students had VCRs and they could go home and easily watch and review their footage from that day's shooting. For convenience VHS makes sense even at the sacrifice of quality. When the two cameras died and I brought in my Mini DV camera we tried for a few days recording straight into a VCR. While this was convenient for the students it was miserably inconvenient for the camera operator because of all the cables running off to the VCR. We finally switched to shooting strictly with my camera using the Mini DV tapes and the quality was astounding and

unbeatable for under \$10,000. The problem with Mini DV is that no one has a Mini DV player at home leaving me with the task of dubbing the tape down onto VHS for both partners for each scene. We normally shot between one and two hours of tape each class and two classes each week; this meant four to eight hours of additional time each week for me, the TA. Needless to say I got behind.

For this class to produce the quality of material of Mini DV but with the speed and convenience of VHS there needs to be a hefty expenditure of funds. The least expensive means would be to purchase one Mini DV camera similar to my own and a Mini DV / VHS dual tape deck. This would allow for dubbing down to be happening while another scene was being shot and would allow the students to leave the class with their tapes rather than waiting for the TA to finish them. The next possible solution would be to purchase two Mini DV cameras and a VCR. This would allow the use of dual camera shots and when the second camera wasn't needed it could be hooked up to a VCR and used to dub tapes during class. The final alternative would be to shoot with less expensive DVD camcorders but the quality is simply not the same as Mini DV.

On top of these costs there should also be money spent on a new tripod and tripod head to allow a greater versatility of shooting. Audio quality is often the biggest problem so the acquisition of one good quality shotgun microphone and two wireless body mics would allow maximum versatility as well as handle all shooting conditions. The body mics and shotgun mics would greatly enhance the feel of a real shoot and give the students experience using a technology that is very prevalent in TV and onstage.

The script material is a trickier matter and one that I feel is largely due to me being new and curious about everything. It also ties into the time restriction problem so I'll try to address them both together. As I've already stated *Sportsnight* is a very well written show and it doesn't feel dated even though it is going on 10 years old. This is one of the benefits of using sitcom scripts because there is often a good deal of thought put in by the writing team to produce less time sensitive material in the hopes that after a nice long run the show will continue on into syndication. However, film does tend to date itself because the writing styles and shooting styles keep changing and evolving. Some of the scripts seem a little outdated in the language and the students have a harder time connecting to them. I realize that in theatre they are sometimes reciting lines that are over 2,000 years old but film is a business about the "Now" and staying current is crucial to staying afloat in this multibillion dollar industry. With all the new movies and TV shows being produced every year and with the proliferation of websites offering whole scripts for movies and shows online it seems that there should be some more recent material represented in the class.

Having said this I want to progress on to the time restriction issue because it is directly relevant. This class is too important to only be one semester. There simply isn't enough time to teach all the different styles of film acting in a single semester with a class that meets only about 12 times. Lorri and Barry are both in support of this and I think it would make a fantastic addition to the program even if it was only offered as an upper level elective. The additional time would allow for the exploration of commercials, industrials, prime time dramas, romantic comedies, even soap operas. It would also give

the instructors time to read through new scripts and find new scenes that work as well as the old standards. There is a comfort zone that we as teachers find with certain material where it comes to be like an old friend and we can teach it or direct it in our sleep. I think the challenge of new material would be the incentive I needed to keep exploring and enhancing my own craft along the way, returning to that idea of shared learning with the student and the teacher.

I would also encourage the technicians to enroll. One of the design and tech majors enrolled in Barry's class this summer and learned a great deal about what it was like to be on the other side of the camera for a change. I know that I have learned an amazing amount about both sides of the camera and that knowledge will help inform whichever side of it I'm working on at any given time. Alternatively, a separate course offered in the technical side of camera work could be of amazing benefit to our more television and film oriented technicians. Allowing them time behind the camera and giving them the chance to learn to edit the shots together would give them additional skills that are highly sought after in the job market today.

Finally, we are a stone's throw away from the film department at VCU and yet we have no standing relationship with them. They have well over a \$100,000 in video and studio equipment. They have directors and cinematographers but they have no actors. If the second portion of the course were opened up to the film department just imagine the possibilities and the networking opportunities? Why run around Richmond looking for actors for a short film when you know people from the theatre department? Why rely on bad actors from the film department when you have the names of people from a film class?

It would also be the start of establishing some shared equipment and facilities so that the Theatre Department's students would gain the benefit of being inside a real studio. I feel like I keep coming full circle because this reminds me of the earlier discussion of our narrow sightedness and our tunnel vision. We are so focused on our own little world that we never look up to see the possibilities that lay just across the street (or alley).

Chapter 3

On Acting...

“And acting this in an obedient hope...”

During my final year at the University of Maryland – College Park I was enrolled in a Stage Management class. It was an interesting mix of students because it counted as an upper level elective for both technical and performance track students so we had a mix of second and third year technical majors and senior performance majors that had failed to get into the upper level acting classes. The teacher made a passing remark about Stanislavski and one of the fourth year performance students raised her hand and asked “Who?” I will never forget the look of utter disbelief that passed over my teacher’s face and the way his shoulders drooped a little as he shook his head and muttered. After we explained Stanislavski to her she attempted to defend herself by saying “well, we’ve not gotten to him in history yet.”

This moment has stuck with me for four years and I’ve revisited it again and again as I’ve thought about this thesis because it is the heart and soul of my argument for a more closely interconnected curriculum. I know from having taken the acting courses at MD that there wasn’t a lot of time spent on a specific style or method of acting or at least no names were ever used. Like most colleges today there was an amalgam of Meisner and Method with a smattering of Michael Chekhov from a few of the instructors but mostly it

was the particular blending that our professors, individually, practiced themselves. Was this student's faux pas her fault or the fault of the acting teachers that failed to share the names and history of the various techniques that they were practicing? Was it really anyone's fault? I wanted to blame someone because I was a lover of history and felt that being an actor and not knowing Stanislavski was comparable to being an American and not knowing George Washington. Much to my relief, and due at least in part to this incident, the next semester Maryland instituted the use of *The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods* by Richard Brestoff for all Acting I classes. While this plugged one leak I was still concerned with the question of how to better instruct our actors.

I realized that part of the problem was deciding when to go "technical" with the actors. When this thought hit me I was infuriated because it classified actors as fragile and simple minded people who, while expected to be able to perform, project, memorize lines and blocking, sing dance, etc... were considered unable to think on their own or handle complex conceptualizations. So this may have been overstating the case a bit but the issue remains the same. When is it appropriate to teach actors the theory and not just the technique?

I'll begin by playing devil's advocate for a moment and admitting that there are actors who perform brilliantly on stage but truly do not possess the mental capacity for higher reasoning. I am not being cruel, but stating simple fact. Perhaps it is this stereotype that has forced Theatre Departments to lower their academic expectations to allow success from the lowest common denominator, but raising their artistic expectations proportionally to create a balance or at least to soothe guilty consciences. That thought fills me with a

not-so-nameless dread known as “No-Child-Left-Behind” laws. While these policies are invading and disrupting public schools from K-12 grades it is alarming to think they are reaching a college environment. It is not that I want to see anyone fail but it is horribly discouraging to know that the same degree goes to the student who does nothing academically and the student who strives hard and excels.

There will always be a mix of students that have different needs academically. In an ideal world there would be funding for more teachers so that more classes could be offered that addressed students at the level of learning that they required or desired. For example, a history class could be tailored to focus primarily on the periods in history that are still actively addressed in modern performances while a traditional history survey course would still be offered to the more academically inclined. The problem with this solution is that while offering more options it does not challenge the student but rather allows an escapist alternative.

The problem that exists is that the bar is no longer being raised boldly in the classroom in challenge to the cries of “...too hard...” and “...too much work...” but is instead being lowered, politely, with a little apologetic nod of the head for expecting so much from mere students. Let’s pause a brief moment for an etymological exploration of the word student. Student is directly related to the Latin word *studium* which means “painstaking application”. Call me old-fashioned but I rather like the idea that studying requires a little bit of hard work and that we should hold the students to a higher standard.

As teachers we have all had the one or two students per class who are over-achievers, but even as I type “over-achievers” I see the flaw in our collective logic. Should

we really be calling students that do the work, read ahead, and are prepared “over-achievers”? Or should they simply be where we place the bar? In any case, those one or two are the exception and not the rule. The remaining students fall into a variety of subcategories that range from smart but lazy to less intelligent but hard working. The hard working students may never get the best grades but they learn and have the ethics to succeed. But the students that have the brains and don’t utilize them are the ones that need the bar raised. The student that does the bare minimum of work to achieve a passing grade needs to be forced into working harder because when they realize what they can achieve when we challenge them then there exists the possibility that they will begin to challenge themselves in the future.

At Maryland the acting faculty had lowered the bar too much but this is not an isolated occurrence; the same problem exists here at VCU if in a slightly different form. I have had the benefit of working with the last three senior classes of performance majors that VCU has produced. It has been fascinating to see how the changes in the acting curriculum reflect in the different classes. Unfortunately, in all three classes I was dealing with seniors suffering from the dread “senioritis” and this reflected poorly in their work on more than one occasion. However, I feel that I worked with them long enough to get a strong feeling for their work; both their ability and their work ethic, and am able to convey the experience with a great degree of confidence.

I only worked with six of the students of the class of 2005 in an acting environment while I was a teaching assistant for Cara Rawlings’s stage combat course. The actors were interested in the work but more interested in having fun with one another. The attitudes

were constant across the board and more than a little obnoxious. They seemed highly unprofessional and the actual acting ability was in short supply. Again, this was their final semester and they were already looking ahead to May and many of them were looking ahead to making the move toward Chicago or New York. This worried me immensely because it seemed that there was no standard of training for these students and that they were going out into the world with sub-par knowledge and ability. While it is not uncommon to have young actors that lack proper training and understanding of their craft, it was more than a little disconcerting to see that all six of these students were so ineffectual in their performances.

My next encounter with the senior class was the following fall when I was the teaching assistant for Lorri Lindberg's Acting for the Camera course. This class of 2006 was far improved over the class of 2005. Several of the actors had a strong sense of professionalism and the drive and determination needed to continue in this industry. The largest problem was an alarming propensity for recreational drug use. While I realize that this is not necessarily a part of the academic environment and that many of our faculty and graduate students would be labeled "Mr. Pot"...for calling the kettle black, I mean. It shocked me that no teachers were really addressing the health of the body in their classes. Janet covered vocal health beautifully, and when David or Aaron taught a movement class they would stress the need for stretching and warming up the body gradually and correctly before working out or performing. But the actual health of the body seemed to be neglected. We had two students in particular that were heart-breaking because their work was some of the best in the class when they weren't drugged or coming down from the

drugs—unfortunately this was almost never. Lorri won my heart for all time when she privately took one of these students aside and spoke to him about the problem and tried to help him find ways to deal with the situation. It took until the spring for the problem to really clear up but Lorri never gave up and continued to provide encouragement and support in helping this student to control their drug problem. That action placed her so far above and beyond the role of teacher and proved her dedication to her students and that she was more than just an instructor—she was a friend.

Again, I understand that in this industry there is a large quantity of drinking, smoking, and recreational drug use that abounds and if a student decides to pursue these avenues then that is their own choice. It is also difficult to speak up against this use when it is so prevalent both in the industry and within the members of the faculty. I would be a liar to say that I didn't enjoy going out for a beer with friends. I just finished performing in a five - person adaptation of *Twelfth Night* with Richmond Shakespeare and we performed 14 shows and went drinking after 10 of the 14 and after rehearsals as well. The difference is the knowledge of when it is okay to drink, smoke, etc... That is something that can be taught and shared with the students. Accepting that nine out of ten students will engage in some variety of recreational drug use, doesn't it seem important to let them know that we're not preaching but that we actually understand what they're doing but that there is a time and a place.

The reason I am harping on about this subject in the chapter that is supposed to be about acting is that over the last three semesters I have witnessed students coming into classes straight from The Village and a “liquid lunch”. I'm friends with most of them and

so they think it is funny and come and tell me what they drank and ask if I can smell it on them just to make sure that the teacher won't find out. I've also seen students show up high as a kite and sit through class doing little more than giggling and falling when they attempted to stand up. I've had freshmen show up high to a rehearsal because they had heard from upper classmen that most of the grads and teachers smoked or use to smoke and so it was "cool". I am a person that is slow to anger but these examples have me enraged. Not only is it a level of disrespect for the teacher/director it is a disrespect for the rest of the class, the work, the production, and themselves. I never saw this sort of behavior at College Park and maybe that is why it disturbs me so much. This is not normal behavior and whatever is causing the students to take this flippant attitude towards drug use or to at least believe that they are completely capable of performing at the same level while inebriated, stoned, etc... must be addressed. These are the students we're sending out into this industry as representative of our school and our instructional methods and I do NOT want anyone to associate me with that level of unprofessionalism, disrespect, and idiocy.

Again, I realize this is a personal choice and we have no actual control over this behavior but we can lead by example. When students hear their professors, some of whom they idolize, talking about their wild times experimenting with illicit substances and all the crazy misadventures being drunk and stoned and partying they do take those stories to heart. Yes, these are funny and honest and they do happen but we have a generation of students that have rarely ever had to think for themselves and certainly never been encouraged to think for themselves and to lay out these stories and examples for them is

irresponsible on our parts. What does a student think when they walk by The Village and see graduate students that they have as teachers in an hour for a movement class sitting at the bar at 9 or 10 in the morning drinking bloody maries and chain smoking: If the teacher can drink and do movement class then why can't I? In a theatre department there is a natural inclination to be more friend than teacher to the students because the relationships are far more personal than in most departments by the sheer nature of what we teach. But acting by its very nature requires a healthy body and a healthy mind for the best work to be achieved and somewhere along the lines I think this has been forgotten.

It might seem strange but this idea of body health is one of the areas I feel needs the most work in the acting training program at VCU. I think this is a far-reaching issue because it was a weakness at College Park as well and is reflective of this country's lack of exercise, failing health and growing slothfulness. I need to begin this paragraph with praise for Janet Rodgers because she has been holding an early morning workshop/class twice a week for anyone who wishes to participate where she takes the class through a full regiment of her oxy-rhythmic exercises. I was introduced to these two semesters ago during Janet's vocal extremes class and they are still an active part of my pre-show warm-up as well as my regular stretching and exercise routine. I must also extend a hand of thanks to Sully who has been doing weekly yoga classes for the theatre students giving them an inexpensive way to pursue yoga which is an amazing means of improving the body's health and a discipline they can continue throughout their lives wherever they might move.

What made me think about the physical education aspect of the program was my time spent as an advisor for the incoming freshmen. These weren't theatre students, for the most part, and they came from all over the country to attend VCU. I had access to their high school records and often had to skim through them to see what AP/IB/Dual Enrollment courses they had taken. One thing that I noticed was a lack of physical education courses over their four years. Some students had a semester of PE their freshmen year of high school and others didn't even have that. Some of the males had chosen to take an additional semester of it or had a tie-in credit through a sports team but the actual degree of physical education courses was minimal. When asked I discovered that most schools had eliminated these requirements due to the large number of parental complaints/excuses being made for out of shape or embarrassed children. This astounded me.

When my father attended high school in the 1950s they took a PE course every semester. When he attended college they were required to take swimming and three or more additional semesters of physical education classes. 40 years later we have no such requirements. Not only have the high schools eliminated them but the colleges have taken away all pretense at desiring physical health to promote mental acuity and all-around healthiness. I'm not saying that everyone should be forced through a regiment of PE classes at college (they should) but I am saying that since the college is not holding the students to any level of physical fitness that maybe the department should take on this burden a little more stringently.

By this point you may be thinking that I belong in a boot camp somewhere but let's be realistic. During the actor evaluations the students are told that they should change their hair color, have bad posture, need their teeth whitened and need to lose 10/15/40 lbs. It's all well and good for them to be told this but do we really ever tell them how to go about it? Go to the gym. Lift weights. Eat right. Three of the least useful phrases known to mankind. Have you been to a gym? Do you know how intimidating and simply bewildering some of those machines can be? "I put my foot here, and my hand here, and I move it about" It's like the hokie-pokie without the jollies. Let's take it even farther and say that they do try to figure out the machines. Do you have any idea how easy it is to hurt yourself in a gym (and we're not just talking pride)? Pulls, strains, hyperextension, overexertion, dehydration, etc... These happen daily at gyms because people try to do too much without knowing enough. Yes, they can spend \$30-\$50 per session to get a personal trainer but how many of our students can honestly afford that? If we tell them they need to exercise then it is our responsibility to show them how.

I propose a new class for freshmen year that would be required for all theatre majors. It would be a mental/physical health and wellness class. Dance majors are required to take an anatomy course so why aren't theatre majors? The technicians don't need it as much although it would aid the costume designers with their rendering, but actors need to know about their bodies and their muscles and how it all works together. Teachers end up spending chunks of time in various classes explaining the diaphragm and breathing and musculature when it could all be explained more clearly in this course. Along with anatomy they would also study basic nutrition so that when a freshmen reads in

their evaluation that they need to lose 15 lbs they won't panic and start eating nothing but saltines and diet soda and end up passing out in a movement class from malnutrition. They would also be taken to the gym and taught how to use the equipment. Even if the department had to pay a nominal fee to one of the personal trainers to do a walk-through the benefit would more than outweigh the pittance it would cost. Even if only a handful of students stepped up to the challenge and started going regularly at least they would all have been given equal opportunity and understanding so that the choice would be theirs. It is also a great opportunity for guest artists to meet with the students and share a variety of exercise routines. One day could be a Pilates instructor and one day could be yoga and one day could be tai-chi. You could even bring professional actors/dancers in to teach their personal warm-up routine that they use before a show. I know that some of this is addressed in freshmen acting classes already and that there is a portion designed to develop an individual exercise routine but I think it can go even farther. Barry utilizes stick balancing as a means of combining physical activity with line memorization, a practice that I think is brilliant. But throw in the entire facility of a gym and you have *Tempest* on a treadmill, and *Cleopatra* doing curls, and *Dracula* with the dumbbells! It's a whole new world of opportunity for students to expand on what they are already being taught. The Fusion of ideas and of body and mind.

Speaking of the mind, this class should also address mental acuity as well. I'm not talking about intelligence tests or brainteasers although I think they would be fascinating as a teaching tool. What I'm talking about is basic memorization skills. The brain is a muscle and memorizing is as close to mental crunches as I've ever found. We have

students who panic at the thought of having to memorize a monologue in a week, or doing a scene for the Camera class and only having the script for a few days. This is absurd but the reason is clear. They don't memorize enough. I've worked with so many students that claim they can't memorize lines well and I've heard every excuse from Attention Deficit Disorder to Dyslexia to Narcolepsy (I kid you not). I don't buy into any of them. You don't have to be a genius to memorize lines otherwise Hollywood would be a ghost town. What it takes is practice and repetition and being taught how the mind works. Short term vs. long term memorization. Cramming vs. Packeting. Physical engagement, etc... Most importantly they need to be memorizing a different piece of text 2-3 times a week. Ideally, if the class met twice a week then at the start of each session during the warm-ups they would recite what they'd memorized. Start easy with a verse from a song or a poem. Then move up to 8 lines from a sonnet. Then a full sonnet. Then move into long poem format. Then move into prose. Mix up the source material with classical text, modern text, lyrics, poetry, ANYTHING. The material doesn't matter it is the act of memorization. When I was asked to pick up the role of Dr. Faustus in January the show was two weeks behind on rehearsals and the director desperately needed the two actors off-book as quickly as possible. Graham Birce, who was playing Mephistopheles, and I had the scripts for 1 day before the first rehearsal. The first seven pages of the script were a giant monologue for Faustus and by the first night I was off the first 13 pages except for the latin. Graham and I memorized 35 pages of material in less than a week (a little longer on word-for-word precision). We both developed splitting headaches around the fourth day because our brains were physically exhausted. I hadn't had to memorize that heavily in years and

neither had Graham. Our brains were flabby. We were packing the gray matter equivalent of a beer belly. By the time Faustus finished we were sporting 6-packs on our frontal lobes. Because of my ability to memorize so quickly I was called to step in and pick up the roles of Malvolio and Sir Andrew in *Twelfth Night* with two days to prepare. I stepped into a high school performance on a Wednesday night, book-in-hand, having received it that morning. Thursday we were in the rehearsal space getting blocking. Friday was opening, again with book-in-hand for security and fuzziness in some of Malvolio's longwinded scenes. By Saturday night's performance I was completely memorized and carried the book around for a little extra sympathy just in case something should go wrong. I also picked up Orsino for last two weekends of the production. I would not have gotten that gig if I had not been able to memorize so quickly and be physically in shape enough to perform the outlandish acrobatics of Malvolio and the physical shifts required to differentiate between three separate characters. I'm not saying this to be arrogant but to give factual, real-world examples where these skills not only come in handy, but actually earn you gainful employment.

Gary Hopper requires his actors to be off-book for his productions on the first day of rehearsals and I applaud him for this. The actors sweat it profusely going in but just imagine if they entered every show with the confidence that they could memorize a sonnet in 10-15 minutes without breaking a sweat. Or to pick up a 5 page scene for Acting for the Camera and have it down in an evening. Basic memorization is also a skill that will aid them in every single class they take at this university in or out of the theatre department. I taught it to my VCU 101 freshmen and my VCU 102 students on academic probation.

They were better students for that knowledge and their grades reflected it. Let's share these secrets with our students as well.

There is a darker side to the mental/emotional health discussion that I feel I need to mention because it has been brought to my attention by multiple students and by teachers and I have noticed it myself with the class of 2007. There is an idea of the emotional journey that they take their junior year and it is a semester full of deep exploration of the student's past and their feelings and emotions. Having experienced something similar in my undergrad I was not surprised to hear that this procedure was being taught here at VCU. Disturbed, slightly, but not surprised. It is an inescapable truth that theatre has a tendency to attract individuals that have lived through greater pain or darker times than others. This is by no means meant as a blanket statement because any sweeping generalization like that is bound to have exceptions. However, it is true that actors tend to be more in touch with their emotions or at least that they have seemingly more emotions to cope with, whatever the causal reason. It is important that they come to terms with these emotions if they wish to be successful actors because so often they will be asked to undertake a role where strong feelings are required and they must be capable of eliciting these emotions or a believable approximation thereof.

For a moment I want to touch on a far larger argument that is capable of filling entire books, let alone a thesis, because I feel it is important to know where I stand on this issue and why. The argument: What is acting? And what makes a good actor? In particular, I would like to look at inside/out vs. outside/in. I was trained under the Method and primarily inside/out techniques that support it. I fought tooth and nail against these

techniques because it seemed so opposite of what I've always felt acting to be: Acting NOT Being.

When I went through "my journey" at College Park I found it a little uneventful. This is not to say that it was incorrectly or poorly done or to say that other students didn't fall on the ground kicking and screaming like babies and sobbing in front of the class. But please tell me how that has anything to do with acting? I had spent a fair bit of time in my life looking back at past decisions and events, good and bad, because I always believed that things should be dealt with as they occurred and when you allow things to build up then eventually they explode and therapy or serious medication is usually the result. I saw that happen to other people and I thought it might be a good idea to go through and do that early on while I was still young enough to not have more baggage than an overbooked 747. So to be taken on this trip again was rather like going through a haunted house for the fourth or fifth time...no real surprises and no life-altering breakthroughs. What was useful about this "fifth trip" was that, like in the haunted house, it allowed me the opportunity to look for the wires, trapped doors and all the other little tricks.

Maybe this sounds like I wasn't taking things seriously, or that I simply wasn't in touch with my feelings or that I wasn't "there" in the exercise. Maybe. But what I witnessed in my own experience and in seeing the rest of my class go as well was that for those people who had walls and barriers beaten down by a teacher who didn't know them at all and applied relatively the same blunt force to each individual...they certainly found some deeper emotions and a lot of past troubles and they would curl up in a fetal position and be wracked with tears. If they had then leapt up, wiped the tears from their eyes,

smiled, taken a bow, maybe even shared a conspiratorial wink, I would have applauded loudly. But when they continued to lay on the ground and shake and cry and have to be led out of the room to collect themselves...again I ask what this has to do with acting?

I lied before when I said that this didn't raise some emotions in me—it caused anger and rage. This woman who was at best a voice/movement teacher was trying to perform the same work as a therapist but instead of the delicate mental finesse that a therapist spends years and years learning to perfect, she was addressing the same issues with a sledge-hammer. Walls and barriers should be taken down but they need to be taken down when the time is right and with someone that knows what they are doing. The damage is less in the shattering of these walls than in the aftermath. These students break down and the teacher smiles a sage and self-satisfied smile knowing she's "helped" another student and she has NO IDEA what to do with them next and doesn't care to because her "job" is now over. These students then go off on summer breaks or Christmas breaks or out into the world with these raw, gaping wounds that they think they've dealt with and try to utilize these events to find character emotion. When an actor stands onstage and fights to hold back tears the audience holds their breath and feels their strength, when an actor loses themselves in their own emotions that have NOTHING to do with the character they are portraying the audience feels uncomfortable, embarrassed and betrayed because that is NOT the night of entertainment they paid to see.

While I have only witnessed one of these "journeys" at VCU I have heard enough to be worried. What disturbed me more was a request put forth to have an office for a psycho-therapist in the theatre building for these students. While I appreciate the apparent

consideration in having a therapist available for a student should they require those services, if we as teachers are driving our students to a point where they need therapy then we are doing something horribly, horribly wrong. We are not doctors and we take no Hippocratic Oath to do no harm but the very concept of Pedagogy seems to carry with it that responsibility even if the words are never uttered. Mental harm is as painful or more painful than physical and the scars take longer to heal. I have heard the students' complaints and I know their fears and worries both for themselves and for their grades, and I add my own in that I believe there are other means of achieving these results without subjecting the students to such an unsafe situation.

I am not saying that inside/out acting is wrong or always dangerous but it must be handled delicately. Even Stanislavski towards the end of his life shifted his System to more reflect the outside/in approach of Meyerhold and his peers. Unfortunately the Method had already made it to these shores and was firmly embedded in the acting culture of America and the rapid rise of film acting. Inside/out should be taught to students but not first. I feel that so many actors claim that Method and other inside/out techniques are all that work for them because it was what they were first exposed to. Once a style is learned it is hard to un-learn it and to embrace something new and so radically different. But if students were initially taught Michael Chekhov's techniques, some of the basic Meyerhold concepts, Alba emoting (which Janet so beautifully imparts to her juniors) and other methods of finding the physical state in which the emotion lives. It's different for every student and any technique requires adaptation to work for an individual which is why it is so important to give them the fundamentals and allow them the most time to

develop their own individual acting techniques during their remaining years at VCU. If inside/out is to remain as the primary tool for teaching acting and emotional recall is to be used then it needs to be done with the delicacy of Stanislavski's later works rather than the early and it needs to be taught with all the cautionary tales and warnings that will help students make choices that are safe. So often we tell students that in acting you have to make the most interesting and dangerous choice and that is true—the character needs those choices to be interesting. The actor should always be safe, physically and emotionally, or else the audience is lost. If a *character* is standing on the edge of the stage (cliff) threatening to leap into the rushing river (orchestra pit) then the audience waits with baited breath, when the *actor* is standing at the edge of a stage and losing their balance the audience can only worry that the *actor* will be okay. Physical...Emotional...the audience cares about the human being portraying a character. How can we preach physical and emotional and mental well being and health while inflicting the grievous harm we so desperately tell our students to avoid?

Acting – To play the part of, to behave *like* or *pose* as; impersonate; to perform

Play – To *amuse*, to *perform*, to *act* the part of

Perform – To act, play, sing, or do *tricks* in public

Let it be about playing and sharing and having an encounter with the audience and then a generous actor can receive as much as he gives. Nowhere does it say that you have to be the character you are impersonating. Play. Love. Share. And celebrate each encounter as the beautiful, wondrous event it is.

VITA

David White was born on August the 9th, 1980, in Salisbury, Maryland. He received his BA in Theatre Performance and Design from the University of Maryland College Park in 2003. He has worked professionally in DC as a Sound Designer and in Richmond as an Actor. His teaching and TA credits include Sound Design, Theatre History, Stage Combat, Public Speaking, Acting for the Camera, Period Styles, and a variety of other areas.