

Analytic Introspections from an Actor's Perspective

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## Introduction

I am not a scientist.

A scientist would hypothesize and experiment and verify and analyze and eventually prove something. A scientist's thinking would be methodical and rigorous and sharp.

Introspection is a problematic scientific apparatus. Wolfgang Köhler explains its flaw: "as a procedure, introspection lacks the chief methodological virtue of work in physics: a position of the observer outside the system which he observes. Introspecting and its objects are facts within the same system, and the chances that the former leave the latter undisturbed are exceedingly small."

The writings assembled here may not be valuable as scientific data, but the process of collecting introspections over the course of the project had a significant impact on my inner experience, which is something you'll just have to take my word on.

Over the past two semesters I have continually attempted to capture what it feels like to be a 28-year-old actor/psychology student writing an undergraduate thesis paper about acting and psychology. In doing so, my hope is that I've written an undergraduate thesis paper about acting and psychology.

## Methodology and Style

"Whereas incorrect Activity causes contraction in our body and soul, correct Activity frees us and leads to expansion. The actor must discriminate between the two kinds of Activity in himself, and must try always to keep to the right one."

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

In developing this project, writing began to pour out of me. I began with what felt like academic formality, making sweeping claims about Freud and Stanislavski, defending my argument and imagining conclusions. As I continued writing and reading and thinking, the formality and argument began to feel hollow and distant, so I let it fall away. Allowing myself to write without knowing where I was headed proved beneficial- my explorations deepened, my reflective thinking gained sharpness, and my curiosity took the driver's seat. Continued research and writing became not only fruitful, but pleasurable. Framed the way I framed it to myself, the writing process is unrestrained- offered room to expand, to shift, to meander.

The pursuit of my goal to become a better actor began by gathering stacks of ideas and approaches so that I could write with some authority on Acting and Psychology, so that I could be more deeply informed on the ways that others have thought about the intersection between the two fields. Reading and thinking about the topics from an objective perspective was interesting and in some way I developed a position in the ongoing conversation, allying myself generally with Michael Chekhov and C.G. Jung.

As time passed and the audition approached, my writing strayed from a focus on what others have said and what I want to say about acting and psychology and toward my subjective experience, which felt more relevant than theory or argument, because I was experiencing the intersection of acting and psychology. I started using writing as a way to unpack my anxiety and discovered that the attitude with which I approached my writing (which is the same as my thinking or is at least a part of it) had a direct impact on my experience of performing. The more I indulged my anxiety as I wrote, the more anxious my performance became. I corrected my approach and did less, wrote less, and the outcome was a calmer, more present performance.

In order to become better, I needed to take stock- to find out where I am now, which cannot be separated from what led me to here. So, I began thinking backward. I also started paying closer attention to my dreams, the contents of which are an amalgamation of imagining, remembering, and experiencing. Then I paid less attention to my dreams because I had to get to work and I did not have 30 minutes to write longhand in a dream journal but I still tried to seek meaning in my dreaming.

Then, after the audition, after being cast, my thinking (and my writing, which became more sparse) turned further inward. I felt it important to uncover what kind of actor I am- and in the digging, I could not distinguish between what kind of actor I am and what kind of person I am.

At one point, this writing was intended to precede a live performance- it would be one part of a theatrical experience that would culminate in total embodied enactment.

Then, SARS-CoV-2 turned the world upside-down and audience members became a threat to each other just by sitting in proximity and theatres worldwide shut their doors and being an actor and being a person became more confusing than it was before.

These pieces of writing land somewhere in the overlap between autobiographical narrative, process journal, and memoir. My hope is that the reader will engage with my confusions and excitements and will not be alienated.

## Preface

On a beach in Southern California when I was four years old I remember watching the tide recede around my ankles and then a wave slammed into me suddenly and it was so loud and the wind was knocked out of me and I could only see churning water and sand and I couldn't breathe and I didn't know what was happening but I thought I was dying.

As the water settled and I found my hands and knees I was coughing and saltwater was burning my eyes and I could not catch my breath and my mouth was full of sand and seawater and it tasted painfully bitter. I don't remember if it was my dad or my mom but somebody scooped me up and wrapped me in a towel and I shivered there on their lap.

Whenever we returned to the beach as I got older I would watch people swimming out there past the waves with deep confusion.

My uncle relentlessly coaxed me back into the water and taunted me with how unscary it was to him but he was so much bigger than me and I didn't think he understood what had happened and what could happen.

Later I learned that I could confront oncoming waves directly, dipping beneath the crest of the billow and emerging on the other side and looking back to watch it crash. I felt powerful floating beyond the violent edge.

Then when I was thirteen my uncle handed me a wetsuit and snorkelling gear and we went out into the water but not very far and when I looked beneath the surface a mass of seaweed undulated and it seemed alive and immense and my heart was pounding and I jolted back and rushed to the shore and sat and shivered.

When standing in front of an audience, their collected attention assumes an oceanic form, sending waves of energy into and through me.

The following writing is itself a performance, an accounting of my subjective emotional processes, excitements, and anxieties over the course of several months. The initial intent behind the project was to investigate overlaps between acting theory and psychoanalytic theory as I prepare to play Freddie in Sarah Ruhl's *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* at Salt Lake Acting Company. Then, a global pandemic struck. Then, the writing itself became the point.

On many levels, acting and psychoanalysis both concern the inner world of the individual. Thoughts and feelings are the raw material used in both processes: here are some of mine.

## **1: hypotheses**

**August 21, 2019 - September 15, 2019**

The first stage is the most intimate and subtle, in which the conception of the whole future performance and all the characters takes place. All is anticipation, expectation, and hopeful guessing.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

## **August 21, 2019 - in which the brainstorm begins**

I sit facing an immense shifting mass of questions and possibilities regarding form, content, intention, and process.

There are countless intersections between acting and psychology. In order to progress toward a cogent thesis (or specific topic, for that matter) it is imperative that I make clear what sort of acting I wish to dissect, and in which context. I have no idea where to begin.

As a spiritually frustrated teenager, I found respite in acting classes. I wasn't offered any answers to deep questions about my existence, but in sussing out the meaning of a line and imagining circumstances outside my personal experience I felt my angst subsiding and my curiosity awakening.

There is a difference between the sensation of reading a play and the sensation of reading a script that contains a character that you as the actor are committed to playing. To the actor, each line, each word, each punctuation mark, even each space between lines- every symbol or scrap of information relevant to the present role ceases to be inert ink on a page when a performance looms.

The craft of acting has been described and taught and analyzed and deconstructed and restructured and mastered and butchered many times by actors, teachers, directors, critics, and theorists for hundreds of years. I don't know that there is anything new I can offer to the discussion.

Konstantin Stanislavski is generally considered the grandfather of modern acting theory. The instigating force behind his approach is psychology and affective memory<sup>1</sup>.

I have been thinking seriously about what I most want to do for a long time. In many ways, I am doing it. I am doing it through my work at Salt Lake Acting Company<sup>2</sup>; through my relationship with my girlfriend, Cassie, who is an actor of an incredibly high caliber; through my study of psychology and continual discovery of parallels to the craft of acting; through my continued commitment to supporting the development and production of brave contemporary theatre.

So- what will my capstone project look like? There are a number of swirling possibilities- some look like a performance, some look like a play that I direct, some that I write, some look like a practical guide for actors, some look like a series of acting exercises. Very few look like a traditional academic research paper.

In the end, my goal is to become a better actor.

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably. Frankly, my understanding of Stanislavski is general- although his widespread influence merits further investigation, I focus on Michael Chekhov (Stanislavski's "most brilliant student") in this writing.

<sup>2</sup> Aka "SLAC"

## September 2, 2019 - in which it is revealed just how little I know about psychology

I have begun to loathe psychology. Not through my own thinking about it- I enjoyed reading about Freud's deeply beautiful, totally misguided ideas and tragic, hilarious life story<sup>3</sup>- but as I read and absorb acting theory, I start to resent the intent behind psychological study and the relentless rationalism of the scientific method. In the process of seeking wisdom about the ways theatre-makers move audiences, I find myself increasingly distanced from the rationally data-driven, from the scientific particulars, from attempts to nail down concrete facts about the thinking mind.

I was surprised to learn about how desperate Freud was to make a scientific discovery that would make him famous. He hoped to become a Newton or a Darwin. He was obsessive about it, surrounding himself with thinkers he viewed as influential, making them his closest friends until they betrayed him and became his mortal enemies. The two-page biography in *Theories of Personality* describes a paranoid person who seems like a shoo-in for bipolar, if not full-on borderline personality disorder<sup>4</sup>. He continually painted himself into corners by making sweeping claims and had difficulty amending his theories as his life went on.

When interviewed by Paula Vogel in BOMB Magazine, contemporary playwright Sarah Ruhl nudged the theatre field away from Freud's influence: "I think our generation has to look at Freud and Freud's impact, and many of us say, Oh, maybe Freud didn't have it right. Something that he was right about he got from literature: the Oedipal complex, from the Greeks. So maybe we ought to go back to the Greeks instead of back to Freud on the Greeks."

Ruhl goes back to the Greeks, but not through the conventional avenues that so frequently make Ancient Greek theatre dusty and boring. Her instinct is to follow Ovid instead of Aristotle, trading well-worn plot arcs for magical, simple moments of transformation. In *Melancholy Play*, for example, a woman gets so depressed that she becomes an almond.

Hers is nowhere near the only approach to making theatre, nor anywhere near the most common. Many would argue that a play requires realistic psychology, that to tell an effective story the characters and events must be, above all, believable. Ruhl resists the rational, realistic urge. She distills her approach in a profile from *the New Yorker*: "If you excavate people's subjectivity and how they view the world emotionally, you don't get realism."

It seemed, to me, that the study of psychology would open a window into the human mind that would benefit my craft as an actor. If I could amass encyclopedic knowledge of the psyche, I would gain the key to unlocking the secrets of characters I previously couldn't even see. I thought I had a path forward, a road toward mastery that would lead me in the right direction.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, I stumbled on an amazing anecdote that took place during Freud's visit to the United States: the food he encountered disagreed with his digestion, and he could not stop shitting his pants for the duration of his stay. His bias against American culture stemmed from this experience of constant embarrassment.

<sup>4</sup> In learning more about individuals who suffer from bipolar and borderline this comment feels misguided, bordering on hurtful- I leave it here as-is, because it is the thought I had when I wrote it.



As I see it today, the trajectory I had imagined was woefully naive. Getting an analytical<sup>5</sup> perspective on the history of psychological practice will be interesting, sure, but studying the mind and acting require radically different skill sets.

I hope to continue running into these walls. I arrive at a conclusion and then I read something deeper, something outside, and I realize how little I understood. As it seems to me today, psychology is so preoccupied with the thinking mind that in considering the way human beings function in the world it neglects the journey of the heart.

I stand in agreement with Ruhl: “Psychological realism makes emotions so rational, so explained, that they don’t feel like emotions to me.”

How could I have been so blind?

### **September 8, 2019 - changing my mind again [manic episode]**

Last night I lay awake, my mind racing, making connections, visualizing the springtime and my project reaching completion, hallucinating my victory over myself, proving to the world that I’m not a fuckup who couldn’t keep a job or earn a degree. I ordered stacks of books, more than my shelves have room for, more than I will be able to read, more than made financial sense<sup>6</sup>. I jumped far ahead of myself, spending hours poring over articles about Michael Chekhov and the embodied imagination, Mac Wellman essays on non-Euclidean character and the deficiencies of the American well-made play, sucking down information like a vacuum cleaner, like a black hole. Considering how little sleep I was getting at the time, I am unsure of the degree to which I retained any of the ideas.

At the same time, I took another step into the history of psychoanalysis. I discovered that many of Freud’s contemporaries were frustrated with his methods. In recounting Alfred Adler’s journey away from Freud, the authors of *Theories of Personality* seemed to anticipate how distanced from Freud I had been feeling. Adler’s radically different theory fell into place and I found myself nodding, then dissociating, then reevaluating my childhood, and finally sitting in the realization that an inflated sense of inferiority hid beneath the development of my personality.

Before my encounter with Adler, I was inflamed with the notion of my thesis project. I found myself swept away with images of myself creating the Most Beautiful And Insightful And Moving Thesis Project Ever, gaining complete mastery of the work of every acting theorist and

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<sup>5</sup> “Analytical” feels as awkward to me now as “Archetypical”- at this point, my fledgling psychological vocabulary was still in its early stages.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Strasberg authored the Britannica entry on Acting. As my interest and excitement peaked, I ordered a copy of every single book listed in the references of his article. Packages started arriving a few days later, and didn’t stop arriving for a full month. Cassie became concerned after the third package arrived- after the tenth, my embarrassment verged on total.

psychologist that's ever lived, solving acting, solving psychology, and ascending into perfect glory.

According to Adler, "maladjusted people set extravagant goals as an overcompensation for exaggerated feelings of inferiority."

People who feel inferior are motivated to prove their superiority, which decreases their ability to cultivate *Gemeinschaftsgefühl*, a delightfully German word that encapsulates a feeling of oneness with their community. If your goal is to prove you're better than others, their successes feel like a threat.

Adler says that children naturally feel inferior. To a child, an adult is a giant. When I was small, my father's frustrations and anxieties overwhelmed me. When he was angry he was immense and I was very afraid. I didn't know how to protect myself or my sisters or my mother. He was so much bigger than me.

The impulse to self-diagnose is both unwise and unavoidable. Freud himself was guilty of it, spending inordinate amounts of time attempting to untangle his own mind. My textbook quotes him as saying, "the chief patient I am preoccupied with is myself."

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders lists the symptoms of a manic episode as: "elevated mood, inflated self-esteem, decreased need for sleep, racing thoughts, difficulty maintaining attention, increase in goal-directed activity, and excessive involvement in pleasurable activities." To qualify as a manic episode, three of these symptoms must be present. My recent flurry of activity checks six out of seven symptoms.

Adlerian analysis places emphasis on the trajectory of the individual, considering the individual's vision of themselves in the future as the primary motivator of behavior. This teleological perspective on human striving aligns directly with Stanislavski's conception of the super-objective<sup>7</sup>. Adler calls it the individual's Fictional Final Goal.

Instead of attempting to portray emotional states directly, Stanislavski asks the actor to consider what the character wants and how they go about getting it.

Though Lee Strasberg is at minimum two degrees of separation from Stanislavski himself, he articulates core aspects of Stanislavski's philosophy clearly:

The aim of the modern method is to turn the actor away from a concern with what he, the actor, is doing, thus ridding him of his fundamental self-consciousness; and to create for him those proper elements of what the *character* is doing which become the impulses for behavior. The actor thus becomes concerned with acting the *causes*, and not the *results*, permitting the latter to occur as they do in life.

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<sup>7</sup> Would you look at that, an overlap between psychoanalytic theory and acting theory!

I loved reading about Adler's flexible and affable approach to talking therapy. Instead of sitting behind the patient and making declarative observations, he'd engage face-to-face with each patient, treating them as an individual, investing in their well-being. Rather than their past, he'd seek to understand their hopes and dreams and goals for the future. Adler saw the individual for their potential, where Freud seemed more interested in digging up deep dark urges and resentments from early childhood<sup>8</sup>.

Despite my initial sense of discouragement about my mania and my inferiority complex, I feel prepared to continue my research and study. I can see a grounded, healthy path forward, one in which I am as interested in the success of those around me as I am in my own achievement.

### **September 15, 2019 - in which I doubt my approach**

As I stirred from an unplanned nap this afternoon I felt a wave of panic as my to-do list came rushing back to me. Before I fell asleep I had been watching youtube videos on the Jungian individuation process, the Anima and Animus, Jung's tower at Bollingen, and the esoteric mandalas he carved into a stone cube there.

I grazed the surface of a vivid dream and watched myself rushing down the massive set of stairs that leads from the GT building to the rest of campus, my feet barely touching each step as I rapidly descend.

The fields of psychology and acting theory have so much in common that even where they intersect, they do so broadly. There are infinite parallels- historically, methodologically, culturally. They have so much in common that in some ways it is harder to find differences than similarities.

Michael Chekhov mirrors Jung in countless ways. Like Jung, he speaks of the occult, the woo, the archetypal<sup>9</sup>, and acknowledges the energetic fields<sup>10</sup> that lie outside the brain. His approach extends into what Jung calls the collective unconscious, beyond the reach of Stanislavski's psychological system.

"Affective memory" as a technique for manifesting psychologically realistic acting has its strengths.<sup>11</sup> Each actor must bring a part of themselves to the role- must consider the character's worldview, perceive their hopes, acknowledge their traumas, and find ways to justify their actions, folding the actor's personal experiences into their interpretation. That said, affective memory has limitations.

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<sup>8</sup> This is reductive.

<sup>9</sup> A-ha! There's the correct usage.

<sup>10</sup> Although I didn't know what I meant by 'energetic fields' at this time, I dive into the notion in the following writings.

<sup>11</sup> Affective memory refers to actors connecting emotional experiences from their life to events in the character's life- the stereotypical example is the young actor recalling the death of their pet to conjure tears in performance.

Comparative religion contributed significantly to Jung's discovery of the collective unconscious and enabled him to suss out universal archetypal forms in disparate cultures. In some ways, I hope to treat acting theory and psychological theory in the same way- comparing, finding commonalities, and uncovering archetypal forms<sup>12</sup>.

In thinking about this project and talking about it with Cassie it has become clear that I don't need to solve psychology or solve acting. Despite this acknowledgment, I continue to encounter a relentless feeling that I need to solve myself. Jung's path toward individuation feels like a place to start. But- fuck. Solve myself? That's a lifelong process. How is this project even related to that? Why can't this just be a research paper? Isn't this just an undergraduate degree?

Why does it feel like I'm on the verge of something big? Why has it always felt that way? Will I ever arrive? Am I making any progress at all?

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<sup>12</sup> Thus far, I have not uncovered a single archetypal form.

## **2: preparation**

**September 30, 2019 - October 3, 2019**

The actor should never worry about his talent, but rather about his lack of technique, his lack of training, and his lack of understanding of the creative process. The talent will flourish immediately of itself as soon as the actor chisels away all the extraneous matter that hides his abilities— even from himself.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

## September 20, 2019 - questions regarding praxis<sup>13</sup>

Auditions for Sarah Ruhl's *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage* have been announced and will take place in fourteen days.

A familiar apprehension arises when an audition looms. No matter how well-acquainted one becomes with the audition process, questions of identity proliferate: Who is my competition? Are they better than me? What makes me different from them? Who will sit in judgment behind the table? Am I good-looking enough? Am I too tall? Too gangly? Does everyone else acknowledge the awkwardness of the situation? Will they like me? Will I remember my lines? Will I make a fool of myself? Am I worth anything?

The audition room is like some unholy amalgam of the principal's office and the pearly gates.

Will I be found worthy?

Ragnar Freidank, a founding member of the Michael Chekhov School, offers a video series of "Imaginary Classes" with accompanying audio exercises. Through text, it's difficult to capture the idiosyncrasies of his speech, which is imbued with emphatic pauses and lighthearted solemnity- but such is the dilemma of writing about acting. He begins:

There is *the theatre* as an art form... and at the *center* of it- whether we like it or not- is the actor. The performer. (*pause*) So who is this actor, this performer, and why would they have the *right* to be on stage and ask our attention? ... They are people- who have somewhat of a gift- in a particular direction, but they've also the ability to be touched: by their imagination, their feeling-life... they are open to other people, they are open to material: to text, to words, to distance, and to the presence of an audience.

I'm not sure about this notion of the actor's 'gift'. In thinking about actors I've worked with, some difficult, some inspiring- the ones certain of their own giftedness, their own superior ability, are the least cooperative.<sup>14</sup> Some would say the actor is in possession of nothing- cannot take credit- they are empty, an open channel. Then again, some people might have a knack for emptiness. Maybe that is the gift.

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### on giftedness

I am four or five years old and I am reading the back of a cereal box out loud and my parents are looking at me surprised and excited and then my dad is pointing to big words

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<sup>13</sup> I don't know if I'll be able to forgive myself for using the word 'praxis' here.

<sup>14</sup> Months after this writing it will become clear that I have been as guilty of this as any actor I've encountered. Probably more so.

and I am reading them and it's like a magic trick, my dad is impressed with me, I am gifted, like how do you know how to read that?

I am in fourth grade they are doing reading assessments and a grown-up I don't know is looking at me like she is impressed and she tells me I am reading at a college level

My mom is looking at me with concern because I am not doing my homework and my grades are starting to slip

Everyone is ready to go to school in the morning and their seatbelts are on and my mom finds me in the bathroom curled up on the floor and I was supposed to get in the shower 45 minutes ago

It happens again and again and my mom looks tired

A psychologist is giving me an IQ test and then he is explaining what a bell curve is and showing me that my score is more than two standard deviations above the mean and he is looking at me with emphasis, saying that my cognitive abilities are Very Superior

My mom comes into my room, it is 6:30 am and she sits on my bed with a glass of water and an Adderall

I am explaining to a teacher that I don't have Hyperactive Type, I have ADHD-I, and the I stands for Inattentive Type

My personality changes when I take the pills, I am watching my classmates laughing and wishing that I was funny

I am grinding my teeth while I sleep and I am trying a mouth guard and I am chewing through the mouth guard and then looking at my teeth and my canines are getting flatter and flatter

I am getting a headache at 4:30 pm every day after school

My knees are incessantly bouncing, they were then and they are now

I am eleven years old and the psychologist says "it's not your job to make sure your parents are happy" and I do not understand what he means

I am fourteen years old and my dad is describing the difference between an internal and an external locus of control and I understand what he means but I don't know if he understands what he means because I am so often the reason for his anger

The earliest thing I can remember: I am sitting at the breakfast table and my father shoves my mother and she falls to the ground and he storms out of the kitchen and she gets up and comforts me and my sister

My family is in a restaurant in Park City and I am sixteen years old and my dad is making fun of me and I say *dad, shut up* and he drags me away from the table in front of the world and takes me to the entrance of the restaurant and shoves me against the wall with a hand on my neck and he is saying something about respecting him and I don't say anything for the rest of the night

An acting teacher is teaching us that people stop relating to you when all you're doing is saying LOOK AT MY WOUNDS! LOOK AT MY PAIN! LOOK AT HOW MUCH I HURT!

I am twelve years old and I am told again and again that I am smart and I read about Shakespeare and Einstein and I wonder if I'm that kind of smart

I am sixteen years old and I have spent hours reading books about the Sex Pistols and Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground and I have spent hours writing about what the books said happened in 1977 and I have cited everything diligently and I have written enough pages and my 20th Century History teacher gives me an F and I don't understand, *doesn't he know I'm gifted?*

I am nineteen years old and I have been asked to act in a play put on by a Real-Life Professional Theatre Company and I am handed a check with my name on it and \$1,500 now belongs to me and I believe I've made it, I am a Professional Actor now and I Did It Without A Degree and *I Knew I Was Gifted*

It is closing night and I have spent the money and now what am I going to do

I am perplexed with myself because they told me again and again that I am Very Superior and I keep failing classes and I keep running out of money

How can I be gifted and be such a mess?



Okay so that section can be called Giftedness and Failure.

In my body that section felt like a frown, a sinking sensation, a mild headache, a drooping slowness and like a small dark corner of self-pity.

This next section will be called Giftedness and Arrogance.

In my body this upcoming section feels frenetic, like a shuddery guilt, a little eye-widening, what can I confront or admit?

I am eighteen years old and I am telling the Theatre Department Chair that I shouldn't have to take Acting 1 because I've taken *so many* acting classes and I've acted in Salt Lake City and I should be able to jump into Acting 2

And besides my dad is the Dean of Students so my tuition is waived and I'm basically just here because it's free

I am seventeen years old and I am very much ashamed of my high school GPA and I refuse to attempt to apply to a single college program

I am eighteen years old and I am auditioning for a play at UVU and the director is talking to me about how he knows my dad and then he's casting me as William Holloway in *Something Wicked This Way Comes* and I think *this is another example, because I am gifted, I am deserving* and I declare to myself that in my Very First Audition in college I was cast in a Leading Role and that speaks to my giftedness, to my talent, to my path that will just keep going higher

I am twenty-three years old and I am in the second round of the Kennedy Center acting competition and my scene partner misses his line and we recover and we are in the hallway afterward and I am shaking and he's saying "sorry man" and I'm telling him *it's fine, I'm fine, I trust you* and trying to mean it

I am standing in Acting for Film and we are doing an exercise on Type and I am told that my look suggests the Best Friend or the Supporting Character and there is a consensus in the rest of the class and I feel indignant and confused, because why wouldn't I be the Leading Man, and *how do they not know how gifted I am?*

I am at a screening of student films at BYU and I am watching myself as the lead and I am sitting in the audience sweating and baffled and embarrassed at the incoherence, the disengagement, *is that really what I look like?*

As I write this I am twenty-eight years old and I still cling to some dream of universal approval and of Great Success and although I have a different relationship with the notion of giftedness I wonder if I'm any less arrogant or if I've just adopted humility as another way to puff myself up and to soothe the urge to feel important

I am sitting in this chair today and I feel grateful and sad for the ways in which others have accommodated me and given me space and nurtured my curiosity and given me attention when I felt that I needed it

I am noticing in this moment the value of generosity and of gratitude.

I feel regret when I think backwards but I also feel lucky to have met so many loving people who made space for me, who listened to me, who suffered through my confusion and arrogance.

I have encountered the deep pleasure of giving a gift to another and I am thinking about the ways in which a performance can be a kind of gift to be given, rather than the attention a gift I receive.

The theatre can be a place where generosity can be creatively cultivated, and where gratitude has great potential to flourish.

Each cast can be a family, each director a teacher, each playwright offering a fountain of opportunities to more deeply connect to human experiences outside my narrow life.

In my body these last few lines felt calm and warm and luminous stillness.

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Tuesday night, as I sat listening to the first readthrough of *form of a girl unknown*, the show at SLAC whose rehearsals began this week, an insight arose- the play is beautifully written, hilarious, timely, relentlessly vulnerable, and features striking neopagan imagery. I felt jealous of the playwright for excavating these characters so deeply, for writing sharp, heartfelt dialogue, and for journeying the story to its natural end.

There is no world in which I could have written a play like this. My attention wandered and I looked around the room at the cast, the stage manager, the sound designer, the lighting designer, her assistant, the director, *her* assistant, the assistant set designer, the Executive Artistic Director- all these collaborators unified behind the project, sitting to hear words read from the page.

I made a note for myself: *it has nothing to do with having the Most Interesting Idea- it has something to do with how well you play with others.*

There are two roles in *How to Transcend* that I will audition for. They are, as the audition notice describes them:

*David (pronounced Dah-veed): in a relationship with Pip and Freddie. A mathematician, he has a vaguely Slavic accent that is hard to place.*

and

*Freddie: Gentle. And attractive to both sexes. Late twenties or early thirties.*

An important detail follows the descriptions: *David is not from America.*

In the 14 days leading up to the audition, I will spend time with Freidank's audio-exercises- of which there are 13. These exercises have no bearing on my ability to memorize, won't give me any answers about the characters I am auditioning for, nor will they clue me in on instructions for the 'vaguely Slavic accent'.

Rather, they will encourage me to encounter, in order: Sensation, Curved & Straight Lines, Characterization, Expanding / Contracting, Imagination, Qualities / Atmosphere, Four Brothers, Imagination / Space, Imagination / Sustaining, Imagination / Centers, Imaginary Body, Atmosphere / Sound, and Psychological Gesture. I paid \$46 to download the audio files. I don't know what Four Brothers is.

I eagerly anticipate receiving ideas through my headphones, the voice of an acting teacher with expertise in Michael Chekhov's technique present with me as I move and explore. Sitting and reading and writing has begun to hurt my neck and back anyway.

### **September 23, 2019 - turning toward the wave**

I find myself here, today, in this moment, feeling unsure, uncertain, a little bit afraid, a little bit alone, in my thinking, in my existing, I am nervously preparing a monologue in hopes that I will perform it well enough to earn a role in a play.

Despite woo notions of the body moving through space, the acknowledgement of energies flowing through the performer, the felt-sense of acceptance that comes with allowing freedom of movement and abandoning cerebral planning, I continue to hope that I will perform admirably. What I do in the audition room will have a bearing on my future.

Will I be in the play, or won't I?

In reality it relies on much more than just what I do in the room. It depends on how everyone else performs, what their physical attributes suggest about the relationships between the characters, pressure from the theatre-field-at-large to consider the diversity of the cast, the chemistry between actors both physically and emotionally, the vision of the director, and all the other variables of which I have no awareness.

During the day I take phone calls and assign actors audition times. I answer their questions. I email them the same sides I am preparing. I tell them to break a leg. As I rehearse my monologue, I can't help but wonder what the other actors are doing to prepare. How they will approach the dialect, for example- am I doing too much? What does "a vaguely Slavic accent that is hard to place" mean? To what degree of intensity should I push it? Is the harshness of Slavoj Žižek's Slovenian dialect something to imitate, or to avoid?

I have identified the sound changes- the trilled R that Žižek stumbles over in every word, the K that sneaks into every H, the constricted embouchure that nudges each W toward a V, the flattened A that turns every 'and' into an 'ent', the emphatic stops and starts that give his speech its musicality. I have explored levels of intensity to each extreme, chopping eetch - vorrd - eento - eets - own - la-borr-ed - spurrt, then tumbling through a fluid up-and-down-and-faster running-on. Thus far, no sweet spot has become apparent.

Ragnar Freidank's imaginary classes continue to lift me out of an analytic phase. Rather than through logical argument, he shows Michael Chekhov's technique at work in the performance of his teaching, continually acknowledging subjective forces that pervade the performance-event. The classes meander. He follows each impulse and train of thought that occurs to him. Fully facing self-doubt, he gives voice to energetic 'processes' that invade his field of being as he speaks directly to the observer. By naming these forces, he diffuses their limiting power.

I've done my best to transcribe a few moments that rang true. As he speaks, his physicality is dynamic and mercurial- his arms sometimes waving, then stopping, suspended- he clenches his fists, his energy lifts, his body softens, he returns his gaze to the viewer. In a video entitled *living processes*, he begins with his eyes closed, explaining what Michael Chekhov's technique is about, his arms circling in front of him:

...*processes* are happening to us in everyday life, all the time, and we might or might not notice them, and we might act on them, or they might bother us, or we might ignore them. For anybody moving into a performative space, you might have experienced, if you experience things similar to how they happen to me, that these processes get *amplified*. You might (*gasp*) feel your breath, you might feel kind of lightheaded, you might feel, all of a sudden, your hands... you might feel your heart going *dvvdvvdv i-have-a-heart i-have-a-heart* so these processes that everyday life are like, dum-de-dum processes, all of a sudden in the performative space, be it- um- I mean, anything, be it on stage, be it in front of a camera, be it in front of a classroom, you go dum-de-dum-de-dum, you become

*public*, the moment you are public, these processes are going *UHH GGGZZ RRRG* (*spasmodic jerking*), so they are like, kind of like a horse or something that's kind of moving in going *huhhuhhuhh* so the technique that, um, Michael Chekhov was proposing, in my understanding, is interacting with these *processes*- processes that are happening to us, or in us, or through us, that are like- *what the hell is going on??*

In a 2006 *New Yorker* article dissecting stagefright, John Lahr cites a study claiming that "actors' stress levels on opening night are equivalent to that of a car accident victim." He goes on to describe an all-too-familiar series of sensations, many of which trigger visceral memories of lived experiences and also of recurring nightmares: "The actor stiffens, trembles, and grows numb and uncoordinated. His mental and aural processes seize up. His throat tightens, his mouth goes dry, and he has difficulty speaking. The experience, with the metabolic changes it sets off--sweating, confusion, the loss of language--is a simulacrum of dying."

Why do I hope to return to the stage? What drives my masochistic interest in doing something so anxiety-provoking night after night?

Freidank deftly, simply twists the notion of stage fright on its head, proposing an alternative to the death-knell: into what can stage fright be transmuted<sup>15</sup>? What happens when, instead of denying and resisting the amplification of life-forces, the performer allows them space to move through the body?

so - now, you might notice, when you have something happening to you, and you go-*oh, this is definitely not happening*, it becomes kind of stronger, it goes (*his body tenses*) *RAAH I'm gonna kill you*, but then if you kind of follow it, (*his clenched fists begin to move*) it's kind of- oh shit, and it's kind of like, (*following the impulse further*) *whuh this is kind of interesting...* you're following something that is- (*the movement shifts, randomizes*) in a way, is like- pathless, in the sense that we have no word for it- like- when the heart goes like this (*thrumming quickly, shuddering*) *dudududud* we might have no word for it- we might have words for it that other people gave us, but they might not be particularly helpful because the word could be- *Uhh you are, like, nervous-* you go, "yeah-", it's like telling somebody that is drowning, *uhh, you might have an issue with water*. It's like *GUURHHHRH GHHH* (*intense shaking*) goes like this- so the question is how the performer can interact with the event.

The attention of a crowd produces immense waves of psychic energy<sup>16</sup> that directly impact the performer's ability to perform. But do we do these processes a disservice by assigning them a negative connotation? Are there other ways of interacting with these waves of energy?

So the proposition is- you can interact with the event by *interacting with the event*. So let's say if the heart goes *uhhhhuhhhuhhhuhu* (*anxious jitters*) then what is it to join that? (*he allows his body to jitter*) Okay, and then joining it, maybe it shifts... (*jittering slows, becomes gentle rocking*) So you might notice, if you try it, that when you're in a

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<sup>15</sup> This notion contains a seed of Jung's view of Alchemy. I don't know if I had encountered that at this point.

<sup>16</sup> Psychic energy is the way Jung uses the term *libido* (as opposed to the more common, Freudian, sexual meaning).

way *attacked* by these life forces, that there are avenues that you can invent, really, of how to interact with those.

What do we lose by ignoring these life-forces? I actively avoid them. I compulsively recite my lines like an anxious mantra, stretch and breathe to push anxious feelings away, or ask my castmates to punch me in the arm as hard as they can- all to distract from gnawing, impending, overwhelming energetic psychological processes. I've learned these avoidant methods from cast mates, from directors, even from acting teachers. What could we all be missing out on?

So- um- obviously there is a kind-of approach out there that goes okay let's get rid of them, um you know, take a pill. Like, make them go away, numb them a bit, go it's like, you're nervous, you're sensitive, or I don't know you have a- I don't know- like, make it go away, like, be like, all like tempered out. Well my proposition is, to not do that! But to um dive into these processes, in the same way you would dive into water. And in the same way that you find out the *temperature* of water by diving into it, you'll find out something about these processes and their *intelligence* and their *significance* for both our creative work and possibly, you know, for what we're doing in our life.

Auditions are in ten days. I can't say that I feel ready. I can feel these processes bubbling up, calling from the distant future. Getting ready for me. Observing the physical sensations without interpreting them, it's hard to tell the difference between apprehension and anticipation.

### **September 29th, 2019 - lull [depressive episode]**

In compulsively reciting my monologue, I have become numb to its meaning. I have reduced the words to movements of my mouth and breath. I twist the volume knob of the dialect from a hint of a hint of a flavor to dense sludgy absurdity. I've rehearsed it thirty ways: quiet and sincere, impassioned and sharp, dismissive and sarcastic, joyful and fleeting. I've explored it in my body, visualized the physical space and the other characters, charted the preceding conversation, and toyed with different objectives. Its familiarity has made it feel boring and rote.

The motor of my enthusiasm was my fear. As the audition approaches, my apprehension has seemed to wane, and my excitement has dimmed in tandem. What seemed immense last week seems trivial now. It's only an audition. It's only a play. Who cares?

In the monologue, Dah-veed quotes Pythagoras. The line reads:

I don't really believe in identity. Or in individuality. As you know, Mikhail, I stand with Pythagoras, who said almost two thousand years ago: 'All things change, but nothing dies: the spirit wanders, passing from beasts into human bodies, or from human spirit to beasts, but never does it perish.'

Like a law of spiritual thermodynamics, Pythagoras argues that sentience cannot be created or destroyed. Apparently this ancient greek concept of reincarnation is called *metempsychosis*, which sounds very much like a mental disorder to me.

I tried to find the source of the quote and discovered that in the same way Socrates' ideas are found in Plato's writing, Pythagoras speaks through Ovid in Book XV of *Metamorphoses*. The quote is found amidst an argument against eating animals that is both affecting and inarguable—now that I've read it, to continue eating meat as I do, I must forget or disregard the notion that I am eating the body of a once-sentient being.

I find Dah-veed's perspective fascinating, his argument sound. He seems like a person I'd like to hear a lecture from, or with whom it would be nice to share a psychedelic outing. He reminds me of my friend Patrick, who spent an evening wandering in the mountains with me as I navigated a mushroom trip. He introduced me to Walter Benjamin's writings regarding his drug experiences, his literary insights confirming that my fascination with psychedelics had some academic validity, his observations shimmering with novelty.

I often left my conversations with Patrick curious and nodding. Once after a noise concert on the upper floor of an art gallery, he and some others were talking and someone said “teleology” and I didn't know what that meant. Patrick told me to think of a telescope and that the word had to do with the end goal, the aim of something. I felt safe when he explained it to me.

Pythagoras makes the case for vegetarianism by arguing that souls transmigrate from body to body. Dah-veed bases his argument on a similarly spiritual conception- but instead of advocating for vegetarianism, his claims are in defense of polyamory.

### **October 3rd, 2019 - the apprehension returns**

I broke a rule. Auditions are tomorrow and although I am not the intended audience and I have nothing to do with the audition process, my curiosity overcame me and I watched a video submission of an actor performing the very monologue I've been preparing. It felt like cheating. Maybe it was<sup>17</sup>.

The actor mirrored many of the impulses I had had. The sound changes in the dialect eerily matched the middle-ground I had arrived at. He hit the emotional beats I had planned on hitting. He got emphatic in moments I had planned on placing emphasis. He counteracted the anger of

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<sup>17</sup> It was. Months later, I confessed that I had watched the video audition to Cassie- she and I agreed that it was not only unwise for my sake, but unethical. It was not my business. No matter my reasoning at the time, I used my position at the theatre to gain some selfish advantage. I regret it unequivocally.

the piece with humor and vulnerability, just as I had planned to do. I don't know what anyone else would think of his performance, but it concerned me. I thought the choices I had planned to make were unique. I was spooked.

There is a world in which these similarities would be relieving- an encouragement that I'm on the right track. I was not relieved. I wondered about ways we differ. I began to doubt the groundwork I had laid. I wanted to outperform him. I wanted to outperform everyone<sup>18</sup>.

I took the dog for a walk and re-explored the monologue. I tried a dozen alternative angles. I dug for the emotional truth, the moments that engage my feeling-sense. I mocked myself. I mocked the other characters. I sang the monologue operatically. I shouted the entire thing, engaging my sense of wrath. I explained the plot out loud to myself, in dialect, every event that affects Dah-veed, articulating his philosophy of life, his dedication to Pythagoras, to the number three, to the triad. I expressed and explored the loss he feels, connecting his rage to his hurt.

There is a difference between describing something and interacting with it. I could describe the plot, the character, his hopes, his aggravations, but all that analysis will do is make me into a docent- standing outside the character, outside the play, making observations. I'm nervous that I haven't adequately explored the character through my body.

Michael Chekhov talks about movement of the body as a door to emotional truth, but the process is only being described. When I attempt to navigate psychophysical exercises on my own, I feel totally unequipped. I don't know if what I'm doing is working.

Tomorrow afternoon the moment will arrive. I will find myself standing in front of the table. I'll introduce myself, then take a moment to orient myself into the character. I will breathe and direct my gaze above the heads of the observers. I will do some acting. I will recite some words. I will take reasonable pauses. I will conjure resentment and amusement. I will drive at the argument with compassion. I will rest in the final moment. I will feel very self-conscious, and I will say thank you. I'll walk out of the room thinking, embarrassed<sup>19</sup>. I'll replay each moment, placing inflated significance on every word and facial expression I receive from the observers. I'll wonder what I should have done differently.

Tomorrow's the day. I hope I can sleep tonight.

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<sup>18</sup> That pesky inferiority complex rears its head again. When the audition is framed as a competition, a better/worse binary emerges, insecurities proliferate, questions of inherent value pop up- it's the wrong way to think about it.

<sup>19</sup> Here, I am clearly concerned with what I, the actor, am doing. Perhaps I should have studied Stanislavski a little more closely.



### **3: enactment**

**October 4, 2019 - October 11, 2019**

Patient and quiet exercise will lead the actor to experience one part of his being— his body and voice— as an instrument belonging to himself. He will gradually experience the other part of his being as an artistic ego, as his Creative Individuality, as the possessor of the instrument.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

**October 4th, 2019 - 4:10 pm, directly following the audition**

I spent a few minutes breathing and stretching outside before I went into the room and then I found myself walking into the room and looking at Cynthia and Cassie and Annette and Adrienne, who asked me to back up first thing, which made me feel stupid, like I had been standing too close, and then I backed up. There was a pause, and then they were waiting for me to start, and then I started and I barely remember what happened.

I know most of my planning went out the window. I know I became very very nervous. I know I tensed up, and I know I'm still shaking. I felt incredibly awkward and self-conscious. It's over.

As I began speaking, I got hit with a wave of paranoia, wondering about where to put my hands, I heard my own voice, I heard myself doing the dialect, was I doing it too hard? Did I sound like an idiot? I didn't do any of the things I had planned. Everything was happening and it was over before it even got started<sup>20</sup>. I need a cigarette.

I am so frustrated with myself. I spent so much time practicing and thinking and analyzing the character and then I find myself in front of people that know me and support me, and Adrienne was the only one I didn't know, and I'm sure they could all tell how nervous I was feeling. Annette was relaxed, Cassie was relaxed and kind, Cynthia was relaxed, Adrienne was looking at me, and I was a ball of nerves. I feel like a mess. I feel totally embarrassed, totally amateur, totally freaked out.

I didn't know what to do with my hands. I was assaulted by forces that I was unprepared to handle. It was like the first time I had ever done anything. I want to crawl in a hole. I don't want to act ever again.

I awkwardly folded my arms at a certain point, which I have never done before. I awkwardly put my hand in my back pocket, which I had never done before<sup>21</sup>. All the research and all the studying I've been doing told me to do the exact opposite of what I did. What you're NOT supposed to do is to resist and deny everything. I told myself I would breathe, that I'd be relaxed. I told myself I'd contain humor and anger. What I got was a shaky, nervous recitation with nonsensical half-gestures that did not feel true.

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<sup>20</sup> Freidank's living processes, the stage fright stuff, the physical overwhelm- everything slammed into me like a wave. I don't know that writing about those things helped- rather, by putting my anxieties on the page, I made them bigger. I don't intend to repeat that process ever again.

<sup>21</sup> I have, in fact, folded my arms and put my hands in my pockets before. Both reflexes help to protect the body, to conjure nonchalance, and to mitigate anxiety.

Cassie came into my office afterwards and I didn't want to meet her gaze. I felt embarrassed and I thought *I'll get a lecture about this later, I'm making too big a deal out of nothing*. "You did well," she said. "That was great!" What I heard was, "I want to make you feel better because I can tell you think you did terribly and I want you to feel better about it because it's not a big deal if you get cast or not." What I am saying to myself is "That was weird, that was wrong, that was bad. I have failed utterly." Adrienne must think I'm a total amateur. She must think I'm a buffoon. How dare I even approach this? How dare I think I would be capable of performing at this level? Don't you have to be a good actor to earn membership in Actor's Equity Association? To work at a theatre, shouldn't you be good?

Every auditioning guide tells you to make clear, specific choices. What I did felt vague. I wanted a do-over. I wanted some direction. I wanted some feedback. I got "Thank you." Am I upset with myself, or upset with the energy of the room?

### **5:13 pm**

I drove the dog home and took a shot of tequila. In replaying my audition in my head I remembered that I hadn't missed a line, so at least there's that. Cassie informed me that Adrienne isn't giving anyone direction or feedback, she's just saying "thank you" to everyone. That makes me feel a little better. Often, it feels like "thank you" means "that was terrible, please leave the room as soon as possible."

Luckily, what happens next is out of my hands. My exaggerated feelings about my poor performance have no bearing on anything.

Where do these feelings come from? Why is my immediate response to denigrate my abilities? In some ways I guess it's a self-protective tendency- if I don't get cast, I'll be right. If I do get cast, I'll be pleasantly surprised.

### **7:41 pm**

Cassie sent me a text reassuring that my audition was great, even if I felt nervous. Now that I've had a few hours away from the moment, I don't feel that I did so terribly. I do know that I felt overwhelmed, like it went by too quickly, like I had gotten myself into an unpleasant situation.

The waves of energy Freidank described felt viscerally real. Without a costume and without rehearsal and without lights and a scene partner, the audition feels like the most vulnerable performance. The audience is inherently evaluative. A job is at stake.

There are other ways to frame the auditioning process, and perhaps in another context I would feel differently, but this audition was an intense reminder of the subjective forces that a performance event incites.

### **8:38 pm**

I feel fine about my audition now. Over the course of four hours, my memory of the event has morphed into something much more harmless. In the moment, my cognition became distorted as I was confronted with the performance I had been anticipating. It had a powerful effect on my mood, and in reflecting on my experience I feel silly for getting so wound-up over it.

What happens next will happen next. I've gone through that hurdle in the process, and now I wait to find out what the next steps are.

### **October 5th, 2019 - results**

I have been called back, but not for Dah-Veed. Instead, I've been asked to read for Freddie.

### **October 8th, 2019 - post-callback**

I sit in my office now, waiting for Cassie to come out of the room where they are deciding who to cast. We can go home when she's finished.

My role is a small one. I would be floored if they asked me to play Dah-Veed. That feels like an absolute impossibility.

I tried a different approach. I had spent days reflecting on how miserable and tense I felt in the initial audition, and thought about all the ways I had prepared incorrectly. I hadn't listened to my own advice the first time, all my preparation had been cerebral, just thinking and reading and speaking the text over and over but very little physical preparation on the day of the audition. I'd stretched a little bit, moved around, but it wasn't enough to prevent myself from getting so mindfucky.

So, this time, I laid on the floor of my office and did a full body-scan meditation to some pleasant ambient music, breathing deeply. I slowly rolled to my side in a fetal position, rested there, breathed there, then rolled into child's pose, stretching my arms out in front of me, breathing deeply, then to cobra, feeling the stretch in my lower back and my lower abdominals, breathing again, pushing the air down to my core, then I tucked my toes under and bent into down dog, stretched there, then walked my feet slowly forward, letting my arms and head hang,

then slowly stood up, stacking my vertebra one by one, finally coming to standing. I stood and breathed. I shook my body from the hips, from the shoulders. I hopped up and down. I sighed. I put in my headphones and played “[Blankenship](#)” from DIIV’s new album, moving expressively, slowly at first, stretching and moving, and letting my body move in ways it wanted to, letting my tension become movement, shaking and hopping, dancing privately, continually checking the door to make sure that nobody was coming in, because I’d have to explain what I was doing, but nobody came in, so I kept dancing, hopping around, thrusting my elbows and wrists, shaking my head, taking a wide stance, playing around, smiling began to happen. I wasn’t thinking at all about the character or the lines or the scene or the room I was about to enter.

Then I went to the lobby where the other actors were waiting, tension in the air, I spent time making small talk, trying to diffuse that tension, not being too loud, keeping my mind off the anxiety I had felt so intensely at the initial audition. Trying to listen and be present and not overshare. I tried to give space, too, not wanting to distract people from what they needed to do to prepare<sup>22</sup>.

I stretched, I looked at my lines some, I didn’t stress about being memorized, I just remained as calm as I could, as present as I could, looking at the door, imagining the door being bigger, looking out the window, looking at the trees and the way the light bounced off the trees, observing the colors and shapes around me, the way the heavy green curtains hung around the doors to the chapel, speaking when it felt right and standing gently stretching and adjusting my feet to remain in my body, trying to remain present, not worried, not compulsively reciting my lines.

An hour and forty five minutes passed as I waited, trying to remain calm, to keep the relaxation I had gathered with my warmup. When I sat down a mild panic started to bubble up so I stood again, and stretched.

They asked me to read for Dah-veed again, which I wasn’t expecting. I did it without the dialect, I stood and spoke, I did literally nothing. It felt really silly. It felt like a no.

Quickly after leaving the room, I returned to my Freddie side, because over the course of the days after hearing that I wasn’t right for Dah-Veed I had been thinking more about Freddie, the way he must seem, the way he must think, which is calm, which is nothing, which is present.

When the time came to read Freddie there was a pause. There was the moment when the scene was supposed to start. Matt was standing. Andra was sitting. I offered her an imaginary

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<sup>22</sup> Here, instead of being wrapped up in a competition mindset, I was interested in the success of others. My internal experience, my performance, and the outcome were vastly different than the initial audition.

pistachio. I sat next to her and tried to look lovingly and appreciatively at both of them. I spoke my lines. I returned my gaze to the script when I didn't remember the line. I spoke slowly, trying to be as genuine, as pure, as childlike as I had envisioned Freddie to be<sup>23</sup>. He is described as gentle, so I tried to play gentle.

When the scene was over, I felt that I had remained present, I had remained playful, I didn't experience the same overwhelm that I had for Dah-Veed, and there was a weird thing that happened- When the scene was over, everyone laughed. Matt laughed first. Later, in the lobby, Andra said she loved my Freddie, that it was so funny, and I don't know that the intent was to be funny, but things just were, they were ridiculous in their simplicity, I felt that I had accomplished my goal of avoiding the anxiety I had felt at the initial audition. I heard Cynthia laugh, I heard Cassie laugh, and when I walked out Cassie said "You're all simple??"

It seems that in remaining relaxed and present the scene seemed to work, at least from my perspective. I don't know what they thought. It seemed that Adrienne wanted to see different takes on the character immediately. Maybe they wanted something more serious? Less genuine? More direct? Whereas last time it felt like I didn't do anything, this time I wondered if I had done too much- but it wasn't things I had planned to do, it was just what was happening in front of me, I just tried to stay playful. I don't know what they're talking about in there.

Last time I felt so nervous preceding, this time I felt so calm, this time I felt comfortable in the room, Like I was just being there, like I was just speaking what was true, and becoming embarrassed, but Freddie speaks that way, it felt like I did what I wanted to do and the other actors laughing after makes me feel good, but also worried- I don't know what they're deciding. Am I too close to this process? Am I too involved? I tried my best to be kind to the other actors, to listen, to be playful.

Why did I want to be playful? Should I have been more focused?

Why did it make them laugh? What did I do?

Was I selfish? Was I mugging? Was I too honest? Too simple? What are they talking about in there?

I will be pleased if they ask me to play Freddie. If they ask the other actors to play both roles I will be hurt, a little. It will feel like a judgment on my decisions.

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<sup>23</sup> Michael Chekhov would call this activity "radiating" - in this case, projecting calmness outwardly.

This time I felt proud of myself. I made choices. I treated the scene as a piece of art and myself as the artist. I committed to my idea of who Freddie is, which is- open, wide-eyed, kind, and self-aware. I hope my reading felt that way. I hope it didn't feel indulgent.

I did it by allowing things to come to me in the moment. I didn't deny any impulses. I sat and I spoke and I looked. I listened, I responded, I tried not to step on anyone else's work, but to respond to it, I tried to really listen.

Last time I couldn't listen to anything. I was too stuck in my body<sup>24</sup> and too stuck in my head to allow anything to occur naturally. I anxiously recited. This time I had scene partners, I had people to look at and listen to- I only got to read for Freddie once, I had hoped I'd get to listen to the other actors auditioning for the other roles, I had hoped I'd get to play with more people. I had hoped for some more direction, for a second chance.

In rehearsal, I will get to try things and adjust them, try them again, try different things. This time I had one shot, and I hope I didn't blow it.

I want to play Freddie. I don't want to play Dah-Veed. I like Freddie, I like the image I have of Freddie, someone who went to Harvard and then decided not to do anything.

In the scene, another character asks Freddie "So what do you do?" and he responds "Nothing really." "No, I mean, like, for a job?" "Yeah, I try not to do anything. I try not to leave an imprint. Or a footprint. I think, I walk."

Freddie has compassion for the things that get discarded. He sees the value in things that other people just toss away. He may seem a little silly, maybe that's why they laughed, because it seems ridiculous- but to me, the perspective is beautiful. He savors the things others don't care about. It seems to me that he adopted a radically inclusive, radically nonviolent philosophy, a monastic, jainist, zero-waste, do-no-harm notion and took it to heart, made it his identity. It is beautiful in its simplicity, and I suppose that it's funny. But I didn't make Freddie a caricature.

Or maybe I did? Maybe in playing the gentleness to such a degree that it was too much, it broke the scene? Did they laugh because I made the scene feel ridiculous? Maybe they think of it more seriously. Maybe in making the scene feel ridiculous I placed too much emphasis on Freddie, who shouldn't stick out. Maybe I should have done less. Maybe I did too much.

What could they be thinking about me?

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<sup>24</sup> The phrase 'stuck in my body' feels inaccurate- my body did feel stuck, but I think it was more like I was stuck outside of my body. No, that's not it either. Stuck in my head.

I know it's folly to concern oneself with the opinions of others, but in this context I really do care what Adrienne thinks. I want her to like what I did, I want her to feel confident about naming me worthy, as someone she'd want to work with. I tried to show myself for myself, and Freddie was an easier window for me to do that than Dah-Veed<sup>25</sup>.

After I left the room and they sent everyone home, I spent some time talking with Tracie and J Todd, who had auditioned, and I said "now it's calm. There was tension before. Was there tension before?" and Tracie said "not tension, just nerves" and I said "yeah nerves" and J Todd said "no tension. I don't get nervous anymore." Which surprised me, because he had seemed a little bit on edge as I spoke with him before auditioning, and he had stepped outside at least three different times for three different cigarettes. Maybe it's not fair for me to assign nervousness to his behavior, but I just have a hard time believing that he didn't feel nervous. Don't we all feel nervous? Aren't we all jittery? Everyone else seemed a little bit jittery. Was that all in my head?

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### **on new york**

I keep having dreams about living in New York and having moments of awe about how many millions of people live there and how big the city is and feeling a deep sense of pride, *I did it, I'm actually living here, I'm affording it, I managed to escape my life* and brimming with wonder and then I stir from the dream and see my room and my bank account and then I feel disappointed in myself for wanting something different than what I have when what I have is beautiful and what I have is already a miracle

I am seventeen and about to graduate from high school and expressing my desire to Go To New York and Be An Actor and my theatre teacher says "just go." and I feel believed in, the possibility is glowing, but I've never had a job and I barely know where money comes from but I think *I could do it I could get a job and I could be there*

I am twenty-two years old and I am actually in New York City in Real Life and we have about one hour to practice in the space before we have audiences and I feel outside of my body because I have imagined Being an Actor in New York so many times and even though it's only for a short time and I don't live here or anything my fantasy is becoming real and we are running through the play and my scene partner is screwing up his lines and my heart is pounding and we are in the middle of a scene and the director is suddenly

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<sup>25</sup> Is a character a window?



shouting “TOPHER YOU ARE SO IN YOUR HEAD! I CAN FEEL IT!” and I cannot breathe and my fantasy is becoming the worst-case scenario: I have come all this way and I am acting badly.

We are driving away from the theatre and I am embarrassed and trying to breathe and I can't hide that I am crying which makes it all worse and the director is saying that his husband has anxiety too and it's just a panic attack and it's okay and he's not understanding that he triggered this and he's not apologizing for it

The TimeOut New York review gives us four stars and describes my performance as ‘impassioned’

### **on being in your head**

I am twenty-eight years old and I am watching a video of myself at twenty-two years old performing in the promo video for a play and I can see my younger self waiting for his scene partner to finish speaking so that he can say his line immediately, like his conception of good acting is quick recall and complete and accurate memorization, and the performance looks dead, thoughtless, and little more than recitation

I am twenty-two years old again and it is moments before the beginning of the play and the director comes backstage and says “hey Topher- don't fuck it up” and I know he is teasing and the best acting I do that night is concealing my terror with laughter and nodding

I am fifteen years old and we have just finished performing a scene from Midsummer for a school assembly and I remember the audience laughing after my lines and my theatre teacher whisks me to his office and I can tell he is upset but I don't know why and then he tells me that my hands were tucked into my sleeves the whole time and he looks so serious, more serious than ever, and he tells me about this thing that must be toxic, or it must be one of the worst things a person can do, and he delicately but directly calls it Artistic Masturbation and I have already been told in church and by my parents that masturbation is Wronger than Wrong and I feel perverse and confused and ashamed.

I hear only that I have acted badly and that I have been indulgent. I don't know what to do differently and because I feel remorse and disgust at myself for acting so badly I am unable to process whatever advice my teacher is trying to offer me.

Acting is a unique mindfuck because in some way you are always watching yourself act

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## October 11, 2019 - the path becomes clear

One hundred and fifty days from today, on March 9, rehearsals for *How To Transcend A Happy Marriage* will begin.

I find myself a little mystified as to how I landed myself in the position to play the role of Freddie. I have an impulse to say that I *earned* myself the role, but that feels a little situationally untrue, because the result is not tied directly to my effort. My effort played a part in its happening, but if I had not been asked to play the role, it would not have been due to a lack of effort or a lack of work- those who auditioned and did not get cast are not to blame for their outcome. In the same way, I am not solely responsible for the outcome I am encountering.

A friend auditioned and was distressed that he did not receive even a callback- I observed his energy lean into the sullen, he seemed confused, disheartened, he had thought himself to be an obvious choice to play Paul, he had prepared the way he thought he should, he felt confident about his audition, but he was not invited to continue. He has not spoken to me about it. It took him almost a week to talk to Cassie about it, and when I returned to the table where they were sitting, he changed the conversation abruptly. I don't think he knows that I've been cast.

In a way each actor I know is a mirror of myself. There are ways in which I align with my friend that wasn't cast. I can put myself in his shoes. I can connect with the feeling of disappointment he experiences. I was bordering on that disappointment myself, worried about it, worried that I would not be asked to play the role for so many possible reasons, but I *was* asked to play the role. Is it because I am luckier than he? Why do I deserve something he does not?

Do I deserve this experience? It is an opportunity that another actor would receive if I did not. Someone will always be cast. If someone else had been asked to play the role, I would be wondering now what they possess that I do not. What do I possess that others do not?<sup>26</sup>

I am grateful for the opportunity to be cast, but I feel some guilt about it. Because I got it, someone else didn't. Of course, there are always more opportunities, more plays, more ways to interact in the world, there is not a lack of world to dive into.

When one person receives an award, many do not receive it.

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<sup>26</sup> Again, my inferiority complex is activated. Here, I sink into a mindset centered on inherent value and giftedness and competition.

Is the opportunity to play a role an award? In a way, I suppose I *won* the role, I competed and came out on top, but it's not because of my ability or because I am inherently *better* than another actor-

Why was I asked to play the role?

I told myself I'd be pleased if this was the outcome. I am pleased, but there is a complex feeling underneath my satisfaction- like I am selfish, like I took something away from someone else.

My near future is beginning to solidify. Many questions about the qualities of the experience will remain until I reach it, but I know what my role will be.

#### **4: rumination (causes & consequences)**

**November 25, 2019 - January 10, 2020**

He understands the plot, the content, no less than anyone else, but it is not centered in his brain only— it is spread over his whole actor's being. It lives in his hands, arms, torso, feet, legs, and in his voice. He feels capable of expressing it as an actor, but not as a critic or an analytical scientist. Through the Gesture with the Qualities, he knows more true and profound things about the play and the character than the scientist ever could.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

## **November 25, 2019 - purging the yuck**

The last time I was in a play at Salt Lake Acting Company I was sexually assaulted in the dressing room.

The show was FUN HOME, a musical based on the graphic novel by Alison Bechdel, which centers around the author's closeted father and her own experience of coming out to her family.

It happened on April 4, 2018, the preview performance in which our first audience was in attendance- maybe 5 minutes before we were called to places and the show began.

Perhaps the most exciting moment in the lifespan of a play is the first performance. It's the moment when all the hard work and excavation of the rehearsal process comes to fruition; when we actors are finally able to share our hearts with our beloved spectators; when our performance is invigorated by the collective attention of the crowd. This is when we find out if they will laugh, if they will be bored, if they will cry, if they will gasp, if we are able to hold their attention for the course of the story. This moment spurs all our efforts as we prepare, and it is precious.

I played four roles in the show- three of which only interact with Bruce, the closeted father. The actor playing Bruce was an old friend of mine.

He and I first met in a Stage Directing class at UVU seven years previous and played opposite each other many times- perhaps most memorably in NEXT TO NORMAL in 2014, in which he played Dan, the father- and I played Gabe, the dead son.

That production took us to the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival (Region 8) in Los Angeles, where we performed for over a thousand people.

Separately from the production, He asked me to be his scene partner for the Irene Ryan Acting Competition at KCACTF. We competed. Out of 458 nominees, we were selected as regional finalists who would move on to nationals at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC. I was surprised to learn that I had won Best Scene Partner in the region.

Throughout these competition experiences, and especially in DC, he relied on me heavily. His requests for validation and facebook messages were incessant. In the rehearsal room, he was often moody, aggressive, and domineering, continually "pulling rank" when we would practice our scenes. I sensed that he needed to constantly assert his superiority over me, to prove his strength, his talent, and his "craft", and then ask for my reassurance time and time again.

In other moods he'd collapse into tears, spilling feelings of utter insignificance, listing the sources of his unbearable guilt: the intense desire to cheat on his wife; his inability to stop screaming at his autistic son; his sexual encounters with students both male and female; who he had his eyes on; and his obsessive, compulsive use of pornography.

In social settings he frequently seemed unable to let others share attention- his laugh would often verge on exasperation, veins bulging in his forehead.

At KCACTF nationals, he won the Mark Twain Scholarship for Comic Performance, the Society of American Fight Directors Scholarship, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company Acting Fellowship. He did not win these awards on his own.

He went on to complete an MFA at the Academy of Classical Acting at STC. When his program began I heard from him intermittently, when he felt overwhelmed by graduate-level acting training, when he felt inadequate. Then I heard from him less and less.

Years later, after the FUN HOME audition process at SLAC, I was excited to learn he had been cast. I was looking forward to working with him again, excited for him to have the opportunity to earn membership in Actor's Equity Association, excited to welcome him into a theatre that had started becoming a home for me.

At the first read-through, as the company went around and introduced themselves, he held up a certificate with my name on it, and told the story of KCACTF regionals, how I had won Best Scene Partner. I didn't realize he had kept my award.

During the rehearsal process, I noticed him modulating his self-presentation, remaining serious and professional, making conscious eye contact, laughing appropriately, like he had been trained, like he had learned social boundaries.

His eyes appeared to water when he asked me what I thought about his approach to a particular song in the play, he nodded emphatically at my suggestions, he said he was glad he asked me.

The buzz of excitement at the prospect of an audience has a contagious effect on a cast. We had established a warm-up routine of playing categories, with an emphasis on quick and accurate responses- a shortcut to thinking on one's feet, a way to perk up, to mitigate nerves. Without games like that, it's easy to fall into a self-defeating anxiety spiral.

The dressing room at SLAC is in a small building adjacent to the theatre- an open doorway separates the mens side from the womens, with room dividers and a piece of cloth hung for privacy. All conversation is easily heard throughout the space.

Laughter comes easily in the dressing room- at least it did for this cast. We had developed inside jokes, found some camaraderie, cultivated a sense of it's-okay-to-act-weird-here. We were stretching, warming up vocally, hyping each other up, and jumping around. Boisterous, convivial energy pervaded the space as we prepared to perform in the regional premiere of a beautifully written, heartfelt musical.

He and I were assembling the last of our costume pieces and laughing along with the women on the other side of the wall when all of a sudden he grabbed my arm and bent me over my dressing room station, pressing one hand firmly on my upper back and standing behind me with his pants down.

I pushed him off of me and he turned around as if nothing had happened, he buttoned up his pants, I heard the stage manager call, "Places, everyone!" and before I could make sense of what had happened we were on stage singing the opening number.

The audience jumped to their feet when the play ended, I jogged out to take a bow with another supporting actress, and then we stood in a line, as a cast, and took each others' hands. His right hand was holding my left hand, and his left hand was holding the hand of the nine-year-old actress who played Young Alison.

I didn't realize what had happened until I was on my way home after the show.

The previous day I had sat with young children in my care as they listened to a volunteer from Prevent Child Abuse Utah, who coached them through three rules:

Listen to your uh-oh feeling.  
Say No.  
Go Tell.

### **December 1, 2019 - continuing getting this out**

I don't know if I've repressed this event or if I've been avoiding writing about it, but it's been almost a week since I decided that I have to acknowledge the incident. I have written about the anxiety that an audience incites but I haven't written about another anxiety lurking beneath the

surface, about the castmates I'll have, about the intimacy of *How to Transcend*, about the feeling in my gut that I can't trust anyone.

I keep avoiding the page. I keep checking my phone or deciding I should work on something else or going to get something to eat because I guess I feel nervous about writing about the process of FUN HOME.

There is a scene in the play where his character seduces my character. As directed, he offers me a drink but when I go to take it, he pulls it back, we hold flirtatious eye contact, and he tells me to unbutton my shirt. Then he walks behind the couch where I sit, pulls my shirt off my shoulders and touches my skin.

When I spoke with the stage manager and then the Executive Artistic Director about what had happened in the dressing room, they were sympathetic and took action, they filed a report of sexual harassment, they moved my dressing room station to the laundry room, and assured me he'd never be hired at SLAC again. All this happened, and I sat in solitary confinement, in my private dressing room, facing 44 performances over the next six weeks.

In another scene, I played a 16-year-old boy. His character offers me a ride, then offers me a beer when I get in the car, then puts a hand on my inner thigh.

I confronted him about it a day or two after it happened. He broke down in tears almost immediately and I don't remember exactly what he said but I remember him claiming that his pants were down because he was changing into his costume (which was not true) and blaming his actions on what he termed "latent internalized homophobia" which made no sense to me, partially because I knew about his sexual history- years before he had told me in detail about encounters he'd had with men. Regardless, what kind of excuse is that?

I suppose he was trying to apologize in a way that made sense to him but I didn't feel heard- I was not upset about the assault because it was gay, I was upset because it was a sudden violation of my body, which felt like a desperate grab for power, for dominance, and it made me feel unsafe, it made me feel confused, like it was a mistake to encourage him to audition, like it was wrong for him to be in the play, like he had done this to others, or done more, like it is dangerous for children to be in the play with him, like he shouldn't be allowed to be in private spaces with anyone, like what did I do to invite this?

He texted me many times trying to apologize and apologizing for his insufficient apologies in a recursive apology spiral and trying to talk about it. I asked for space.



For the entirety of the run of the play, I did not speak with him unless we were on stage. In reviewing the series of events I wonder if I should have let it go, if the run would have been easier or less awkward if I just got over it and pretended everything was fine.

I hadn't thought about the assault until very recently when I was speaking with Kim Abunuwara about her experience acting in DOUBT- it was just a casual conversation, and then the story just started spilling out of me- I felt comfortable describing it, like it was normal, just the thing that happened. She encouraged me to talk to someone about it.

I have a therapy appointment scheduled for this upcoming Wednesday.<sup>27</sup>

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### **on writing**

I wanted to title this on finishing or on incompleteness or on depression but I decided that on writing was the simplest way to put it and I don't know what slows me down but I have been avoiding the page, avoiding this project, and straying from the path I had planned, even the new path, even the path I began a short time ago

I have encountered the seeds of ideas that I have about resentment and how taking the position of a victim limits growth in so many ways but I haven't managed to follow the ideas further, at least to a point where I feel like I can begin writing about them

And I remember sitting at the computer at four in the morning with an assignment due the next day and looking at the blinking cursor and writing and deleting sentences

I remember how that felt in my body like I was becoming flattened and dull like I felt panicked and sad and confused, how did I not do what I needed to do long before now and how does this keep happening? Why am I here again?

And then I remember my mom helping me write and doing anything, everything she could to get an essay out of me, she would offer to type for me, I could just dictate, and instead of accepting her help or refusing, I would slouch and mumble and tell her how tired I felt

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<sup>27</sup> I attended four therapy sessions. In one of the sessions, we targeted the incident (which he termed a 'sexual imposition') with EMDR, which I suspected would be interesting. I was unprepared for how quickly my thinking could change- within about 5 minutes of eye movement, the event was not disturbing to me. My therapist described the process as 'accelerated meditation'.

And I remember my dad trying to help by checking on me and saying I want to see a paragraph when I come back down here and then I would sit and stare, I really would, I wouldn't get anything written and then he would come down and I knew he was going to get mad and it was like he was trying to push me and my mom was trying to push me and my teachers were trying to push me, to get the engine going, just do it, sometimes you have to do things you don't like doing, just get it done, it doesn't even have to be good, just anything

And I remember seeing the adults around me look exasperated, and then I felt badly about myself, and then it would continue

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### **January 7th, 2020 - cranking the engine**

It's not that I've stopped thinking about everything I started thinking about last semester, it's just that I stopped writing things down for about a month because the semester ended and then there were holiday plans and travel and drinking and arguments and late nights and parties and spending and sleeping in.

Deadlines are approaching from many angles- this thesis project, the copy for the program for A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2 is due in a week, the final report for the children's show, which took up so much energy in December, grants are coming due soon- online classes have started again, and just my luck, they both came with a mandate in bold: **FEDERAL LAW REQUIRES THE STUDENT TO SPEND 9+ HOURS PER WEEK FOR A 3 CREDIT COURSE.**

What federal law says that?

So let's see- 40 hours of work plus 27 hours of school work plus 33 hours of rehearsal makes 100 hours per week, and then trying to write on top of that, thankfully I get Sundays off, but 100 hours over six days means 16.6 hours per day, which leaves 7.4 hours for sleep, which rarely occurs anyway, and then I start to feel crazy, like I'm not here, like far away, like I can't remember anything.

I re-listened to a podcast in which Sarah Ruhl is interviewed by Sharon Salzberg and they were talking about the Dalai Lama and I had heard this part when I listened last year but when I heard it again I couldn't stop thinking about it, and for the weeks preceding the semester it just kept coming up for me- in terms of my capstone project, in terms of the play, in terms of any creative work-

Paraphrasing here: When westerners attempt to show the Dalai Lama a work of art, expecting him to appreciate its beauty, they are often confused by his response. Apparently through a Tibetan Buddhist lens, the value of a work of art is not in the artwork itself but in the transformation the artist goes through in the process of making the art.

That made me think a lot about the writing I did last semester, about how I am different now than I was at the beginning, and how I will continue to change. It also made me wonder less about the content of my writing. Instead, I began to think about the ways I have changed and the ways I am changing all the time.

### **January 8, 2020 - mind as vehicle?**

My textbook suggests that cognitive psychological research can only be done by observing behavior, which makes me think about how isolating it is to be a person, to only be known by what can be observed, because so much of what feels like me cannot ever be observed by anyone but me. And at the same time, I can only know another by what I see of them, by what I hear, by what I observe. There is an impenetrable wall between inner experience and the rest of the world, and that seems absolutely tragic to me.

Then, I thought, well, what is acting if not peering inside the mind of another? Feeling out what it feels like to be someone else? Being another? And, then, does it not follow that acting is an act of empathy?

I know it takes empathy to act well, to be able to care enough about experiences and thoughts and arguments of another person, even a person who is not real in the way that they do not exist, but some actors play people that have existed or that do exist, but that in some way is different, that is an impression, a caricature, an imitation.

Does a character exist? Well, yes, there is the thing called a character, that exists in the play, we can talk about it, it is useful to talk about it, it serves a function.

A character also does not exist. There are words on a page that are purely invented, purely false, Even if someone has said the same words before, it's imaginary. It's pretend.

When I was a smartypants eleven-year-old at the library I remember being in a room sitting next to my mom and someone was teaching acting or talking about acting or something and he asked the audience, "What is acting? Can anybody tell me?" and I raised my hand and he called on me and I said, "Well, it's lying, really," and I could have said more, but he cut me off suddenly, and he said, "No, acting is not lying," and I felt like I wanted to respond, to defend myself, and he

went on, “Acting is closer to telling the truth. Acting is living truthfully in imaginary circumstances.” And I took his point, but I also felt like nobody could have guessed that that was the answer he was looking for, and it could totally tell that he didn’t think of that himself anyway, so why did he think he was so smart, and part of me thought, *yeah, but it’s still kind of like lying, I mean I get your point, but if you ask me my name and I say my character’s name, then God will know that I’m not telling the truth, and I’ll know He knows, and you’re kind of full of yourself.*

And then in Social Psychology last summer I learned how difficult it is to tell if someone is lying, and how unreliable memory is, and it had been a long time since I thought God was reading my mind at all times, and if, now, I told someone new that my name was Freddie they would have no reason not to believe me and it wouldn’t taint my soul and they wouldn’t actually care that much anyway.

Do I exist? Am I any more real than Freddie? Freddie is a name and I think sometimes that “I” is just another name, we can talk about “I”, it is useful to talk about “I”, it serves a function.

### **January 9, 2020 - center of the world**

I requested *Letters from Max* from my Secret Santa at work and I wasn’t prepared for how much I would love it, for how sad it would make me, for the feelings that would rise to the surface. I ploughed through it in about 2 days.

The book is a collection of correspondences between Sarah Ruhl and a student of hers named Max Ritvo, a poet suffering from Ewing’s sarcoma, who becomes her friend, who undergoes treatment after treatment for his cancer, who becomes sicker and sicker, and keeps writing, and dies.

Considering the long list of references I included in my thesis proposal I thought that I had found a good collection of things relevant to my research, like I had gathered a rich pool of writing to extend my thinking about my project, and then I read this book, and it feels more deeply relevant to my writing than almost anything else I’ve encountered, and it confused me, and I sat in another dissociative state, like I had been so foolish, like this project is more about learning to write than it is about psychology or about acting, and it left me with a feeling of longing, like the book was happening to me.

I found myself jealous of Max for many reasons, and then guilty for feeling jealous, and then wondering about ways we are the same and ways we are different, and I am not jealous of his cancer, and was he smarter than me? Better than me? Why is it that Max was at Yale at age 23

and able to take a playwriting class from Sarah Ruhl? Why was he able to know her? To become her friend? To receive her attention and care?

When I read beautiful writing or hear beautiful music it often makes me think about myself, in some narcissistic way, like *I could do that*, like I identify with the work, and it feels childish, like I'm thinking about the world as happening around me, like I am the center.

I imagine meeting Sarah Ruhl and I imagine her knowing me, like she knows how much of her writing I read, like she is my friend, but she has no reason to have any idea I exist, and why should she?

### **January 10, 2020 - ruining nuance**

I first encountered Ruhl in 2011, or maybe before, I think an acting teacher had mentioned *Eurydice*, and how it was supposed to be really good, and there was an elevator that rained on the inside, and I had no idea what that was supposed to mean, and then I was working the tech crew for UVU's production that we brought to KCACTF at Weber State, and my job was to be in charge of the letter drop-

There was an effect in our production- one that I thought was a stage direction in the script, but when I went searching for it I realized was a directorial choice on the part of Lisa Hall, who is now one of my capstone mentors, who will likely read this writing-

In our production, near the end, letters rained gently from the sky, gradually more and more, until the ground was covered in letters. I stood in the wings and gently tugged on a rope that was connected via a pulley system to a vast collection of letters, and when pulled gently enough, created an effect that felt like a gentle crescendo of rain.

In a tech rehearsal, I tugged the rope with too much force, and at the end of the delicate, subtle final moments of the play, I unleashed a deluge- all the letters fell at once in a great WHOMP. It ruined the moment completely.

It was funny and embarrassing at the time, but it also taught me something about being too eager, about trying too hard, about being ungentele.

In 2016 I was acting in *Harbur Gate* at SLAC and there was an effect of falling sand, a similarly delicate moment, that said things about time, about Iraq, that was beautiful. In a tech rehearsal, the first time they tried the effect, someone in the wings pulled a rope ungently, and a deluge of sand crashed down in another great WHOMP. We laughed and I thought about how trial and

error is a part of the process and in some way I felt less embarrassed about the time with the letters.

## **5: chronesthesia**

**February 24, 2020 - March 8, 2020**

The Higher Ego experiences the flutterings of ‘first love.’ Eagerness to meet the future audience; confidence in it and in oneself; the hope of being able to express dear, intimate things in one’s own way, individually and freely— all this is the actor’s experience at this moment.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

## February 24, 2020 - the cycle begins again

I was on the fence about even considering auditioning, but after attending a pretty rough production of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* with my mom this weekend at my high school and briefly speaking with my former theatre teacher (who also runs Sting & Honey- a fairly new theatre company), I have encountered that familiar nervousness, those proliferating questions about his upcoming production of *The Seagull*.

He sent me a text asking if I'd thought about it. I've acted in two Sting & Honey shows. My experience with both was confusing- fulfilling in some ways and disappointing in others. I remember preparing diligently, working earnestly- both of my characters spoke in dialect, and I relished the challenge. I was proud of my performances- and in both shows, I was cast in the leading role.

*The Seagull*, and Chekhov in general, is easy to fuck up. When I mentioned that I'm thinking about auditioning, Cassie reminded me that bad Chekhov is even worse than bad Shakespeare. I felt the impulse to agree. It's incredibly difficult to pull off, and it has to start with the director. A good actor can't save a show of that scale.

The most disappointing aspect of each of my experiences acting for Sting & Honey professionally happened after the months of preparation and weeks of rehearsal- once performances arrived, hardly anyone came to watch. In spaces that hold 200 seats, what is the point of a three-week run when we barely have a single performance in which more than 50 people attend?

Why do I need my work to be seen? Do I need my work to be seen? Is the play my work?

**2:50 pm**

Oh, god. After discussing the possibility with Cassie last night and going over the pros and cons, I decided that because there is the possibility of a meaty role, I will audition. It may be a selfish reason, but there aren't very frequent opportunities to sink my teeth into well-written characters, I want to do it.

She says, "But do you like him as a director?" And I don't know. I don't know if his approach makes for good theatre. He believes it does. But often it doesn't connect. And there's always a tree.



I confirmed my interest with the director and he asked me to simply attend callbacks, which means I won't have to prepare a monologue or go through many of the familiar preparatory anxiety hurdles.

Then I find out that the director himself is playing Trigorin. The notion of a director acting in the play he's directing raises the eyebrows- is there a more arrogant thing to do?

## **February 25, 2020 - 1898**

I read the Stoppard version- the script they will be using. Then I fell down the rabbit hole of reading about the 1898 production at the Moscow Art Theatre- I had a vague awareness of the event and its significance, but I was not prepared for the amount of writing that has been done on that production.

Stanislavski directed the play and played Trigorin. This director is attempting to do the same. This director is no Stanislavski.

Vsevolod Meyerhold played Konstantin Treplev<sup>28</sup> in the 1898 production. A copy of *Meyerhold on Theatre* sits on my desk, unopened. There is a world in which I could have followed Meyerhold's Biomechanics over the past months, instead of Michael Chekhov's technique.

Michael Chekhov is the nephew of the playwright. Stanislavski rehearsed a revival of *The Seagull* in 1917, and Michael Chekhov was cast as Konstantin, the role I am approaching. That version never reached production.

The director is no Stanislavski, and I am no Meyerhold, let alone a Michael Chekhov.

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But what has happened to my enthusiasm for *How To Transcend*? Over the months since being cast and as the semester caught its stride, I have had to strain to write about it- nothing is happening yet. Rehearsals will begin in thirteen days, at which point I anticipate that I'll have a lot to say- or, perhaps, very little. My character has the fewest lines. Or perhaps he is the least important. In the play, George's daughter Jenna is only in two scenes- just like my character, but Jenna is held in sharp focus. Freddie is a supplemental character, a support, a side dish.

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<sup>28</sup> Treplev, Treyplyov, blah blah blah.

In 1917, as stated in rehearsal notes taken by his assistant Pyotr Sharov, Stanislavski targets my character's super-objective, while analyzing a scene in Act 3 between Konstantin Treplyov and his mother, Arkadina:

[Stanislavski] makes an analogy between Hamlet and Treplyov. Both are at a time of life when they have nothing in their life except their mother. ... He decided to commit suicide not because he didn't want to live, but because he passionately wants to live, he grasps at everything that offers a foothold in life, but everything collapses. For him, an aesthete, there is nothing in life that could hold him. His through-action<sup>29</sup> is *to live*, to live beautifully – to aspire to Moscow, to Moscow.

Konstantin is a role that tugs at a deep ache in me. He's who I root for as I read the play- he embodies an archetypal version of me- my hopes for new theatre, for new forms, adolescent urges toward success, a teleology leading toward Moscow/New York, a vision of the self as a great artist, reaching into the depths to pull up truth, and a breathless exasperation at the time it takes to get there.

Until yesterday I hadn't taken the time to read *The Seagull*- I'd seen a few versions, including Aaron Posner's contemporary upending of the classic, STUPID FUCKING BIRD, at SLAC- and appreciated them, enjoyed them, but there is so much gravity around the play- the Moscow Art Theatre still uses a seagull as their emblem, 122 years later, for christ sakes- it's such an influential work that you *have* to appreciate it, which makes it holy, which makes it inaccessible-

But then I read the thing and I am struck by its simplicity, its quickness, and the ease ingrained in the Stoppard translation- it feels contemporary, and actable, and rich, and-

It is Tuesday. Within three days of even encountering the idea of acting in the play, I have not only read it and dug through Wikipedia for references, and then dug through those references for more, and built a model of the play in my mind, but I have alienated Cassie again by talking about it too much and almost forgotten about the play that I wrote my whole thesis about. Is this dis-ease and mania part of being an artist? Will I ever get a handle on my feelings?

For weeks, I have worried about the ending of my thesis- Every time I read the pieces in order and I get to the end, it feels more than incomplete- it feels like there's a gaping hole when the writing stops.

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<sup>29</sup> Through-action, super-objective, blah blah blah.

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Michael Chekhov - 1955, Beverly Hills, 64 years old, cancer, heart attack.  
Vsevolod Meyerhold - 1940, Moscow, 65 years old, executed by the NKVD.  
Konstantin Stanislavski - 1938, Moscow, 75 years old, congestive heart failure.  
Carl Gustav Jung - 1961, Küsnacht, 85 years old, cardiovascular disease.  
Sigmund Freud - 1939, London, 82 years old, throat cancer, lethal dose of morphine.  
Alfred Adler - 1937, Aberdeen, 67 years old, suddenly collapsed on the street, heart attack.

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In *The Seagull*, Konstantin's journey ends with a bullet. But a play is just a play.

Christopher Rasmussen - 2020, Salt Lake City, 28 years old, ?

I don't know how long my body will sustain me.  
I shouldn't attempt to predict how I'll feel in the future-  
At my lowest moments of adolescence, I remember weighing the options of ending my life.  
I think I was just angry at my dad.  
Maybe it is a taboo that shouldn't be crossed in an academic setting but so far I have written  
openly about thoughts that emerge and suicidal thoughts are just thoughts-  
I can't remember what it felt like to want to kill myself, but I do remember that I did think about  
it-

There was a boy named Bo in my ward who was 2 years older than me, Eagle Scout, Student  
Body president, headed to college- then he started hearing a buzzing in his head that wouldn't go  
away. He saw doctor after doctor, I never really knew him, he couldn't get rid of this incessant  
sound, and then in 2011, he blew his brains out in his family's living room.

Then another time in 2012 I remember my friend describing what happened on the phone and  
what happened was that Alex was way too drunk and none of them were 21 yet and Alex was  
insisting on driving and shouting and pushing and they threw his keys on the roof and then he  
shoved my friend to the ground and shoved another friend over a car and both were bruised for a  
long time after and then he took a cab home and then he wasn't answering calls or texts and the  
fighting had been so extreme that they made their way down to his house and they found him in  
the closet and he had shot himself in the head.

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Many plays end in deaths, in suicides- deaths feel like endings, but everyone around the death has to deal with the aftermath- the audience is left with the aftermath-

Every play ends  
Every human life ends  
Every moment ends

## **February 26, 2020**

I don't know who will ever read this writing. I'm afraid that most of the people I've mentioned wouldn't want to know how I really feel about things.

## **March 8, 2020 - waiting to get results**

Rehearsals for *How to Transcend* begin tomorrow evening, but I am wrapped up in questions about whether or not I'll be cast in *The Seagull*. It's been 8 days since the callback, which I intentionally didn't write about- the last time I wrote about auditioning, it sent me into a tailspin.

A few days ago a friend who had also auditioned asked me if I'd heard anything yet. I still haven't. He was offered the role of Medvedenko, told me about it, and then got a followup email in which he was told not to say anything.

I only auditioned because the director asked me to. If he hadn't, I would be totally focused on the play I'm about to do, but now I'm in this limbo where I just make assumptions and obsess about a play six months from now.

If he went with another actor, I just want to know so I can stop thinking about it. If he hasn't decided yet, why did he ask me to audition?

Was my audition bad? I was playful, I made choices, I actively participated with my scene partners.

I keep having the impulse to follow up with my friend who was cast, to see if he's heard anything else.

If I wasn't cast, a likely reason is my Equity status- it may be that he can't afford to pay a union actor. But he told me that wouldn't prevent me from being cast so that's not the reason.

Was I outperformed by one of the younger actors who were called back for Konstantin? Do I look too similar to the actress he chose to play Nina? Or too different from the actress who's playing Arkadina?

If he reaches out soon to offer me the role I will feel silly for indulging in these insecurities.

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He called me as I was writing that last sentence. He has chosen to cast another actor who "looks like he could be Deena's son". He's never worked with this guy before and he wanted to let me know it wasn't because of anything I did. He said the work I did was great and that he can't wait to work with me in the future. He said he felt obligated to let me know because he asked me to audition. He sounded like a sad dog.

I don't intend to spend a lot of energy on my disappointment about the lost opportunity of Konstantin, but it would have been a great challenge. Michael Chekhov played him. Meyerhold played him. Mark Rylance played him. This time around it won't be me.

The notion of playing Konstantin made Freddie seem tiny. Konstantin is central to the plot of one of the most significant theatrical texts in the modern history of the form. I guess I've avoided the possibility of performing the role poorly.

It doesn't matter how badly you want something. We all want to be chosen.

Actors invest in precarious possibilities, putting work and energy toward opportunities that only pan out for one applicant. Constant auditioning is a series of perpetual disappointments, and many people quit trying after a while. It's a gamble to be an actor. There are no guarantees.

And then I return to the script of *How to Transcend* and I remember how much I love the play. And I remember the actors I'm going to be acting with. And I remember the rehearsal room and learning lines and setting blocking and wearing costumes and making discoveries and being confused and waiting for my turn and scene partners and timing and tech rehearsals and opening night and bows and closing night and performances when the house is only half full and sold-out performances and wondering who is watching and what they're thinking and stretching and getting home late and making new jokes and meeting artists and watching performances develop and getting notes and all over again I am thrilled and excited and nervous and happy.

I am approaching four weeks of rehearsal and five weeks of performance. It starts tomorrow.

Have I become a better actor?  
Better than what?

Maybe I should have established some metrics at the beginning of this process- that's what a psychological researcher would have done.

If the quality of an actor is based on their quantity of jobs earned, I am on the low end.

If the quality of an actor is based on the size of their role, I am on the small end.

If the quality of an actor is based on their performances, then, well, TBD.

## **6: rehearsal begins**

**March 9, 2020 - March 10, 2020**

The more he becomes acquainted with the play and the character, the more strongly his actor's intuition begins to raise its voice. Innumerable possibilities and individual ways are opened.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

### **March 9, 2020 - first read**

We have arrived at a key moment. In addition to the actors, I meet the designers, the assistants, the director. We sit quietly and sign our contracts. 25 people sit in the green room to hear the play. The scenic designer discusses the scenic design and projection mapping. The puppeteers demonstrate the articulation of the Recently Slaughtered Deer. I laugh with the 3 actors I know and smile with the 4 actors I don't.

The actor who plays Dah-Veed shares my last name. We are unrelated, but I wonder how many audience members will furrow their brows wondering if we are brothers, especially during the orgy.

My nervous system is wildly active during the entire readthrough. I feel tense and relaxed at once. I can feel my heart beating. From the beginning, it's like my spine is a xylophone getting played up and down. I write down "fuck I love this play."

Earlier I was concerned with the size of my role but while we are reading the play that concern dissolves. The story being told, the play itself- that's why I'm here.

Before the read, Dah-Veed said "I'm just gonna go for a dialect." Like he hadn't been working on one. Like he hadn't thought about it. And when he spoke his lines, a wave of derision bubbled up. Not that I would perform the role better, not that I deserved the part, but the specifics of the dialect- after all that work I did, he's guesstimating? I remained quiet. Not my business anymore.

The actor is a little taller than me, a few years older, rail-thin. He seems to have an answer for everything, loves to explain things at a high volume, to demonstrate his expertise. I wonder if we'll get along.

### **March 10, 2020 - table work**

Before we get on our feet, we read the play again without the audience, stopping to discuss when things arise. We slow down the play, peer into its internal structure, and define our understanding of it as a group.

Actors respond in different ways to this part of the process. Some don't care about analysis, they want to just start acting it. Others feel like they're being grilled, that the director is testing their knowledge of the play. For me, this exploration is thrilling.

My Jungian Analyst friend told me "only a strong ego can tolerate ambiguity."



The director asks questions of the actors, about their characters- things like *how long have you two been married?*

There are clues in the text- clues for everything. Even though the decision seems arbitrary, specificity leads to richness. Yet some actors resist.

This director offers the entire cast the opportunity to contribute, even in other people's scenes. I tend to have a lot to say about metaphor and dream logic and Pythagoras until a question about my character arises.

As Dah-Veed speaks, I recite his lines in my head. All that preparation never went anywhere. It's strange to hear him stumble through the dialect when I can hear it clearly.

**7: collapse**

**March 21, 2020 - April 12, 2020**

### **March 21, 2020 - well that was fucking crazy**

Since last week, everything has changed. Not just in my world but the world at large. SLAC has given us two weeks to take care of ourselves and our loved ones. I stopped everything. We hunkered down.

I raked the dead leaves from the back yard and stood in the sun.

By the end of last semester, I had a stable vision for the end of April: the play would open on the 10th; on the 16th, I would turn 29; my mentors would see the play and we'd talk on the 26th; my classes would end; I'd get my cap and gown; then finally walk across the stage and get my diploma on May 1st. It was a perfect ending to ten years of struggle, a victory with overlapping meanings.

By the time rehearsals approached, I was following r/coronavirus closely. The stories in Italy were disturbing, but nothing compared to what was to come.

### **March 22, 2020 - honing attention**

The play won't happen this year. How do I talk about this?

I'm relieved that the play will be postponed because this mysterious contagion is spreading exponentially. Theatres are potential hotbeds of coronavirus.

The outbreak snuck its way into every aspect of my life, of everyone's lives. We're facing a global recession and weeks of social isolation. We're doing what we can to stay safe and to keep others safe.

But what about my project?

Everyone is putting things down, we are all ceasing activity outside the home. Our small theatre is closing its doors for- who knows how long? And we are not alone. Broadway is shut down, all the local theatre productions are canceled, movie theatres even, restaurants, bars, sporting events, anything that brings people together in physical space.

Salt Lake County has made groups of 10 or more people illegal.

### **March 23, 2020 - letting go**

The culminating piece of this project, the center, is gone. Not gone. Delayed.

Preparing a play for performance means nothing without the people who come to see it. Theatre without an audience is not theatre.

I felt relieved when everything began to get canceled because containing the spread of the virus, protecting human lives, that kind of thing matters a lot more than a play.

I saw friends in other plays wailing about how sad it is their shows were canceled and I felt dismissive- who cares about your stupid play in the middle of a global pandemic?

And then I thought who cares about my stupid play in the middle of a global pandemic?

And then I thought about all the writing I've been doing, and how it's all been leading up to that play and that rehearsal process and now all of that stuff won't happen for another year. My graduation, even, won't happen.

Nothing I write seems to hold any weight now. Everything I'm reading- everything I feel compelled to read- describes this crisis as world-shifting, the coming weeks holding the potential for a global recession, mass unemployment, industries collapsing, the end of the world. My thoughts about acting or about the play I was going to act in seem so frivolous, nonessential.

During the first week of quarantine, Cassie and I were shaken awake by what turned out to be a 5.7 earthquake NNE of Magna. It seemed impossible because we had already hunkered down, we were already freaked out about the virus, disinfecting everything, SLAC shut down, everything shut down. Her mom called during the quake (somehow), hysterical, she lives much closer to the epicenter and on the second floor of a tall and narrow apartment building.

We had spent time calming our fear, studying up on the real details of the virus, preparing, managing our expectations and letting unnecessary things go. Like *How To Transcend*.

Then, a quake? It took our already frayed nerves past the edge. My dad sent a picture of the angel Moroni on top of the Salt Lake LDS temple, whose trumpet had fallen out of his hands. I responded *is that real??*

On Instagram, Sarah Ruhl offered to send 44 copies of her brand new book of poetry to followers who would send her a poem. We were lying in bed when I read her post, still quaking internally and baffled.

I sent her a message:

It's been 15 years since I wrote a poem.

we were stilling,  
Found time to move the dead leaves from  
before.  
Resting to deepen, moving to deepen.  
Sabbath.

Then,  
Still dark, the bed shakes us awake this  
morning  
5.7 earthquake, outside Salt Lake City  
Fourteen aftershocks so far.  
The golden angel on top of the Mormon  
temple drops his trumpet

Two emergencies at once? Ten? A trillion?

And the water in Vienna is crystal,  
At least according to Twitter

I wouldn't choose immunity from thunder  
Or from snowfall or sunburn

This body has many temperatures inside it.

Then, in another message:

Salt Lake Acting Company's production of  
How To Transcend A Happy Marriage has  
been postponed for a year. I am relieved  
to spend more time with that "ethical slut/  
ethical slaughter" play. I'm cast as  
Freddie. I cried often when reading Letters  
from Max. And i printed out your piece on  
"writers block" and hung it in my office.  
You don't know me but I feel I know you.

And I tried to go back to sleep. A few nights previous I had encountered Sarah Ruhl in a dream and instead of her signature calm insight and depth, she was frustrated with my academic impotence and handed me a harshly graded crayon drawing that someone else had drawn. She had no time for me.

I woke up an hour later to her response:

your poem made my cry today. I'm so  
grateful. Freddie!!! Hooray! Sorry it's  
postponed but hope the waiting has  
sweetness. be well, book will be winging  
its way to you soon, Sarah

And then I reread my message and realized that I meant Venice, not Vienna.

### **April 10, 2020 - opening night**

For days I have been making phone calls, letting ticketholders know that *How To Transcend* is being postponed, and what would you like to do with your tickets? I can send you a refund, or you can turn it into a gift certificate, or you can donate it to the theatre. And is there any way we can assist you? Pick up groceries, track down some toilet paper? And we look forward to a time when we can gather safely in a theatre again.

Tonight would have been Opening Night, the big celebration, the culmination of all of our work and the beginning of a five-week run of performances. The play will still happen a year from now. We still have an opening night to look forward to.

Partway through the day, I get the news that J Todd (the actor playing Paul in our production) has committed suicide.

March 12 was our final rehearsal before we were put on immediate hiatus. We were still in our first week, and still getting to know each other. J Todd was cracking jokes and going to smoke and telling stories of playing Tybalt and Pistol and That Awful Production of Three Musketeers and talking about how housing worked for the Utah Shakespeare Festival.

I have a tendency to ask questions that border on alarming. I find it amusing, it often results in something interesting, and it soothes the anxiety that emerges when there's a lull in the conversation. During a rehearsal I asked the cast the old standard "What the biggest thing you've

killed?” and as often happens people were bemused and a little befuddled and I told the story of being responsible for the death of our guinea pig when I was 8, and J Todd laughed and I think he said he had maybe killed a big spider.

Then on March 12 I sat next to him on a break and asked him “So, Todd, What happens after you die?”

And now I wish I hadn’t asked that question. His answer wasn’t alarming, we just had a brief back and forth, but his first answer was that nothing happens.

### **April 12, 2020 - standstill**

In separate conversations, my mom and my dad both explained why people kill themselves, like they understood, despite never having met J Todd. They were also expressing appropriate condolences, but I didn’t appreciate how simple the situation seemed to them.

I will never know the reasons why J Todd killed himself.

Another castmate mentioned that theatre was J Todd’s only source of income in a Facebook post, implying that because theatres are shutting down that J Todd had no future. Maybe that was it.

J Todd’s sister mentioned alcohol and depression in her post.

J Todd was gregarious and wiry, eager to go out for a smoke, old school. He’d been acting forever, it seemed, in all these cities, for all these theatres, he’d done the classics, he was a stage combat savant. He seemed tense during the table work, like he was antsy to get on his feet, to start *acting* the damn thing.

At the first readthrough, he asked everyone in the room to keep an eye out for an apartment nearby, he was hoping to sublet- he’d been living at his parent’s in Herriman and taking public transit and seemed eager to get his own place.

Stanislavski’s 1917 note about Konstantin came back up in my thinking:

He decided to commit suicide not because he didn’t want to live, but because he passionately wants to live, he grasps at everything that offers a foothold in life, but everything collapses.

SARS-CoV-2 has incited the collapse of live theatre, at least for a while. If an actor's got a play they're working on, even one a year from now, they've got something. If all the theatres shut down, that takes a toll.

I could never assign a reason for J Todd's suicide because I never really knew him. I envisioned offering him a ride back to Herriman on a night when rehearsal had gone late and he'd missed the last train. I imagined him telling me his history, how he went from being an acting student at BYU to landing at American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco, what it was like to act at Utah Shakes, what about his time in New York, what it feels like to be back in Utah.

That opportunity is gone.

### **April 14, 2020 - approaching the end**

What am I left with at the end of this journey?

In one of my first writings, I had all these ideas for a play or a guidebook for actors or some sort of performance, and instead, I have a collection of my experiences and the thoughts and feelings that went along with them. I fear that I've left the reader with an altogether anxious and depressed jumble, that I haven't offered the reader any solutions or conclusions. The play could have been a victorious ending, but it fell away and was replaced with global catastrophe, loss, and great uncertainty.

The performance is in reality a mutual creation of actors and audience, and the Atmosphere is an irresistible bond between actor and audience, a medium with which the audience can inspire the actors by sending them waves of confidence, understanding, and love.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

In my preface, I described the audience as an ocean and connected it with an early trauma. I remain afraid of being observed, absorbed with the possibility of being judged, criticized, or found wanting. Imagining a benevolent audience sending waves of understanding makes my body soften and reminds me of the reasons why I love to act on the stage. I rarely imagine that, but I can remember that more.

I don't know when audiences will be able to gather safely again. The coronavirus has incited the necessity of physical separation, abolished closeness, made us afraid of each other. Even when we are able to gather again, will audiences feel safe enough to enjoy a play?



## Conclusion

From the very beginning of his study, he has been inside the character; his reward will be his own inner growth.

Michael Chekhov, *On the Technique of Acting*

Here is the place where I wrap up this thesis. I again sit facing a shifting mass of possibilities, but they look nothing like I could have predicted. I don't know when people will feel safe sitting in a theatre together. The idea of an audience has dissolved and dispersed. I will return to this section over the coming weeks and try to say something that feels like an ending.

### **April 21, 2020 - results & discussion**

Despite the upside-down ending to this narrative, I feel that I have captured succinctly the psychology of being myself as an actor and harvested the thoughts and feelings that made up my preparatory process in the face of rehearsal and performance.

The transformations I have undergone over the course of this project include:

- my capacity for and appreciation of ambiguity and ambivalence, which has increased
- my relationship with the work of Sarah Ruhl, which has deepened and veered
- my relationship with my ability to write and to act, which has softened and widened
- the length of my hair, which is now longer than it's ever been
- the length of this thesis, which is the largest piece of writing I've ever written
- my appreciation for the possibility of theatrical events, which has begun to ache
- my relationship to the inevitability of death and the myriad means by which it can happen, which became starker and more present suddenly and unexpectedly
- a sense of ownership of sensations and impulses arising in my body, which unfolded

What I didn't do, that perhaps I'll have the resources and capacity to do in the future, is write anything about the changes in my thinking and being that have occurred thanks to the Jungian Analysts from whom I have learned a great deal, because I feel I am still in an embryonic phase of my understanding of psychology. Perhaps, as my development continues, I will be fortunate enough to enter a path of study centered on true Jungian Analysis and embark on my own analytic process.

Another thing I look forward to exploring further (and perhaps even writing about) is the Michael Chekhov technique, which lent me its credibility when I lost a sense of what an actor should do. Perhaps, once some kind of safety arrives on the planet, I will be fortunate enough to attend the Michael Chekhov School for further training and exploration.

*How to Transcend* happens next spring. The work I have done on my role, some of which I hope is represented here in this writing, will continue. I will continue to transform. And, I'm sure, more great uncertainty is on its way.

I am currently experiencing a glowing sort of spacious warmth as I type these words, thinking back on the work I have done and the work I will continue to do.

I tried to tell the truth.

I know it wasn't science but I hope it held some value to you.

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