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Acting Mindfully

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

By

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## **Acknowledge and Dedication Page**

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Without the inspiration and knowledge of my theatre and yoga instructors I would have not been able to write this document. Therefore, I am very humble and grateful to Terry Murray, my high school theatre arts teacher, and Patricia Hawkrige, my undergraduate mentor, and friend for motivating my passion to continue learning many new things about this amazing art form.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Acting and Mindfulness at Virginia Commonwealth University.....	5
Chapter 2: Developing Presence.....	11
Chapter 3: Identifying Your Story.....	14
Chapter 4: Pay Attention to Tension: The Power of Breath Release.....	24
Chapter 5: Catherine Fitzmaurice and Structuring Breath.....	28
Chapter 6: Kristin Linklater and Breath.....	31
Chapter 7: Reaching Your Highest Creative Self.....	33
Chapter 8: Chekhov and Individual Creativity.....	39
Chapter 9: Unleashing Fear: Risk Taking.....	41
Chapter 10: Yoga Meditation for the Actor.....	44
Chapter 11: Conclusion: My Final Reflection.....	48
Bibliography.....	50
Appendices-A Syllabus.....	52
Appendices-B Lesson Plans.....	56
Appendices-C Journal Prompt Assignments.....	67
Appendices-D Midterm Performance Composition.....	69
Mindfulness Workshop	

## **Abstract**

### **ACTING MINDFULLY**

By Dawn Marie Souza

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

Dr. Keith Kirk: Head of Graduate Studies, Theater Arts

Acting Mindfully, is a form of embodiment pedagogy that investigates the ways in which actors can explore their craft through a lens that connects them closer to their mind, body, and voice. The document draws content from a wide variety of theatrical movement and vocal practitioners in combination with mindfulness techniques including: yoga, meditation, and energy work. Embodiment pedagogy allows the acting student to approach and perform scenes and monologues with truth and authenticity; while allowing them the ability to tell their own stories.

In order to explore this work, a course, *Acting and Mindfulness*, was introduced at Virginia Commonwealth University as an experimental way to begin to connect students to their artistic work in a mindful way. This document includes research, as well as a mindful acting curriculum, that make connections to embodiment pedagogy.

## Introduction

Perspectives and philosophies of performance have developed from the time of 535-475 BCE and continue to evolve to the present day. Performances are evident in all facets of life including the arts, daily activities, sporting events, and technology; and they continue to tell the stories of humanity that reshape and identify the human spirit. As actors we tell the stories of humanity on stage; and perhaps we repeat them over the course of a year, month, or few weekends; however, no one performance will be entirely the same. Much like a repeated ritualistic practice, graduation, wedding ceremony, or super bowl, these performances may result in the same manner but may be executed differently, based on a particular culture, religion, or person in charge of its preparation. The phenomena of our everyday life are fascinating because it is unpredictable and always up for interpretation. Although these performances can be repeated, they will never be the same. Richard Schechner, author of *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, refers to this as "restored behavior," "physical, verbal, or virtual actions that are not for the first time; that are prepared or rehearsed" (Schechner, 29). Ultimately, our interactions with humanity at artistic, sporting and other events are a series of stories that we as participants and observers take ownership of to uncover the phenomena of life. Collectively, stories are what communicate and define performance. In *Performance Studies, An Introduction*, Erving Goffman, defines a performance as, "...all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion; which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Schechner, 29). How we react to these performances transforms our perspectives on humanity and allows us to see life through a different lens; which then guides us in the development of our artistic perspective and definition of performance.

Performance cannot exist without the participants involved in the performance, as well as the participants observing the performance. Consequently, both parties are needed “to perform,” and the act of performing involves, "Being," "Doing," "Showing doing," and "Explaining ‘showing doing.” Schechner states, “‘Being” is the existence in itself. "Doing," is the activity of all that exists, from quarks to super galactic strings. "Showing doing," is performing; pointing to, underlining, and displaying doing. "Explaining, ‘showing doing'" is performance studies" (Schechner, 28). For this document, these concepts will be explored in relationship to the body, mind, and voice of the actor because it is through the truthful engagement of these instruments that we can produce meaningful beings on stage and tell authentic stories. Our bodies in space create meaningful relationships with ourselves, characters, audiences, and daily interactions with other humans. "Being" includes what we see in front of us on a daily basis but does not have to be entirely active. In the universe, our bodies may be static, but it is life in stillness that often becomes a source of meaning and communication to an actor or audience. In addition to the static nature of being, we can also draw conclusions based on our movement through different kinespheres of space including left, right, up, down, diagonal, angular, etc. The concept of “Doing,” and “Showing doing,” engages us with the idea that our actions are ever changing and will never be the same on a daily basis and are constantly in flux. Heraclitus of Ephesus, Greek philosopher, credited with the creation of the doctrine of “flux,” the theory of impermanence and change. ‘You can’t step into the same river twice because the flow of the river insures that new water continually replaces the old (Schechner, 28). In addition to “Being,” “Doing,” and “Showing doing,” explaining, “showing doing," keep the performers and observers committed to the process of communicating what is happening in the body in a

variety of states of performance. Explaining encourages, artists, educators, directors, etc. to commit to a consistent dialogue to keep the human spirit alive.

Overall, the power of performance cannot be achieved without the physical body being mentally, vocally, and physically engaged with itself and the world around its existence. A pedagogical practice more comparable to this type of theatre education is referred to as embodiment pedagogy. The content in this document uses acting and mindfulness as a tool in exploring embodiment pedagogy, by drawing from a variety of mind, body, and vocal professionals to gain a better understanding of how the body can serve the actor in “Being,” “Doing,” “Showing doing,” and explaining, “Showing doing.” However; it is only through a strong cultivated awareness of the mind and body connection that the performing artist can develop and create meaningful work through storytelling. Mia Perry and Carmen Medina, authors of *Embody and Performance in of Pedagogy Research* state, “Performance in Pedagogy, as we take it up with this study, allows for experiences of learning that can include what Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) describes as the inaccessible through-cognition-or awareness or events of the mind/brain and body” (62). The process of awareness also coincides with our ability to experience; and how our experiences nurture or debilitate the bodies’ ability to effectively communicate to its full potential. Medina and Perry also suggest that “We are all bodies, six point six billion of us, engages in varying degrees in our journeys of learning and living” (63). When we immerse ourselves in experiences, we will inevitably physically, and vocally react to those experiences in either a positive or negative way. Our reactions translate into our bodies and often become habitual tendencies that become hard to break. It is also encouraged that this type of pedagogy serves as a process in the exploratory work of the performing artist. Medina and Perry suggest, “We are interested in considering experience, and



the learning experience in particular as a process of emergence (movement) brings to the forefront or attention to the body” (64). This is not a practice that can be mastered overnight; rather it needs to be continuously engaged at all stages of human development.

## Chapter One

### Acting and Mindfulness at Virginia Commonwealth University

*Acting and Mindfulness* is an exploratory course designed from my observations and experiences as an artist, high school theatre instructor, and adjunct theatre faculty member. After countless courses, productions, and observations of student work; I concluded that creative processes and their performance outcomes are heavily influenced by our everyday lives. Developing a sense of truthfulness on stage involves nurturing and becoming more mindful about what is occurring in our physical bodies, how that is expressed in our voices, and how we are communicating in the world in which we live. Without the ability to approach life mindfully the actor presents a character who is unable to live in a moment of time, lacking authenticity. How can we, as educators and directors expect students to access human life on stage when they do not have a connection to their selves nor the tools necessary to understand themselves? So often we critique student actors by telling them to stop "performing" their roles or to not overthink their character choices. The course *Acting and Mindfulness* reconnects the actor to their instrument and how their instrument responds to the world around them. In addition to reconnecting, *Acting and Mindfulness* revitalize the artist's intuition and imagination so that they can perform their roles with truth and honesty. According to Azriel ReShel, author of *How Yoga Unlocks Creativity* state, "The practice of mindfulness long shared by spiritual teachers, especially Buddhist experts, is increasingly becoming more mainstream and has been shown to greatly reduce stress, increase well-being and happiness and promote innovative thinking or thought processes that generate and explore creative ideas" (3). Mindfulness training allows the actor the freedom to release and liberates their creative abilities. Through my practice and

research of mindfulness, I have discovered that mindfulness involves tapping into what we already know about ourselves, but what we have been hiding from ourselves because of life circumstances. From an acting perspective, mindfulness is about discovering how life circumstances have manifested into our body and voice and then using the proper tools to release and rediscover the true potential of the actor.

As actors, we defy the laws of nature in hopes to reach the approval of others. We are fearful of showing emotion because we do not want to appear too weak or vulnerable. Stanislavski states, "If you know where true art begins, you won't go astray. You will be able to understand your mistakes, and so be able to correct them" (22). "True art," begins at the root of who we are, embracing our quirks, personality traits, faults, etc. Two of the most inspiring pieces of literature, unrelated to acting theory, which initiated my work in developing this course include, Brene Brown's, *The Gift of Imperfection*, and *Rising Strong*. Although, they are not theoretical acting texts the content in each resource is comparable to what we as theatre educators and directors, expect of our acting students. As theatre educators we want our students to approach their work fearlessly, take risks, and expand their imaginations, but what happens when they do not know the steps to take to achieve that sense of freedom we expect from them. Based on Brene Brown's research and a variety of other resources; I developed five mindful tips that I believe to be the most important concepts for an actor to explore throughout their actor training. These concepts will then be nurtured through the mindfulness practices of yoga, meditation, and energy work, in conjunction with a variety of acting techniques; including the work of Catherine Fitzmaurice, Kristin Linklater, Michael Chekhov, and others. There are many other ways to connect mindfulness work to other acting techniques. However, this document explores ways in which I incorporated them into my curriculum. The course curriculum for

*Acting and Mindfulness* will be included in the second half of the document, and a truncated version of the course will also be applied to the workshop, *The Whole-Hearted Actor: Approaching Acting as a Human Being* taught at the Southeastern Theatre Conference in March 2018 in Mobile, Alabama. The mindful acting tips include 1. Developing Presence and Awareness 2. Identifying your Story 3. Pay Attention to Tension: The Power of Breath Release, 4. Reaching Your Highest Creative Self: Energy Clearing. 5. Unleashing Fear: Risk Taking. For this document I have narrowed down mindfulness actor training by using these five tips or concepts; however, the ability to expand this list is possible based on the contribution of your students. The curriculum is designed to be transitory with every new group of students that the instructor comes into contact. The responsibility of the instructor is to get to know every student and not be attached to the order in which the curriculum should be followed. The element of impermanence in the curriculum gives the instructor the freedom to adjust the curriculum based on the needs of the student population. However, this does not suggest that the instructor feel responsible for addressing all of the needs of each student, that is impossible. The class is designed for the student actors to explore and discover facets of themselves using mindfulness strategies. After careful assessment of the students as a whole, the instructor can then determine which way they would like the class to flow. The first few days of class may involve the instructor to getting to know the students with an exercise called, Tell Me About the Time You... (*The Complete Voice and Speech Workout*, 7). Students are asked to sit face to face with a partner. The instructor assigns one student as letter A and the other B. Letter A will then tell their partner about an extraordinary experience that happened in their life. After they have told the story they are to tell it again, but this time as if they are reliving it moment by moment. As they are telling the story energy and intensity must build in their storytelling. Although Letter A

begins sitting they are also encouraged to let the energy and intensity of their story pull them out of their chair, and they are also encouraged to become physically engaged in the story. This exercise is a suggestion but does not need to be a part of the curriculum per say; however, it is also great way to see where each individual's student's strengths and weakness lie as a performer. As an instructor you also see who is more vulnerable in sharing their story. The instructor then repeats the exercise with Letter B. When the instructor feels as if they have a solid grasp on the various personalities in the class they can then apply the concepts in combination with the vocal and movement techniques.

Stanislavski states, "There is only one way, as I have already told you: ceaselessly to fulfill the basic goal of our art, and that consists of the life of the human spirit of a role in a play and in giving that life physical embodiment in an aesthetic, theatrical form. The idea of a genuine artist is contained in these words" (38). The work of the actor initiates with developing an understanding of our genuine selves and then becoming mindful of how we experience life and interact with the people in our lives. Both positive and negative experiences are broken up into little moments of discovery. Often times we dismiss those moments; we want to avoid them because of a trauma, we are immersed in technology, are tied down to the many responsibilities of our day, or are fearful about how we will be perceived. Consequently, our ability to be present in our experiences is nonexistent. Our lives are under a microscope for everyone to see and judge. Mindfulness training allows us to stop and smell the roses and see life for what is directly in front of us in a moment of time without the judgment of ourselves or others. Sam Haft refers to mindfulness, "It is a game changer. It is the awakening of consciousness, and it is a giant leap toward enlightenment (1)." Mindfulness training for actors enriches our discoveries

by allowing ourselves to stop and recognize what it is we truly feel internally and see externally without judgment.

The ultimate goal of mindfulness actor training is to foster the natural abilities of the actor authentically and in an environment where they feel safe and vulnerable to uncover the abilities that already exist within themselves. Within our discoveries, we uncover other parts of our personalities that we can then translate to the characters that we create on stage. Knowing ourselves on stage includes knowing our habits that psychologically show up in our bodies. For instance, if someone slams a door in your home can you identify how you would react physically, vocally, or mentally? Perhaps, the sound of the door makes you scream, triggers a memory of your past, and makes you cower in fear. We are no longer relying on our natural born instincts to create characters. Instead we "perform" our roles, based on what we think others would do in those circumstances. Lenard Petit states, "We live in an age where all of our responses to life are monitored, our thoughts and feelings are continually questioned and weighed into the scale of social acceptance" (9). We push ourselves, vocally, physically, and make less than truthful character choices; instead of allowing our personal experiences to translate into the characters.

The content of my thesis does not suggest that mindfulness actor training can happen overnight; in fact, it is a lifelong process that changes over time and continues to transform within the realm of an actor's career. Although there are many facets of psychology that make up the actor, the content of my thesis document, as well as the designed course, examines the mindful approach in which an actor can approach a role. It is important to note that each part of the mindfulness training relies on the development of its other components and one component cannot exist without the others. In addition to creating meaningful and truthful characters'

mindfulness actor training prepares us for other obstacles that we may face in the industry. Developing our effective mindfulness strategies can benefit our growth as artists by nurturing who we are so that we can immerse ourselves in vulnerable situations like an audition, long rehearsal hours, truthful development of characters, and strong relationships with ensemble members. The majority of the content of this thesis uses yoga, meditation, and energy awareness as mindfulness practices for artists. However, there are a variety of other ways to practice mindfulness on a daily basis.

## Chapter Two

### Developing Presence

Although voice and movement teachers like, Catherine Fitzmaurice, Kristin Linklater, Michael Chekhov, Anne Bogart, etc. all have developed their methods of teaching actors; ultimately, they want to reach the same goal. Their mindful methodology nurtures the actor by first developing the actor's keen sense of presence. Presence is when an actor is in the moment free of any physical tension in the body. Judi Dench defines presence, "Just standing there in that moment and not being in front of it or behind it. It's acting in the moment; it's that idea of not being able to take your eyes off something" (Rea, 142). Presence can never be mastered, but there are ways in which the actor can strengthen their abilities to become more present in our day to day lives as well as our artistic lives. The idea of presence will be repeated throughout the other chapters in this document, as this is just another concept of actor training that becomes "present," in breath control, tension release, unleashing of fear, and development of creativity; however, understanding the physics of presence and where it exists are some of the many facets important to the actor's training. The ability to be present in your work as an actor requires you to be emotionally available and open to all of your surroundings. Ken Rea states, "It requires you to be completely open, available and able to listen to those around you: inward energy. At the same time presence is an energy that travels through your body, and outwards, connecting to those you are speaking to" (143).

*The Acting and Mindfulness* course indirectly nurtures the inward and outward facets of presence so we can react on impulse on stage. Internal awareness stems from what is going on inside of your response to a stimulus from the outside world. It is impossible to be present to



every sight, sound, smell, color, and shape; but to expose yourself to a variety of experiences and reflect on how they show up in your body and emit from your voice is a valuable tool to have as an actor. “Stimulus, effect, response, and expression-this is the natural order. The greater the number of things that you are aware of and available to, the richer your talent” (Morris and Hotchkiss, 48). Vocal and physical presence initiates with the keen awareness of the spine and recognizes that when the spine is out of alignment our ability for potential vocal and physical expression is inhibited. Many of the vocal and physical exercises in *Acting and Mindfulness* draw attention to the exploration of the spine with physical exercises, but also with exercises that further the attention of the mind's eye. For instance, Catherine Fitzmaurice's, grounding exercise instructs students to lie on their stomachs connecting to the earth and give over to gravity. While lying on their stomachs students lift one knee up, so it is close to their armpit. Students then notice the parts of the body that directly connect to the earth; this could include the hips, knees, cheeks, shoulders; etc. Students are then encouraged to trace their spine with their mind's eye from the thoracic spine, traveling down to the lumbar spine. As the students are moving through the spine, they are also noticing where their breath is flowing, and what the tempo and quality of the breath communicate about their state of being. The simple grounding exercise allows the students to begin to understand where the tension lives in the body, but also allows for relaxation. When the body has relaxed the ability to receive emotional impulses becomes easier, but also develops a stronger sense of awareness

The grounding exercise in combination with Kristin Linklater's Workday One exercise, in *Freeing the Natural Voice* (33-41), continues to strengthen the actor's awareness of the spine in relationship to the skeleton. “When the spine is out of alignment, its ability to support the body is diminished, and muscles intended for other uses must provide that support” (Linklater,

32). The actor begins the exercise standing with their eyes closed and scans the body with the mind's eye from the bones of their feet, up to the top of the skull. Scansion of the body from the bones of the feet up creates an image of a trunk of a tree in the mind's eye, with the limbs hanging off. The trunk acts as our spine while the limbs are our other body parts. In addition to the scanning of the body the Workday One exercise allows the student to isolate certain body parts, but then notice how the isolation of one body parts may exude tension on another. The isolation also helps guide the actor in identifying where the breath is trapped. The actors are challenged to release both the tension and breath of each isolation. Again, this exercise provides students the ability to respond to impulses with ease and awareness on stage.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Identifying Your Story**

Over the course of my studies as a theatre practitioner, I have been taught that in addition to being an actor I am a storyteller; and the terms actor and storyteller are interchangeable. As an individual, we have multiple stories to tell, and as we begin to analyze a character; perhaps a particular story resonates more with the character that you are playing. Character stories are similar to our own stories in the fact that they include our struggles and our triumphs. At times our stories are difficult to tell and require self-reflection; however, as Brene Brown states, “Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing we’ll ever do” (40). Perhaps the stories we tell do not have a happy ending, however denying the story inhibits our creativity and our ability to fully live in the moment. Withholding your personal story does a disservice to your audience because you are robbing them of the ability to be educated, enlightened, challenged, and entertained.

The first part of the actor and mindfulness training involves uncovering our own stories and how that transfers into the evolution of a character. Identifying your story becomes the catalyst in mindfulness work because it is here he or she can recognize and become more aware and present of their emotional experiences and how the experiences influence the effect on the physical body. The actor can then diagnose where the breath lies and how that creates physical and vocal tension in the body. Owning and developing a relationship with our stories also enriches our work as actors; by allowing us to identify the commonalities that exist between ourselves and the characters we are playing. The process of owning our stories also initiates curiosity, so we can recognize what instills fear within ourselves; and how the unleashing of fear

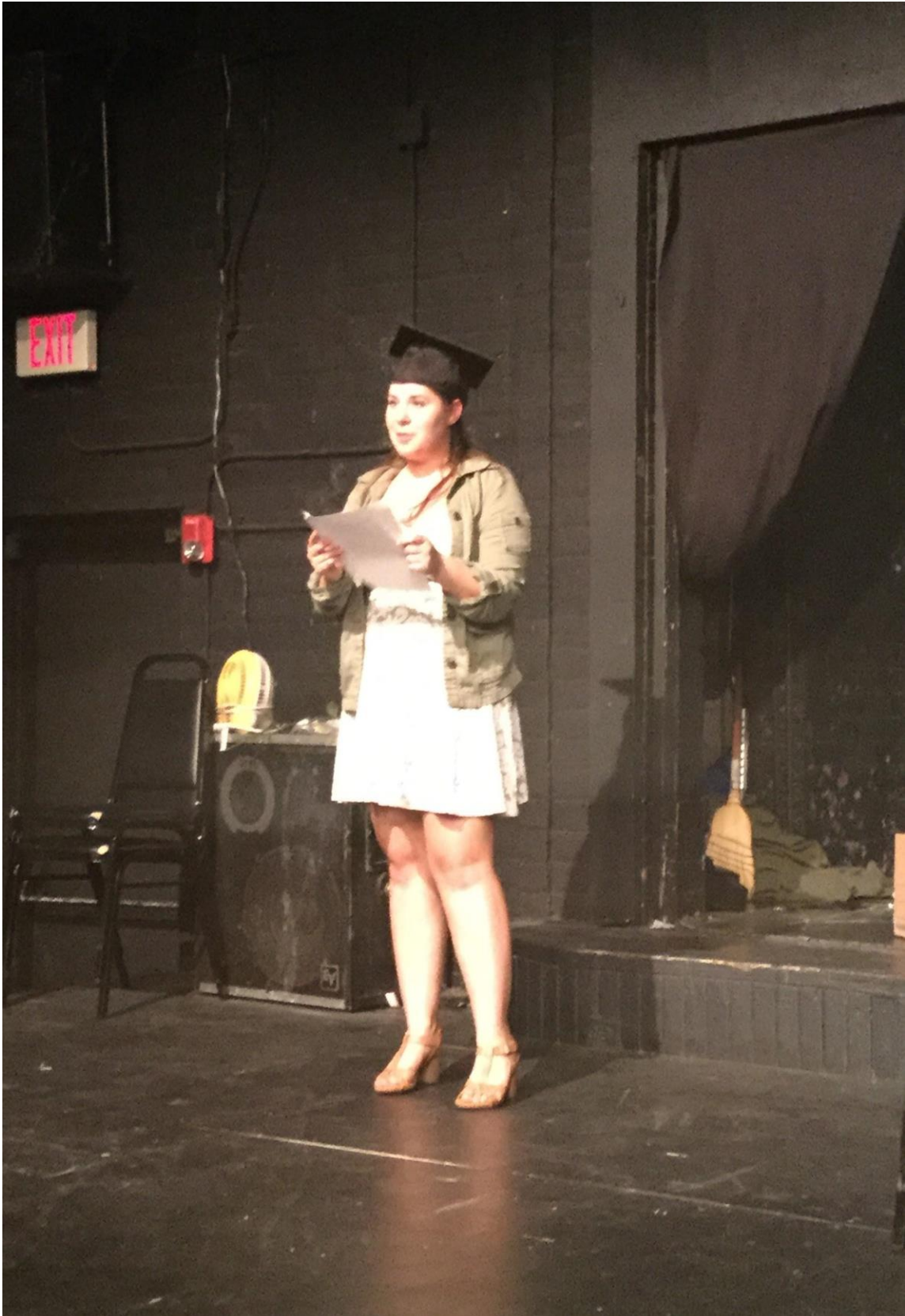
creates a sense of freedom to create. Brene Brown refers to this initial work as the "Reckoning," "First they recognize that they are feeling something-a button has been pushed they are hooked, something is triggered, their emotions are off kilter. Second, they get curious about what's happening and how what they are feeling is connected to their thoughts and behaviors. Engaging in this process is how we walk into our story" (40). Before the actor moves forward with the remaining mindfulness instruction, he or she should be able to articulate one personal story that they can perhaps apply to character work.

Each class in *Acting and Mindfulness* begins with a discussion on the journal prompt responses from the reading *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown. The journal response topics stem from questions relating to vulnerability and authenticity from personal experience, as well as artistic experience. The process of articulating your own story does not happen in one class period, and for some students owning their story may not happen until they leave the class for the semester; however, the journal prompt discussions simply initiate the process of cultivating a possible story. Students in the course are also reminded that their stories will evolve as they continue to experience life and mature into adulthood. In fact, the students are encouraged to go back to their prompt responses in a few years to see if their responses to the prompts would change.

In addition to the journal prompts, students are also encouraged to create their artist bio. Unlike a bio that you see in a play bill that expresses an actor's stage accomplishments; the actor's bio reflects the kind of actor in which they perceive themselves, as well as how others view them as artists. The exercise was taken from *Roadblocks in Acting*, and requires students to first answer the following questions: Why am I an actor? What type of actor are you? What kind of actor do you want to be? What are the patterns in your work? What kind of reputation do you

have as an actor? The students then create a bio that articulates the meaning of the work that they create.

After a few weeks of reflection, the students then begin to express a personal story and can articulate their story in one to two sentences. The students will begin to create a five-minute solo composition piece by choosing a monologue that resonates with their personal story. The monologue is required to be a new addition to their repertoire and allows the actor to explore new ways in which to approach the text. Students will rehearse the monologue by using Michael Chekhov's, *The Imaginary Body*. A further explanation of the exercise will be explained on pages 32 and 33 of the document. According to Lenard Petit, Chekhov believed, "One way of becoming a character is to change your body to the character's body" (164). After the students explore the physical body of the character they are required to include one to two other mediums that connect to their monologue. They can choose from a variety of theatrical mediums including mime, music, poetry, instruments, dance, monologue, scene, etc. The composition must also include clear transitions from one moment to the next in the form of, music, dance, poetry lines, etc., a clear beginning, and an end to the piece, a choice about where you want your audience to live while you are performing, one set piece, and one prop. The images on the next few pages of the document are evidence of final solo composition pieces in the *Acting and Mindfulness* course at Virginia Commonwealth University. Each composition was created after careful reflection of the actor's story and where they are in their journey as an artist.





















## **Chapter Four**

### **Pay Attention to Tension: The Power of Breath Release**

The forefather of acting and lifelong learner, Konstantin Stanislavski, furthered his fundamental skills while working with Aleksandr Fedotov; and it was during this time he began to understand that he was no longer in control over his body; rather his body was controlling him. Stanislavski became tense and found himself developing habits in his movements, eventually inhibiting truthful performances. He states, “Obviously, first of all, you must gain control over yourself; i.e., put an end to anarchy, release the body from your tyranny of your emotions and hand it over to feeling” (100). Stanislavski discovered that when an actor does not have a controlled body, the tendency is to play-act the role. The same idea of releasing muscular tension is inherent in mindfulness practices discussed throughout the content of my thesis, of course, initiated by the breath. Practicing mindfulness techniques requires the artist to explore how tension can reveal itself through the physical body. Eric Morris and Joan Hotchkis reveal, “It is the manifestation of unexpressed emotions, bottled up impulses, all of your responses to the world. Tension is the result of the interruption in the natural process of stimulus -effect-response-expression” (33). Anxiety about working with a director, fear that you are not good enough for a role, and fear of failure, are just the many ways in which tension can rear its ugly head in our performances. Although tension can manifest physically, it can also make an impact on an actor emotionally, preventing the artist from taking risks on the stage or stifling creativity. Physical tension can settle in the back, jaw, shoulders, hips, chest, and hands; while emotional and mental tension leaves us overthinking a role, forgetting lines, and feeling exhausted after long rehearsal hours.



Kristin Linklater states, “The second assumption is that the tensions acquired through living in this world, as well as defenses, inhibitions, and negative reactions to environmental influences, often diminish the efficiency of the natural voice to the point of distorted communication” (Linklater, 7). Both physical, and emotional body, tension can result in poor vocal quality; however, if your voice is tense the possibility of the tension residing in other parts of your body is likely. The challenge that the actor faces becomes more about how to marry both the voice and body safely so the actor can express safely and creatively. Morris and Hotchkis state, “Physical and mental tension usually occur together, both states crippling the actor, making him/her helpless on stage, incapable of being affected or responding to function on an organic level” (3). In a race between the authentic self on stage and tension, tension usually wins because the artist does not know how to alleviate the tension. The worst-case scenario is that the actor suppresses the tension and continues to work, not understanding their true authentic potential. Another potential result is that the actor is too aware of the tension in their body and does not understand their relationship to tension and how it affects playing a role. Paying attention to the tension and acting on the tension through yoga, meditation, and energy alignment are some of the ways to begin the lifelong journey of relieving tension and are explored in *Acting and Mindfulness*.

The ability to release tension involves the initial activation of the breath; however, because it is such an unconscious action, it is very easy to take its power for granted. We have been engaged in the breath from the moment we entered the world, and if we were healthy babies we took each breath freely and without pain, but at some point, in our life, the cycle and flow of our breath changed. Kristin Linklater refers to this moment as a “Pang,” “The Pang signals the need for sustenance, without which life will not continue.” “The Pang in the middle of the belly

has a built-in neural with the baby's breathing mechanism, and the breath that has been experienced as life-giving now becomes the instrument of survival" (20). As babies our ability to cry is our way of communicating that we need to have our diapers changed, be fed, held; etc., but as we continue to grow into adults our breath becomes jarred with every emotional experience; however, survival is communicated differently. Our breath influences our communication of grief, anger, fatigue, fear, and acts as an indicator of our state of being.

Another way to communicate the power of breath is to engage in the concept that our natural response to life is based on a "fight or flight" response. Kendra Cherry states, "The fight-or-flight response, also known as the acute stress response, refers to a physiological reaction that occurs in the presence of something that is terrifying, either mentally or physically. The response is triggered by the release of hormones that prepare your body to either stay and deal with a threat or to run away to safety" (1). One way in which fight or flight responses manifest are through our breathing patterns. The psychological stress leaves the breath catching up with the human rather than the breath moving in unison with the human. When the loss of the natural breath flow becomes apparent often people experience anxiety, exhaustion, illness, and even pain. The breath gets "stuck" in certain areas of our physical body and transforms into unwanted tension. Jaw, neck, and shoulder tension are common places where the breath gets trapped in the body, but tension can live anywhere, including the stomach, legs, knees, and hands. The breath is central to our ability as humans for obvious reasons, but it also relieves us of unwanted tension in the body. Mindful breathing also allows us to recognize the pace in which we are living life on a daily basis. "As you are challenged, as we all are today, with increasing levels of psychological, physical, and biological stress, the internal metronome that determines the quality and state of your breathing and health may be set at faster and faster speeds."

(Farhi, 70). After of years of trying to catch our breath in our daily lives; you can only imagine how this becomes detrimental to the actor's full body, vocal, and creative potential.



## Chapter Five

### Catherine Fitzmaurice and Structured Breath

In addition to the breath being a prime indication of how you feel it also defines how a character feels throughout a scene or a monologue. The quality of the breath influences the quality of sound production. In *Breathing Is Meaning*, Catherine Fitzmaurice states, "...it is the energy impulse that excites the vibration in the vocal folds and the resulting resonance in the body-starting, continuing, and stopping it" (1). Breathing is the impetus to creating sounds; which convey ideas and allow humans to communicate. Sounds simple, breathing is easy, right? Unfortunately, the process of reconnecting to our natural breath requires awareness and a willingness to inquire about what brought the breath to where it is in the first place. Donna Fhari states, "Discovering the naturalness of our breath has to do with uncovering or removing the obstacles that we have constructed to the breath, both consciously, and unconsciously" (102). Catherine Fitzmaurice refers to this work as deconstructing, "The deconstructing work consists of deep exploration into the autonomic nervous system functions: the spontaneous, organic impulses; which every actor aspires to incorporate during the acting process" (7). The process of deconstructing the breath is done with a series of yoga postures that induce a tremor response from the body. The body's natural tendency is to tremble in a flight or fight response circumstance. For instance, trembling with fear, shivering because we are cold, shaking with excitement, are all examples of our bodies response to emotions. Once the actor experiences the tremor, a natural release flows through the body. Catherine Fitzmaurice states, "At the same time a great deal of unaccustomed energy, waves of tremor, and ultimately, relaxation, flow throughout the body, sensitizing it to vibration, and increasing feeling and awareness" (7). The students in *The Acting*

*and Mindfulness* class are introduced to a series of yoga postures. In each posture, there is an opportunity to experience a tremor. The tremor does not have to be drastic; rather it can be very subtle. The point of leading the students into the tremors is not to necessarily experience the tremor but to create openness in the body so the student can produce a sound that is richer with a pleasant quality attached. As an actor, this becomes important when approaching texts authentically. The next step after breath release in the tremor is to add sound in combination with the breath. Catherine Fitzmaurice states, “The introduction of sound into these positions allows the ensuing physical freedom to be reflected in the voice too, not just the body, because this freedom also naturally effects resonance and laryngeal use, so that pitch range and inflectional melody are improved, as are tone, timing, and rhythm, and even listening and inter-relating” (2).

Once the breath and body have been destructured the process of restructuring can begin in relationship to sound and even text, however, the two cannot exist without each other. Restructuring the breath becomes more of a technical process; while destructuring creates more freedom and release within the breath and body. The process of restructuring the breath begins with a breath that expands the rib cage; if the breath and body have not experienced the sensation of release, the breath may reside in the upper chest or shoulders. Because of this the actor will experience tension in both the body and voice. The challenge of the actor is to harmonize the techniques of destructuring and restructuring to produce a sound that is rich in tone, quality, volume, and is also sustainable when the actor is performing longer speeches or in a lively stage combat scene or another piece of choreography. As the ribs begin to expand, the transverse muscle, located below the naval begins to engage. The transverse muscle should not be confused with the diaphragm, as the diaphragm moves in an up and down motion, while the transverse

muscle moves in and out. When the transverse muscle contracts inward vocalization release occurs in a more involuntary way, producing vibration and power. Another element of the restructuring process involves the focus line; which occurs in the mind's eyes and becomes visualization exercise when the actor is exploring the text. In *Structured Breathing*, Fitzmaurice states, "The 'focus line' (as a mental image only) then extends from the dynamic acting at the abdomen down and around the pelvis and up the spine into the head and of the 'third eye,' so the attention is not on oneself, not on the vocal tract, but on the point(s) of communication" (2). The focus line also justifies why the deconstructing work of the actor is so important because it is through deconstructing the actor becomes reacclimated with the spine. Because of time constraints restructuring was not applied to the *Acting and Mindfulness* course; however, will be included in a future revised curriculum, specifically with work surrounded a piece of heightened text.

## Chapter 6

### Kristin Linklater and Breath

One of the first steps in Kristin Linklater's process of releasing the breath is to understand that breath is transferred into our ways of thinking, feelings, and behavior; and when our rebreathing habits are restricted creating characters that are enriching are almost impossible. Linklater states, "To enter and live the life of a different character, one must be able to let go of deeply ingrained breathing patterns and temporarily allow new behavior from the psyche of the character one is playing to govern the breathing musculature" (43). Linklater does not suggest there is a correct way to breath. However, there can be breath for many different purposes. The power of observing your pattern of breath does not suggest that you control your breath, but only that you develop an awareness of the subtlety of the breath and how that connects to your emotional impulses in your creation of a character.

*"Freeing the Natural Voice,"* offers a wide variety of exercises that allow the actor to connect to their natural breath and were introduced into the *Acting and Mindfulness* curriculum. Linklater gives the instructor a step by step approach that allows the actor to move unwanted tensions that may constrict their pattern of breath. Before the student begins the "Work Day Two" exercise (Linklater, 43-60), he or she will complete a small yoga practice connecting them to the breath and body. When the practice is complete, the students can begin the work with a relaxed and stretched spine. The students will then focus on the subtle movements the body is making as the breath enters in and out the body. Recognizing the involuntary rhythm of the breath and the subtle movements can inform the actor of what the breath wants from you. For example, if you sprint for a short distance and you stop, naturally your breath pattern will be at

faster and quicker pace, indicating that you may need to rest. The students are instructed that with each exhalation more of the tension in the body is released. Linklater states, “The more relaxed you are, the smaller the exchange of oxygen it is necessary to sustain you” (47). Students are then asked to continue with involuntary breath but are also instructed to notice if and when they are breathing with their mouth or nose. Students are then instructed to begin to make a sound on their exhales. Following, the students will then become aware of the diaphragm and how that activates as they begin to produce sound. While Catherine Fitzmaurice believes that the breath initiates in the transverse muscle, Linklater believes that the work begins in diaphragm. The objective of the Workday Two exercise is to initiate a discussion on where the body is in the present state and how the breath transforms through the exercise. “The important thing about badgering the pupil in the general experience that could be articulated and therefore learned, both organically and consciously” (Linklater, 61). Like all of the work in this document, Kristin Linklater approaches breath awareness mindfully.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Reaching Your Highest Creative Self**

Since I began studying theatre, I learned that the actors three most important tools are the body, voice, and imagination. At the university level, there are courses on movement and voice for the actor, but I have never had the option on taking a course called Imagination for the Actor; perhaps it is assumed to be inherent in scene and monologue acting classes; however, that is not always the case. Like the body and the voice, the creative mind also needs to be exercised to create and transform the story of the play. When an artist analyzes a character's experiences and analyzes the function of the character in relationship to the entire play; he or she is intellectually understanding the character. However, when an actor approaches a character with their imagination, the possibilities are endless. Ken Rea states, "Without this, even the most intellectually rigorous work will not engage the audience. Your imagination fuels your ability to come up with fresh, original choices that lesser actors might not have dared to make" (8). Most artists have their way of accessing their imagination. However, some do not, and the playwright does not always give the actor or director everything they need to know to portray a character. Konstantin Stanislavski states, "There is the kind of imagination, which takes the initiative, which works on its own...There is also the kind of imagination which lacks initiative but which readily accepts anything suggested to it and then develops it independently" (66-67). Unleashing our creative freedom is another element of mindfulness actor training and involves many schools of thought; however, all scholars want to achieve the same goal for artists, to reach their highest creative self with a sense of freedom and liberation. Brene Brown states, "Creativity embeds knowledge so that it can become practice. We move what we're learning from our heads to our

hearts through our hands” (7). All of our experiences and lessons that we learn throughout life show up in the characters that we portray on stage; however, immersing ourselves into those experiences is the only way to achieve this goal. Michael Chekhov states, “You will have to achieve it by enlarging the circle of your interests. Try to experience or assume the psychology of persons of other areas by reading period plays, historical novels or even history itself” (18). Our experiences influence the body, voice, and enhance our imaginations. The imagination becomes the avenue to express our creativity, just as a paint brush guides the visual artist on their creative journey.

Another way to reach our creative potential is to understand the concept of the energetic system. Every individual, animal, plant, or object in space is operating on a vibrational frequency that can often become distorted because of our trauma. Trauma manifests in our bodies through tension, but also and disrupts our energetic system, making it almost impossible for us to reach our highest creative potential. Mindfulness practice teaches us ways in which we can connect back to our creativity. F. Emmanuelle Chaulet states, “The energetic system-the energy system is composed of the chakras (the energy centers), the aura, (envelope made of energetic fibers)” (38). Every trauma in our life is linked to our energetic system and is also correlated with our five senses; which means that if one of those chakras is blocked our energy system moves at a lower vibrational frequency. When our energy system moves at a higher vibrational frequency, we become freer to create. As actors, we rely heavily on our imagination to make choices about our characters. Chaulet states, "Tapping into this vibration gives tremendous support to creating a character. Suddenly the actor is not left alone with a set of intellectual and psychological traits to put into form but is now relating in a sensory, organic way to a tangible, vibrational rate that is

the vehicle to this particular character" (45). Overall, the energetic system acts as the umbrella of all mindfulness work involving the body, voice, and mind.

The students in *Acting and Mindfulness* were led through a guided meditation and yoga practice to clear their energetic system. Anne Cushman, states, "Yoga gets the energy body moving, and the energy body is the source of creativity" (3). The energetic system is composed of seven chakras, each located at specific places throughout the spine, having a specific function, and associated with a color. When the chakras are blocked, the energy does not flow naturally throughout the body and often stops. Chaulet states, "If the energy doesn't move, the whole system will come to a halt, and the person will feel energetically "asphyxiated." This results in fatigue, mental confusion, difficulty concentrating, headaches depression, anxiety, and various pains, and ultimately health issues" (79). One of the first steps to mindfulness actor training is to identify the possible blockages that occur along the plane of the spine and then develop a practice to clear the blockages. Chaulet describes these blockages as "a tar-like residue sticking to the fibers of the aura" (79). For example, if there is a blockage of the first chakra, the base or root chakra, there may have been a direct trauma that initiated in childhood. Perhaps, the child was neglected, abused, or lacked nutrition; which could result in a lack of security or the fear of settlement. A blockage of the second chakra, located in the pubic area, is the prime place where we store our feelings on sexuality and money. Perhaps an individual was sexually abused; which resulted in shame and or guilt and created a blockage in the second chakra. Other chakras that could experience blockages include: the third chakra, located in the solar plexus activating our self-esteem, and sense of love, the fourth chakra located in the heart region controlling our sense of compassion and understanding for the world in which we live; the fifth chakra, located in the throat, activating our ability to express ourselves, the sixth chakra, located in the third eye guides



our innate sense of intuition, and finally the seventh chakra, located at the crown on the head; which opens us up to different thoughts and inspirations that may come from a higher source. Overall, each chakra may experience a blockage; which can then lower the vibrational level of the energy system inhibiting creativity.

All of the trauma we have held onto over the course of our life has had a deep effect on our energetic body; and just as we destructure our breath with Catherine Fitzmaurice, Emmanuelle Chaulet developed *Energize*, a mindful approach in which actors can clear out their energetic system to prepare for a role. The ultimate goal is to raise the vibrational frequency and to have the freedom to access the imagination freely and naturally. Clearing the vibrational system involves meditation directly correlated to the seven chakras. The process begins with the idea that to clear out the energetic system the actor must first have an intention. Chaulet states, "Intent is the very power of energetic vibration; which can manifest, change and create results. Intent can clear negativity, bring light joy, raising its subject to higher level of happiness, energy, and creativity" (85). The next principle of the *Energize* model requires the actor to raise their vibrational level in hopes to eliminate the negative vibrational frequencies that could distort creativity. Self-deprecation and stage fright are common examples of negative vibrational frequencies that can translate into our energetic system as a negative vibration. Thirdly, the **Energize** model does not negate the negative behaviors but require the actor to acknowledge their opposites. "When we want to clear the negative aspect of emotion, we simply have to look at the opposite side and connect the two opposites, so they reactivate the natural energy current" (Chaulet, 88).

Both in the *Acting and Mindfulness* class, and at the Southeastern Theatre Conference, I incorporated an adapted version of Michael Chekhov's exercise of The Imaginary Body in

conjunction with the chakra balancing work in hopes to achieve a freer actor, vocally, and physically. The class began with a series of yoga postures to facilitate them into getting connecting energetically to the body and breath, but also to release any tension that they were experiencing throughout the day. The second half included an energy clearing meditation. Following, I asked the students to imagine the character from their monologue. The students were then asked to, in their mind's eye, imagine that character was standing in front of them. The first task was to notice what the character looked like and to be aware that the character was not you, but another completely different being. Naturally, the actor may imagine a character who resembles them but does not have to look identical to the character. The task was to not place any judgment on the character but to observe how they thought the character to appear. Essentially, the actor was building his or her character from the ground up; and after making observations of the character, the students then had to befriend their character, and listen to the story in which the character wanted to tell the actor. The story could have been about the character's journey through the play, their obstacles, or other trials and tribulations that the character endured throughout their journey. This process allowed the actor to give the character a certain amount of humanness. The next step was then to imagine that they were standing behind the character and that the character's body would become a second skin to the actor. They were to imagine that there was a zipper on the back of the character that they were physically required to unzip and then the students would step into the body of the character. Once the students were in the body of the character, he or she would zip the back of the character back up. The students were asked to take a breath inside of this character; breath was encouraged throughout the entire delivery of the exercise. The students would move around the space as the character and to define where the character's center resided. As the actors began to move around the space, I

would invite them to acknowledge the people in the space. I challenged the actors to move at a pace as if their character was in a rush, but also to be mindful of the obstacles and other characters in the space. Students were then asked to freeze in the body of the character and begin to add a line of text from the character's monologue. I then would tap a character's shoulder, and they would begin to recite the beginning of their monologue, as soon as I would tap another person's shoulder he or she would begin to recite their piece. This went on a few more times until I requested that the actor finally unzip the character and step out of the body of the character. After the yoga sequence, energy clearing, and constantly reminding the actor to breathe, there was a feeling of blissful peace within the room. All of the students in both the *Acting and Mindfulness* classes and the workshop at SETC had explored their characters in a way that connected them to the character's bodies as well as their own, giving them more ownership of the character. Because they approached the character mindfully and with a sense of ease the students felt that did not have to stretch so wide to play the role. They could just be in their bodies with openness.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Chekhov and Individual Creativity**

Mindful actor training nurtures the actor in developing an imagination that is unique to his or her own; and allows the individual to unleash parts of their creativity that they may not have known existed. For instance, if a playwright's usual mode of a genre is a comedy, perhaps they undergo an experience that inspires them to create a drama. On stage the actor uses the body and voice to express ideas and thoughts; however, Chekhov suggests, "These constitute as the "building material from which the higher self, the real artist in you creates a character on stage. The higher self simply takes possession that building material" (96). Linklater, Chekhov, Fitzmaurice, and other movement and voice professionals give you the tools to nourish your materials, but the essence of creative individuality comes from the individual. When the actor receives the tools to build the materials he or she can then be open to inspirations, as well as embrace the unexpected. Once the student is open to this these inspirations the process of creation can begin. Chekhov refers to this as power, "The power permeated your whole being, radiated from you into your surroundings, filling the stage and flowing over the footlights into the audience" (96). Because of this type of power, the actor can begin to embody true presence on the stage.

In addition to the building materials Chekhov also suggests, "To summarize the foregoing, the true creative state of the actor-artist is governed by a threefold functioning of his consciousness: the higher self-inspires his acting and grants him genuinely creative feelings; the lower self-serves as the common-sense restraining force; the illusory "soul" is governed by three states of consciousness, each in charge of three specific parts of the imagination" (100). The

"higher self" does not suggest that all inspiration comes from personal experience, but also a connection to the experiences of others that allow us to reach our highest creative self. The "lower self," allows the actor to let a character go after a performance and to separate yourself from the illusionary life that you created for a character. Both the higher and the lower self can transform the actor's physical and emotional health; therefore, mindfulness strategies can connect us back to our natural state of awareness to open to receiving new experiences.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Unleashing Fear: Risk Taking**

One of the benefits of practicing mindfulness as an actor is that we begin to understand our true authentic selves that unfold in our own experiences. Brene Brown states that "Authenticity is a collection of choices that we make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest and let our true selves be seen" (49). Although the ultimate goal of an actor is authenticity; there are always roadblocks within our process on and off the stage that can prevent authenticity from showing its true self. The importance of recognizing the roadblocks and then approaching them with an open heart is a part of the on and off-stage work of an actor. One of the many problems when cultivating authenticity is the possibility of becoming too authentic for fear of revealing ourselves in a way that may seem self-indulgent, narcissistic, or will never reach the approval of others. Fear is the common denominator manifested in our resistance to approach creative work. We fear that we may seem too narcissistic, or not good enough for a role, and even fearful of auditioning for a role because we probably will not even get a callback. Our fear will debilitate us and prevent us from reaching our highest creative self. The wonderful aspect of mindfulness work is that it allows the artist to relieve the fear to take risks on the stage. Whether we are paying attention to tension, acknowledging our creative blocks, deconstructing our breath pattern, or acknowledging fear; we first have to become aware of the problem. Declan Donnellan states, "Fear can be dealt with. But first our fear needs to be acknowledged and seen. And it is better when we can prepare ourselves when cool, rather than when we are choking in its grip" (32). Mindfulness training provides the actor with the perfect opportunity to look fear in the eye and place it behind you.

Being a step ahead of the fear is the approach to coping with our most powerful fears. Unfortunately, it is impossible to eliminate fear entirely, but understanding its origin can also give us access its powers in a positive way. Fear acts as a moralist to other parts of ourselves that can sabotage our creative work in the present. Young people who are dipping their toes into acting are afraid of failure; which results in an inability to take risks on stage. They have a fear of making a fool of themselves or connecting to a role because they are fearful of becoming emotionally available. Perhaps you blame yourself for why your scene is not truthful, or you feel obligated to take on the responsibility of scheduling scene rehearsals. Blame, fear of failure and obligation are the many examples of how fear can creep into many aspects of your creative life because it inhibits you not to take the next step in your work. Ken Rea states, "Taking risks is about revealing yourself and your imagination and being at ease with the possibility of failure" (97).

In addition to showing up as a moralist; the power of fear also does not exist in the present time. Most of our anxiety exists in the fact that we are fearful of the unknown, future, or afraid of taking risks because of our previous experiences, past. Donellan uses the example of an actor forgetting his or her lines, "Actually actors rarely forget their lines when they remain in the present. However, as soon as Irina has the thought: *'Oh my God! I don't think I can remember my next line'*, she is predicting what will come; she quits the present. *'I will forget my text'* anticipates the future but tricks Irina into forgetting her text for now" (33). The mindfulness of yoga and meditation reconnect us back to the present moment by focusing solely on the breath and allow us to focus on the now rather than the fear

Our experiences with fear translate into our physical and vocal instrument, and when we allow fear to suppress the natural flow of our body, we become inhibited on stage. An exercise

used in the *Acting and Mindfulness* class involves Michael Chekhov's expansion and contraction. Students do a series of expanding movements using the entire space around them. Following the students will then do a series of movements in which they are contracting. The exercise allows the students to begin to release, free of fear and judgment. Chekhov suggests, "You must not be disturbed by the doubts as to whether you are actually radiating or whether you are only imagining you are" (12). Students are suggested to eliminate the idea of doing something right or wrong for fear of being judged.



## Chapter Ten

### Yoga and Meditation for the Actor

Almost every *Acting and Mindfulness* class begins with a standard vinyasa sequence incorporating body, breath, and sound. Vinyasa is a term commonly linked with the term, flow, and is practiced at many yoga studios throughout the country. Like Fitzmaurice, Chekhov, Linklater, Suzuki, etc., vinyasa yoga is one of the many types of yoga derived from ancient practice. I already had an understanding of the power that my voice and body had on my journey as an actor; however, it was not until I began to practice yoga that I began to fully understand the body, vocal, and mind connection that was valuable to me as an actor, as well as guiding my artistic "flow." Being a yoga practitioner enabled me to be more present and aware of my body and breath connection but provided me with the reasons why tension existed in my body, why I often experienced creative blocks, and even why I thought I was never good enough to work in the theater. All of these reasons, amongst others are some of the reasons why I continue to practice today. By marrying yoga and acting, I unconsciously realized the value of my instrument and how it was a gift that I would always need to continue working to transform as an individual and an artist.

Through the practice of yoga, I uncovered some unpleasant parts of myself, that I was able to express through my practice, but also on stage. The trauma I experienced was very similar to the trauma some of the characters I encountered in their world; however, the difference was I had to go home with it every night. The trauma I experienced was continuing to limit my body and voice as an actor, but it also affected how I approached a piece of text. I was continually over analyzing every choice I made as an actor and was not at all confident in the choices I was

making. David Emerson and Elizabeth Hopper, “In trauma, the body’s alarm systems, turn on and then never quite turn off. And we experience the intense suffering of never feeling truly relaxed, at ease in life, always intensely on guard, with the primitive brain constantly scanning for threat or opportunity” (153). In actor translation, I approached every actor with intensity; I was never able to relax into a role, and I was always afraid of what other people were thinking about me. After five hundred hours of training, I began to understand how the practice of yoga had similar concepts with the practice of acting, and of what acting teachers expected of me. I was unable to use the instrument that was given to me to my full capacity because I did not know how to release any of the trauma I was hanging onto so tightly for my entire life. How many times as an actor have you heard director’s say, “Get out of your head, and into your body?” Through the practice of yoga, I was able to let go of the distractions that prevented me from being present on and off authentic on stage and off.

One of the many benefits of yoga for actors is that the practice allows you to quiet the mind and to be with what is present, at the moment. Another common critique, "Live in the moment," is something you cannot teach, but you can experience through yoga. Because you can quiet your mind on the mat, you offer yourself up to a world of artistic possibilities. Karen Macklin states, “Asana and pranayama help fuel the creative process, by increasing and directing the flow of prana, the intelligent life force, through the energy conduits in our bodies (Rama, 3). Actor translation: Yoga postures and breathing can help fuel the creative process, by directing life through our energetic body. As actors our responsibility is to tell the story of the human spirit, and what makes us alive is our ability to perceive the world with our senses. The practice of yoga heightens our senses so we can experience life more vibrantly. "New students of yoga

report that they can suddenly experience a different range of sensations in the body, and they feel more perceptive and sensitive to their surroundings” (Rama, 4).

Yoga is a movement meditation for the body; however, the actor can achieve the same results while practicing sitting meditations. The acting industry requires that he or she have their work constantly critiqued by other actors, directors, audience members, and reviewers.

Unfortunately, people are not always going to love your work, and that constant berating of negativity can take a toll on the actor transforming our views of our work. These negative patterns of thought can influence the kind of work that we bring to the stage, but also program us to live in a world of constant self-doubt. Lack of self-worth can translate into our bodies and voices when we go on auditions, or even how we approach our roles. Meditation allows us to reprogram our brains to decrease the negative thinking behavior patterns. Anthony Meindhi states, “When we become conscious of what we say to ourselves and wake up to our destructive and conditioned thoughts and reboot them with new neural programming that not only becomes a practice of mindfulness meditation-but we're also rewiring our brains" (1). Meditation helps us become more aware of when we are experiencing negative behavior, but all assist us in treating ourselves with compassion without any judgment.

As a yoga instructor, the importance of gearing a yoga practice to the physical needs and capabilities of the student are necessary to prevent injury. It may be safe to assume that none of the students in a typical theatre class have any yoga experience. Therefore, each vinyasa practice in the *Acting and Mindfulness* class is taught at a basic beginner level. The students are encouraged to take care of the body and to eliminate any sense of competitiveness within themselves or with other members of the class. The goal of the short vinyasa practice is to begin to cultivate the connection between the mind, body, and breath. Students are also encouraged to

place no judgment on the breath, and there is no right or wrong to the breath pattern and to view the practice as an experience that may guide them in their artistic life as well as their daily life. A basic vinyasa sequence and variations of yoga sequences are found on pages 149-166 in *Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformative Yoga Practices*.

## Chapter Eleven

### Conclusion: My Final Reflection

Designing and teaching *Acting and Mindfulness* at Virginia Commonwealth University has been a rewarding and reflective experience. If I went away from this experience without some take away from the process, I would not be serving the mindful curriculum nor the students. I was able to teach five extraordinary students from different facets of life and with different experiences as student artists. Luckily, I had the privilege of teaching a small group of students who I was able to attend to; however, I understand that this may not always be the ideal circumstance. If I were in a setting with a larger student population, I would have spent more time getting to know them collectively, as an ensemble. Perhaps I would have played some theater games or by included some reflective writing and discussion so that the students would feel comfortable in the space and with each other. At times I felt my approach to the work was methodical and I believe that I would have benefitted in getting to know the students, and to then design the curriculum with their interests in mind. Realistically, I would approach the students' needs as a collective and an ensemble, but also meet the students where they are emotionally, physically, and mentally.

The class offered a smattering of mindfulness techniques to approach their work as an actor; however, I would have preferred to focus on one to two movement and vocal techniques spending more time with each of them. The majority of the class was spent mainly on the students developing and creating their own story in a performance piece. Perhaps this was important to this particular class and what they needed at the time; however, I wanted the text to play a more active part in the class. I believe that the mindfulness work is the crux of the class,

but I wanted to stress the importance of the acting work as well, and the relationship between the mindfulness work. As an instructor, I want to pay more attention to the goal of the course and where I want the students to be at the end of the process. Some of the questions I would ask myself is if a final assessment is necessary to cap the class, or if it is simply the students to develop their mindfulness plan if they were cast in a show. The final assessment fell at the waist side because of student absences or canceled classes.

Pedagogically, I would have held the students more accountable for missing class, and or being prepared for class, but because the students were vulnerable in sharing their work, I let these important details slide. In hindsight being prepared for any experience in the theatre is a mindful strategy that should be included in the curriculum as well.

With that being said, these five students inspired me to move forward with this curriculum and perhaps use the curriculum to facilitate workshops or other classes. It was a pleasure and a joy to serve the Virginia Commonwealth community.

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- ReShel, Azriel. "How Yoga Unlocks Creativity." *UPLIFT*, 14 June 2017, [upliftconnect.com/yoga-unlocks-creativity/](http://upliftconnect.com/yoga-unlocks-creativity/).
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- Stanislavsky, Konstantin, Jean Benedetti, and Richard Eyre. *An Actor's Work*. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Stephens, Mark. *Yoga Sequencing: Designing Transformative Yoga Classes*. North Atlantic Books, 2012.



## Appendices-A Syllabus

### Acting and Mindfulness

*A Well-Balanced Actor: Acting Technique & Mindfulness*

**Fridays-1:00-4:00/Shafer Playhouse Rm. 106**

**Instructor:** Dawn Souza

**Email:** souzad@vcu.edu

**Office Hours:** By appointment

#### Course Description:

The demands of acting can take a toll on our vocal, physical, and mental well-being. Tension can be manifested in many ways and eventually unveil itself on the stage, with an overall unhappy actor, burned out from the process. This course is designed to foster actors in beginning their journey of self-discovery on and off the stage, by examining the fears that leave them feeling vulnerable on the stage, but also in dynamic group situations. The course will combine the mindfulness techniques of yoga and meditation in combination with the acting/movement and vocal techniques. The course will conclude with a personal theatrical piece created by the student artist making connections between acting and mindfulness.

**Required Readings:** All readings come from specific texts. You are only required to purchase one text; although you are not required to purchase the texts, they are a good resource to obtain in case you need to be reminded of specific principles.

Brown, Brene. *Rising Strong How the Ability to Reset Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. N.p.: Random House, 2017. Print. **PURCHASE**

Brown, Brene. *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*. Center City: Hazeldon, 2010. Print.

Chaulet, Emmanuelle. *A Balancing Act: The Development of Energize! a Holistic Approach to Acting*. Starlight Acting Books, 2008.

Chekhov, Michael. *On The Technique of Acting*

#### Course Objectives:

- Students will be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses as an actor and how both influence their work on and off the stage.
- Students will identify the possible emotional blocks and or habitual tendencies that manifest throughout the body and voice.
- Students will be able to apply mindful (yoga and meditation) strategies to improve their vocal, physical, and mental well-being.

- Students will be able to apply the principles of Michael Chekhov in combination with mindful strategies.
- Students will develop an awareness of breath by applying Catherine Fitzmaurice techniques.

### **Attendance and Participation Policy:**

**Tardiness:** Being late for class two times equals one unexcused absence. Leaving class early also counts as a tardy.

### **Class requirements:**

- Comfortable clothing to class. This means no jeans, skirts, tight fitted shirts, and overly distracting accessories. Be prepared to move in class and be barefoot or in socks.
- Please bring a yoga mat to every class.
- *Respect for the space as well as your classmates. The classroom is not a place for judgment; we are all learning in this environment so mistakes are always encouraged. To provide a safe space for everyone to explore difficult topics, there is a strict confidential policy that will be enforced in the classroom.*
- Participation in classroom activities as well as discussions.
- Required to keep a weekly journal about class including any experiences that have developed in class as well as outside reading. Prompts will be provided for the journal entries. All weekly journals are confidential and will only be read by the instructor. There will be an opportunity to discuss any discoveries that are made throughout the process.
- No late work will be accepted.

### **Materials Needed**

- Required readings for the day.
- Yoga Mat
- Water
- Layers, anything that will keep you warm.

**Structure of the Class:** Each class will begin with a 30-minute yoga practice/meditation based on the theme of that day, followed by a discussion of the readings. We will incorporate Michael Chekhov and Catherine Fitzmaurice into the last part of the class as well as an element of **PLAY!!!**

### **Grading:**

40% Participation, Attendance  
 20% Midterm Mini Performance/Reflection/Paper  
 20% Response to Reading Prompts  
 20% Final Performance/Reflection Paper

### **VCU Theatre Grading Scale**

A 93-100  
 B 85-92  
 C 77-84

D 69-77  
F 68 & below

**Class Meetings: All assignments are in bold. SUBJECT TO CHANGE and will be updated on an as needed basis/All Journal Prompt Assignments will be posted on Blackboard under assignments**

**Jan. 19 Cultivating Authenticity/Introductions to the Course**

**Jan. 26 Cultivating Authenticity  
Journal Response 1 Due**

**Feb. 2nd Cultivating Physical and Vocal Awareness**

**Feb. 9 Identify Story/Breathe  
Journal Response 2 Due**

**Feb. 16 Identify Story/Assign Midterm  
Journal Response 3 Due**

**Feb. 23 Cultivating Creativity/Chakra Work/Journal Response 4 Due  
March 2 Cultivating Creativity  
Journal Response 5 Due**

**March 9 NO CLASS SPRING BREAK  
March 16 Developing Presence with a Character**

**March 23 Developing Presence with Character  
March 30 Solo Performance**

**April 6 Assign Final Exam/Developing Presence with Body and Voice  
April 13 TBD**

**April 20 TBD  
April 27 Possible Work Day for Final/Meetings with Individual Students**

**May 4 Last Class and Final Exam/Final Paper Due**

*Course Syllabus and Confidentiality Policy*

*Now that you have read the syllabus with your instructor please be sure to complete the form and sign and date the contract page. This page also acts as a confidentiality agreement between student to student, and student to teacher.*

**PLEASE SIGN AND HAND BACK TO THE INSTRUCTOR**

**ATTESTED THAT YOU HAVE READ AND COMPREHEND THE**

**INFORMATION, REGULATIONS, AND REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE**

**Acting and Mindfulness Theatre 491**

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**E-MAIL:** \_\_\_\_\_

**PHONE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**X**\_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendices B-Lesson Plans

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson One Class One**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** January 19, 2018

**Instructor:** Dawn Souza

**Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Cultivating Authenticity

### Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will be able to articulate their definition of authenticity and how that translates into their personal life as well as their life on the stage.
2. Students will be able to assess the parts of the body where they experience tension, and how that can reflect in their embodiment of a character.
3. Students will be able to articulate their expectations of what they want from the class.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water

**Resources:** Article on Cultivating Authenticity from *The Gifts of Imperfection*

### Learning Activities:

- Introductions to the class/Review Syllabus and Course Expectation
- Read Cultivating Authenticity from *The Gifts of Imperfection*, by Brene Brown.
- Students are given a series of question that they respond yes or no to.
  - a. When I make a mistake, do you dwell on it forever?
  - b. Do you tend to dismiss you're on ideas?
  - c. Do you allow guilt to eat you up?
  - d. Do you tend to speak negatively?
  - e. Do you focus on things that you cannot change?
  - f. Do you compare yourself to others?
  - g. Are you unable to take a compliment?
  - h. Do you often find that your moods are inconsistent?
  - i. Do you rarely feel good about yourself?

*Students discuss the correlation of their responses to how that effects to how they approach work their work as actors.*

- Mindful Meditation/Scanning the Body (Barton, 63-67)
- Students write three expectations that they have of the class. Their responses are listed.
  - a. Find emotional blocks
- b. Living in the moment
  - c. Become more self-aware of the mind and body and the connection.
  - d. Relaxation
  - e. Bad habits in their work.
  - f. Breathing and speaking in a natural voice
  - g. Confidence in abilities
  - h. Find the reality of my character within my own character.

**Preparation for Lesson Two:**

Journal Response Prompt 1 (See page 61)

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Two Class Two**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** January 26, 2018

**Instructor:** Dawn Souza

**Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Cultivating Authenticity

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will be able to articulate their definition of authenticity and how that translates into their personal life as well as their life on the stage.
2. Students recognize the mental and physical condition of his or her body after a yoga vinyasa practice.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water, Journal Entries

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown

**Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- One Hour Yoga Practice /Followed by a fifteen-minute break and discussion.
- Discussion on Journal One Prompts
- Sense Memory Journey
- End of Class discussion

**Preparation for Lesson Three:**

Journal Response Prompt 2 (See page 61)

Prepare a monologue as if you were going to a mock audition

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Three Class Three**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** February. 2, 2018

**Instructor:** Dawn Souza

**Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Cultivating Physical and Vocal Awareness

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will be able to understand Brene Brown's principles of vulnerability and how they apply to their life as an actor.
2. Students will be able to define a roadblock and then identify their roadblock as an actor.
3. Students will be able to recognize the mental and physical condition of his or her body before and after a yoga vinyasa practice.
4. Students will begin to understand the process of deconstructing the breath by applying Catherine Fitzmaurice grounding work to their yoga practice.
5. Students will be able to understand the physical and vocal presence that they are bringing to an audition space.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water, Journal Entries, Audition Monologue for Mock Audition

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown, *Roadblocks in Acting*, by Rob Roznowski

**Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- Discuss meaning behind roadblock? Students identify and share their roadblock as an actor? Some responses are listed
  - A. Uses subtle or quiet gestures in relaxed situations.
  - B. Doubts choices and does not fully commit to actions.
  - C. Overthinking and intellectual.
  - D. Unable to live in the moment
- One Hour Yoga Practice including grounding work from Catherine Fitzmaurice/Followed by a fifteen-minute break and discussion.
- Discussion on Journal Two Prompts
- Mock Audition and Evaluation of what the body and voice are doing?
- End of Class discussion. Students observed the following from the mock auditions in the body and voice....
- Afraid to fully commit to the beginning and ending moments.
- Locked knees prevented full body movement.
- Leaning forward with the body.

- Rate of speech.
- Volume.
- Students did not breathe/tension in the shoulders.
- Silence equals vulnerability.
- Ran up to do the monologue/did not introduce.
- Mumbled words.
- The top half of the body does not move.



**Preparation for Lesson Four:**

Journal Response Prompt 3/Collecting Journals (See page 61)

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Four Class Four**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** February 9, 2018

**Instructor:** Dawn Souza

**Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Identifying Story/Cultivating Breathe

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will be able to begin owning their own stories.
2. Students will be able to recognize the mental and physical condition of his or her body before and after a yoga vinyasa practice.
4. Students will begin to understand the process of destructing the breath by applying Catherine Fitzmaurice grounding work and tremoring to yoga postures.
5. Students will understand the power of the spine and how it is central to the  
Students will be able to understand how the power of the breath and often time affect our stories.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water, Journal Entries

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown,

**Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- One Hour Yoga Practice including grounding work from Catherine Fitzmaurice/Followed by a fifteen-minute break and discussion. Butterfly Tremor is introduced to yoga practice.
- Students will reflect on the following questions. Why am I an Actor? What Type of Actor Are You? What Kind of Actor Do You Want to Be? What are the Patterns in Your Work? What kind of Reputation do you have as an Actor?
- Write a bio of yourself based on those questions.
- Begin discussion on the breath
- Getting curious about the spine activity
- End of Class discussion.

*I was unable to complete all of the activities that I wanted to in class today because students were heavy in a positive discussion.*

**Preparation for Lesson Five:**

Bring a poem that resonates with you in class. The poem should be long enough to draw text from. Preferably a poem you do not know.

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Five Class Five**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** February 16, 2018

**Instructor:** Dawn Souza

**Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Identify Story

**Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will be able to develop and own their own stories
3. Students will be able to recognize the mental and physical condition of his or her body before and after a yoga vinyasa practice.
4. Students will begin to understand the process of destructing the breath by applying Catherine Fitzmaurice grounding work to their yoga practice, and including the Happy Baby Tremor.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water, Journal Entries

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown, Midterm Exam Assignment

**Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- One Hour Yoga Practice including Fitzmaurice Grounding/Followed by a fifteen-minute break and discussion.
- Discussion on Journal Three Prompts
- Student share poems and extract pieces of text that resonate with the story they would like to tell in their composition piece.
- Review assignment for Midterm (See page 63)
- End of Class discussion.

## **Preparation for Lesson Six**

Monologue for Solo Movement Piece

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Six Class Six**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** February 23, 2018      **Instructor:** Dawn Souza      **Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Cultivating Creativity

### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will continue the process of developing a story.
2. Students will be able to recognize the mental and physical condition of his or her body before and after a yoga vinyasa practice.
4. Students will begin to understand the process of destructing the breath by applying Catherine Fitzmaurice grounding work to their yoga practice and apply the Sideways tremor.
5. Students understand how the power of the energetic body can apply to creativity.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water, Journal Entries, Monologue

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown, *A Balancing Act*, by Emanuelle Chalet

### **Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- Guided Chakra Meditation (Chalet, 84)
- One Hour Yoga Practice including grounding work from Catherine Fitzmaurice/Followed by a fifteen-minute break and discussion.
- Discussion on Journal Three Prompts
- End of Class discussion/Share monologues in class

## **Preparation for Lesson Seven**

Rough Outline of Solo Composition Piece and Monologue

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Seven Class Seven**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** March 16, 2018      **Instructor:** Dawn Souza      **Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Developing Presence with a Character

### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will begin to draw awareness to the spine and how that affects the vibration of sound.
2. Students begin to formulate their solo composition pieces in collaboration with their peers.
3. Students will be able to embody the character from their monologue using Michael Chekhov Imaginary Body Exercise.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water,

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown

### **Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- Feldenkrais workshop with guest graduate student
- Imaginary Body

## **Preparation for Lesson Eight**

Solo Movement Composition for Notes

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Eight Class Eight**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** March 23, 2018      **Instructor:** Dawn Souza      **Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Developing Presence

### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will be able to articulate their story in a five-minute movement composition.
2. Students will develop a sense of presence by exploring the spine with a series of stretches and exercises from Kristin Linklater.
3. Students will evaluate solo performance composition pieces.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga Mat, Water

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, by Kristin Linklater

### **Learning Activities:**

- Check in with Students
- Workday One Exercise, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, 31
- Solo Performance with Notes
- Students receive prompts for midterm reflection paper.

Suggested prompts include:

1. Carefully articulate your story in three sentences or more. Do you believe that this story represents a part of you and how did the monologue resonate with you and your story?
2. What elements of the mindfulness training that you have had thus far impact your performance in class? Think about everything we have done in class so far.
3. Why did you choose to place the audience where you did in the space? Be specific.
4. Were you able to be truly authentic in the performance piece? Be honest. If so when did you feel like you were in your head?

## **Preparation for Lesson Nine**

Solo Movement Composition for Notes

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Nine Class Nine**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** March 30, 2018      **Instructor:** Dawn Souza      **Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Developing Presence Body and Voice

### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will be able to articulate their story in a five-minute movement composition.
2. Students will develop a sense of presence through breath awareness with the work of Kristin Linklater.
3. Students will examine Michael Chekhov's qualities of movement: contracting, expansion, radiating, molding, flying, form.
4. Students will perform and evaluate solo performance composition pieces.
5. Students will begin to draw awareness to the spine and how that affects the vibration of sound with Feldenkrais.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga mat, water, props for performance.

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, *On The Technique of Acting*

### **Learning Activities:**

- Warm-up with Work Day Two Exercise (Linklater, 43-60) and Contracting and Expansion, (Chekhov,
- Performances followed by discussions
- Additional Feldenkrais Workshop

## **Preparation for Lesson Ten**

Journal Prompt 4

Acting and Mindfulness  
**Lesson Ten Class Ten**  
Virginia Commonwealth University

**Date:** April 6, 2018      **Instructor:** Dawn Souza      **Location:** Shafer Playhouse 106

**Lesson Plan Title:** Developing Presence/Truthfulness with self and other actors on stage

### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Students will develop a sense of breath awareness through Kristin Linklater's Work Day 2 (Linklater, 43-60).
2. Students will understand how simple blocking communicates relationships to the audience.

**Materials Needed:** Yoga mat, water,

**Resources:** *Rising Strong*, by Brene Brown, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, *Acting on Stage and Off*

### **Learning Activities:**

- Warm-up with Work Day Two Exercise
- Performances followed by discussions of Prompts
- Simple Relationships with Characters on Stage

## **Appendices C- Journal Prompt Assignments**

### **Journal Prompt 1**

1. Name and describe some ways in which you live an authentic lifestyle. Name and describe some ways in which you live an authentic lifestyle. Why do you find yourself diving into unauthentic habits or behaviors?
2. Do you see yourself as an authentic person when you are in a theatrical environment? Vice versa. Perhaps, give examples of specific moments.
3. Describe one way in which you can practice an authentic lifestyle. Give one example of this on stage and off stage.

### **Journal Prompt 2**

1. Reflect on one of the *Rising Strong* vulnerability principals 1-10. Pages 3-13. Is there a principal you resonate with the most? If so give an example in your personal or theatrical life that you can connect this principal too?

### **Journal Prompt 3**

Please complete the journal response involving the reading on page. 39

1. What are some ways in which you own your own stories? Do you write them down, express them in your art, or talk to them with a friend? Is there a particular story that you have trouble owning for any reason? Describe.
2. Are there moments throughout your day that you ignore? For instance, if you are hungry do you not satisfy your hunger, or if you are extremely tired do you go to bed at a late hour. Define three specific moments in your life and if you do not reckon with them what are some ways in which you can be more mindful towards them. I.e., If you are hungry, you eat.
3. Be able to share three other parts of the reading that you have found inspiring.

### **Journal Prompt 4**

1. When you consider the trust elements in the acronym BRAVING: Boundaries, Reliability, Accountability, Vault, Integrity, Nonjudgment, Generosity...What positive examples in your life come to mind? This can be in your everyday life or life as an artist.
2. What opinions and feedback matter to you? Are they from directors, teachers, friends? See if you can list these individuals in a one inch by one-inch box.



### **Final Reflection Prompt**

If you were performing/directing a demanding show that required you to have a full-time rehearsal schedule, what would be some mindfulness strategies you would incorporate into your work? Let this include your strategies for your well-being as well as your character work. Develop a plan. Write about three to four strategies in a detailed two to three-page reflection.

**Appendices-D**  
**Midterm Performance Composition**  
**Acting and Mindfulness**

The first part of this course involves cultivating authenticity, by exploring the many facets of who you are as an individual and artist. Now you are going to continue with this work through the use of the imagination.

Be very clear about what your story is. Be able to articulate this in one to two sentences.

Create a five-minute composition piece incorporating a monologue that resonates with your personal story.

Include another 1-2 mediums to connect your monologue. There are a variety of mediums to choose from. Mime, Music, Poetry, Instruments, Dance, Monologue, Scene, etc.

Your composition must also include the following.

- Clear transitions from one moment to the next. This could be music, dance, poetry lines, etc. The composition should flow.
  - A clear beginning, and an end to your piece.
  - A choice about where you want your audience to live while you are performing.
- One set piece.
- One prop.

Deadlines: March 16<sup>th</sup>-I will view your pieces as is and give you feedback  
March 23<sup>rd</sup> Performance

