The Informed Imagination: Researching and Building a Character’s Identity

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The Informed Imagination: Researching and Building a Character's Identity
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Fine Arts in Theatre Pedagogy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Abstract

THE INFORMED IMAGINATION: RESEARCHING AND BUILDING A CHARACTER’S IDENTITY

By Jeremy William Hilgert, MFA

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

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An actor’s duty to the play is to present the most fully formed and vivid interpretation of the character. To do so, the actor must have an understanding of how that particular character developed their own sense of identity. This should be constructed not from the actor’s personal experience but from an informed imaginative experience founded on research and analysis. As pedagogues we are challenged with attempting to give young actors the skills for such an analysis. I have developed a formula to aid the actor in creating the foundations for such an interpretation founded upon the sociological understanding of identity and symbolic interactivity. I also lay out a plan for a college course designed to teach preprofessional actors this method for character analysis.
Introduction

This thesis begins with a problem or rather an observation. I was sitting in the audience during a production of a “great American play” and at intermission a friend and fellow acting teacher and I began to discuss what we had just witnessed. It was neither particularly good nor particularly bad. There seems to be a pandemic in the theatre world of the simply mediocre. There was no singular failing aspect of the production, but it just never seemed to fully live. As I was grappling with my feelings on just what was making me feel so ambivalent about the piece, I turned to my friend and said, “I am tired of sitting and watching actors act, and not seeing characters live.”

This was a turning point in both my career as a performer and more importantly in my career as a teacher. Up to and including my time at Virginia Commonwealth University, I had always taken pride and extra care in my attention to understanding and actively portraying a character. My background was a bit “old school” in the sense that I started in the professional theater and never had a tremendous amount of formal training in an academic setting. My mentors were the professional actors, directors, and producers I had worked with since the age of 10 and the advice that kept being driven into my skull was always, “character, character, character.” In my career it was not enough that I could understand what emotions or impulses I needed as the actor, but every time I am on stage the strongest and often times best choices were fueled by a
deep understanding of the identity of the character I was playing. I needed to use my imagination to fully create a reality based upon the given circumstances presented by the playwright. This is only achieved from an informed imagination that takes into account the many facets that affect the individual and relationships within the historical, political, communal and familiar makeup of the world of the play. Basically, I had to have at least a casual (usually far deeper) knowledge of the historical, cultural, and societal influences within the life of the character. The character’s identity is a result of these influences. And the truth is, the professional actor’s work should begin and end with the character. It is not the actor’s story. It is not the audience’s story. It is the character’s story.

Unfortunately, academic theatre programs do not begin and end with the character. They begin and end with the actor. This is a systemic problem in academic theatre programs. The methodologies of Stanislavsky and later Meisner, Hagen, Adler, and Strasberg in various capacities are often presented in the classroom as beginning with a notion of self. Whether it be true to their nature or a genetic mutation passed from teacher to student, all methodologies in the United States revolve mostly around the actor’s ability to create something from themselves to create a false reality. Theoretically it seems the self is the most true beginning. This focus on the actor is not specifically problematic as it offers young artists a chance to learn and grow with their own barometer for change and a constant source of ready information. I am not asserting that the standards set by Stanislavsky et al. are not valid and useful, however a vacuum has been created in theatrical education.
As Stella Adler put it, “Ninety-nine percent of what you see and use on the stage comes from imagination” (Adler 17). It is the imagination that is neglected when young actors are not exposed to detailed character analysis, research, and study. Giving the student tactics for performance based upon the self is only on portion of their imaginative capacity. The informed mind has wondrous capacity for understanding and creating. A career in the professional theater will call on them to make informed, intelligent choices based upon a thorough understanding of the character. Many theaters cannot afford a dramaturge and many theaters cannot afford the time necessary for each actor have long discussions with the director about their character. The actor is expected to do this work and to come in with the knowledge necessary for making specific choices and the clarity of understanding necessary to formulate a performance based upon the demands of the director and production in front of them. Without some training in this vein, we do not prepare young theatre practitioners for the requirements of the professional world. Audiences do not pay to watch actors act, but to see characters live.

How does an actor begin to form an understanding of a character’s identity? How does an actor go about objectively researching and implementing their understanding of this identity? How do pedagogues teach objective research techniques to encourage young actors to pursue an understanding of character? These are the questions I struggle with in the classroom, in my career, and in this thesis.

The first section of this thesis sets out to explain a rudimentary foundation to begin to answer these questions. I will examine the very nature of personal identity as we have grown to consciously understand it and how it can relate to performances on
stage. I have chosen to focus on the work of George Herbert Mead as presented by Sheldon Stryker, Peter Burke and others. I am developing an understanding of identity through the sociological model that is universal for both the actor and the character. The purview of this paper is rather narrow, and I will not be delving into any social or cultural ramifications of my findings about the individual. Merely, I wish to draw the firm parallel between actor and character for which to begin a fully realized analysis.

The second section is a simplified, formulaic breakdown of the multitude of influences on identity for understanding the character. The various audiences, relationships, and forces that affect the character are explored to show how that the character’s identity is formed by an understanding of the roles taken up in the world of the play. Within the breakdown I will discuss where to begin the research and the value of it in presenting a role. The final section will describe a semester long course for teaching character development coupled with tactics for teaching objective research to BFA performance students drawn from my experience such a class at Virginia Commonwealth University.
Chapter 1:  
The Roles We Play:  
Sociological Understanding of Identity

When a self does appear it always involves an experience of another; there could not be an experience of a self simply by itself. The plant or the lower animal reacts to its environment, but there is no experience of a self ...When the response of the other becomes an essential part in the experience or conduct of the individual; when taking the attitude of the other becomes an essential part in his behavior — then the individual appears in his own experience as a self; and until this happens he does not appear as a self. (Mead 195)

It is safe to assume that humans have been contemplating their existence as a singular identity since the genesis of cognitive thought. Recorded history has documented that even Aristotle developed a law of identity in this work Metaphysics stating, “And why is this individual thing, or this body having this form, a man? Therefore what we seek is the cause, i.e. the form, by reason of which the matter is some definite thing; and this is the substance of the thing” (Aristotle). The idea of what constitutes identity has been debated and theorized upon since this time. For actors to fully understand the identity of their characters, they must begin to understand the process by which all humans develop their distinct understanding of self or identity.
There are multiple schools of thought on the subject of identity and how the self is constructed. It would take a lengthier paper and a steadier hand to innumerate them all, but a very useful starting point is the work of George Herbert Mead as interpreted by later sociologist. Mead’s theory of symbolic interaction is simplified most neatly and succinctly by Sheldon Stryker as, “Society shapes self shapes social behavior” (Stryker 285). Society creates the self and in doing so the self creates the behaviors associated within their agency within a group or society. This agency is most clearly performed through the character’s relationships with others in the play. The reason for focusing on this sociological model is particularly useful for actors in that relationships are usually clearly definable within the work and, therefore, easily accessible for research. Also, the entire theory revolves around the notion of "role-playing" much like an actor taking on a role. For the purposes of this paper, I will limit my focus to some of the larger tenants of the theory of symbolic interaction and the application to character analysis and performance.

A. Defining Identity -

In character analysis the actor must begin by developing a definition for the concept of identity. According to the work of Stryker and Burke, identity refers to “a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker Burke 284). This definition can be broken down into two parts of equal gravity, the function of society in formulation of identity and the function of the self. The first half of this definition is the most straightforward in that society determines identity of the self through the creation of roles. In
order for society to function there must be present a collection of individuals functioning for the needs of the society and each role has a prescribed set of expectations of the individual. The individual creates a notion identity based upon fulfilling the needs associated with the role thrust upon him by society.

The second half of this definition is that the identity is, at least in part, “self composed.” It is not enough to say that identity is constructed merely out of the function of the self in playing out the roles prescribed by society. The self determines its participation through two other processes that of self-categorization and social comparison. Through these processes, the self legitimizes and solidifies its own identity. Self-categorization is the “accentuation of the perceived similarities between the self and other in-group members, and an accentuations of the perceived differences between the self and out-group members” (Burke 225). Social comparison is the semiotic process by which the individual creates a positive self-image by associating positive things with their associated group and negative things with other groups, the creation of an other. There is an amount of discernment exercised by the individual in developing identity to either to adopt or reject the roles and expectations.

Actors should be aware of this definition as it allows them to begin a character analysis based upon the relationships within the play. The relationships outline the roles and expectations placed upon the character as an individual member within a society, group or groups. Using Stryker’s definition these roles constitute one half of the character’s identity. The character is both performing a function within the group and determining their value through their opinions of these relationships as seen through behaviors as outlined by the plot of the play. This definition is also useful in giving
substantial weight to the nature of the conflicts within a piece. Often a character’s prescribed roles are at odds with their objectives or desired roles in the present relationship. The character is then forced to abandon the status quo and the expectations within relationships, and in doing so not only alters the implications of the action and plot but alters the very fabric of the character’s identity and notion of self. Such a shift in the self carries an easily understood significance and weight that should be embodied in all character choices.

B. Commitment -

This significance and weight are commonly referred to in theatre as “the stakes” of the play or scene. A symbolic interactionist model for identity directly address this notion by means of the concept of commitment.

Commitment refers to the degree to which persons’ relationships to others in their networks depend on possessing a particular identity and role; commitment is measurable by the costs of losing meaningful relations to others, should the identity be forgone. (Stryker Burke 286)

When a character is faced with the question of either to rebel or maintain a prescribed role, the concept of commitment presents a relative weight to any potential loss of association within a group or society. The character is forced to measure and weigh a cost benefit of maintaining a relationship for the sole purpose of retaining a connection to another versus the potential for changes to the self. This is a powerful tool for understanding what the character puts at stake while pursuing their objective. In the choosing of objectives, tactics, and beats there must be a sense that the character is
burdened by the knowledge that there is a potential loss either to a notion of self or to a relationship. Who the character is, wants to be, the very notion of the self at the most basic level is at stake.

Furthermore, commitment helps to dictate an individual or characters behavior. A character closely committed to the religious aspect of their identity will carry out behaviors that strengthen their role within the group associated with that religion. The plot handily outlines both the start point and destination for the character’s identity. This final identity has to be built upon an active pursuit of objectives through the behaviors that show a commitment to the groups that constitute that ultimate self. In understanding this, the actor is presented with clear choices for best portraying the character’s identity. Also, sociologists have concluded through the concept of commitment that “conceptions of identity and identity salience suggest stability in identities and their salience across time and situations” (Stryker Burke 286). An individual is more likely to retain identity and commitment than they are to change. For actors, this means that shifts in identity should be seen as incremental. Identity does not shift greatly without great struggle and this should be taken into account when making behavioral choices for a character.

C. Multiple social identities

A character’s identity is not simply composed of a relationship to a singular group referred to as society, but there are multiple groups with which the character will associate. An African American woman could possibly identify herself as both African American and female and any other possible identifier. Each group will have
As Brewer points out the need for such balance creates a “drive” or compulsion. Within a play, a character would be compelled to associate or disassociate with relationships or commitments in a struggle to obtain this balance. This compulsion is attached both to the stakes of a scene or entire play and to variations in objectives and tactics. Different impediments will arise that prevent a character from attaining an optimum balance, and the tactics should reflect the necessity for such a change. Objectives should also in some way reflect such a necessity, and the character should always remain in pursuit of this ideal balance as it is a cornerstone for identity.

Also, it is important for actor to remember that “the individual may be aware of having these separate identities but does not engage them both simultaneously” (Brewer 189). The character can have multiple notions of the self and call on each when it is appropriate to the scenario. This seems straightforward but often actors will limit their understanding of a characters identity to dominant identities that are explored in the world of the play. For example, Joe in Kushner’s Angels in American
cannot just be built upon his identity as a Mormon, but is identity as a man, a conservative, and homosexual all need to be explored equally as they inform the character’s search for a balance between inclusion and individuality.

D. Acquired versus ascribed identities

The compulsion to acquire individuality in a world that is seemingly more and more inclusionary has caused an fascinating phenomenon in modern society. As the paradigm for acceptance changes individuals seek to further identify themselves as distinct beings. According to Leonie Huddy there has been a “shift in modern identity from attributes that were essentially determined at birth in medieval times - one’s religion, occupation, and economic status in life - to identities that are much less deterministic and more subject to choice in the modern era” (Huddy 137). This shift presents both challenges and benefits to actors on multiple levels.

An actor needs to be aware of the modern idea of chosen identity while coupling it with the ascribed identities still imposed upon the character by the society in which he or she was born. This conscious movement between identities does not in someway negate an ascribed understanding of the individual’s identity. The definition we spoke of earlier has two halves. The first being that society imposes the necessary roles of identity upon the individual and then the individual will build an identity based upon these roles and personal discernment of their validity. A determination to reject a given identity does not disassociate that role completely from the individual. Society’s view of the individual and expectations may remain intact and that too is part of the character’s identity. Actor’s need to understand this idea when building status for their characters.
Status is most often determined by society’s view of the individual and only rarely vice versa. The actor must be aware of the implications of status that come with associations with both ascribed and acquired identities.

Also, the actor should be aware that this is seen as a purely modern development in identity construction. This sort of freedom of the self to determine associations did not exist for the majority of human existence. This is why I strongly caution actors when they choose to pursue a character analysis beginning with their own personal experience. It is highly unlikely that a character of an early era would even understand that identity can be manipulated by the self. This is not to say that the playwrights or directors will not chose to ignore this for the purpose of metaphor or allegory, but it is important for actors to know when working on earlier works that the formulations of identity were almost completely ascribed by the roles set forth by society and various groups. Therefore, it is best for the actor to use the sociological understanding of identity theory to build a character based upon the relationships in the play and what these affiliations may say about the roles that character is asked to perform in their society or group rather than cloud their understanding by approaching it from their modern knowledge of identity and its fluidity.

E. Conclusion

The symbolic interactive method of understanding identity has been adopted and expanded in the fields of political science, economics, business management, and many others. It is not accepted without reservations but serves an excellent starting point to begin to unravel who the individual is and how they fit into society and the world.
as a whole. To fully tell a story on stage from the view point of another, an actor should understand how that individual character has developed their understanding of self. It affords opportunity for the actor to expand the boundaries of their imagination and understanding of a character and to make better informed and interesting choices of objectives, tactics, status, and stakes within a play.

There are other theories that attempt to answer the questions of identity, but for the purposes performance the symbolic interactive theory offers the most concise and useful formula to begin to analyze a character. The work of theorist and sociologists such as Mead, Stryker, Burke and others have created a theory of identity construction that allows for multiple interpretations by creating variable priorities of involvement based upon commitment, the need for a balance of inclusion and independence, the interplay of society and the self in determination of identity, and the possibility of ascribed and acquired group associations. Understanding that identity is a complex network of roles and relationships in a quest to understand one’s self, allows the actor to research the various societal, communal, and familial relationships to help identify not only how the character sees himself but how each group views the character. This unlocks the imagination of the actor from simply relying upon their own personal experiences and requires an inquisitive look into something completely outside of themselves and the world in which they are comfortably a part.
Chapter II

Defining the Character

The playwright gives you the play, the idea, the style, the conflict, the character, etc. The background life of the character will be made up of the social, cultural, political, historical, and geographical situation in which the author places him. The character must be understood within the framework of the character’s own time and situation. (Krasner 138)

Stella Adler really puts it best. The previous chapter discusses the question of identity largely from a personal perspective. The modalities for understanding ourselves and, what is more important, how we develop and perform our various “roles” are useful to begin to unravel the idea of character. The most important thing to keep in mind though is that this is what we share with the character. The idea is that the character, as a human construct, has an identity constructed by the same means that we as actors (individual beings) do. Therefore, we can begin to create an understanding that will inform our choices.

For most actors, the question is often, “What would I do?” but that question is largely irrelevant. The actor’s identity produces a response based upon the numerous forces within their life. A married man in 2011 cannot say to understand the life of a married man in 1951. The idea that the shared experience of marriage somehow gives
all the answers is folly. The very idea of marriage, how it is viewed and defined by the participants and society has changed drastically in the past millennia. The idea of what it means “to love” may retain some universal power, but the performance of or the act of love is dictated by social, communal, and historical forces unique to each epoch. The question then becomes, “What must this character do?” This is not to say there is one correct way of playing the character, but in relation to the world of the play there exists a notion of right and wrong. Understanding what is “the correct” allows the actor to build their choices in a broader understanding of their impact. The most dynamic moments on stage can be created by a character doing what is opposite to the expected role criteria.

The character is their own being made up of the structures similar to our own, but their existence in a time, place, society that is different from our own holds too many implications to draw the conclusion that the character is anything like the actor at all. The actor must embrace this idea. The actor can begin to understand that their identity consists of the forces of various relationships and the roles created for them. This is true for each character as well. The key is to begin to define those relationships and understand how they impact status, urgency, and emotional levels throughout a play. Each play has a set of given circumstances that offer the foundation to create an understanding of the character’s identity. The relationships associated with the historic, social, familial, and artistic expressions of the given time and location provide the skeleton for an actor to determine a fully realized character.

We will get to a working formula for researching and analyzing and implementing the various forces at play, but first it is important to gain an understanding of what relationships and “audience” mean in forming identity.
I. Audience - Who is watching whom?

An integral step to developing an identity for the character is to explore how behavior is manipulated by the idea of audience. This is not the idea of an actor to audience relationship, which is of course very important within the world of the actor, but it has little real impact on the life of the character. Audience refers to all individuals within the world of the play, be it physically in the presence of the character or in the form of an internal voice that can be said to be watching the activities of the character. Who is watching this individual (character) perform the roles they are destined to embody? Audience includes the people in the moment and an actualization of the character’s internal driving forces. It must include both.

The first half of this definition is quite straightforward. This can include simply the other characters on stage. The relationships being played out have a direct effect on the behaviors. A married couple who has reached a rocky point in their relationship alone in their bedroom partake in a performance very different from one at a cocktail party. Comfort, ease, and status all shift in various degrees based upon the idea of audience. Within the private space of the bedroom the audience for one character is their partner. Their behavior is dictated first and foremost by the function of the relationship as it is defined by the participants. At a dinner party, the couple will interact with one another based upon who can see them. While in private together they may be cold and unforgiving, but in a public place their performance might be manufactured to fit the expectations of those that see and hear their interactions.

The second half of this definition is a bit more problematic. The question it raises is, “Is someone ever truly alone” or “do we (as people) ever stop performing?” As people
when we are alone it seems that our subconscious is so trained to play the role of our self that we develop an inner audience to observe this performance. An obvious example of this is the highly religious or devout individual who believes that God is ever present, and that God sees all. This notion is meant to help dictate private behavior, and consequently causes the devotee to perform their private tasks with God as their audience. This idea is not limited to the religious. Individuals when alone will perform for various audiences ranging from their perfect self to a loved one either dead or living. Our actions when we are alone reflect this internal audience.

Therefore, the character is never without audience. This is particularly helpful in creating a well rounded character in moments of reflection and privacy on stage. As Strasberg said, “Even if you are just sitting quietly, you are not doing nothing. You are continuing to be involved with or to be concerned over or to imagine or to dream or to plan the continuity of the scene” (Strasberg 276). In short, the actor is performing, yes, but so is the character. In these private moments the actions are given specificity, weight, and urgency if the actor’s not merely being alone in this moment, but allows the character to perform for their quiet, ever-present internal audience. Take, for example, in *The Glass Menagerie*, Laura is discovered onstage alone cleaning her precious glass objects. If she is simply doing the task as herself in a state of “alone” the story lacks a dynamic quality and often invites the audience to look away because nothing is happening, but if you add the idea that when she is alone she becomes free to perform for an internal audience such as her father, the tensions and stakes are immediate and present. An actor can create a large variety of deeply interesting moments playing with this idea by simply changing the internal audience from Mr. Wingfield to the woman
Laura wishes she could be, an idealized self. Each help tell a story and they tell the spectators something more about Laura.

Audience is crucial. And the nature of audience is further supported by the notion of relationships. It is not merely that there is someone there (or not there) watching, but the person has to have a clearly specified role in the life of the character to have a true impact. Audience has no meaning without a sense of relationships.

II. Relationships

The character’s identity is based largely upon the “roles” they fill in their life. These roles are determined by the various relationships of the character to their society, culture, community, and family. Each relationship, and the character’s view of each relationship, defines the emotional, physical, and intellectual outcomes of the character’s various undertakings. The character combats the existence of both normalized relationships and the complex subversive relationships encountered in the play. Each relationship is unique and requires a balancing act for the individual.

It is imperative for the actor to acknowledge and fully understand each relationship on stage while being specific about the character’s feelings and knowledge of it. These relationships are typically clearly delineated by the societal and cultural constructs within the world of the play. The relationship of husband to wife changes with the paradigmatic shifts over time. It is common for plays to offer commentary on the nature of such shifts making it imperative to understand just what is changing and not simply to understand marriage in a modern perspective. The actor must understand the cultural and societal implications of marriage at the time within the play. The
relationships are mirrors of the character’s identity. The actor who understands the nature of the relationships and what they mean within the world of the play has a clear road map for the actions within the play. The relationships are all defined from researching information on different levels of influence on the individual in the play.

### III. Breaking it Down... The Spheres of Influence:

Now that we have an understanding of the importance of both audience and relationship, how does an actor define the various audiences and relationships within the play? To do so, the actor needs to have a fully realized understanding of the world of the play. A simple way to understand this is to visualize spheres of influence surrounding the character. In the figure below, we have a rudimentary drawing (Figure 1) to describe this:

Figure 1:

A. The Box – Environment and givens. The “physics of the play.”
B. The World – The “world” as viewed in its largest extent within the play.
C. The Community – Chosen or otherwise. Often a series of circles.
D. The Family – Chosen or otherwise.
E. The Character
This a simplification for the purposes of this paper, but it gives us a working model for understanding how an actor goes about researching and realizing a character on stage. Each sphere represents a group (often represented by a relationship) and the understood role this group wishes the character to perform in the world of the play. These prescribed roles have expectations that are revealed and actualized through the various relationships represented on stage. To understand these relationships and expectations, the actor has to gain a working knowledge of the historical, societal, cultural, and artistic realities or the world of the play.

A. The Box - environmental concerns

This “sphere”, I refer to as the box because it tends to be the most rigidly constructed of the influences. The Box is made up of all the actual givens within the play; time, location, environmental concerns. I refer to these as the “physics” of the play. They are the rules that govern the reality within the play and are typically unbroken even though they may break the physics of the actual natural world. These offer the starting point for all good research. Each moment or period in time there is a reality that is or was associated with it. Specificity is key here.

To begin with 1930s America is fertile ground for building a character. It offers a great deal to examine and develop from, but to be more specific allows for clarity and therefore better supported choices for the actor. A good choice at this point is Chicago, 1934. Here the actor is given or giving theirself enough specifics to understand not just the implications of a section of time but a moment in time and where it has come from
and where it can go. Sometimes, the playwright or director will be less specific, but the actor should examine the particulars of the play’s unique world concisely and clearly.

Also included in “the physics” is the character’s understanding of how the physical world is literally constructed. The sciences are constantly shifting our world view and therefore an individual’s understanding of the physical world has a shifting set of priorities. As well as an example in Brecht’s *Life of Galileo*, Galileo’s world view has shifted with his discoveries and this creates a change in his relationship to others based upon the new knowledge. In many plays, this will not be as pronounced as it is in *Life of Galileo*, but I believe it is necessary for actors to have an understanding of the character’s relationship to the physical world that is based not on a modern understanding of the physical world, but a conception of the world view that is contemporary to the character’s life.

This is often the “easiest” sphere to examine in research. There are many facts and figures from the various time periods the actor will encounter. The information is very important in the sense that size and scope offer the actor a basis for building urgency. Understanding a character environment offers physical choices to the actor as well. Temperature, climate, time, space and many other physical attributes within the play offer opportunities for exploration of character. Environment does not make us who we are but it has the capacity to frame our views and priorities and can alter the means of our communication.
B. Society - A historical understanding of character

The collective memory of Man is such that he forgets nothing he has ever seen, or heard, or read about, or touched. (Adler 17)

This sphere of influence is the largest in the sense that it should encompass the entirety of world as seen through the character. For each of us, there is a notion of “world” of “humankind” that acts as a sort of universal collective. I have chosen to call this “society,” because for each of us our interaction with this universal is typically limited to our narrow experiences in relation to the greater world. At times it is the character’s identity within this super structure that is at the heart of the conflict within a piece. The world has a set of expectations derived from events and circumstances building up over time, and the character is not comfortable or amiable to these expectations. To fully realize such a role, an actor must have a clear understanding of the make up of the “world” specific to the character’s reality.

Historical understanding gives the best possible window into the make up of the world of the play. To see where and how the world that exists at the moment in the play offers the actor the ability to comprehend the size and scope of the character’s identity in the world. Contemporary histories paint a vivid picture of the character’s construction of this largest influence. To better understand this, look at a particular interaction from John Weidman’s book of the Sondheim musical *Assassins*, specifically in Scene 16, in which Lee Harvey Oswald is confronted by John Wilkes Booth just prior to Oswald’s successful assassination of President John F. Kennedy:

**Oswald**: I’m not a murderer.

**Booth**: Who said you were?
Oswald: You just said I should kill the President.

Booth: Lee, when you kill a President, it isn’t murder. Murder is a tawdry little crime; it’s born of greed, or lust, or liquor. Adulterers and shopkeepers get murdered. But when a President gets killed, when Julius Caesar got killed... he was assassinated. And the man who did it...

Oswald: Brutus.

Booth: Ah! You know his name. Brutus assassinated Caesar, what?, two thousand year ago, and here’s a high school drop-out with a dollar twenty-five an hour job in Dallas, Texas who knows who he was. And they say fame is fleeting...

(Sondheim 95)

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the actor asked to play Oswald. In this scene the very nature of historical reality and understanding is shifted for the audience, but what is of most importance to the actor is the historical relationship of Oswald in history and in society as he perceives it. Oswald’s disillusionment and frustration shown through his decision earlier in this scene to commit suicide is fueled by his belief that he is invisible to and within the society and world he lives. This is highlighted by the fact that he meets Booth at this moment, and Booth offers Oswald a chance to be part of the world from which has been excluded for this rejection. Any actor would be compelled to grasp a historical understanding of Oswald’s life and this time in history and how it relates to the history associated with assassination. History tells us who we all are, or at least tells us how a character fits and relates to the concept of society and “world.”
It is important at this moment in discussion to grasp the importance of sources from a contemporary voice to the time of the play. It is not enough to merely pick up an encyclopedic tome to understand the historical experience of a particular time. Contemporary histories and primary sources are more useful because they are not colored by the agenda of a future that has yet to happen within the world of the play. The character’s identity should not be formulated merely from the position of an archeologist reviewing a specimen, but should be considered as an anthropologist interacting with a contemporary individual and judged only by the norms and experience of the character’s time not that of the actor’s.

C. Community - a political understanding of character

The next sphere of influence is that of “community.” The first thing to acknowledge is that this does not mean simply the singular, but is representative of the character’s affiliations with various groups which is typically composed of multiple, distinguishable identities. In many instances the crux of the play is the internal struggle for the character’s identity based upon the collision of the various affiliations and the power they hold over the character’s relationships. A community in this sense is the manufactured one that the character builds with his chosen interactions with many individuals that is often are representations of the many cultural faces of the self. This is a very human endeavor. Identity calls into question who we are on a normal basis and the individual tends to gravitate toward others that share aspects of the self that they both desire or have within their identity construction.
There are many ways to research this idea through literature and first hand accounts of cultural experiences within a given era. For example, in looking at the political structure, it should be considered that a community tends to exist either in collusion or opposition with, or as a consequence of, the political climate of society. Politics, law, and political philosophy offer a rich ground for understanding the complexities of the individual within a community. Why does a character choose the community he has built for himself? Often this is answered by the political urge of belonging. The idea of majority is always in place in the sense that survival is best achieved in numbers. Also the political ideas of a given time offer the actor an understanding of the pressures from the body politic upon behavior and decision making. To better understand this concept, take a look at moment for the character of Bernard in Mart Crowley’s 1968 play *The Boys in the Band*.

**Bernard**: Your dignity. That’s what you’ve got to lose.

**Michael**: Well, *that’s* a knee-slapper! I love *your* telling *him* about dignity when you allow him to degrade you constantly by Uncle Tom-ing you to death.

**Bernard**: *He* can do it, Michael. *I* can do it. But *you* can’t do it.

**Michael**: Isn’t that discrimination?

**Bernard**: I don’t like it from him and I don’t like it from me - but I do it to myself and I let him do it. I let him do it because it’s the only thing that, to him, makes him my equal. We both got the short end of the stick - but I got a hell of a lot more than he did and he knows it. I let him Uncle Tom me just so he can tell himself he’s not a complete loser. (Crowley 102)
In this particular moment, Bernard is speaking of the racially insensitive treatment the effeminate character of Emory is allowed to perpetuate. Bernard stands at an interesting crossroads of identity. The political climate of the late 1960s was volatile, particularly for African Americans. The civil rights movement was changing the political questions of the day and challenging the status quo within the legal fabric of the United States. The second class position of African Americans was actively being rigorously falsified. In addition to the influence of Bernard’s blackness, he is a homosexual. Here he encounters the political collision of these two communities. For Bernard, at this moment in time and in the world presented in the play effeminate qualities outweigh the social stigma attached to his skin color.

For an actor playing Bernard, to understand how the community has an impact on his identity, he must understand the politics of two separate groups. Here the biggest pressure and mitigating factor in Bernard’s behavior and relationships is based upon the political questions surrounding both his sexuality and race. His entire identity cannot be realized without an active look into Bernard’s understanding of his community and his place inside that world. To do this the actor would look to the political structures, ideologies, and legal practices that effect Bernard’s construction of his “place” in this particular time.

The actor should understand, in their research of community, both the positive and negatives of the world view in relationship to a group or groups of people. It is not enough to understand Bernard’s opinion of his blackness, but there is much to be gained by understanding how the white community was thinking about the cultural and social changes happening around them at that time. Doing this offers the actor a chance
to develop a full understanding of the depth and strength of the influences.

Understanding the opposites, the other oppositional side to arguments, is key to building an understanding of status and urgency into a performance.

D. The Familiar - a social understanding of character

The final sphere is that of the familiar. This sphere is often the easiest to fully grasp as it is usually easily defined within the play. This sphere is comprised of the character’s family or familiars. For some characters this does simply mean blood relatives, but it should be expanded to include friends and lovers. This is where the actor delves into the social influences molding the character’s identity. Relationships play a key role in the understanding of this sphere. Often these relationships are very easy to define by singular, universally understood monikers such as, daughter/son, wife/husband, friend/lover and so forth. These relationships seem to remain quite constant, but as society changes, its understanding and construction of gender, sexuality, and status of the relationships within the life of a character can and will change drastically.

A character’s relationship to a familiar is bound by the socially accepted appropriateness of its existence and the belief in correct behaviors within that particular relationship. For example, the roles of husband and wife in just the past fifty years have seen a drastic shift. The differing genders, as they are defined within society today, carry a different meaning from prior decades and therefore the relationship and behaviors have changed. To better understand this concept, look at particular moment for the character of Fran in Albert Innaurato’s play *Gemini* set in 1973.
Fran: *(embraces Francis)* Happy Birthday, son.

Francis: Don’t hang on me so much.

Fran: What are you afraid of? ... And look, if there’s ever anything, well, that conventional people, not like us Geminiani Italians - but other people might be ashamed of, don’t ever be afraid to come to me, no matter how hard it is, I’ll understand - understand?

Francis: I don’t understand. *(Suddenly embraces his father.)* But I understand, O.K.? *(Innurato 47)*

Here we see a familiar relationship unfold, that of father and son. In the 1970s, physical affection would have been considered out of the ordinary if not bizarre between even the most familiar males. Further, a father opening up to a deep level of understanding of the identity of his son would have been highly irregular, especially in this particular case where the “anything” is the sexuality of his son. These facets alone are apparent in this scene, but the actor’s job is to not merely take for granted the obviousness of this to an audience. By today’s standards, this scene would still seem tense, as the definitions of father to son may not have shifted as drastically as other relation dynamics, but the full gravity can be lost by simply attaching a modern understanding to the behaviors and relationship dynamics shown here. The actor would need to research the social make up of the family as dictated by the norms expressed in writing about the church, family, and culture of the time of the play to fully grasp the gravity and urgency required to fulfill the story.

This is a moment to reflect on the “power of no.” When an actor is researching a role, they may encounter research compelling them to act or react as the character
contrary to that which is prescribed by the playwright. The ends of the play and the reality they have discovered do not neatly fuse. As the playwright would understand, this is where the character has actively chosen to subvert the accepted path in their identity laid out by the spheres of influence - in essence the character is simply saying, "no."

This seems elementary, but the gravity and power of such a decision is indicative of the importance of research. An actor cannot merely accept the rebellion as "the way it is" for this particular piece, but to understand identity is to understand "the why it is." Saying no to the pressures that are forming the individual is a really enlightening and powerful thing, and to give such strong moments to an actor is wonderful. To get the most out of it, the actor must realize what a rebellion means and just what and how much is at stake.

**E. The Character**

The character's identity is made up of all of these influences exerting pressure upon the character as an individual. The research allows for the actor to understand the relationships and the relationships comprise the identity. The world, society, community, and the familiar that are discovered in research create requirements of the character's behavior and understanding. The various influences and the requirements they determine cast a role or roles that the character is expected to play out in their world. These roles must be clearly defined to help tell the most vivid story to the audience. The more an actor can understand the roles and the relationships of the character to the other individuals in the play and the influences they represent, the better prepared he is
to understand the actions, urgency, and status needed to successfully deliver a characterization that is truly complete and alive.
Chapter III:
In the Classroom: Teaching Analysis and Research to Preprofessional Students

The formulaic approach I described in the second chapter is a wonderful tool for the actor. It sets out parameters for understanding a fully realized identity for the character. The information gathered affords the actor freedom to engage their imagination with the nuances and clarity afforded through excellent research. In the spring of 2011, I attempted to develop a course based on this formula to a small group of students at Virginia Commonwealth University. What follows is a breakdown of one way to teach a character research and analysis class. This is by no means the only way of accomplishing this task and it is always important to remember that all pedagogy is local. A course such as this one should be developed to reflect and incorporate the teaching objectives and outcomes not only of the theatre department but the liberal arts or general education requirements of the institution.

I. Being Objective within Research and Reading:

To begin the course I had to combat the various levels of liberal arts education in this particular classroom. Virginia Commonwealth University did not at this time offer a reading course in the classics, a significant literature course, or a philosophy requirement that provided the necessary background for students to undertake thorough and objective research in to the ideologies and theories they would encounter. I do not
believe that this is unique and there is probably a theatre program that exists where there is not a shortage of credit hours to provide both a thorough theatrical education and a substantive liberal arts education. This being said, it is vital to begin the course with a survey in reading and researching to develop an understanding of the objectivity necessary for such research and analysis. I used the formula from chapter 2 of this thesis as a model for developing the focus of reading portion of the course.

For the first three to four weeks, I had the students read and engage in discussion upon a cross section of materials from various historical epochs that each related to the topics of history, politics, and society with the addition of arts and media. A complete list of the chosen readings and an example syllabus can be found in appendices 1 and 2 of this thesis. Each topic was specifically designed to correspond with on of the spheres of influence described in chapter 2; “the world,” community, and family, respectively. The section that included readings and examples of arts, entertainment, and media gave further reflection on how the norms for each level of influence and how they permeate the life experience for a character in any time period. The “box” or environment was discussed through readings in each section and through independent research and discussion. For each topic I pulled from various eras and paradigms such as classics, modern, post-modern, and contemporary works. The students were initially given no instruction on how to read or what to read for, but simply to read and share their thoughts. This is an exercise in allowing the students to see how subjective they allow themselves to be when reading, and to afford them the opportunity to first approach the world without fear of misunderstanding a task.
The very first reading was an excerpt from Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War*. This work is dense and unfamiliar to many students with limited experience in reading classical texts. This is not an exercise in intimidation but a way to encourage students to stretch their levels of understanding and to engage in contextual examinations of works. In their encounter with this work, most students found the sense of duty and importance of the state discussed in Pericles’ funeral oration to be merely unchecked nationalism and rather dangerous in their contemporary understanding. Their lens of a young adult living in the twenty-first century was the only perspective with which they could read. This offered a teaching moment to encourage objectivity. Asking questions such as, “How would an Athenian reading this particular book feel about your own understanding?” It is imperative to encourage the students to remove their lens or at least to become aware enough to look past it. The objective is to help the students to engage their imagination free of judgement and to do it in the intellectual pursuit.

This is extremely difficult in practice, because we do not often ask students in acting classes to marry technique and an intellectual understanding or practical professional need together within exercises, scenes, or monologues. The students in this class seem most comfortable with and used to developing the character from the perspective of, “How is this character like myself?” While interesting and somewhat helpful (and oftentimes the most time efficient), it is not necessary nor the richest choice to always connect to the character from such a personal place. Some characters will bear little to no resemblance the actor making this approach both difficult and absurd. Also it is important to keep in mind that the actor can no more stop being him or herself
than they can become someone else so to personalize to such an extent seems to over
complicate. The actor must, of course, have willingness to empathize with the character
to fully commit to the story, but over-personalization is problematic in that the
performance becomes more about personal gratification than about storytelling. The
catharsis, Aristotle might say, is not for the actor as much as it is for the audience. The
actor should never allow the self to come between the audience and the character, but
should simply connect the two through committed, specific choices and the capacity for
telling the story truthfully from the character. Through the readings and teaching of
objectivity, I tried to impart to the students this notion of being outside the self and open
to understanding beyond their views focusing more so on the views of the character.

To this end I chose short readings that offered distinct glimpses into the life of
each time period. I wanted to give the students an opportunity to develop imaginative
assumptions of what a character may or may not think in feel through the relationships
discussed within each passage that were based in the contemporary works of each time
period. For example, I had the students read a section of Augustine’s *City of God*. In this
particular section the students could see how the individual would relate to the church
and how the various relationship a character has with other characters is impacted
directly by an understanding of the expectations and implications of the construct of “the
church” and the church to character relationship. Doing readings without attempting to
create a tie to a specific play or character allows the students to draw conclusions in a
broader and freer sense. This is an exercise in imagination that allows for them to
experience the act of research and analysis and develop their own process of
interpreting the material in a way that best meets their needs and fuels their process as an actor.

II. Analysis and Implementation:

The class then collectively read a play. In this case it was *A Bright Room Called Day* by Tony Kushner. We discussed the play as a group and then using the outline discussed in chapter 2 each student would go away and do personal research to share with the class. I wanted the class as whole to begin a process of research, analysis and implementation together. This allowed for a multitude of ideas that impacted the viewpoints of each student. As a class we developed a researched understanding of the identity of the character of Agnes and the relationships that help form her identity. Using historical, political, and social readings the students could develop a full picture of the size and scope of the actions and relationships on stage giving them urgency and status.

At the end of this portion of the class, I had the students submit a character analysis breakdown based upon a template that can be seen in appendix 3 of this thesis. It was based upon the form of an annotated bibliography where they stated the sources the used, a short synopsis, with the addition of a paragraph or two on the impact of this research on the identity, behavior, and bearing of the character. The students were encouraged to go into great specific detail. They were to focus on urgency, relationships, action, and even physicality. I wanted to see if they were able to actively imagine how this information could be seen to make up the character’s identity and make choices for putting these into action in the abstract sense. Ideally, the student
would be able to visualize and record their ideas before ever putting anything into physical practice. The focus at this point should be specificity.

The emotional depths and reactions the character has to his or her positioning physically and figuratively in the world represented in the play and the relationships that define that position are based on specific information. Physicality in particular needs to be specified. The cultural, societal, and familial situations that effect the character will have physical manifestation. For example, the class discovered that for the character of Agnes in *A Bright Room Called Day*, her indecision was in part due to her discomfort with the expectations of those closest to her, and because of this her physicality was both reserved and deferential. More specifically, most students commented that her shoulders would be rolled forward in a protective maneuver over her core and so on. These specifics are valuable in so much that it creates a uniformity between actions, events, and physicality. I wanted the students to begin with the abstract so that they were not focused on “performing” while trying to build the character but were focused on understanding. Too often students are rushed to present material that is not fully informed or prepared and they again go back to relying to heavily on the self. Students tend to simply perform or feel their way through the material ultimately missing the rich and complex facets that exist within the character.

III. Monologue and Scene Preparation:

The next step in the process was to have each student individually choose a monologue from a play to work on as a character analysis and research exercise. I believed it to be imperative to have the students choose their own materials for this
portion of the class so they were both comfortable with and excited about their piece. Before beginning coaching sessions on their monologues I worked the class through a journey exercise that was originally used and developed by Stella Adler. We began with a simple walk around the room allowing the students to become very aware of how they move, what they see, and even down to the specifics of how the air moves around them as they move through space. Then we take a prompted, guided “journey” through various location where at the end they encountered a loved one. Afterwards, I would ask the students specific questions about what they saw, how they walked, and where they were going. The point of the exercise is to further highlight the need for specificity and the multitude of questions such work will bring up. Knowing what the landscape before them looks like they have something more to interact with and act upon and react. The more specific the imagination the broader the spectrum of choices they have before them. We repeated this exercise a second time with prompts based upon their research for Agnes in *A Bright Room Called Day*. Their location, their body, and everything about the journey was informed from research and detail gleaned from analysis, and their experience was both internally and externally richer. Each student went on to comment that there was a noticeable difference in commitment level and expression that they could achieve, and this expansion was easily seen by myself as well. This exercise is then repeated a third time.

In this final time, the students are given very little prompting, but rather develop their journey for their monologue. They begin in location that is familiar and seek to arrive at the point they need to begin their monologue. By the end of their journey the character encounters whomever is most important for the purposes of their performance
whether the other or a driving presence. This is often the hardest for the students, because they are not completely used to allowing character to drive an exercise. Usually an exercise is driven by a specific skill or set of skills that the instructor is trying to teach, but in this exercise the students are asked to develop an understanding of what they need to experience and need to know to give their performances and arrive at the embodiment of a character. It is imperative that the students have the opportunity to both accept and reject this formulaic process. Each actor will have different needs when it comes to research and its implementation, and this is best discovered on their own.

Outside of class the students were asked to repeat the process of analysis as done for *A Bright Room Called Day*. The students had to provide research examples for each of the topics used, historical, social, familial, and artistic inspirations for the motivations and actions for their individual characters. Again, the focus is specificity. Further, they had to bring the specificity into play in coaching sessions and performance. In addition to normal questions about objective and tactics, I would ask the students what their research informed about their choices regarding to character and acting. I tried to tie each note I gave them to a research opportunity. I wanted the students to discover the drive, stakes, urgency, and action for each moment from their understanding of the character’s identity in the world of the play. I also asked the students to expanded their understanding and play with the idea of audience, by focusing on the relationship between the character and the other for the monologue and various internal audiences for their character. The nature of the relationship had to be extremely clear and the status differences and the nature and play within the interactions had to be based in their research to make such adjustments clear and
actionable. By continuing to ask of the students, “Why?” and “Where did that idea come from?” and “What else?”, they were encouraged to realize that their options were limitless if they could find within the character the reason for moving forward based upon relationships and understanding of the many influences upon the character, the compulsion to say what they are about to say.

Following their work on monologues, the students were assigned a partner and a scene. Again, there is a pedagogy to the process. As the professor I chose the scenes so that the students would experience the necessity of developing a working practice where they do not choose the work, but the work is chosen for them. Here not only did they have to do their research for their own character they had to use their work and specificity to make a cohesive whole with a partner and the research brought by this partner. Often young actors will appear to be in a completely different version of a piece than the version in which their cast mates are performing. This is usually due to the fact that the actor is playing a version of the self instead of a character in the world of the play and has not developed a complete understanding of identity from relationships. It is very easy for the actor to make the easy and obvious choices because their entire characterization is based on an internalize view of the character instead on an imaginative reality fueled by a true understanding of the given circumstances. In class, the students had to make decisions together and have their research reflect the world that they wished to create together, not independently of one another.

In picking the scenes, I was sure to chose moments when the students are faced with characters at a collision of identities. The struggle had to come from the character’s identity coming into direct conflict with the identity of the other character. This helps the
students to pursue a moment where a relationship has an easily seen impact upon the behavior and self-identification for the character. Also, scenes such as these require that the students pursue their understanding of individual characters together, because the moment hinges on both equally. The success or failure of the scene relies totally on the students ability to understand and implement a complete understanding of the character. To encourage the sense of ensemble needed to accomplish all of this, the students worked as a pair to complete the character analysis in the same way they had done for both their monologue and *A Bright Room Called Day*. This afforded a dialogue about both characters from two individual perspectives without causing conflict that can result from an “actor doesn’t give other actor notes” scenario.

Throughout the entire process, it is really important that I continually tested the students on the resolve and commitment they had for their choices. The point of doing character analysis is that students make the strongest choices for each moment. Constructively undermining their choices asked the students to look to see if they had gone deep enough and if they could justify just what they are trying to accomplish. If the students could convince me that their choices were strong when questioned, then they were able to justify and commit within themselves to the necessary level. This kind of work was the most stressful and annoying for the students, but I think it is the extremely important strategy for working preprofessional actors. The stronger their arguments are for what feels, looks, and is right the better equipped they are to deal with the stress of a short rehearsal process with limited resources. A director of course has the final say, but it is also important that the students learn not only to just change but to understand fully why they change or know where to find that new justification and commitment. This also
encourages the students to make the least obvious and therefore most interesting choices from moment to moment. This became even more integral in the next portion of the class.

**IV. Cold Readings and Setting Themselves Apart**

It is imperative to include a completely practical portion of any supplemental acting skills course. For preprofessional actors, especially in advanced skills classes, the course should include or culminate in a practical application problem for the students. For this course, I decided that the students would be faced with the ultimate actor’s dilemma. They would be asked to, on short notice, prepare for a cold reading scenario within an audition scenario. Often at this moment students and plenty of professionals alike, will rely upon simply their acting technique and ability to pursue objectives and make choices based upon an internalized understanding of the basics of the character or the “like me” basis. This is quite useful, and has given great results. This course, though, is to offer the students with a detailed and thorough look at a particular skill that would set them apart in the world of theatre and in the world of auditioning. The techniques we discussed throughout the course are designed to help the students make strong, powerful character choices instead of simply good actor choices. The difference can mean the difference between not getting and getting a role in the competitive marketplace. As a director, I look for actors who step outside the comfort of self in auditions and take on the challenge of trying to present a living, breathing characterization in no matter how limited the time. It shows that an actor is
committed not to the individual experience but the world of the play and the audiences experience of a story.

In the final two weeks of the course I presented the students on two separate occasions with a list of three plays that they would have to come prepared to read from. They had to do all independent research from determining which characters they believed they would be considered for to the beginnings of an active characterization of those character. It was important that I chose both some obvious choices of possible roles and some less obvious choices. I did not want to the students to take for granted that they could predetermine the direction of their career, because character work is universal and necessary for any character that will be played. Also, I wanted the students to be aware of the questions that arise when you are asked to play a role that is wholly wrong for or not tailored to them. This happens to a lot of actors in repertory companies, and I have seen young actors become overwhelmed with dealing with characterizations so far outside of their comfort zone, so far away from who they see within themselves.

The students presented a monologue to begin and were asked questions pertaining to the character and their process for understanding the world in which that character resides. Then the students were to read with a provided reader. This was to allow the students research and understanding to stand on its own. This is really necessary for students to get used to this process, because it happens within the professional world a great deal and sometimes you are partnered with fellow actors who have no real understanding of their character or the world of the play. After their readings the students were again asked to answer questions regarding their choices
and research. This led to some fascinating moments. The students were at times completely dead on in their analysis and other times failed completely to grasp important factual portions of the given circumstances. In class discussion I tried to encourage students to look specifically at how they prioritize their research. Developing an understanding of the process they need to develop for their most successful showing.

The following week we repeated this process focusing on more opportunities for cold readings with partners chosen from fellow actors in the class. This afforded the students the opportunity to prepare for a short time with a partner and develop a collective understanding quickly. This is often something that is left out of preprofessional training and can be problematic. Students will find themselves working with partners and need to develop a way of communicating the necessary intentions for the audition. It is my firm belief that firm character work makes this process a lot easier because the actor will know in advance what to communicate in terms of their specific needs, and they have strong foundations to rely upon when a partner is less skilled or prepared. At the end of this process, the students were again asked questions and given small adjustments to try to begin practicing using research to be more adaptable on the spur of the moment.

This faux “real world” experience is often the biggest struggle for the students because they do not always have the opportunity to practically apply skills learned in class to a professional endeavor. The more opportunities the students have to be called upon to fully synthesize information and exercise their knowledge the more equipped they are when they leave the controlled and safe laboratory of the classroom. This is
what preprofessional training should focus upon, and the purpose of this entire course was to develop a specific skill that will offer opportunity and strength in the professional theatrical world.

V. Aftermath and Final Notes:

It is hard to fully get a picture for whether this course was fully a success or failure. This was a pilot program of sorts designed to test a technique that is early in development. The students definitely showed growth in the ability to intellectually engage in the understanding of a character while remaining objective. They grew in their ability to stretch their imagination to fully embrace a character that is not the student’s self. They were able to see individuals completely built outside themselves. They also began asking themselves questions that helped develop imagination and specificity within their imagination. Many of the students unlocked themselves from the concern of making the correct choice, but instead saw how a well prepared understanding of a character offers many correct choices and avenues to pursue. They grew in confidence and they grew in thirst to understand.

I think the greatest challenge is engaging acting students in the process of active thinking that does not have them physically engaged at all times. There is an almost perverse theory that thinking, for the actor, is harmful. I think the reality is far more complex and variable - a rich argument outside the purview of this paper, but important to mention. There is a place for focusing on action outside of thought and impulses, but an actor who develops a real understanding of why the character behaves is better equipped to do action with the urgency and strength necessary to give a dynamic
performance. A course such as this encourages students to think and act when both or either is necessary. The reading section of the course feels very passive to students, but their has to be a climate where intellectual understanding is equally important as physicalization. This course in particular has the benefit of requiring both. I think finding a balance is harder than even I realized and I would include more movement and imaginative play exercises such as Adler’s journeying exercise to allow the students a more comfortable process for learning application of the ideas we discuss.

This chapter is not to suggest that this is the only means or that this formulaic approach will work with all learning types or actors’ processes. No technique, approach or skill is that neatly designed to speak to all actors and all talent. This class is more about taking a formula and turning it into a personalized plan for success with character work. I think it is important to encourage the students to face this kind of work and find ways to incorporate part or all of it into their individual goals for their acting. I think acting technique is served by constant scrutiny and constant augmentation. Character work does not replace objective, tactic, or any other strong basic actor training, but it affords the actors another means for understanding the importance of such work. Also, it give young actors the benefit of seeing how far they can stretch the limits of technique by truly trying to step outside of themselves. Many techniques offer so much to the actors’ selves, but do not always allow expansion past finite borders. This course and this formulaic approach is meant to help expand boundaries and eliminate the limitations of the self.
In Conclusion

This thesis began is with what I called a problem and an observation. Unfortunately it does not end with a solution. I continue to discover in the classroom and in rehearsals that actor’s continue to make their work about the process of acting rather than the life of the character. The actor’s job is that of a storyteller, and to tell the best story with the greatest care is to have an imaginative and informed understanding of the character that they play. It is not enough for someone to have an understanding of the emotions or plot of a piece of theater, because all of that remains inside him. The actor should never focus on himself when a character should have an independent voice based and born of his own world and own identity.

Sociologists have laid the ground work for inquiry into the identity of ourselves and others with their work on the symbolic interactive method of understanding identity. By breaking down the various forces impacting the character’s conscious and subconscious construction of self into spheres of influence the actor can use research to fully form and fully commit to an exciting interpretation. The social sciences have adopted identity theory and symbolic interaction as a means to understand the world and individuals in it, but acting training has seemingly remained unaffected or ignorant of such a wealth of understanding.

I attempted in this paper to bridge this gap and create a formula for teaching character analysis to young actors. The idea that an actor should start from their
personal experience is valid on some levels but should not be the only means for creating character. Actors and students need to be exposed to this kind of intellectually based research and analysis to give their performance opportunity to grow with their imaginations. The more an actor knows the more they are free to make decisions with depth and ingenuity, truly bringing to life a character.
Bibliography
Bibliography


Appendix A

Reading List:

Excerpts from:


FALL 2011: THEA 491
Advanced Character Research and Analysis
Political, Social, Historical and Artistic Impacts on Human Behavior

Dates and Times/Location: Tuesdays and Thursdays 11-12:30/Shafer 201
Instructor: Jeremy William Hilgert (hilgertjw@vcu.edu)
Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday: 2-4 or by appointment

Course Objectives:
• Students will be guided through a practical research and analysis process for approaching characters.
• Students will be given workshop opportunities to discuss the impact of character in design, direction, and playwriting.
• Students will learn active and useful tactics for researching and reading various genres of different time periods.
• Students will learn how to synthesize the knowledge of the character’s world and use it to develop behavioral choices (action, urgency and status).
• Students will gain an understanding of how to build given circumstances and “stakes” from research and analysis.
• Students will learn how to quickly craft an analysis of a character for the purpose of a “short notice cold reading”.

Materials:
- Course Pack- available at Uptown Color
- The Invention of Love by Tom Stoppard (ISBN: 155936078X)
- Student is responsible for obtaining necessary monologues and scenes.
**Attendance:**

Attendance is vital for this course. A large portion of the class relies on lecture and in-class discussion. For that reason, students are allowed TWO unexcused absences. For EACH additional unexcused absence, the students' final letter grade will be lowered by one letter grade. Being on time is critical as late arrivals disrupt the class. If a student arrives more than 15 minutes late to class they will receive an unexcused absence for that day. Two late arrivals count as one unexcused absence.

**Grading:**

Students will be graded on written work, participation, and performance preparation.

Grading Scale (this is a 10 point grading scale):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>100-91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>90-81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>80-71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>70-61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>below 61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graded Work:

- Participation: 10%
- In-class Analysis: 10%
- Monologue Analysis/Performance: 20%
- Scene Analysis/Performance: 20%
- Cold Readings Prep.: 20%
- Final Analysis: 20%

**Participation:**

Students are expected to participate in classroom discussions on readings and projects.

**Written Assignments:**

All written assignments must be TYPED in 12 point Times New Roman font with 1-inch margins. All sources must be cited with proper MLA citation. All pages must be SINGLE SIDED and STAPLED.
Performance Projects:

Monologue:
Students will choose a monologue from any play written after 1940. The play does NOT have to be set after 1940, but it must be written and copyrighted after 1940. The students will develop an understanding of the character through the process learned in class and be able to answer questions on their choices and research.

Scene:
Students will be assigned a scene and scene partner. Together the partners will develop an understanding of their characters and necessary relationship through the process learned in class. The students must be able to discuss any conflicts and answer questions on their choices and research.

Written Projects:

In-Class Analysis:
Students will be guided through a four layered process of character analysis. We will be looking at the character of Agnes in Kushner’s *A Bright Room Called Day*. At the completion of the class guided analysis, students will hand in their personal research and analysis.

Monologue/Scene Analysis:
Students will hand a short description of the various sources they have used in their research for their particular monologue and scene. The student should properly cite all sources and give a brief description of how and why they chose to use these sources.

Final Analysis:
Within the first two weeks of class, students will decide upon a play and character on which to write their final diagnostics. The play can be any play written after 1920. The format and what is to be included will be discussed on the first day of classes and through-out the in-class analysis process.

Cold Reading Preparation:
The final two weeks of class are set aside for an exercise in cold readings. Students will have a limited time in which to research 2-4 potential audition opportunities. They must come prepared with their research done and be prepared to apply and adjust in a cold reading scenario.

**Instructors Note***:
Throughout this course we will be examining many different works. You may have a strong opinion about some of these, and I am anticipating that. I expect from the student to try to be as objective as possible. We are more interested in a character’s response to these works then we are in the actor’s. That being said I also expect students in class discussion to remain respectful of the thoughts and feelings of others when responding to the ideologies and philosophies we discuss. We are not making value judgements for ourselves. We are examining what value, if any, these ideas have in the world in which the character exists.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to Course</td>
<td>Readings on History: DUE&lt;br&gt;Thucydides - <em>History of The Peloponnesian War</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Go Over Syllabus</td>
<td>Thueydides - <em>History of The Peloponnesian War</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explanation of written assignments</td>
<td>Thueydides - <em>History of The Peloponnesian War</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Readings on the Arts: Media&lt;br&gt;Design</td>
<td>New Plays Workshop: Character and the Playwright&lt;br&gt;Guest speaker - TBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>In Class Analysis: Character and Politics</td>
<td>In Class Analysis: Character and Society&lt;br&gt;DUE: Reading: <em>A Bright Room Called Day</em> by Tony Kushner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>In Class Analysis: Character and History</td>
<td>In Class Analysis: Character and the Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>DUE: In Class Analysis Paper&lt;br&gt;TBA</td>
<td>Character and the Director: Director-proofing a Performance: Guest Speaker: TBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Monologue Prep: Coaching</td>
<td>Monologue Prep: Coaching&lt;br&gt;DUE: Rough Draft Monologue Analysis</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

56
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Thursday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Monologue Performance</td>
<td>Monologue Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Due: Monologue Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>TBA</td>
<td>Scene Prep: Coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Scene Prep: Coaching</td>
<td>Scene Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DUE: Rough Draft Scene Analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Scene Performance</td>
<td>Cold Reading Prep:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Due Scene Analysis</td>
<td>Postmortem: Scene/Monologue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Design/Character:</td>
<td>Monologue/Cold Reading:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 3</td>
<td>Visiting speaker - TBA</td>
<td>Solo Auditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Announcement of Cold Reading 1</td>
<td>Announcement of Cold Reading 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Cold Read 2:</td>
<td>Postmortem:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working with a partner.</td>
<td>Discuss Cold Readings</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Final Analysis is due by noon for</strong> Final Exam.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Bibliographic Template

Your Name

Jeremy Hilgert

THEA 491: Advanced Character Analysis

Due Date

Title of Play, Author

Character’s Name

Character Description: Age, sex, nationality, race, etc.

Environmental Elements: Time, place, etc. Be specific... specificity only helps.

Research:

I. Historical Sources: (this should be done for each source you use. I would like to see a minimum of two in each section! Thats a MINIMUM!)

[bibliographic information... MLA format]

Summary: What was the information you got out of this article.

Usage: How did/would you use this information in building the character... actions? behaviors? relationships? relationships to whom or what? Be specific and objective.

II. Political Sources:
Summary: What was the information you got out of this article.

Usage: How did/would you use this information in building the character... actions? behaviors? relationships? relationships to whom or what? Be specific and objective.

III. Social Sources:

Summary: What was the information you got out of this article.

Usage: How did/would you use this information in building the character... actions? behaviors? relationships? relationships to whom or what? Be specific and objective.

IV. Arts and Media Sources:

Summary: What was the information you got out of this article.

Usage: How did/would you use this information in building the character... actions? behaviors? relationships? relationships to whom or what? Be specific and objective.

(Please note with any visuals... please include a website or some other means of for me to take a look. If you use music... just the title will be satisfactory.)
Vita

Jeremy William Hilgert was born in East Stroudsburg, PA on June 1, 1981, and is an American citizen. He graduated from East Stroudsburg Senior Highs School in East Stroudsburg, PA in 1999. He received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with a concentration in American Government and Public Policy from Centenary College in 2004. Jeremy has been working in professional theater for the last 20 years. His work encompasses nearly 80 different productions as performer, director, and coach. His credits include: *Seussical* and *A Midnight Cry* at The Growing Stage [Netcong, NJ]; *Carousel, The Music Man* and *Plain and Fancy* at The Round Barn Theater [Nappanee, Indiana]; *Nunsense A-men* at Cornwells Dinner Theater [Marshall, Michigan]; *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast, 42nd Street* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* at The Palace Theater [Manchester, New Hampshire]; *42nd Street, The Pirates of Penzance* and *Fiddler on the Roof* at Shawnee Playhouse [Shawnee-on-Delaware, Pennsylvania]. Jeremy is a proud member of Actors Equity Association. He has taught Effective Speech for Business Professionals, Advanced Character Analysis and Research, and was often a guest lecturer for courses in dramatic literature and theatre history at Virginia Commonwealth University.