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Love the Art in Yourself: Empowering Actors to Honestly, Comfortably, and Successfully
Embody their Characters

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INTRODUCTION

As an actor, I have performed in more than twenty plays and worked with ten different directors over the years. The outcomes of these performances have varied, and so has the effectiveness of the different approaches I have experienced. As an early career director, I am working to find my own creative voice as well as my personal style of directing and communicating with actors. The purpose of this process is to address the relationship between the actor and the director and how this can best serve a production from the rehearsal process and into performances. A director's initial role is to create a concept for the show that will hold the entire piece together through the production process. They must then be able to execute this in a way that cultivates trust within the entire team. Over the course of my research, I found that there is not one key technique or approach that will work on all actors. Rather, it is important to take into consideration every individual's personal strengths and work together toward a common vision for each character and show.

In my experience, I have met both successes and challenges. I have found my most effective methods have grown out of patience and keeping a laidback atmosphere in my rehearsal rooms. My biggest challenge has been working with my peers. Navigating this power dynamic can be tricky since it is sometimes difficult to maintain a degree of professionalism when you are in a room with people you are overly comfortable with. The next step for me is to make sure that I keep the actors' trust in the rehearsal room so that these experiences can translate to a truthful performance for them onstage.

From April 2018 through March 2019, I had the privilege of working with nearly twenty dedicated and skilled student actors. The scope of these projects varied between partial scenes and full-length plays, the final of which closed on March 3, 2019. In April 2018, I worked on a Leadership Institute project in which I examined the application of my personal strengths in a

theatrical setting to determine what constitutes effective leadership. I worked with three other students, directing them in the final scene of Martin Sherman's *Bent*, a play that explores the persecution and erasure of the LGBTQ community in Nazi Germany. During the Fall 2018 semester, I assistant directed the BSU Theatre Department's original Lab Theatre production, *Word for Word*, with the goal of expanding my understanding of the directorial process in devising new work. The collaborative team that developed *Word for Word* included myself, BSU Professor Lisa Rafferty, and fellow BSU students Charles Hill, Dylan Crowley, and Michael Eckenreiter. During this process, we created three distinct documentary theatre pieces using interviews and viral internet material to explore the topics of suicide and depression, family holiday traditions, and the impact that technology and internet use have on our daily lives. January through March 2019, I directed a full-length production as part of BSU Theatre's Student Repertory Theatre slot. *Hand to God* by Robert Askins is a contemporary dark comedy that follows awkward teenager Jason as he navigates the loss of his dad, normal teenage strife (the high school bully and his crush on the girl next door), and a potentially possessed hand puppet named Tyrone.

Throughout the aforementioned work, I began researching the most popular contemporary directing and acting methods in order to apply these to my rehearsals. I applied selected exercises from my research to *Hand to God* while conducting character development and blocking rehearsals simultaneously during the production process. Exercises were sourced from:

- *An Actor Prepares* by Constantin Stanislavski
- *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* by Melissa Bruder, et al.
- *The Viewpoints Book: A Practical Guide to Viewpoints and Composition* by Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, and

- *Sanford Meisner on Acting* by Sanford Meisner.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of each technique, the methodology I followed included direct observation and conducting interviews with all of the performers I had worked with. While the methodology used is subjective, this is the best way to measure an actor's experience because of the subjective nature of live theatre, which can be influenced by external factors at all times. I asked them the following questions:

1. Which rehearsal exercises were most effective for you?
2. Which rehearsal exercises were least effective for you?
3. How do you think your performance developed from the rehearsal process into performances?

Evaluating these three processes was an opportunity to track my own growth as an artist and to help other actors find out what works best for them. Because of the subjective and collaborative nature of theatre, the same approach does not always work for an actor from experience to experience, and an approach that works for one actor may seem totally useless to another. Part of finding your artistic voice is being able and willing to try things and file them away for another time if they don't feel applicable to a specific situation. The actors I worked with on these projects were always receptive to learning new techniques and remained dedicated to the final product through the entire process.

STANISLAVSKI

Constantin Stanislavski's methods are the most widely used in traditional Western theatre settings. Throughout the last years of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries, Stanislavski was co-founder and a director at the Moscow Art Theatre, where he spent time developing his system. This system is geared toward breaking out of artificial acting choices and

bringing psychological truthfulness to a character. This is done by closely analyzing and determining the character's superobjective (the overarching "want" that carries them through the entire piece), objectives (individual "wants" that may change from scene to scene), obstacles (what is in the way of them getting what they want), and finally, using verbs (actions shown through physical and vocal choices and blocking) to carry out the act of getting what they want.

In *An Actor Prepares*, Stanislavski asserts that, in these steps, there needs to be a sense of truth and excitement to the actor, otherwise nothing will be honestly playable to them. This boils down to deciding on objectives that are strong and can instill a call to action within the actor (Stanislavski 119). When determining objectives and verbs within scenes, it's important to steer actors away from nouns because nouns can "call forth an intellectual concept of a state of mind" (Stanislavski 116), which can lead to overgeneralizations in portrayals instead of truthfully living the action of the play. The example that Stanislavski references is one in which a student wishes to portray power. He reduces himself to making physical gestures that he thinks might portray power, but it is not convincing. To focus the actor's energy, he suggests that the actor instead "earn the affection of the public to appear powerful" (118). This is a tangible goal that a performer can work toward. An actor can use the verb as a means of guiding them toward stronger physical and vocal choices in line with their objective. Another example could be that, in Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*, the character Sabina's objective is to survive impending doom. In order to survive, she can't just be strong; she instead seduces those around her to ensure her own protection. If the actor playing Sabina is seducing Mr. Antrobus, the head of the household, she might selectively use physical touch to gain his attention or prominently display parts of her body that he might be attracted to.

Stanislavski's system also encourages making use of subtext, the underlying meaning in a line that is not explicitly verbalized but is instead implied through "intonation, gesture, body

posture, pauses, or choices in action” (Sawoski 9). Subtext can be informed by a character’s backstory, supplied by the playwright through what the character says or what others say about them. It can also be more up to the interpretation of the actor. For example, in *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Sabina is always at odds with Mrs. Antrobus, her boss and the matriarch of the household. When Sabina is giving her two weeks’ notice because Mr. Antrobus, her former lover, has sent her a sign that he wants to rekindle their relationship, she literally says, “I’m giving my notice. I’m leaving two weeks from today,” but the underlying intention for the actor could be, “I’ve won this round,” when saying it to Mrs. Antrobus. It is up to the actor to determine how they are going to convey this underlying meaning.

By far, Stanislavski’s method was the most accessible way of connecting student actors to the material and to their characters. This makes sense because it may be the easiest for us to reason through – as humans, we are always actively trying to take care of our own wants and needs. In the three different processes, we found ourselves revisiting Stanislavski when there were issues that needed to be resolved. These issues included but were not limited to acting that felt dishonest, interpretative differences, and self-conscious actors. Any time there was a problem that needed to be addressed, my first response was always, “Let’s sit down and talk about it.” The greatest question I was ever asked by a director was, “What are you doing in this scene?” Usually, the answer to this question will come out as, “I’m feeling...” to which, the director would respond, “Yes, but what are you doing?” Eventually, we would come to a consensus on something that was playable and relatable. I used this approach frequently to break down stale acting moments in my directing experiences.

One instance in which Stanislavski and verbs were helpful was when we were approaching the content of *Bent* because each character’s stakes were too high for the actors to personally identify with. Tiago played Max, a German man who was sent to a concentration

camp for being gay and managed to bribe a guard into putting him in the same area as the Jewish prisoners rather than with the other LGBTQ prisoners. Eric played Horst, another gay prisoner who falls in love with Max when he meets him in the camp. Will played one of the German soldiers working in the camp, watching over and threatening Max and Horst as they carry out their secret, forbidden conversations.

Will had approached this role using just his own US military background to inform his choices, but this proved only to help him form a baseline of physicality and nothing more. As discussions about the play evolved, we determined the given circumstances of all three characters in the final scene, including why this soldier was working in this concentration camp, what he wanted from Max, and what secrets he himself was keeping (his attraction to Max). Stanislavski stresses that imagination plays the “greatest part” (51) in creating a theatrical reality for the actor. Once we had filled in this soldier’s given circumstances and made him more three-dimensional, I was able to give Will the verb “to play” with Max and Horst, which stemmed from his character being selfish and sadistic (Sexton). From this came a world of new choices vocally and physically that gave Eric and Tiago plenty to react to, including new tactics surrounding the idea of physical intimidation. For Eric (Horst), using Stanislavski’s methods was a way for him to think more about his own goals of emotionally accessing Max by appealing to his sense of survival, rather than just seeing himself as an opposing force within the play (Lander). It was clear that this method allowed both actors to connect themselves to the story they were telling on a deeper level despite their inability to relate to the specific circumstances that the play was historically written about.

The Lab Theatre process also benefited from discussion of objectives and verbs. The actors in the three original pieces presented were all tasked with performing documentary theatre, which is a nontraditional genre where they were stuck mostly performing monologues

with a less clear trajectory of character development. Because of this, we had to work to find goals either within each specific twenty-minute piece or within each monologue. Aya felt that she had a particularly difficult time across all three pieces connecting to the material because of its disjointed nature. When we were given one-on-one time to talk through character intent, she felt that she was then able to form a full story from beginning to end for her characters (Khoury). Jess also found this part of the process helpful. She had had prior experience working with monologues in intro acting courses, so my way of connecting with her to get an honest performance was to go through the process of subtext and directing her to say certain phrases as if she was really saying another thing. This unlocked a level of subtlety in her performance that she previously had not accessed (Deutsch). Emily, another actor in Lab, felt that these discussions allowed her to end the process with a “clearer vision of who everyone else was” in relation to her own journey (O’Donnell).

In *Hand to God*, objectives, obstacles, verbs, and given circumstances were among some of our first discussions. Between casting and the first rehearsal, I instructed the actors to thoroughly read and re-read the play in order to come up with a backstory outside of the play’s action, filled in by their imaginations. This step of the process is important because, as Stanislavski says, “all such feelings are the result of something that has gone before. Of the thing that goes before, you should think as hard as you can. As for the result, it will produce itself” (38). On the first day of rehearsal, we were able to hit the ground running, listening to each other’s given circumstances and how we might relate to or be informed by this information. Dakota (Timothy) felt that this process seemed unsure at the beginning because it was new to him, but that it did help him think more deeply about the material (Lopes).

PRACTICAL AESTHETICS

The next method we explored was Practical Aesthetics. This technique was developed by award-winning actor William H. Macy (*Fargo*, *Shameless*) and award-winning playwright David Mamet (*Glengarry Glenn Ross*, *Oleanna*). In some ways, it branches off of Stanislavski's approaches, but it also diverges from these approaches at times too. Like Stanislavski, this technique is rooted in character analysis. However, Practical Aesthetics focuses more on the actor's own experience and relationship to the play than on deep psychological analysis of the character. The intended result is acting choices driven by the will of the actor. The approach is broken down into four steps. They are:

1. What is the character literally doing in this scene?
2. What does the character want from the other character in this scene?
3. What is the Essential Action?
4. What is the action like to me?

First, the actor must determine what they are literally doing in a scene; it is important that they not confuse this with Stanislavski's concept of objectives and verbs because it is not the same. This first step must be as literal as possible. For example, in Act IV, Scene 1 of William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Beatrice is literally crying about her cousin, Hero. This differs from Stanislavski's application of activity in a scene because it is not always dependent on the other character and does not necessarily have anything to do with tactics or emotional objectives.

Second, the "want" must be determined. An actor's "want" will always be dependent on the scene partner, so the question asked is, "What do I want from the other person in this scene?" Continuing with the example of *Much Ado*, Beatrice wants Benedick to avenge her cousin for her.

After determining these first two pieces of information, the actor must then distill that into a universal human desire, known as the “Essential Action.” This cannot be as specific and detailed as the literal action and want; instead, it should be something that could be universally applicable to many situations. In the tradition of Practical Aesthetics, there are only eleven essential actions that can be played. They are:

1. To get someone on my team
2. To lay down the law
3. To draw the dividing line
4. To get someone to take the big risk
5. To get my due/retrieve what is rightfully mine
6. To get someone to see the big picture
7. To enlighten someone to a higher understanding
8. To tell a simple story
9. To get to the bottom of something
10. To close the deal
11. To get someone to throw me a lifeline (McBroom)

The final step in this process is for the actor to come up with a personalized “As If.” This is another area where Practical Aesthetics can get confused with Stanislavski, but also what separates the two in ideology. While Stanislavski’s methods can sometimes require an actor to rely on sense memory of a real-life event in order to make a situation personally relatable, Practical Aesthetics’ “As If” must be nothing more than a hypothetical. If an actor uses a memory they’ve already experienced, they cannot act fully truthfully in the moment because they already know the outcome of that memory. The goal of the “As If” is to “create for yourself a tangible, personal stake in the action you have chosen” (Bruder et al. 28). Once these steps have

been followed, the actor can then be fully invested in the scene at hand and make new discoveries in their work.

We focused on this technique only with the *Hand to God* cast, to mixed reception. At this point in the rehearsal process, actors were already blocked and off-book, and we were in the process of running scenes and working specific moments to their fullest potential. Although the actors found this experience to be challenging, I observed that the parts of the play that we applied these steps to ended up gaining more depth and honesty than they previously had because they were now being approached with personalized and honest emotions.

The experience levels in the cast varied, from freshmen coming right out of high school theatre, where acting techniques aren't typically explored in detail, to graduating seniors with more extensive resumes. Across the board, most of the cast found the process of going through each step to be overwhelming. Abigail, who played Jessica, was appreciative of the time we took to discuss the steps. While she found the specific step-by-step process "tedious" and "a bit odd" due to the unfamiliar approach, in the end, she found it to be helpful. This is because, after going through these steps and then running the scene, she encountered experiences and moments with her scene partner, Eric (Jason/Tyrone), that allowed her to tie back to the superobjectives she'd discovered during our Stanislavski days. This further supports the idea that each technique can have its value from project to project or even within just one project. For Abigail, Jessica was literally sitting in a church basement with Jason, she wanted Jason to ask her out on a date, her essential action was to get someone to take the big risk, and it was as if she was trying to get her high school crush to notice her. All of this was in line with the superobjective we decided earlier, which was to get Jason to like her back (Dwyer).

The biggest breakthrough with this technique came from Colleen, who played Margery. As a twenty-one-year-old college student with no spouse and no children, she had been

struggling the most with trying to find her character, a woman in her forties with a teenage son and a deceased husband. There was also a moral disconnect which served as a source of distress for Colleen because Margery commits statutory rape. Adding the Practical Aesthetics to the mix was helpful to Colleen because the "As If" allowed her to remove herself from Margery for a moment and instead play the scene with her own personal stakes by drawing these analogies. Before this discussion, she had a lot of trouble relating personally to much of what Margery was experiencing, and thus having issues playing the character honestly. By the end of the Practical Aesthetics rehearsal, Colleen felt that she was able to conduct herself genuinely in the scene and felt that she had a much more personal and thorough understanding of Margery in order to bring her to life without passing judgment on her (Sweeney).

For Colleen's scene partner, Dakota (Timothy), the process was equally helpful. Dakota's high school program had not done much exploration of new techniques, and his former director had always encouraged their actors to take a more Method approach. This approach, championed by Lee Strasberg at the Actors Studio in New York City, builds on Stanislavski's ideas by capitalizing on the use of affective memory, in which the actor must draw upon a lived experience of their own to get them up to the emotional capacity of their character in the scene (Strasberg 114). Being able to personalize the experience of Timothy differently, through the use of an essential action (to get someone on my team) and then a personal "As If" (as if my mother will not listen to me telling her we need to leave the grocery store and go home right now) allowed Dakota to take a more removed approach that was less emotionally draining by stripping away the exact stakes of the specific situation in the scene (Lopes).

Alternatively, Ethan, who played Pastor Greg, found Practical Aesthetics to be among the least helpful approaches in his process. Rather than enjoying the personal approach in the "As If" section, he found it to be "frustrating trying to personally relate." He had a hard time finding

a connection to Greg at all because he could not relate it even vaguely to anything he'd been through. Greg is another middle-aged adult (Ethan is a twenty-year-old college student), a pastor, and spends much of the play leveraging his position of authority and Margery's emotional vulnerability in an effort to romantically win her over. Additionally, Ethan's preference as an actor is often to remove himself from the equation and discover a completely new person in each of his characters. Despite the frustration, he saw value in fully exploring this technique by taking the time to sit down and get into such intense play analysis. At the very least, it offered him valuable insight into how other actors perceived Pastor Greg, informing his choices moving forward. He found that it opened him up to a new interpretation of Greg, where he really does care about Margery. Because of this, it wouldn't make sense for him to quickly treat her with resentment upon his discovery of her transgressions after he'd given her so much patience and sympathy before. In our discussions of essential actions, we addressed the idea of absolving Greg of guilt, so the action, "to get someone to see the big picture" applies here. Instead of placing blame on Margery, using the idea of absolving of guilt in the context of the bigger picture made Ethan play it so that "Greg recognizes he has wronged too, and that he was partially to blame for the perversions within the church" (Child).

VIEWPOINTS

From Practical Aesthetics, we moved into Viewpoints, a technique first used by dancer and choreographer Mary Overlie as a means of codifying movement and dance improvisation. This technique was built upon by seminal directors Anne Bogart and Tina Landau into the nine viewpoints of time and space. Bogart, who founded SITI Company with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki and served as Artistic Director at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, MA, first encountered Viewpoints when she met Mary Overlie during their overlapping

residencies teaching at New York University. Landau was a member of Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, IL and met Anne during her time with ART (Bogart and Landau 225). Viewpoints is now used as a means of training performers toward building ensemble and creating movement for the stage (Bogart and Landau 7). The nine primary viewpoints, as outlined in *The Viewpoints Book*, help create a universal language when talking about movement and characterization and creating points of awareness that a performer should always use onstage. Bogart and Landau also mention three vocal viewpoints (pitch, volume, and timbre), but these were not discussed in our rehearsals.

The nine primary viewpoints include viewpoints of time and space. Viewpoints of time are:

- Tempo – the speed at which a movement occurs;
- Duration – how long a movement or sequence of movements continues;
- Kinesthetic response – a spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you; and
- Repetition – the repeating of something onstage.

Viewpoints of space are:

- Shape – the contour or outline the body makes in space;
- Gesture – a movement involving a part or parts of the body;
- Architecture – the physical environment in which you are working;
- Spatial relationship – the distance between things onstage; and
- Topography – the landscape, floor pattern, or design we create in movement through space.

Due to the short rehearsal period, we were unable to spend more than one introductory warmup on viewpoints, and we were unable to fully play with all nine. During this time, we

focused on tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, spatial relationship, topography, and gesture. My goal was to give the actors in *Hand to God* a chance to get their creative juices flowing and relate more to their physical bodies after spending so much time deeply analyzing their characters and the text of the play.

Over the course of a twenty-minute warmup prior to a run-through of the full show, I instructed actors to begin first by walking around the bare stage in actor's neutral (proper spinal alignment, hands by their side, normal stride and pace). Then, I layered in different viewpoints, first having them try them out alone, as recommended by Bogart, and then jumping in fully and utilizing all freely, in what Bogart and Landau refer to as "open viewpoints" (Bogart and Landau 71). I started out by explaining shape and asking the actors to just play with making different shapes with their whole body; then I moved into gesture, asking them to create expressive gestures that came from different feelings. At this point in the exercise, the actors mostly contorted their bodies into stock gestures one might assume for different states of mind, for example an arm thrown up at the sky to portray a tragic or melodramatic character experiencing intense anguish. From there, we discussed spatial relationship, and how proximity to and from different people and objects would inform what story is being told and what reaction someone or something might have (getting into kinesthetic response).

Before putting everything together, I finally went into topography, first asking the actors to walk through the space as if on a grid, where they are only able to walk forward and backwards, then only side-to-side, only in diagonals, only in circles or spirals, etc. I had them imagine that the bottoms of their feet are covered in paint, and the paths they create paint the floor with their traveling energy. When we finally put all these pieces together with the other five viewpoints in question, the toughest part was reminding the actors to move spontaneously and

stay with it; at times, it was easy for them to feel silly and make a joke of the exercise and lose focus.

In order to focus these exercises to the rehearsal at hand, I gave them structure by applying Bogart's suggestions to how viewpoints could inform *Hand to God*. I did this by using her exercise for "Open Viewpoints in Character" (Bogart and Landau 126). While the cast continued to move through the space and influence each other, they needed to begin allowing the idea of their characters to inform their choices, from natural walking tempo and posture, to reactions to one another, and physical ticks that everyone may have.

For Eric (Jason/Tyrone), this was a helpful exercise because he usually limits his acting choices and habits to his facial and vocal abilities. Usually when onstage, he doesn't "think enough about what [his] body is doing" (Lander). After warming up using Viewpoints, Eric felt freer and more aware of how his body could help him make his characters more distinct and less static. This also aided him in developing a physical relationship with Tyrone, his puppet (Lander). After our warmup, Eric had developed Jason's posture, which was more internal and reserved, Tyrone's movements, which were more explosive, and a clear tension between Tyrone and Jason specifically through Tyrone's manipulation of spatial relationship to get what he wanted out of Jason. This also aided Ethan (Pastor Greg) in breaking out of his own physicality, specifically when playing with shape and gesture to use different levels that he might not think of but were inspired by Pastor Greg and his personality (Child). For instance, Ethan's default posture is typically very open. He is a tall and confident person, but Greg, while open and kind, is certainly not as confident. Greg's gestures ended up being more reserved and tentative than Ethan's typically are. While Dakota (Timothy) did not mention any character breakthroughs, he did note that the exercise did help loosen him up in preparation for what would end up being a physically taxing rehearsal for him due to Timothy's extensive fight choreography.

For Abigail (Jessica), the introduction of topography led her into her own discovery of the use of architecture in storytelling. She mentioned that “being able to interact with the space [stimulated] thoughts on how we connect and utilize our personal and physical interactions.” It also cleared up any stagnation she’d been feeling regarding Jessica’s walk and physical life, helping her strike a balance between her own natural physicality and how that could intersect with Jessica’s (Dwyer). Given that Jessica starts the play out as the most reserved of the five characters until she creates her own sexy puppet in order to seduce and distract Tyrone, Abigail benefited from Viewpoints because it allowed Jessica’s physical journey to evolve through each scene.

Exploring the nine viewpoints was not as helpful for Colleen in her work as Margery because it was difficult for her to get past the goofy atmosphere even when reminded to work through it. Had there been more time to push through the jokes created by all actors (everyone has different focusing abilities), she may have benefited more, maybe in a classroom or workshop setting. Despite this, she appreciated the physical work because it let her explore how “someone else [might] hold or present themselves” in their own day-to-day lives (Sweeney).

MEISNER

Our final exercise experiment was centered around the basics of Sanford Meisner’s teachings and philosophies around acting. Meisner began his life in the theatre in the early twentieth century, acting with the Group Theatre and creating pieces with other well-known theatre artists Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler. During this time, he appeared in Clifford Odets’ *Awake and Sing* and *Paradise Lost* and assistant-directed Odets’ famous one-act play, *Waiting for Lefty* (Meisner 11). From there, he moved to teaching intermittently with the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City as well as in Los Angeles. Meisner’s philosophy on acting was

summarized when he said that good acting is “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (15). The goal of Meisner’s exercises was to strip down the actor’s preconceived notions surrounding performing and bring them to a baseline of actively doing something.

For our rehearsal purposes, I used Meisner’s lesson that he outlines in the second chapter of his book, which is a common repetition exercise introduced in acting and directing classes. Cast members partnered up, and I instructed them to do away with their thoughts on *Hand to God* for now and just be present in the exercise as themselves. The first step in the exercise is for one actor to make a physical observation about their partner, such as, “Your hair is shiny;” the partner then repeats, without inflection or thought, “My hair is shiny.” Eventually, after going back and forth for some time, the words are eventually stripped of their meaning and new meaning can then be given to them. This can be difficult and may require a lot of time and focus because the actors’ initial instincts can be to consciously change the inflection and assign new meaning that way. This eliminates the truth of the exercise. If done correctly, actors can then be instructed to move into more emotional observations of their partner, such as, “You seem tired.” All these observations should be instinctual and spontaneous. It takes time for an actor to get out of their own head, and Meisner instructs his actors to “not do anything until something happens to make [them] do it” (35).

This exercise was the least effective with the cast of *Hand to God*. Most reported feeling confusion surrounding the goal of the exercise. My hope going into the process had been that taking time away from the material would loosen the actors up and stimulate their desire to react on impulse in their scenes. While there were no particular moments that I felt needed an overhaul, I did want to see what the actors could apply from this exercise to their own time onstage. From their confusion came frustration, followed by a lack of concentration, and then discouragement due to feeling like the exercise didn’t work. Common missteps that occurred

included actors consciously changing inflection rather than letting things happen (or not happen), giggling, joking, and losing focus. Had there been more time between blocking and teching the show, I personally would have appreciated the chance to spend at least an hour working through Meisner again. I also would have been clearer in my instructions and expectations ahead of time. If I had, I believe that we could have experienced more breakthrough moments that could have heightened their performances further.

One actor, however, did experience a degree of success and comfort with the repetition exercise. Ethan (Pastor Greg) found the process to be enjoyable. He felt that he had already established his character somewhat early in the development process, and that working through repetitions broke down the work we'd already done and pulled him out of a character rut. By stripping meaning and deep, thought-out intentions away from anything he was saying outside or within the show, Ethan felt that he could return to square one and discover new things in our rehearsals (Child). From an outside perspective, Ethan's evolution as Greg ended much more nuanced and organic than it had begun, allowing him to be a real person existing and functioning in the world of the play. It is important to note that Ethan's personal strengths and interests lay around creative improvisation, and this exercise followed soon after our Viewpoints work, which could be why he found this process to be so fruitful and the earlier processes (Stanislavski and Practical Aesthetics) to yield only smaller breakthroughs.

ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

In addition to drawing upon specific acting techniques, there were also a great many exercises and factors that contributed to the overall success of the three performances, as well as some that were not as helpful. Most consistently, many of the actors noted that they enjoyed the level of patience, understanding, and structure that I brought into every rehearsal room through

warm-up exercises, my overall attitude, and my communication style. While some actors mentioned that certain exercises felt less useful, overall, I think that my approachable attitude maintained a productive and healthy environment that allowed everybody to thrive and play.

Some of the basic warmups I used were ice breaker games or focus exercises that a lot of young actors learn as early as middle school or high school. For the *Hand to God* cast, I opted to use the mirror exercise, famously used and further developed by Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner Augusto Boal and Improvisation artist Viola Spolin. This is because the small cast size, friendliness amongst co-actors, and comedic content of the show tended to make for some potentially rambunctious rehearsals. The mirrors exercise is silent, and actors partner up and must maintain composed eye contact while mimicking one another's fluid body movements. Based on the atmosphere in the room before and after, I felt that they had been a success in re-centering the cast and getting us to a point where we could do some work; all joking, giggles, and side conversations were put to a stop. However, the only feedback I received on this work was that they were unhelpful because of how silly they seemed. In the future, I would probably approach the exercise by first prefacing it with more direct rules about maintaining composure even through the silliness because eventually it does get to a point where you can feel completely calm and focused. In *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Boal says that this game is most successful when the participants are as "meticulous, detailed, exact, and rich in discoveries as possible" (129). This can only be achieved once all participants have fully given themselves up to the goal of the exercise and are committed to helping each other succeed.

Another ice breaker exercise that had success across all three projects was for the actors to move through the rehearsal space. The goals of each exercise and tasks assigned to them while moving varied depending on the needs of that rehearsal. For *Hand to God*, before every performance I asked the actors to take a walk through our warm-up area and begin to think of

their character's body language. Because we were using Texas dialects, this was also their time to begin saying key phrases that helped them slip into this dialect. Once I felt that they'd had enough time individually to get into character, I layered in interactions with one another, such as stopping and telling one another their objective. Tying back into our earlier work with Stanislavski and combining this with their physical character choices right before sending them onstage was a good way to remind them of why we were doing this play and the journey they were about to take with their characters.

In both the *Hand to God* and Lab Theatre rehearsal processes, there was also time allotted to work individually with actors. Eric, who played Jason/Tyrone in *Hand to God* felt that he benefited from this one-on-one time immensely (Lander). His role was demanding because he was learning puppetry, which was a new skill to him, developing two separate characters simultaneously, and learning a new dialect. The reason he was successful was due to his willingness to put in extra hours outside of rehearsal to learn these skills by himself. Once he'd taken the time to hone those abilities, my job was to simply spend time with him putting it all together. We spent this time going through his more demanding material (opening and closing monologues, a scene he had to do entirely by himself as both characters, and a tricky impression of Abbott and Costello's famous "Who's on First?" routine). As I watched him rehearse these sections, I paid careful attention to make note of moments when the separation between him and Tyrone was most distinct so he could recreate those moments at other times in his performance as well. We also spent the time developing healthy vocal technique and testing out different Tyrone voices to find the one that would be most sustainable through a five-week rehearsal process and a one-weekend run. This is something that was better achieved on an individual basis because we had to spend most of our group rehearsals blocking or working on character development.

In the Lab process, one-on-one time was used a bit differently. As Assistant Director, I was supervised by the main director and completed tasks that had been delegated to me. When we reached tech, we split up the workload and gave each actor some individual attention with the goal of addressing areas of confusion and shaping moments that could be more strongly played. During this time, I worked with Kiersten on strengthening her projection skills by applying healthy vocal technique. Kiersten was off-book for all three of her roles quickly and accurately, which made a difference when we got down to looking at details of her performance. During our time together, I knew that we needed to work on getting her comfortable with projecting her voice and being loud. As a vocal coach, I usually begin by having students lay on their backs and just breathe, so they can familiarize themselves with what proper breath support feels like. Once we got past this step, I devised an exercise that would help her to increase her volume without feeling self-conscious, so I stomped around the room while she spoke her lines over my noise. This translated to a marked improvement on the stage, and she also felt that it was helpful because it was a fun, different approach than just giving her the same, “Be louder,” note repeatedly. Instead, this approach ultimately stuck with her through performances (Samalis).

In the *Bent* process, there was one exercise that helped Tiago (Max) and Eric (Horst) get into the world of the play. They were playing two gay men in a concentration camp, in love, and forbidden from speaking with one another. After we had blocked out the scene, we spent a portion of one rehearsal just running the dialogue with them sitting back-to-back and whispering to one another. For Tiago, this helped raise the stakes and helped him tap into the urgency of the situation much better than he had been able to before (Rodrigues). The whispering also helped them reach the proper emotional intensity that the scene called for without using the high volume that realistically would have gotten both their characters killed. When we added the blocking back into the scene, it was clear that the connection was maintained and even heightened without

them having to have any physical contact or eye contact at all. For Eric, the whispering also reiterated Horst's own communication problems with Max because he spends all their time trying to reach him, while Max remains emotionally unavailable up until the very end of the play (Lander).

In all three processes, many actors also praised the level of trust that I was able to establish with them and why that contributed to their own success. Acting often puts people in a position of emotional and sometimes physical vulnerability just by its very nature because the performer must be able to ride the emotional wave of their character and live their life multiple times a week during a show's run. In each play, there was also some element to it that could have made the actors feel unsafe or uncomfortable at any given moment. For *Bent*, it was the main plot regarding LGBTQ persecution and any general discussion of the Nazi regime. For Lab Theatre, one of our short pieces was comprised entirely of real people's personal experiences with suicide and depression. For *Hand to God*, it was the depiction of statutory rape and the intense stage combat that went with it. Will in *Bent* felt that I always handled the topic with enough care that the rehearsal environment felt safe and open (Sexton). Dylan in Lab Theatre believed that my method of delivering positive reinforcement and verbal confirmation of people's choices and thoughts helped maintain a professional environment in which the actors felt heard and supported (Crowley). Dakota, who took part in most of *Hand to God*'s stage violence, felt that the painstaking work I took to choreograph out every single moment was hard, but he felt a level of safety and trust that allowed him to let go and "go there" every night (Lopes).

The other thing that contributed to my success in directing my peers was the structure of my rehearsals in each process. Before starting every rehearsal, I brought the cast through physical and vocal warm-ups and then any extra acting or grounding exercises that might pertain

to whatever we were going to cover that night. This could be anything from the previously mentioned focus and centering exercises, diction exercises (tongue twisters), physical stretches, or character exercises to get them in the zone. For *Hand to God*, we also did fight call at the top of every rehearsal with the intention of getting all the fight choreography into the actors' bodies as habitually as possible to make sure that everything could be executed safely in performances. Following any warm-ups, we ran whatever material we would be focusing on (eventually getting into full runs of the show), took a short break for actors to shake the show off, and then reconvened for notes, discussion, and fixing any problems that came up. This warm-up/run/notes structure helped Abigail because she was going through a lot in her family life at home, so keeping a set routine allowed her to return to a sense of normalcy and focus on the tasks at hand in rehearsal. By the time we hit the weekend of the show, the routine was so ingrained in all five actors that not even a surprise snow cancellation and an added 10:00 am performance could throw them off their game (Dwyer).

CONCLUSION

Regardless of which technique or exercise was being applied, my goal was always to make and keep a connection with all the actors I was working with. I have always thrived in settings where I felt valued because they made me feel comfortable enough to try new things. Based on the results of this process, I believe that bringing patience, solid research behind each technique, and the ability to outline each exercise step-by-step while also listening to and responding to my actors as they went through everything fostered the most positive, productive environment that I could have envisioned to do the work.

For creators of content that gets consumed daily (visual arts, music, television, film, theatre, poetry, prose, the list goes on), artists are too often overlooked and dismissed. Every

time an actor steps into a rehearsal room, they open themselves up to a level of emotional vulnerability that many prefer to shy away from. As a director, I felt incredibly lucky to be able to watch every individual journey and make my own discoveries along the way. I feel confident in my abilities to string together exercises from any of these recently studied techniques and guide myself or another actor toward an honest performance in a safe rehearsal room and onstage.

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