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Madness Methods, Practical Instincts

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Madness Methods, Practical Instincts

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Thesis

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“Though this be madness, yet there is method in't.”
— William Shakespeare

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Madness Methods, Practical Instincts

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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This paper serves as a reflection on my journey to pursue graduate studies in Acting, the specific tools acquired through training at UT Austin, the development of my particular methods of approach in response to such training, and the intention/s with which I now continue my career as a performer and theatre practitioner.

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Introduction.

TO BE an actor mandates that one is identified, identifiable, and simultaneously malleable as such, and to be “successful,” one must achieve a marriage of the dualities: be like no other but be recognizable to all. In addition, one must do so within an art form that is ancient as it is ever-evolving. My journey to graduate school was formed on the combined base questions of how to identify and strengthen my personal artistic tendencies, how to determine and gather which tools of craft I lacked, and where to find an inspiring community of theatre practitioners with whom I may proceed to build a career. Entering a rigorous, academic setting at the University of Texas at Austin made me confront some of my greatest fears and challenges as an artist, particularly in terms of facing the unchanging and untrainable elements that make me *me*, asking myself how to participate holistically and sustainably in the business, and challenging how I define my own success. I am graduating with a treasury of theatrical experiences, a toolbox packed with technique, an expanded mobile community of makers, and a richer understanding of my own innate (and unavoidable) traits and talents and therefore a deeper confidence in all of the above.

This thesis will explore the techniques and methods that I have developed as an actor through course and performance work over the last three years. First, I will identify where I began when I entered graduate study. Immediately thereafter, I will illuminate what became uncovered in my first year of classes and performances and what foundational elements I identified as building blocks to my artistic growth. Following that, I will add the unexpected lessons that continued to build during the second year when the breadth and depth of my opportunities expanded both personally and geographically. Finally, I will determine how the combination of these lessons have fused in my final year into a practicing method as well as an understanding of my place in contemporary theatre (including type and intention). I will conclude with my

intentions as a maker of theatre as I graduate and move forward into the next phase of my career.

Chapter One: GROUNDWORK - FINDING BREATH.

The Prelude.

I have been told throughout my life (starting at an early age) that I would make a good therapist. I have always known that it was not my job to sit and listen, but that what others sensed in me was a perception that needed expression. I am a sponge and a mirror of the world around me, squeezing out what I see, keeping only what feeds and fuels me to greater strength, wisdom, and compassion. I am inspired by abundance of feeling, and I am driven to escape that feeling by diving head-first into it. I am seduced by language, moved by community, driven by questions of inequity, and intrigued by interrogation. I am fascinated by the ridiculousness of humanity. I am an actor.

Before beginning graduate school at University of Texas at Austin in Fall of 2010, my performance training was limited to summer camps, weekend classes, and sought-out mentorships. I avoided studying technique in my undergraduate years at Brown University (though I spent one year in acting classes at Sarah Lawrence College), choosing instead to focus on performance as theory. I collected experience through instinct - I have always auditioned well and this got me in a good number of doors in high school, college, and beyond. Performing was my craft, but was there any craft in my performance?

My first job out of undergraduate study was as an AmeriCorps environmental educator through which, despite the romance of working on a boat and the beach, I hungered still for the theatre. When the AmeriCorps year ended, I pursued temporary gigs in offices and restaurants and found myself a theatrical community in Providence, Rhode Island, that was of a quality I could respect that had a direct purpose I adored - namely within The Manton Avenue Project which connected elementary school students with professional actors to write and then perform original plays. This of course led me to meeting more folks who opened more doors of performance, and soon

I found I was working in restaurants and offices to make money but rehearsing/performing in the theatre to live. Providence is a small town, and I quickly felt known, starring in shows at the largest venues (save the Repertory theatre). I felt ready for more. I felt stuck in my own habits, but I did not know exactly what my habits were. I realized that there was nothing I would be excited to do all day every day except perform in the theatre. I hungered for a larger community and had no idea where to begin.

In the winter of 2007, I applied to graduate schools. I fell in love with UT Austin, felt my heart meet me at the door, and knew it was the best place for my graduate study. All other audition rooms felt like the kind of theatre I had avoided: cold, competitive, quick. UT Austin sat in a sunny spot and boasted programs in playwriting, theatre for youth, design, and performance studies in the midst of the training actors, and the structure told me that for three years, the folks in the building would be dedicated to my and my peers' growth as performing artists. I felt that here, while I was deepening my craft, I would not be limited by the title of ACTOR; it would merely be the tag with which I might begin engaging the conversation of "what shall we make?" and building my confidence in my ability to participate as a better skilled maker.

That year, then-MFA head Fran Dorn told me I was a delight and, were I male-bodied, I would be more than accepted. It was an ironic result, given my Gender Studies/Performance degree and my impending habit of being cast across gender lines. The gender ratio was skewed and no more ladies would make the cut. Did I want to come in three years? The question felt impossible to answer.

My heart sank. I moved cities. I launched a career as an elementary school teacher in Philadelphia. I fell in and out of love. I joined a comedy improv troupe. I began building a sustainable professional life. And quickly, the incredible school community and social world that I built in that time proved the same lesson again to me: I wanted theatre more. Still. So, three years later, I said yes to Ms Dorn and UT

Austin. And in the fall of 2010, I made the journey to Austin that my heart knew was right. And I began studying, practicing, and learning all that I knew but didn't know: Who am I? What do I do? What is my place? And how can I build a neutral place as a performer from which to choose my directions as an actor?

The Doing.

My relationship to the instruments of my body and voice have altered significantly in the past three years, as I have identified habituals and learned how to track their roots in order to reshape this neutral beginning ground from which to build performance. As a young performer, I was often directed to increase my volume. Whether this tendency towards quietness arose out of a fear of taking up too much space or a desire to be natural, I worked without specific technique to be heard from the stage. Somewhere along the way in doing so, I developed the physical habits of jutting my chin forward (out of alignment with the spine) and hunching my shoulders, as if protecting my heart. I also entered graduate school with body memory of several throat, neck, and spinal injuries that created a basic distrust in my physical strength. These habits were some of the fundamental reasons I wanted to attend an intensive training program: I was aware enough to recognize them and understand their hinderance to my performability (physically and psychologically), but I did not understand how specifically they were limiting me and how to make the adjustments out of them in a way that is sustainable.

The first and most fundamental beginning step for addressing my fears of the body was in grounding the breath, and much of the work that occurred in my first year classes centered precisely on this. I became aware that if I mistake the origin of the voice as in the throat, then I am doomed on all levels. First, I will strain my vocal chords; secondly, I will not be heard; and thirdly, I will be playing false action that does not come from the core. So the best way for me to simultaneously enhance my

performances while renewing a faith in physical abilities became to find breath in the diaphragm and through this to become rooted and grounded. Everything stemmed from this starting point.

The strengthening of my core and realignment of spinal imbalances that I learned in Andrea Beckham's Pilates-Feldenkrais class were helpful in laying new groundwork for relearning healthy patterns. The exploration of habitual tendencies and focusing on alternate choices as well as Alexander Technique, Suzuki Method, Body Mind Integration, and authentic movement that we did in Tom Truss' class helped me to bring awareness to the constant process of recognizing said habits and natural tendencies and making new or informed choices. Many of Barney Hammond's warm-ups helped me to quite literally find the placement of my chin and shoulders and release their tensions, allowing access to a voice that arises from the core and is thus supported by breath.

While the first year initiated the recognition of my patterns and the learning of techniques, the last two and a half years have involved my ritualizing of counter exercises, bringing awareness to habits that no longer serve me and establishing new, regular patterns to my voice and body. The culmination of these efforts is a deeper faith in my body's ability to make healthy and sustainable choices in my performances and personal expressivity and a method to carry forward into a professional life.

Chapter Two: METHODS OF APPROACH IN PERFORMANCE - YEAR ONE.

The Threepenny Opera.

Two particular performances in my initial year of graduate study proved to be direct applications of other simultaneous studies, as well as opportunities for me to craft more precisely my method of approach. First, I will address my experience in *The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht as directed by Halena Kays.

Kays was in her third year of the MFA directing program when she gathered the team for the *Opera* - her cumulative thesis project. Though I did not initially audition, Kays caught me on the day of callbacks and expressed a desire for me to join the process; intrigued by her notion of bending gender expectations in the play, I was convinced to show up for a late audition. After having me read and sing for the leading male role of Mac the Knife (which proved to be too large a musical challenge for the time slotted, as all of his music would need to be rewritten into my alto range), Kays cast me as Twisted Finger Jake, a prominent player in Mac's gnarly gang of misfits.

Twisted Finger Jake is traditionally a male role, and when I spoke with Kays about her intentions for the character, she encouraged me to discover on my own how I wanted to toy with and define my female-bodied truth to the playing of the male-named character. I had been immersed fully in Meisner technique in Lucien Douglas' Acting class, and I knew and appreciated that the purest truth of the moments on stage involved bringing myself as I am in all fullness, and talking and listening to those around me. I did not want to 'pretend' maleness, and the challenge of a Victorian time period (as the play was set) intrigued me to further embrace my female bodied reality. Eventually, I created a backstory that involved Jake being born female, realizing her queer desire and experiencing male violence as a result of pursuing a romantic interest. Thus, in the environment of a hetero-dominant and economically challenged street

culture, Jake created the persona of Twisted Finger Jake, and brass-knuckled her way into the bandit gang led by Mac the Knife.

One of the artistically satisfying elements of generating Jake's performance was knowing that as an actress I was creating what Jake too would be designing. Both actress and character needed to construct a walk that, despite a female build, did not betray hips, breasts or genitalia. Both Alexis and Jake needed to develop a voice that sounded believably male while still being authentic and grounded.

Beyond working with the incredible costume and design team to integrate fashion choices that supported my character, I focused on the use of Laban work (studied particularly in Andrea Beckham's and Tom Truss' classes) to generate a code for Jake. Laban technique identifies a number of possible oppositions of movement by examining Space, Weight, Time, and Flow. When these elements are combined in various ways, they create eight possible different states of being, otherwise known as Effort Actions (for example: dab, glide, slash, etc). I located a swiftness to Jake's limbs that employed his/her anxiety about survival and a dart-y, easily shifting directness of physicality, bringing about a cagey, scrappy actuality of self that lived somewhere between a punch and a dab. The use of swift, direct, but easily shifting movements extended to my voice work which I pursued as gravelly but unresting, articulate but clipped. Each day before performance I would review my Laban points, darting around the backstage area with light feet, ready hands, and alive eyes.

The combination of historical research and imaginative backstory free-writing with Laban work (extending from limbs to voice) gave me both a foundation as well as a short-hand from which to perform and to re-engender performances night after night.

The Chronicles of Bad Ass Women.

The success of my performance as Twisted Finger Jake in *The Threepenny Opera* was measured most for me when I stepped onstage later in the same semester for the performance of the second show I will discuss, *The Chronicles of Bad Ass Women*. This show was a developing piece in the 2010 New Works Festival (which takes place at UT Austin every other year and showcases all sorts of emerging performances and installations). *Chronicles* was in fundamental stages of being written by playwright Holli Gipson and minimally staged by Austin artist Shawn Sides. I learned after a performance that when I arrived onstage in simple black clothes to play Janis Joplin, an audience member who had also seen *The Threepenny Opera* exclaimed, "Oh! That person is a GIRL!"

The playing of Janis Joplin was a joyful challenge in an entirely different way from Twisted Finger Jake. Rather than combining elements of personal reality to create a believable fiction, I needed to integrate another living person's true reality into the fictional reality of the play. For Janis, I turned first to video recordings of interviews and performances in order to observe her stance, physical tendencies, stature, etc. I listened to her music and read about her life in order to better understand her emotional baselines. It was clear to me that her deep insecurities raged out of her body in a rebellious celebration that both defied and revealed the intense pain living deep inside her.

The largest undertaking, of course, was the regeneration of Janis' voice - a sound that lives infamously in the history of American music. Janis was most popular specifically for her voice, and I needed to approach speaking/scream-singing with a similar tone and grit that identified her as herself within the boundaries of my own vocal sounds and without injuring my instrument. Because Janis' voice originated from both personal resonance as well as heavy use of drugs and alcohol, my approach needed to live somewhere between imitation and technique. The dialect and intoning

work that I had been doing in Pamela Christian's voice class came into immediate practice in this process. I was able to break down into observable parts the rhythm, quality, pace, and variable tones of Janis' vocal patterns. I then located in my own vocal instrument similar qualities and experimented with how far I could take each element before creating physical pain. The result was a mixture of grit and rawness that celebrated Janis' signature wildness within the healthy limitations of my own vocal possibilities.

Playing Janis Joplin was an intensive, intimate, and explosive experience of concentrated voice work that moved my work in volume, vocal support and freedom forward while simultaneously honing my work in specificity and technique.

Chapter Three: METHODS OF APPROACH IN PERFORMANCE - YEAR TWO.

The Cherry Orchard.

Beginning the second year of graduate study, all MFA actors in addition to several local professionals and a handful of undergraduates were cast in *The Cherry Orchard*, as translated from Chekhov by Paul Schmidt and directed by Brant Pope (Chekhov, Schmidt 1997). The most challenging aspects of this experience was the sharing of designated roles across triple casting and in a setting where every actor playing each role was directed to adhere to the choices of the primary cast.

Despite all of the frustration throughout the rehearsal and performance process for this particular production, it was clear to the cast that tackling a Chekhov script was unlike most other things we had experienced. The plot was almost imperceptible, and the dialogue rarely connected to the real, physical actions taking place on stage. The real talking and listening we had practiced for months in classes with Lucien Douglas and Lee Abraham proved difficult, as the Chekhovian text, thick with subtext, had to be psychologically interrogated with actor purpose and awareness. Luckily this play rehearsed at the same time as Fran Dorn's Shakespeare class, wherein we learned her unique process of designating a precise and productive action per each beat of text, where beat is defined as a sentence. This hands-on breakdown of text allowed me to wipe some of the mystery of ambiguity away from Chekhov's prose and in its place choose specific intention.

I was excited to take on the part of Carlotta, as in my familiarity with *The Cherry Orchard*, I appreciated the loner character whose origins were unknown and whose place in the family goings-on were mysterious and questionable. I turned to my step one: research. In anticipation of embracing a gypsy-infused childhood, I listened to Romanian street music and watched snippets of movies with traveling caravans and nomadic performing communities. I traced the geographic and emotional history of

Carlotta's immediate family and developed a personal understanding of how she had ended up not only coming to the Renivskaya estate but staying on for so long. I chose juicy secrets that infused my brief scenes and allowed my unclear existence in the room to feel justified internally. I then applied all of these spices to the playing of actions within the mapped framework that director Brant Pope had predetermined as my prescribed blocking.

Though in the end, I felt that many elements of our production of *The Cherry Orchard* proved to be challenging without particular pay-off, I took away a heightened sense of self-reliance in character creation. I also experienced the pleasure of being an audience member during one of the other cast's performances, and I was reminded that no matter how frustrating the process, a well-written show always holds its own innate beauty.

A Single Shard.

Other performance experiences provided by UT Austin (though not necessarily on Austin soil!) have undoubtedly shaped my repertoire as an actor and expanded my practice and understanding of being a professional performer. One such experience arose when I was granted the incredible opportunity to travel to Seattle, Washington, to rehearse and perform in five small roles with the Seattle Children's Theatre (SCT) in the world premiere performance of *A Single Shard*. This piece was adapted from the Newberry Award winning children's novel by Linda Sue Park into a stage version by Pulitzer-Prize winning playwright Robert Schenkkan and directed by SCT Artistic Director Linda Hartzell.

At the time, this was by far my most professional experience in the theatre. Previous to that experience, I had never done a run of more than twelve shows, and *A Single Shard* ran for four weeks at eleven shows a week. The performance venue sat

about 600 people, and most shows were full to sold out. The rehearsal and performance experiences proved to be both challenging and deeply rewarding in a variety of ways.

The cast of *A Single Shard* was one of those rare collaborative miracles that occurs in the theatre where a family is quickly fused and formed. Showing up for work every day was a practice in community and affection, and I truly believe that this positive energy carried us like a strong wave over and through the minutiae and frustrations of a rigorous performance schedule.

At the beginning of the rehearsal process, I received some conflicting notes from Linda, our director, and I struggled to make sense of them in a way that satisfied both her requests as well as my own artistry. In particular, Linda was complimenting my naturalness and ease of sincerity, while asking for some more character-y choices. I was confused by their negation of each other as directions, and I reflected on Viewpoints training (which emphasizes looking at systems of movement in order to build a character in space) and then sought out advice from my teacher and advisor Fran Dorn on how to approach the five small roles I was assigned.

Consulting Fran proved to be beneficial, as she urged me to pick one clear and distinct choice (physical, vocal, rhythmic) for each character, and to commit strongly to them. I found a comfortable balance between natural and bold, Linda was pleased with my choices, and I felt good about my work.

The largest challenge that I encountered in the process of *A Single Shard* was actually outside of the theatre, though I feel it will prove relevant to my life as an actor. After the very initial experience of arriving in Seattle and beginning rehearsals wore off, I quickly fell into a space of overwhelming disorientation. This was a result of being in a new city with the sole purpose of performing in this show, and having minimal resources outside of the theatre. Because my part in the show was less time-demanding than others, I also had a less rigorous rehearsal schedule than some of the

other cast members. Therefore, I went from the often over-stimulating community of graduate school to a transient expanse of time in a cold, wet, and unknown city. This gave me a taste of what could be a familiar experience in professional endeavors post-graduate school.

I did several things to ease the depression this sparked. First, I wrote to my professor and friend Quetta Carpenter who I trusted as a mentor who served as both an instructor in movement and mask work as well as a fellow professional actor. I also reached out to friends, local professional contacts, and SCT resources to gain support and access to Seattle-specific activities beyond and within the theatre. Within hours of beginning to reach out, I had a wealth of responses. Quetta shared with me meditations and activities that she employs in particularly lonely projects (one memorable suggestion included creating a scavenger hunt to explore the city). A friend of the family offered a bicycle for me to use as transportation during my time in Seattle. In addition, the Seattle Children's Theatre School invited me to sit in and participate in their running classes for youth of all ages.

Although my transience in the city proved trying for the entirety of my stay, the practices that I discovered early on in order to combat the painful loneliness of transition will serve me again in similar future experiences. Most particularly, I recognized that moving to a new city is very different from traveling temporarily to one for an acting job; when moving, one chooses a neighborhood carefully, brings along loved ones, and invests in putting down new roots. An artistic experience is significantly longer than a vacation, but very different from a permanent move or longer residency. I am glad to have had the experience of visiting some dark places inside myself during that initial time (and at times throughout the two months) in order to recognize the possibility of disorientation in the midst of artistically stimulating situations. I feel better equipped to arrive anywhere and fend for myself. I also feel better equipped to advocate for my most basic needs when accepting roles in the future.

The Orchard Project.

I received an unexpected gift while in Seattle through a relationship with the playwright of *A Single Shard*, Robert Schenkkan (widely known for his Pulitzer Prize winning play *The Kentucky Cycle*). Robert recognized a talent in me, and encouraged me to look into the Core Company at The Orchard Project run in the summer through NYC's *The Exchange*. I applied to the residency and, when accepted, Robert along with Dr. Brant Pope graciously helped me to find full funding for my attendance. Little did I know that The Orchard Project would be one of the most singularly inspiring and foundational experiences of my artistic life thus far.

The Orchard Project, a month-long residency for theatre artists in the Catskills of New York, operates in a patchwork of comings and goings by a superb and absurd mixture of performing artists. The overlap is intended to ignite and inspire opposing and collaborative forces. The Core Company, of which I was a part, is a small ensemble of actors, directors, and writers who stay and work the entire month, supporting and apprenticing with the groups and individuals that come while simultaneously developing work in solo, duo and group settings. There is a constant and undying energy of generation at The Orchard Project that runs on the endless fuel of new work and collaborative sharing.

As the oldest actor in the Core Company, I was able to serve as both an active player as well as a mentor in the group setting. I had first-hand knowledge of craft and technique that showed clearly in my vocal, physical, and emotional approach to the work at hand. I also had the perspective of having lived an 'adult' life outside of the theatre before choosing to pursue it professionally, and this insight was illuminated often in the conversations I shared with the younger artists present. Simultaneously, I was deeply moved and energized by the buoyancy of the Core Company's goals and artistic intentions. I was granted support to explore my own work while mingling and

working with professional theatre artists my age and beyond from all parts of the country (and beyond!) devising new work in our presence. I observed a variety of work practices, further clarified and expanded my own personal preferences, and built a network of contacts that immediately made the professional world of theatre both accessible and friendly.

Some particularly juicy take-aways were: 1) apprenticeships (and growing friendships) with performance artist Geoff Sobelle, playwright Nastaran Ahmadi , and members of Chicago's Dog and Pony Theatre, 2) introduction to the playwriting of contemporaries such as Bekah Brunstetter, Jake Jeppson, Adam Szymkowitz, and christopher oscar peña, 3) the development of my own work and insight into how to continuously challenge myself outside of a scholastic setting, and 4) mentors David Chapman, Ari Edelson, and Dean Strober who are the backbones behind the Project, big thinkers, and incredible idea men.

It was through the connection of UT Austin with Seattle Children's Theatre that I met Mr. Schenkkan who connected me with The Orchard Project, and therefore it was essential to my graduate school experience that I reach beyond the backyard of Austin into the expansive contemporary American theatre world of new work and collaborative artists. Never before have I felt so clear about being in the right place at the right time, with all the right tools for the job.

Chapter Four: METHODS OF APPROACH IN PERFORMANCE - YEAR THREE.

My third year of graduate study in Acting has been a practice in polarities that has challenged my values, expanded my questions, sharpened my practice, and illuminated my intentions. Specifically, I was involved in *Ragtime* at the Zach Scott Theatre in the fall and *Edge of Peace* at UT/Seattle Children's Theatre in the spring. The former was a lesson in perseverance despite harrowing challenges, and the latter was a renewing and delightful celebration of all things good and meaningful.

Ragtime.

Until *Ragtime*, I had not been involved in a traditional musical since 1999 (my senior year of high school). I grew up in musical theatre, but I learned fairly early that my singing voice lacked power and range for the stage, and the roles available to women in most musicals were often less than interesting to me. Therefore, I had not been exposed at an adult and professional level to the creation of musical theatre.

Ragtime is a beautiful, historical musical that traces America in the early twentieth century specifically through white, black, and immigrant relations. The lessons are potent, and the music is haunting. I was cast in a multiplicity of Ensemble roles, including Brigit the Irish maid, a Vaudeville "chorine" dancer, a Jewish immigrant, a Massachusetts mill worker and protestor, and a Henry Ford employee. Because my text was minimal, the bulk of my work in rehearsal was spent learning the music and movement for the show. I have an ancient but extensive history in dance, and that landed me a prominent spot in most group choreography.

My frustration during the rehearsal process of *Ragtime* must be broken down and examined to reveal the lessons it brought. Though I had initially been hesitant and nervous to participate in the show, I was inspired by the large group of actors that is assembled across ages, races, and genders. Quickly, I remembered the joy I had once

taken in musical theatre production - the fun in learning music and dances and playing in a different, collective sort of choreographed imaginative story-telling. However, just beyond an initial high, I grew more and more disillusioned with the values espoused by the Zach Scott Theatre. The time of the fifty plus cast members was misused most regularly; we were called for hours and used minimally for weeks at a time. The process of acting, character creation, and role development was passed up for attention to design and placement. The bulk of the cast, non-equity, worked a staggering amount of hours on top of their other jobs and obligations for close to little pay, while out-of-town equity members took most of the starring roles for decent wages. An attitude of “you’re lucky to be here” pervaded the rehearsal room; it rang ironically in the face of scenes where Emma Goldman rallied the workers’ unions and underpaid Austin artists sang and danced in the name of a theatre that prided itself publicly on employing local talent.

Because the collaboration between Zach Scott and UT Austin was new, I felt stymied in my ability to advocate for an experience other than the one I was having. For the first time in my acting life, I dreaded rehearsals, wept in frustration, and spoke ill of the theatre in any spare moment. I felt negative, drained, and confused. New questions began forming for me: if this is part of the world of professional theatre, do I want to be an actor? If commercial endeavors are the method through which I will make a living as a performer, would it be best that I seek out teaching jobs upon graduation and only accept work that I believe in as an artist?

Slight renewal in spirit arrived when we finally entered the run of the show. At last, my job became living inside the many characters, and I took pleasure in telling the Jewish and Irish immigrant experiences. I also developed a backstory for my vaudeville “chorine” dancer that helped shift me from one scene to another and focus my mind and movement in a way that infused it through changes in time. For example, in the first chorine number, I decided my character was young and fresh and that it was her

first ever performance in Atlantic City with Evelyn Nesbit, the lauded leader of the girls' dance group. My character sparkled and shone in the over-the-top minstrel dance number, thrilled by the new life she was about to live. In the second chorine number, late in Act II, I knew that significant time had passed and that my character's view of Atlantic City would have become seedy and jaded, giving the dance a color of irony. The glitter of the choreography and costumes were really just the top layer of a performer's life that had become a sham.

Stories like these helped me stay alive night after night for a month of performances in which my roles primarily added bulk and color to the crowded and bustling stage. As *Ragtime* and Zach Scott were lauded with praise throughout Austin and beyond, I saw first-hand that what shines from the outside eye is not always gold on the inside, and I concluded my experience with sharpened questions about my future and a relief that I could choose to not participate in similar experiences should they arise. However, though the rehearsal process was uninspiring, I stayed committed to doing my job as an actor to build my performances, and I found pleasure in the work within the live theatrical experience.

Edge of Peace.

My love and enthusiasm for the theatre came quite quickly to the *Edge of Peace* rehearsal room, the second collaboration between UT Austin and the Seattle Children's Theatre. This time, SCT Artistic Director Linda Hartzell brought half of the cast from Seattle and Chicago. Together with the Austin actors, we rehearsed and opened at UT, and then we brought the already-running show to the Children's Theatre in Seattle for three weeks.

The Edge of Peace had been commissioned by SCT as it concludes playwright Suzan Zeder's Ware Trilogy, a collection of plays that take place over three decades in the same small town of Ware, Illinois. Our production of *Edge of Peace* was a world

premiere, the celebratory event of Suzan Zeder's retirement (occurring May 2013), and a conclusion to the character stories and questions raised in the first two plays of the trilogy (*Mother Hicks* and *Taste of Sunrise*). It was an honor to be a part of such an event. In addition, because I worked with Linda Hartzell last year on *A Single Shard*, I enjoyed having knowledge of her process, trust for her aesthetic, and the playful, warm, and loving approach she takes with her actors. From the first read-through, it was clear that the team assembled for *The Edge of Peace* was one that cared deeply about the story at hand.

My role in *Edge of Peace* was perhaps the best example of where I might be comfortable being type-cast, and the moment I read the script I knew that I was made to play Girl. Girl is a spunky, independent twenty-three year old who grew up in Ware as an orphan, but raised by "every woman in the town." When World War II comes, Girl heads out of town to join the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP), a temporary service that held training in Sweetwater, Texas. WASP assisted in the transportation, maintenance, and practice of aircraft mobilization for the male soldiers all across the United States of America. In the play, Girl surprises everyone and makes her entrance back to Ware by parachute from a Stuka bomber plane. Her heart is big, her fire is feisty, and her quickness to fight is just as sharp as her quickness to love, help, laugh, and forgive.

Though I related to Girl instantly, I had a lot of learning to do about a time period and experience that I did not share, namely World War II and aviation. To begin, I collected stories about the WASPs and read both background information as well as first-hand accounts from female pilots. I found the book *Winning My Wings*, a first-hand account by Marion Hodgson, to be an especially intriguing source. Hodgson's experience illuminated the experience of leaving home, living with the women at training, the process of learning to fly, and the change in identity for a woman doing such bold things at that particular moment in our country's history. I also studied flight

manuals and pictures of planes to familiarize myself with the instruments and objects that Girl would intimately know.

Performing in a play that is part of a trilogy lends a certain richness to the character knowledge at hand, given that it is possible to literally read earlier parts of the characters' lives in other shows. *Mother Hicks*, the first of the Ware trilogy by Zeder, takes place in the 1930's when Girl is thirteen. Instead of imagining and creating Girl's childhood as an orphan in Illinois, I was able to read about her adventures, thoughts, challenges, and literal conversations through the *Mother Hicks* script. Key elements of this early narrative gave me a structure (or "spine") for Girl that explained where she came from and how she developed as a person, particularly through the relationships that she had in her hometown. I found that the more I digested what I knew about Girl from that earlier play, the deeper and more vibrant my relationships with the other characters became during the playing of *Edge of Peace*.

On top of researching Girl's known life, World War II, the WASP program, and aviation, I had the added challenge of learning some American Sign Language (ASL) for the role. Girl grows up with Tuc, the deaf man in Ware, who teaches her "air pictures" so that they can communicate. My knowledge of ASL was extremely limited at the beginning of rehearsals, and I worked one on one with ASL coach David Simmons (employed by the University of Texas at Austin Sign Language Department) as well as the actor playing Tuc, Robert Schleifer, a professional deaf actor from Chicago. We worked together to determine how what I said to Tuc would be best translated into an ASL form that would serve the play. Because the grammatical structures of ASL and English are different, that which would be signed in traditional translation did not exactly match Suzan Zeder's script. Therefore, for the purposes of performance, I learned a method called Simultaneous Communication (sim-com). Rather than fully interpreting English into ASL, sim-com translates the English words being spoken directly to the recipient. David Simmons also used the term gloss with my technique,

referring to the process of literally glossing over the sentences in order to hit the major or important details for communication. The result meant that my signing was simultaneous to my speaking, and, though not precisely accurate to ASL grammar, it functioned in a general way for myself, the character of Tuc, and for ASL speaking audience members.

One last delightful surprise in *Edge of Peace* was the opportunity to share the stage with friend and mentor Fran Dorn, who has been key to my UT Austin journey. Fran was cast as Nell Hicks, a character that is very dear to Girl. In the end of the play, Fran and I got to share a goodbye as Nell and Girl, and the moment resonated deeply for me.

The challenges in *Edge of Peace* were exciting and illuminating to me as both an actor and a human. Not only did I have a character to uncover, a time period to research, and staging to learn, I also had to learn and layer a new language on top of my lines. These elements and working with a deaf actor provoked and stimulated me in both the rehearsal room as well as the stage to interrogate how and why we speak and listen. It was a pleasure to be able to take such a poignant theatrical experience to both Seattle and Austin audiences.

CONCLUSION.

Previous to my entering graduate study at University of Texas at Austin, I was aware that I have been granted with several distinct propensities and inclinations: I crave intrinsic and intimate knowledge of the sensational and sensuous; I thrive on imaginative play; I am most inspired by communities that encourage communication of emotion and experience; and I was and continue to be interested in the telling of stories in languages verbal, visual, and corporeal. The theatre is the venue in which I have most access to this deep appetite. Theatre is my map to the familiar and mysterious. What is more familiar or mysterious than the self, both personal and other?

The untrainable elements of the actor's tools are recognizable and personal: appearance, energetic presence, emotional intelligence, style, innate sensibilities. My experience in graduate school has been one of reflection, exposure, exploring, and embracing in regard to my own 'untrainable elements' as well as harnessing them into crafted techniques so that they may be utilized for sustainability and functionality within the context of a life of performance.

The challenge that now awaits me is translating this training and deeper self-awareness into a feasible career that feeds not just a personal desire but also a social need. What I want to do is less functional if I am ignorant to how I am perceived. It is my intention to make great work but on simple scales; to express myself grandly but remain accessible. It is my intention to work in community in the midst of a business that often typifies the 'fend-for-yourself' mentality. So as I leave a space where experimentation and duality has been encouraged, where do I fit in as a performer?

Type?

It is my notion that I have a personal theatrical temperament that is broad within the boundaries that are unchanging. Physically speaking, I am a white, woman-bodied person with a tendency towards leanness. I am not a curvy or voluptuous person, but I convey sensuality. I have an androgyny that is a result of my refusal to adhere to certain societal standards of gendered performance as well as my own relationship to a fluid and queer sexuality and identification. I have a face that functions on a certain plastic level; my internal life is very present in my physical reality. Although light of step, I feel that I emanate a quality of groundedness, as I am personally comfortable in my skin and bones. I can play with/in/against these qualities in order to expand, explore, and explode the truths within a play's given circumstances, but I cannot escape the base realities of my own flesh.

In regard to my emotional understanding, I have trouble pinpointing myself as it is my perception that my range is quite large. This alone, however, the fact that I am equally playful and childlike as well as ponderous and painfully resonant, indicates that I give off a certain vulnerability and availability. I do not innately portray stoicism or standoffishness, though I can build walls if emotionally prompted. My accessibility prevents me from being easily read as the 'evil' one. However, my androgynous and lithe physicality lends a certain mischievous quality to my self that could be perceived as adventurous, hip, or even edgy. I have been compared to actors known for their range; while being ridiculously goofy, they are also intense. These include Frances McDormand, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jennifer Lawrence. They display sensitivity, perception of those around them, vulnerability, and an emotional honesty that lies just beneath a very thin surface. They also have the ability to get scrappy.

I am a romantic explorer with a penchant for jest and nurturing. I am accessible and unexpected. I am spontaneous and grounded. If asked to define myself within

type categories, I would argue that I resist boundaries in both my art and my personal categorization; might I call myself an Active Contradiction?

At this point in time, my resume supports such a claim: I have played the misfit boy, the overindulgent housewife, the drugged-out rockstar, the vaudeville dancer, the mistress, the girl-next-door. The linking qualities these characters possess that live ferociously in me are bleeding vulnerability, naked desire, romantic hearts, no matter how dashed or challenged the spirits.

The theatre is a holy and gritty form of work. It is dirty, mucky, in touch with the base parts of reality. Simultaneously, it lifts us, asks us to look above, beyond, outside at the same time that it forces us inside. I am driven to it by the depth of my own passion; in order to harness the weight of my life desire, I often have to temper it through the telling of stories, a temporary obsession with each that inhabits my world and forces me to ask new, interesting questions of myself as well as the world in which I live.

Where do artistic practices meet the world's greatest needs? How can I marry my passions for holistic and simplistic living with a sustainable career in the arts as an actor and theatre-maker? How can I always play as an actor from a truthful place while enjoying the versatility of casting and creation of roles?

It is with these questions that I conclude my graduate school experience. In my dearest of dreams, I will build a career as a theatre artist that is versatile, challenging, fun, and continuously surprising. I understand more than ever my own physical and artistic intrinsic capacities, I have gained practices and tools to keep sharp certain skill sets, and I have techniques with which to lean on when instincts fail. I have a greater theatrical community, a connection to the current world of playmaking, and a vocabulary to share with my contemporaries in the field of performing artistry. I will forever treasure and honor the time I have spent at UT for the light it shined in my dark

spaces, the hours it gave me to build personal practice, and the fuel I gathered to continue forward in the fiery and passionate land of being an artist.

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VITA

Alexis Leah Scott was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. After completing her work at Strath Haven High School, Wallingford, Pennsylvania, in 1999, she entered Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York. She then transferred to Brown University where she received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Gender Studies with a Focus on Performance and Language in May, 2004. During the following years, she worked as an environmental educator, a teaching artist, a waitress, a receptionist, and an elementary school teacher in the cities of Providence, Rhode Island, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In August, 2010, she entered the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin.

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