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Hitting the Marks

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Hitting the Marks

by

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Thesis

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Dedication

To my mother and father, my biggest fans and greatest mentors, without their love I would not be the man and artist I am today.

To the non-believers, to the ones who said it couldn't be done. Thanks for the inspiration and drive to keep me motivated on my quest.

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Abstract

Hitting the Marks

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This thesis consists of three major sections. The first reflects on the new methodologies that I have developed and incorporated into my classes and performances here in the MFA Acting program at The University of Texas at Austin. The second section examines my approach to character and the application of technique to the rehearsal of a role. Finally, I reflect on, and examine, the rehearsal process for *Intimate Apparel* from the first rehearsal through the final performance.

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THE CRISIS IN MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Coming to graduate school was a necessary step in my professional development as an actor and a much needed wake up call for my life. In New York I was competing with highly skilled stage actors and established television, movie and Broadway stars. With a BA in Theatre and English Literature from the State University of New York at Oswego, I moved to New York City with big dreams of becoming an elite performer. Because of my previous success in community and college productions, I thought I was going to find success in the theatre. I auditioned and got small acting jobs here and there. I even joined Actors Equity, but I wasn't satisfied with my position in the professional community. To realize all of my career goals I needed more skills.

My undergraduate training offered me a sturdy foundation for my acting and I felt equipped to begin my career as a young actor when I graduated. However, in New York City I was one of the many holding similar aspirations. Looking for an edge I began to measure the talent pool at auditions. I found myself in direct competition with actors holding BFA and MFA degrees from well-regarded institutions. My confidence dwindled and I faced a crisis point: change careers or attain more training. To enhance my marketability I needed to immerse myself in academia so I could hone my existing skills and develop new ones.

To endure in the highly competitive acting market a person can no longer be pigeonholed into a career by having just one skill. My one skill was musical theatre. Before coming to UT Austin my professional experience was informed predominately by musical theatre. My acting always felt superficial and general. There was no personal emotional connection to my performances, and my voice and body lacked development. I knew that graduate school held the keys to an oasis of new knowledge that would

stimulate my career and broaden my abilities. To satisfy my curiosity beyond musical theatre and to deepen my acting craft, I knew I needed training in various actor training methods: Viewpoints, Suzuki, Laban, and speech dialects. I wanted experience in film, collaboration, devised work, avant-garde plays, new play development, contemporary acting, comedy, Shaw, Chekhov, and Shakespeare. There was no way to accomplish all of the training and experience on my own in New York.

DEVELOPING NEW METHODOLOGIES

Acting with Imagination and Research

As my three-year journey at The University of Texas at Austin comes to an end, the capstone of my training was the role of Mr. Marks in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*. I want to reflect first upon my past work at UT Austin to illustrate my approaches to character, but specifically Mr. Marks. Drawing from techniques and previous performance experiences, I feel confident that I have attained a road map for approaching future characters through specific acting techniques.

The university's MFA graduate acting program roots itself in the concepts of Stanislavski that are reflected in Meisner-based actor training. In our first semester we explored the Meisner techniques through readings, exercises and scene work. The second semester provided me with an even greater challenge as my class directly applied the Meisner technique to our first year acting project *Clybourne Park*, by Bruce Norris.

The Meisner technique changed my acting process. Prior to graduate school I lacked emotional depth and specificity in my acting. When looking at a script I dealt solely with the external elements of the character. I learned my lines and played the character by imitating what I thought they were doing on the surface. I did not want to face a similar fate playing Mr. Marks.

To penetrate the surface of Marks' character and go beyond the externals of the role, I had to acknowledge his inner life and reach outside the circumstances set forth by the playwright. To accomplish this I used exercises developed by Sanford Meisner in preparation and particularization in the rehearsal process for Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*.¹

¹ See Meisner 115 – 135 and 136 – 147 for more information on preparation/particularization exercises.

I've learned to recognize the importance of actor preparation. If an actor goes into a scene with no active emotional life he is simply a shell of a character. An emotionally prepared actor goes beyond the shell. To "live truthfully in imaginary circumstances"² an actor has to use his real life emotion as substitutions for internal stimulus of character. In everyday life, we experience so many emotions, and these emotions affect how we act in the world and with each other. Preparation recalls life's experiences which are vital in rehearsal and performance.

As per acting teacher Sanford Meisner, particularization is the use of the "magic as if,"³ which is necessary to connect the actor personally to what is happening to the character. In his book *Sanford Meisner On Acting* he says, "It's your personal example chosen from your experience or your imagination which emotionally clarifies the cold material of the text".⁴ For me, a scene without preparation and particularization is a series of disconnected words on a page.

In Bruce Norris's *Clybourne Park*, I became obsessed with actor preparation. As beneficial as preparation is, the concept can block me from accomplishing my character's objectives on stage. Directing all of my concentration inward on my emotions can be dangerous. If I close my attention off by going inside of my emotions, it is difficult for my scene partner to break through my barriers and affect me. Acting is a relationship between two people based on talking and listening. I have to remain present with my scene partner in the moment. If I am only concerned with what is happening in the internal life of my character, my goal of changing my scene partner becomes inactive and the scene loses excitement

² Meisner 15.

³ Meisner's use of "magic as if" comes from Stanislavski.

⁴ Meisner 138.

I have an unforgettable moment of resonance connected to preparation and particularization from my first year of acting class. I was doing a scene from Clifford Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* and I was playing Irv. In the scene Irv and his sister Florrie are taking care of their sick mother. A point of contention in the scene revolves around Florrie getting ready to go out with a guy instead of staying home to help take care of their sick mother. She says, "Why don't we send mom to a hospital? She can die in peace there instead of looking at the clock on the mantelpiece all day".⁵ In that instant I thought of my own father who passed away at home. He stared at the figurines on our television stand in the same way as Irv's mother. I was overcome with emotion as the reality of my life intersected with Irv's. The moment was so authentic, I actually felt like I was living the emotions connected to my father's passing all over again.

By reflecting on that moment in class, I asked myself, "How can I allow what is affecting Marks in *Intimate Apparel* affect me personally?" By making this personal emotional connection, I sought to enrich the performance with my experiences and imagination in such a way that my character and I become one. In my first scene with Esther, it's "as if" I am confronted by the girl of my dreams and I'm not allowed to touch her. Do I have a particular substitution⁶ for the person I am projecting on top of Esther's character? I do. Later in the play, Esther informs me of her engagement to George, and for me, it's "as if" I had lost a special friend to a horrible disease. My challenge was to use personal experience to deepen my character's emotional life.

In the acting program we defined acting as "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances". Imaginary circumstances are another acting method to assist in the

⁵ Odets 17 – 19.

⁶ For more on substitution, see Hagen.

creation of a character. Characters are cultivated through the use of the actor's imagination and through research. Actors use both imagination and research as guideposts to ground their performances in the reality of a play.

In my second year of graduate school I played Lopahkin in Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. The character is a self-made man who goes from being a peasant to a successful merchant. Lopahkin also lives in 1904 Russia. My performance in *The Cherry Orchard* was criticized by faculty as lacking complexity. I believe if I had developed my imaginary circumstances and done more historical research, I would have delivered a more compelling performance.

Historical research was necessary for stimulating imaginary circumstances in *Intimate Apparel*. I developed a portion of Mr. Mark's imaginary circumstances before rehearsal started. The play is set in 1905 New York City, and Mr. Marks is an immigrant Romanian Orthodox Jew. I explored Marks' roots fictionally in Romania to imagine what life might have been like as a Jew growing up during the middle to late 1800s. Eventually it would benefit my character's spine⁷ to determine the historical events that led to his emigration from Europe. What stimulated his immigration into the United States? I found a lot of information about Romanian and Jewish immigration into New York City at the turn of twentieth century.

To gather a sense for what life was like in Romania for Marks during the 1800s I used Marcus Ravage's autobiography *An American in the Making: the Life Story of an Immigrant*. For me it was important to understand why Marks fled his homeland. *Jewish Immigration to the United States from 1881 to 1910* by Samuel Joseph was also a great

⁷ Also known as the "unbroken line", see Stanislavski 271 -280.

assistance and provided plenty of information on the economic, political and sociological reasons as to why one would flee their country of origin.

Defining life in 1905 for an immigrant in New York City was useful research in my creation of Mr. Marks. Lawrence J. Epstein's *At the Edge of a Dream: The Story of Jewish Immigrants on New York's Lower East Side, 1880-1920* discussed what immigrant life was like from Romania to the United States. The book goes into details on ship life and the experience arriving at Ellis Island and the "Golden Medina" for the first time.⁸ Moreover, Epstein's book delivers photographs of daily life on the Lower East Side and the conditions of tenement housing.

Another point to consider in Marks' transition from Romania to New York City is his Orthodox Jewish life. Finding a synagogue and negotiating the lifestyle of the old country with the ever-evolving, fast paced metropolitan society could be a cumbersome challenge, and I believe we see this struggle in Marks.⁹ For insight on social adjustments confronting a Jew and the job opportunities available, I looked at *Emerging Metropolis: New York Jews in the Age of Immigration, 1840 – 1920*, by Annie Polland and Daniel Soyer.

Understanding Orthodox Judaism was an essential element of my research. To bring truth to the role of Mr. Marks I read about the history of the Torah and the Talmud, daily prayer rituals of a practicing Orthodox Jew, holidays, dietary laws, and principles of family life. To flesh out a better understanding of this material and the religion, I turned to *To Be a Jew; a Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life*, by Hayim Donin.

⁸ Immigrants referred to America as the golden medina or golden land, see Epstein 13.

⁹ For insight on the adjustments a Jew would have to face and the opportunities available Epstein 59 – 61, 171 and Polland and Soyer 36 -39.

Dialect Studies and Practical Voice Training

A substantial portion of the voice and speech training in the graduate acting program focused on dialect studies. To navigate through dialect text, I developed a personal method of working that incorporated phonetics, transcriptions, and cultural data from live sources into my process.¹⁰ Over four semesters with Professor Pamela Christian, I learned Standard British, French, Irish, Jamaican, Indian, South Boston and Scottish dialects. In class, we dedicated many study hours on the International Phonetic Alphabet¹¹, improvisations, scenes, monologues, research projects and character creation in spoken dialect. Additionally, in my second year, I had a chance to put the dialect training to practical use playing the fantastical Spaniard Don Adriano de Armado in William Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*.

In my training I also spent two years in the classroom with Professor Barney Hammond developing my voice production through practical vocal exercises. The practical voice training assisted me in developing a fuller, deeper, more resonant voice. This was done through a daily vocal progression that included exercises in deep diaphragmatic breathing followed by pitch and range work, muscularity of speech, and the development of my chest and head resonators. We also spent many hours navigating through the exercises developed by Patsy Rodenburg, Cicely Berry, and Edith Skinner.

Movement for the Actor

Stage acting is a physical act that requires physical strengthening and conditioning. In my studies, I've learned that a restricted and underdeveloped body does not aid the actor in performance. My movement training had tremendous influence on

¹⁰ We used Kopf and Meier as main sources for dialect studies.

¹¹ See Meier 11 for a table of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

my growth as an artist in graduate school. I've received many accolades for my physical transformation at UT and I credit my improvement to the movement training.

In my first year of movement with Lecturer Andrea Beckham I established a physical regimen incorporating the exercises of Joseph Pilates into my daily routine.¹² His method of physical conditioning required a time block in my schedule that enabled me to work on the Eight Principles of Pilates: relaxation, breathing, alignment, centering, concentration, coordination, flowing movements and stamina.¹³ All of these elements assist in the development of my physical instrument, and I continued to incorporate them into my daily life for better rehearsals and performances.

I also spent an extensive amount of time in my first year of movement training with Lecturer Tom Truss working with the Alexander technique, Laban effort actions and Viewpoints. I believe all three have direct application to my work on character development, and I implemented these practices into my rehearsal process for *Intimate Apparel*. The Alexander technique is useful in identifying then releasing physical tension in the body. Laban effort actions helped me use my body in space, and Viewpoints was useful for me creating movement for the production.

¹² See Siler for a Pilates exercise breakdown.

¹³ These Eight Principles were adapted from Siler's text by UT Theatre and Dance Lecturer (Andrea Beckham).

REHEARSING A ROLE

Character Analysis

When approaching Mr. Marks through character analysis I had to acknowledge his present circumstances and look into his past. To do this, I broke down my character by examining the text and determining my given circumstances¹⁴, objectives, and obstacles. In any script the given circumstances are the details that the playwright provides the actor with that cannot be changed. Some of Marks' givens provided by Nottage in *Intimate Apparel* include: his occupation as a fabric merchant, betrothed to be married, cannot be touched by a woman who isn't his wife, from Romania, a practicing Orthodox Jew, lives in Manhattan's Lower East Side in 1905, his love for fabric, wears black, and most importantly his tension filled relationship with an African-American seamstress named Esther.

To expand on their dynamic heightened relationship I used preparation and imaginary circumstances to create a burning attraction in Marks' heart for Esther. For me these emotions needed to start sizzling off stage. This burning desire was also a major obstacle for Mr. Marks, considering his religious beliefs. By wanting a physical relationship with Esther the moment-to-moment reality between them had to be palpable. Marks' desire for Esther is always burning beneath the surface of Lynn Nottage's text. Through character analysis and given circumstances, I was able to reveal the heat of their relationship through subtext and physical restraint.

In *Intimate Apparel* Mr. Marks is consistently dealing with covering energy in his relationship with Esther. Covering energy is "an actor's attempt to mask his inner deep

¹⁴ For a good definition of given circumstances see Carnicke 174.

feelings”.¹⁵ A perfect example is in scene six when Marks tells Esther about the competition across the street and how it is affecting his business. He even suspects that Esther may have been avoiding his shop and going over to the competition. However underneath all of this tension, Mr. Marks is really concealing his desire to tell Esther how much he has emotionally missed her. There is also a tremendous amount of subtext underneath what we are saying to each other, and if we’ve done our preparation and analysis the audience will be able to feel our desire through the repressed energy that passes through both of the characters.

A huge character element to take into consideration for Mr. Marks is his religious faith. I am a Roman Catholic and the Jewish faith and tradition are unfamiliar to me. In *Intimate Apparel* I wanted to take the stage as an actor and pass for Jewish. I wanted to know as much about the faith as I possibly could.

Besides faith I also wanted to consider Romanian cultural influences, immigration at the turn of the 20th century, and living in 1905 New York City into my character analysis. Ultimately my goal was for the audience to accept me as a Romanian Orthodox Jewish man. I read a number of books about the Romanian/Jewish experience, and let the facts and ideas contained in the books infiltrate my imagination and performance.

Incorporating Dialect Studies

Intimate Apparel was performed at the Oscar Brockett Theatre and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was in the B. Iden Payne Theatre. The theatres are very different in size and vocal projection is a factor when playing a dialect role. In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*,

¹⁵ Krasner 151.

presented in the spring semester of my second year, I performed Don Armado with a Castilian Spanish dialect. To adjust to the larger size of the Payne Stage, I exaggerated changes in the dialect and my physicality which almost led me to a caricature performance. I wanted a more subtle presentation of Marks in *Intimate Apparel*.

In the smaller Brockett Theatre my dialect for Mr. Marks was approached differently. Marks' dialect needed to be specific, subtle, and everyday. My aim was "to pass" for a Romanian Jew. As *Intimate Apparel* is set in 1905 New York, I needed the dialect to merge with the character in a way that offered a historical authenticity to the role. I wanted to stay away from caricature of a Romanian Jew. I needed a nuanced, real human being.

My dialect study for *Intimate Apparel* started in December of 2012. Early in my research process, it was important for me to find a human source on which to base my dialect study. Initially I chose human rights activist Elie Weisel. I selected Weisel because he is a Romanian Jewish man. I felt that his accent was readily accessible through media. There are a number of videos featuring Weisel on YouTube.¹⁶ However after careful consideration and review, my dialect coach Pamela Christian and I determined that Weisel's voice may not have enough distinct vocal personality in it to base a dialect study on. I turned to the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA) for another live source sample.

IDEA is a language archive on the internet that offers a number of dialect samples of languages from around the world. From the archive I selected a man from Northern

¹⁶ See "An Evening with Elie Wiesel".

Romania.¹⁷ The man in the sample had a heavy accent. His accent was too thick and the character too rich, which had the potential of becoming a caricature of the dialect.

To find a half-way point between Wiesel and the IDEA sample I reached out to a former graduate acting student from the University of Texas at Austin, Smaranda Luna. Although Smaranda is not Jewish, she is from Romania and speaks with a Romanian accent. We exchanged emails and eventually she sent me two recordings of her reading two different written passages highlighting the Romanian dialect. The best recording was her recitation of the “Rainbow Passage”.¹⁸ Of my three subjects to base my study on, Smaranda’s dialect was the best.

From Smaranda’s recording I was able to mark changes from my English speaking dialect to her Romanian one. First, I developed a dialect key for transcription.¹⁹ Initially I noticed an almost syncopated rhythm in the way she speaks. Romanian is considered one of the five romance languages and the dialect has a musicality to it that I identified early on. Smaranda also used a dark velar “l” sound in words like well, old, and liking and an occasional “r” trill/tap sound in words such story, deserted, and superb. Words ending in “TH” such as north became nort. The placement of Smaranda’s voice also differed from my American placement. American speech tends to be pulled back in the throat and Romanian speech lives in the mid mouth forward. The placement also lends to the musicality of the dialect.²⁰

Taking the information I collected from listening to Smaranda, I cross checked my transcriptions with *Accents: A Manuel for Actors* by Robert Blumenfeld. This

¹⁷ See sample Romania 8 from "Romania".

¹⁸ For a copy of the “Rainbow Passage”, see Meier 15.

¹⁹ A dialect key is a chart of phonetic changes transcribed from a live source.

²⁰ My ability to identify these phonetic changes comes from Paul Meier and the International Phonetic Alphabet.

resource supplemented my live dialect study. Not only did it support my observations, it provided further assistance with the transcription of the Romanian Dialect. Blumenfeld identified the switch of “v” for the initial “w”, the soft fricative “h:”, and the “TH” in words like them with a “z” and the “th” in words such as thing with and “s”.²¹

Once I had the key dialect changes, I typed every one of Marks’ scenes and then transcribed the dialect on top of Nottage’s text in pencil, for example:

Marks revels in her delight.) He could have been a thief for all I know, but the color is a lovely coffee, very subtle. Don't you think? So I pay too much, but not enough for the quality. Ah! Yes. I have something else to show you. It's here. Where is it? Where are you? Here we are. (Mr. Marks unfurls a roll of lace.)

Figure 1: A transcription example from *Intimate Apparel*.

After finishing the transcription I was then able to begin the memorization process and combine the dialect and text together. However, when working with a dialect one cannot sacrifice clarity. I used some substitutions when I spoke the text aloud. Above all I needed the play to be heard and comprehensible to the audience so editing the dialect for clarity was paramount. For example, I did not use every “v” for “w” change and I also did not substitute every “TH” or “th” sounds with an “s” or “z”. For words like “the” I would change the “TH” sound to a “d” making sound like “duh”. I would also really lean into the dialect at the tops of scenes and pull back on the dialect as the scene progressed for clarity purposes.

²¹ Blumenfeld 228 – 232.

Taking ownership of a dialect does not solely rest on technique. One must also incorporate character and cultural research.²² My research was extensive and I consider it to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of preparing the role. There is so much one can find when looking at the development of a dialect and how it is informed by the culture. Three main focuses for me before rehearsal started were location, religion, and music.

Using clues from the text, I imagined that Mr. Marks may have been from Botosani, Romania. Botosani is in North Eastern Romania and is bordered by Ukraine and Moldova. Over the Christmas holiday in 2012 I had the pleasure of meeting a woman from Ukraine and there were several similarities between her dialect and Romanian.

Orthodox Judaism also informs the way Marks speaks, and Nottage has written “Jewishness” into the characters’ text. When speaking or reading the text you can hear a cadence that also reflects the Yiddish language, and I find that there is a similar cadence when listening to Orthodox Jewish prayer.²³ My dialect coach also clued me in on this early in the process and said that finding Jewish signifiers in the text would be extremely beneficial in creating the dialect and there are an abundance of them in *Intimate Apparel*.

The last aspect of my cultural research that informed Mr. Marks’ dialect was music. In an early dialect coaching session I was told to find the musicality of the dialect. When examining the music of Romania I came across klezmer. Klezmer is a form of Yiddish celebratory music with roots in Romania and American Jazz. The music was extremely useful in creating the syncopated musicality of the dialect. In my preparation I listened to a number of modern klezmer bands including: *The Klezmer*

²² For more on cultural research, see Kopf 37 – 48.

²³ To listen to the Shema in Hebrew, see "Hear, O Yisrael (Shema Yisrael) in Hebrew".

*Conservatory Band, The Klezmer Lounge Band, Yale Strom & Hot Postromi, and Jontef.*²⁴

Preparing the Body

I used two movement techniques in preparing for Mr. Marks. The first was Viewpoints. Viewpoints was originally conceived as a language to create compositions for dancers. Now directors and actors use the technique in their work as a method to generate devised performances and to assist in the body's movement through the performing space. There are nine Viewpoints: tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition, spatial relationship, topography, shape, gesture, and architecture.²⁵

Kinesthetic response and spatial relationship were the two I used the most in my work on *Intimate Apparel*. Mr. Mark's primary interactions in the script are with fabric and with Esther. Kinesthetic response deals with how the body responds to movement outside of itself.²⁶ How each fabric affected Marks was transmitted through my response to kinesthetic response. Silk flowed through my hands much differently than wool. Silk also has a level of sensuality to the touch and the coarseness of wool evokes the common man. Esther also touches Mr. Marks three times in the play: once by accident, another time in secret, and finally intentionally. Each time a different kinesthetic response was required to register her interaction with my body.

Next I used spatial relationship to explore my distance between Esther. Being a Romanian Orthodox Jewish man in 1905 meant that I could not touch a woman who wasn't my wife. Using spatial relationship I was always aware of Esther's presence in

²⁴ Details on these recordings are listed in the works cited.

²⁵ For more details on Viewpoints, see Bogart.

²⁶ Bogart 8.

my space. I constantly monitored her hand movements knowing that mine could never be near hers. This restriction also added a nice obstacle for me to play against.

The second movement method I used was Laban effort actions. Laban effort actions are also a technique used to identify how a body moves through space.²⁷ In *Love's Labour's Lost* I captured the romantic, flamboyant, grandeur of Don Armado's movements with gliding, dabbing, and floating gestures. I also imagined Don Armado to be a light weighted character. For Mr. Marks in *Intimate Apparel* I used a contrasting approach to character. I considered Marks to be a more grounded character than Don Armado and used a heavy weight. In my approach to Mr. Marks I used pressing, wringing, and bound gestures. I felt that Marks was far more contained as a character than Don Armado and I wanted to highlight that transformation.

²⁷ To read about Laban effort actions and their application to performance, see Newlove.

INTIMATE APPAREL

Working with the Director

I had 28 rehearsals in a span of five weeks that began on January 22, 2013. This number includes initial read-throughs, scene work, run-throughs, tech rehearsals, and one final dress performance before an invited audience. For a period drama driven by complex characters and a demanding script the schedule seemed short. In the Department of Theatre and Dance we usually only rehearse from 6pm to 10pm Monday through Friday and 11am to 5pm on Sundays. For a production of this magnitude we could have used more rehearsal time. During *Love's Labour's Lost* we worked on show material in voice class. We also had private sessions with the director during the day. *Intimate Apparel* would have benefited from a similar schedule. From day one Melissa Maxwell, our director, recognized that time was a factor in our short rehearsal process and encouraged us to be consistently prepared and diligent.

We spent the first few days of rehearsal reading through the play and discussing the material. Although the conversations were stimulating and informative, passively sitting at a table was something Melissa did not want to spend a lot of time doing. She believed actors worked best on their feet so we were up and engaging the material immediately.

Her directing style was text-based and organic. She considered the text to be a Bible for the production. In her eyes we could only play what Lynn Nottage had written and she was there to serve as our conductor - a guide to assist in extracting meaning from the play. Storytelling and arousing the absolute best out of her actors was her main concern. To Melissa we were not lifeless actors serving as her pawns. She expected our best work at every rehearsal, making intelligent, interesting and dangerous choices. She

constantly held our feet to the fire and molded what we brought into the room until we took ownership of our characters.

To be at my best in rehearsal, it was essential for me to warm up vocally. I would do a small vocal warm-up consisting of freeing and releasing the body, dropping the breath in, and warming up the dialect. Usually I would warm-up the dialect by chanting Marks' lines and then speaking them. Klezmer music also assisted in my dialect warm-up and helped me drop into the physicality of Mr. Marks. Finally before each session I would spend some time walking around the rehearsal space endowing the stage with energy and life. I find that an actor often overlooks the space that a character lives in. If a location in the performance/rehearsal space is designated for my character I want to be as comfortable with the set and rehearsal furniture as I possibly can. Rooms have memories and energy. My living room is different than my bedroom physically but it also lives differently inside of me emotionally. Finding the energy for Mr. Mark's tenement flat/shop was important for me.

Unlike several other productions that I have participated in over the last three years at the university, Melissa actually encouraged us to have the script in our hands during rehearsals. She noted that if the actor is only obsessed with learning lines they end up missing so much of what is happening in the play. *Intimate Apparel* has a lot of action written into the stage direction. Early in the process if I try to go off book my focus goes to getting the lines right instead of getting the story right. At first her process was a challenge, and I admit that it made me uncomfortable. For months I had been working to get off book because not only did I have to memorize my lines but I also had to memorize a dialect. However once I was able to release the need for word perfection

and let trust take over my dialect, having the book in my hand helped me find moments that I may have missed and also helped me solidify blocking and acting choices.

Scene work was vigorous. I was called to rehearsal four days a week. In the play Mr. Marks has six scenes spread over two acts. Each scene in the production only contains two characters with Esther always being one of them. In order to maintain consistency Melissa's goal was to have each actor back in the room with Esther every other day or every two days rehearsing so we were not away from the play for an extended period of time. To make the most of my down time I needed to establish daily routines for working on the role.

I believe an actor must not limit his exploration of the character and the play solely to the rehearsal room. For me the evolution of the character is in a constant state of flux and an actor cannot place themselves inside of a box early on in the rehearsal process. Attention must be paid to the details and these details will not take care of themselves. Daily practice is necessary and my routine encompassed research, honing my characters emotions and physical life, dialect drills, and the review of blocking and director notes.

I was always kept on my toes in scene work sessions. Melissa was quick to call me out for going through the motions of a scene and ignoring subtext and intent. She also did not want us playing the idea or state of being of the characters. She demanded daily that we dig deeper. I frequently get lured into reproducing easy choices in rehearsal when they are rewarded with positive feedback. However the dangerous choices are more exciting and really ignite the space between two people. Dangerous choices make a scene far more alive and truthful. A directing method that encouraged and inspired me was when Melissa gave individual notes privately. She believed that actors should have

secrets and by giving us notes privately she put the scene in a state of imbalance where anything could happen. In one scene she may have me make a different choice than I had previously and by not sharing the note with the other actor, we had no idea what was coming.

Play in Rehearsal

After a week and a half of scene work we did our first run-through. At that point some scenes had been worked on more than others. In fact a few scenes had yet to be blocked and explored in detail. In some of my scene rehearsals we would get hung-up on early scenes in the play and never make it to the end of our scheduled work session. This is a common occurrence for a lot of productions, but it in no way affected my psyche. I just noted where the unfamiliar spots were and worked through them to the best of my ability. The first run was about seeing the overall big picture of the play and to identify where the holes were in each scene. I was pleased with where we were in the first run but I felt like I was paying too much attention on getting my performance right instead of trusting what we had built thus far.

In the rehearsal room the actors and the production team are building a product - a product that will ultimately be seen and judged by an audience. This can cause a certain level of stress for me as an actor. In return the stress produces a block that inhibits me physically and mentally. I don't want to become a lifeless puppet on stage.

We were also challenged by the director after the first run to keep pushing ourselves deeper into the world of the play. While working on a scene we spent hours crafting moments and working on impulses and it is important to keep digging at the play and not lose what we found on our journey. In order for this play to be the best that it

possibly could be, Melissa demanded that we step up our preparation. She encouraged us to go to the dangerous and scary places that these characters live in emotionally and review our material so that we would start feeling it in our bodies instead of our heads.

The second run was also very revealing. We had the structure of the play but our work still lacked emotional depth. Melissa asked each one of us how we felt after the second run and I said I felt like a loose plug in an electrical socket that keeps flickering on and off. In order for this production to be successful every character needs to be plugged in from the moment the play starts until it finishes. She described the play as a train leaving the station, and once it goes, the train needs to keep burning with momentum. What is the deep seated need that drives each of these characters with life-or-death stakes?

Figuring out a need for Marks popped in my head following the last read-through before we got on our feet to rehearse. Melissa wanted to know what I thought about Marks and I proceeded to go on a longwinded explanation describing what I thought was happening in the play. To really penetrate the exterior of my character I, the actor, would have to probe into the heart and soul of Marks and find his need for Esther. At first I played with the idea of her hands being a source of attraction but as I progressed the need became more apparent and stronger. Marks needed Esther to fill the loneliness in his heart. He needed someone who shared his love of fabric. Just as Esther was going through the inner struggle of seeking a life partner and finding intimacy, so was Marks conflicted with a prearranged fiancée abroad and questioning his own Orthodox Jewish faith.

During the rehearsal process, the director questioned me about my handling of fabric. If I was going to be a true merchant of fabric in the play and use my props

truthfully I was going to need practice with props. The rehearsal props were less than ideal. In fact I regularly had to bring in my own substitutions because we lacked prop support. To achieve an authenticity with the handling of the fabric I worked with costumes and spent some time in the costume shop furling and folding. I also spent an entire afternoon in the fabric section of Hobby Lobby²⁸ watching employees fold and work with bolts. As this was Marks' profession I needed to obtain a level of finesse with various styles of fabric material.

Over five weeks of rehearsal we did a combination of scene work and six run-throughs. As we progressed from week to week our characters became emotionally richer. Melissa continued to press the cast to go deeper beyond the surface. To challenge myself and further connect myself to the material I would write in my journal as Marks. In my journal I talked about what I felt for Esther and how it was conflicting with my faith. I also deepened my pre-scene preparation by going into detail about the moment before I entered a scene.

Self-Assessment

In my pursuit of going beyond the surface in *Intimate Apparel* I couldn't help but see the parallels in how I approached Chekhov and *The Cherry Orchard* in our second year. Both Lopahkin and Marks display an exuberant amount of covering energy and are fueled deeply by the hidden desires that can never be said aloud. I recall rehearsing a portion of Act 1 Scene 6 in *Intimate Apparel* where Marks is covering his affection, concern and hunger for Esther with a frenetic story about his competition across the street giving extra gift incentives with every sale and how he was afraid she might be buying

²⁸ Hobby Lobby is a popular arts and crafts supplier.

fabric from the competition instead of him. Also the subtext between Esther and Marks translated through their shared fondness for fabric also reflects their fondness for each other. The exchange is palpable. Only through action will subtext surface and ignite the performance.

Act 1 Scene 6 also had challenges for me as an actor. The director informed the cast of a concept she liked to call matching the emotional with the physical. The idea is extremely useful in motivating blocking. As I mentioned above there is a frenetic monologue for Marks to open the scene. In early rehearsals when I got to the monologue my mind would begin to speed forward and words would just spill out of my mouth. The director pointed out that when I was speaking I was firmly rooted to the ground and she suggested translating the energy of the monologue into some physical manifestation; move around don't lock yourself in one spot. This was not a comedic monologue but for some reason I turned to playing the piece funny to release myself from being zoned into one position on stage. Eventually I began to play with some Laban effort actions to assist in my blocking. I used wringing, pressing, and flicking to release some of my energy to find the desperation of the monologue.

The final run before tech was a run for some of our peers and select faculty. This would be the last time running the play in its entirety before tech began. At this rehearsal I was remarkably nervous and anxious.

Tech rehearsal was by far the most tedious element of this production experience. Tech rehearsals are not about the actor and it is easy to let the play go into a state of hibernation if I am not careful during tech. In tech I made the most of my time on the set. As an actor it is a time to work without the director's focus entirely on the performance. There is a sense of freedom and liberation in it. During this time I also

worked to refine moments and action, work with props, and craft entrances and exits. Tech rehearsal is also an exercise in extreme patience.

When all was said and done we had one opportunity to run the play with full tech before our first invited audience. This was worrisome. Running the play repeatedly helped me establish a backstage routine that cannot be simulated in the rehearsal hall. There was still a sense of what comes next backstage before we pressed on through the drama on stage. Maybe this air of uncertainty contributed to our imbalance that ultimately resulted in successful final run to set us up for opening night.

My performances were quite consistent and in line with the director's vision. I'm never one to change anything once the director leaves and freezes the show. This doesn't mean that I am no longer allowed to challenge myself emotional in a performance. As a run progresses I constantly find ways to keep my emotions fresh and in line with the director's intentions.

In the second weekend I found the Wednesday show to be an adventure after having two days off. Assuming that I was going to be able to walk in and pick up right where I left off in the run was an assumption that proved to send my performance slightly off kilter. I felt like I was marginally monitoring myself, lifting my attention from my partner and what was happening in the moment to make sure I was getting it right. To a normal observe my work would still appear consistent but I needed to shift my approach back to doing. Ultimately it was important to keep putting my focus on my scene partner and allowing the scenes and performance to happen in the moment.

The critical reception to *Intimate Apparel* was astounding. Elizabeth Cobbe of The Austin Chronicle called the play "powerfully honest" and labeled my performance as

Mr. Marks as “especially engaging”.²⁹ Jeff Davis of “Broadwayworld.com” said, “I am so wonderfully flustered by this beautifully acted and well-crafted production that all I can think off to kick off this review is "Wow." and “It is beautiful and carefully tailored with just the right amount of accoutrement and decoration, and the play fits the cast and crew like a glove”. He also said, “John Smiley is wonderful as Mr. Marks, the Jewish fabric seller, and he excels at bringing the energetic, somewhat lovelorn man to life”.³⁰ Finally, the campus newspaper *The Daily Texan* read “With such professional execution from the entire cast and the engrossing atmosphere created by the production team, UT’s ‘Intimate Apparel’ will leave the audience reeling”.³¹

I can honestly say that this was my most enjoyable performance experience at UT. For the first time in three years I felt like I was operating on all cylinders. My goal for this production was to create a realistic transformative character and I believe I achieved that in performance. Making physical and dialect adjustments definitely contributed to the depth of my portrayal and I received many accolades from students and professors regarding my transformation. UT acting faculty member Jim Daniels thought that the specificity of my physical life captured the “Jewish” milieu of Mr. Marks. He also commented on the remarkable containment of my gestures and how that added to the stillness of the character. Overall he felt that the performance was honest and found the subtext of Marks and Esther to be extremely palpable.

²⁹ For a full performance review, see Cobbe.

³⁰ For a full performance review, see Davis.

³¹ For a full performance review, see Williams.

CONCLUSION

My acting future is promising and I believe the MFA graduate acting program provided me with a rich and rewarding experience. In my studies I developed the skills necessary to better establish myself in a highly competitive industry. Acting is like any other craft or sport, and to remain competitive I will have to continue to practice what I've collected at UT on the stage and in the classroom. As I continue to pursue a career as an actor and collaborative artist I can look to my training for guidance and inspiration.

With the addition of a graduate degree on my resume, the landscape of my career will open up drastically. I now consider myself a technically skilled actor. I am no longer limited to musical theatre auditions for my livelihood. I can audition for, and perform in, a variety of styles and mediums. Auditioning can be a daily regimen for an actor and I am confident in my acquired tools and ability. My training in Meisner, script analysis, Shakespeare, movement, voice, dialects, and film acting has prepared me for a number of audition scenarios and performance challenges.

Graduate school has also provided me with techniques necessary to create solo performance or group collaborations. We are now in an age full of non-traditional performances. Utilizing methods in devised theatre, solo performance, and group generated work is important for an actor. There are several artistic languages in which a performer can now use for creation. The modern director is also apt to work and implore these methods in the rehearsal room. In my training at UT I've learned Anne Bogart's interpretation of Viewpoints, Laban's Effort Actions, The Rude Mech's Method of Creation, devised theatre, mask, mime, and clown. A career goal is to one day participate actively in avant-garde theatre and physical theatre; I can even create my own ensemble or solo performance using any one of these techniques.

Beyond acting I can now seek employment in higher education. UT provided three semesters of practical teaching experience, giving me the opportunity to serve as an assistant instructor of acting and voice. With my extensive training in voice class and serving as assistant vocal coach on three main stage productions, I would also feel apt and comfortable teaching voice for the stage.

Through the cultivation of technique and specialized training I have certainly enhanced and fortified my work ethic. I've always taken pride in doing the job to the best of my ability. Early in my career "to the best of my ability" meant showing up on time with the lines memorized. That was an ill way of thinking. Yes it is important to be punctual and off book but an actor has so much more to do than that. An actor has to make choices and stretch their imagination. An actor has to know script analysis and playing an action. Simple line memorization yields robotic lifeless acting. I was once a robot but now I have the ethic, skill, and determination to spring life from page to stage in a way that I have never been able to do before and that is magical.

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