The Dyslexic Actor: How Dyslexia Affects the Acting Process

Kate Milazzo

University of Central Florida
THE DYSLEXIC ACTOR
HOW DYSLEXIA AFFECTS THE ACTING PROCESS

by

KATE MILAZZO
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ABSTRACT

Dyslexia can benefit an actor, especially if the individual is aware of how the challenges and advantages of dyslexia impact their personal acting process. Dyslexia is widely understood to be a learning disability that affects an individual’s reading and writing abilities. Many forms of theater rely on the written word, and an actor’s success lies in their ability to interpret the text, leading one to question whether a dyslexic individual can find success as an actor. Yet several famous actors, including Octavia Spencer and Henry Winkler, are known to be dyslexic. As a dyslexic individual, I have also successfully participated in numerous productions despite the challenges I have faced within the art form. Thus, the difference between struggle and success for the dyslexic actor may lie in their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Identifying dyslexia-specific weaknesses can lead to new coping strategies, recyclable methodologies, improved self-advocacy, and a higher level of confidence. Realizing that one’s excellent spatial reasoning, story analysis skills, vivid mental images, and imaginative thinking are characteristics of the dyslexic brain’s strengths can be equally empowering. The foundation of these discoveries gives way to a new understanding of dyslexia. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the definition of dyslexia, the differences in structure and function of dyslexic brains compared to non-dyslexic brains, and how these differences can present challenges. This chapter also introduces advantages, known as MIND strengths, as identified, and defined by Brock Eide, MD, MA, and Fernette Eide, MD, in their 2023 book, *The Dyslexic Advantage: Unlocking the Hidden Potential of the Dyslexic Brain*. These advantages were only recently defined and provide fresh insight into the workings of the dyslexic mind. The following two chapters discuss the identification of dyslexic-related challenges, strategies, and MIND strengths that contributed to the successes and disappointments I experienced while performing in two
different theatrical productions. Chapter Two chronicles how the challenges, strategies, and MIND strengths affected my reading of the script, character creation, rehearsal process, and performance in *Noises Off*, written by Michael Frayn, while Chapter Three chronicles the same process for *Henry VI- Part One* by William Shakespeare. Though sharing this process intends to act as a guide to breaking down the acting process, encouraging the use of coping strategies, and discovering one’s MIND strengths, this thesis serves only as a springboard for other dyslexic actors. The effect of dyslexia is specific to the individual, and each artistic experience and expression is unique.
To my Mom, who taught me how to advocate for myself.

To my Dad, who always knew I would do great things.

And to the dyslexic kids who were made to believe they were anything less than exceptional.
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CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING DYSLEXIA

*Dyslexia is not something people have but rather who they are.*

— *The Dyslexic Advantage* (XVI)

Growing up dyslexic, I have experienced shame, embarrassment, and prejudice in educational settings. I was laughed at by my peers when I read aloud, pushed out of AP courses, and even called lazy and disrespectful by my educators for needing extra time or making spelling errors. I have never been the “ideal” student and have grown accustomed to educators doubting my ability and commitment. Being dyslexic has affected more than just my educational career; I have seen its impacts in every aspect of my life, including my theatrical career. Similar to my teachers’ expectations of me to be the ideal student, there are expectations created by the theatrical community of an ideal actor. The ideal actor can pick up a script and read it perfectly on their first try, rapidly memorize their lines, and pronounce any word they may encounter perfectly. These are all skills I have struggled with, and I have learned to work twice as hard to keep up with my peers. Yet, I have continued to pursue acting and even found success despite its reliance on the written word. I am not alone in this, as several successful dyslexic actors in the industry have done the same. Leading me to believe that there must be a reason dyslexic people are drawn to the art form; perhaps dyslexia is not only a challenge but also an asset to an actor.

To discover why dyslexic individuals succeed in acting, I first had to discover what dyslexia is. Despite all these years of knowing I am dyslexic; I’ve never known what causes it or if it affects anything other than my reading and writing abilities. Are there any benefits to dyslexia? If there are, how can dyslexia be beneficial in this profession? These questions lead me to the research of Brock Eide, MD, MA, and Fernette Eide, MD, specialists in
learning disabilities and neuroscience. The first edition of their book, *The Dyslexic Advantage: Unlocking the Hidden Potential of the Dyslexic Brain*, was published in 2011, and after a decade of continued research, the authors released their revised and updated version in 2023. This book aims to reframe how we view dyslexia and primarily focuses on the lesser-known and unique strengths that dyslexia can offer, which they refer to as “the dyslexic advantages” (Eide 6). *The Dyslexic Advantage* features their research and a collection of studies from other scientists that support their claims. The book presents this information in a way that is more accessible for dyslexic individuals. Through its font style and size, the use of individual narratives that help connect the research to the dyslexic experience, and analogies that help clarify more complex ideas. In this chapter, we will explore the research laid out in *The Dyslexic Advantage* to understand the structure and function of the dyslexic brain, the challenges caused by dyslexia, and the dyslexic advantages.

The first description of an individual with dyslexia appeared in medical literature in 1896 written by British ophthalmologist W. Pringle Morgan (Eide 8). The individual was a fourteen-year-old boy named Percy who, despite his teachers’ belief that he was one of their brightest students and having had several years of intensive literacy education, struggled to read and spell at an elementary level. His case was the first of many that catalyzed the study of a specific group of people who, regardless of their level of intelligence, processed written information fundamentally differently than their academic peers. These individuals had not experienced any traumatic head injury but rather had been born with a genetic brain-based impairment eventually known as dyslexia (Eide 8). The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) as well as the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) define dyslexia as the following:
Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge. (Eide 9)

Eide and Eide point to this definition as an example of the traditional view of dyslexia and argue that it leads people to perceive dyslexia as synonymous with its negative attributes (Eide 10). This view of dyslexia flattens the dyslexic experience and ignores any positive qualities that dyslexia may offer an individual. While the authors do not provide a new definition, they propose viewing dyslexia as a 3-D model. Dyslexia can present a variety of traits of various degrees depending on an individual's unique relationship to the dyslexic experience (Edie 25). They equate this model to that of a mountain, as they believe thriving with dyslexia is comparable to climbing a mountain (Edie 27). When climbing a mountain, the conditions one might face have infinite varieties, and you must consider various factors, including latitude, longitude, altitude, weather, time of day, etc., to describe best how one climbs to the top (Eide 28). Just like when one discloses they have dyslexia, the word alone doesn't describe the strengths and challenges one may have or what they will need to reach their peak performance (Eide 27). The factors that will make up an individual's 3-D model of dyslexia will be a combination of the structural and functional elements as well as the dyslexic challenges and advantages, which we will discuss throughout this chapter. By knowing the possible factors that contribute to my model of dyslexia, I hope to identify better
the elements that affect my acting process. Brock and Fernette Eide also disagree with the categorization of dyslexia as a learning disability. Instead, they believe that dyslexia is its own neurological processing style as it arises from a different pattern of brain organization and function (Eide 4).

**Structure and Function of the Dyslexic Brain**

Brain function can be broken down into four levels: the structural, the connection or network, the cognitive, and the behavioral level (Eide 33). Through the study of these levels, researchers have found differences in the structural, connection/network, and cognitive levels of the dyslexic brain.

Structurally, the right hemisphere excels in managing the overall, generalized features of an object or concept while the left tackles the finer details (Eide 35). The human brain relies on the right hemisphere’s big-picture processing when approaching a new task. It draws parallels to previously encountered tasks and facilitates problem-solving without becoming overwhelmed by the specifics (Eide 37). The right hemisphere’s big-picture processing style influences auditory, visual, motor, memory, language, and other cognitive features that play a role in reading (Eide 35). The more intricate the task, the greater the need for precision, speed, and automatization. At that point, the left hemisphere takes over, processing the fine details and improving proficiency and mastery (Eide 37). This left-hemispheric processing does not only pertain to reading but is associated with many cognitive processes that become innate (Eide 37).

Due to dyslexia’s right-sided preference, the left-sided pathway associated with expertise does not fully develop. Therefore, people with dyslexia have been observed to take longer to acquire automaticity in various rule-based skills and procedures (Eide 38). It has
also been found that dyslexic brain hemispheres are similar in size compared to non-dyslexic brains which are characterized by a left hemisphere that is larger than the right (Eide 35). A study conducted in the late 1990s by Doctors Sally and Bennett Shaywitz implemented a brain scanning technique known as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to pinpoint the specific brain region activated when an individual reads. Their findings showed that in dyslexic individuals, the right hemisphere is more active in reading and its associated processing, thus illuminating the preference for right-hemisphere processing as well as the lack of the leftward shift typically developed as the reading process takes place (Eide 36).

In a 2005 study, Dr. Mark Beeman observed each side of the brain as it processed a particular word through its semantic fields, definitions, and descriptions (Eide 38). Beeman found that the left hemisphere focused on the common or literal meaning of a word and the right brain focused on broader relationships such as synonyms, antonyms, figurative meaning, humorous connections, and irony. While the left hemisphere process aids in the precise and rapid understanding needed for speaking and writing, the right hemisphere process may take longer but leads to more meaningful connections and complex, nuanced, symbolic communication interpreting (Eide 39).

A more complex structural difference between dyslexic and non-dyslexic brains was discovered within the cortex in a study conducted by Dr. Manual Casanova, whose work was published in 2010 (Eide 42). Neurons in the cortex interact via a blend of chemical and electrical signals that influence cognitive functions such as memory, language, attention, sensation, and awareness (Eide 42). The cells within the layers of the cortex are organized into units known as columns, which, in turn, consist of small units called minicolumns (Eide 43). These minicolumns play an essential role in variation between brains.
Minicolumns serve as units for fundamental data processing in the cortex (Eide 43). Through Casanova’s studies, he found that the structural organization of minicolumns differs in every brain and that they each have a distinctive arrangement of space between minicolumns (Eide 44). Brains with more widely spaced minicolumns have longer axons, establish connections over greater distances, and create larger circuits. In contrast, tightly clustered minicolumns have shorter axons, resulting in more localized circuits (Eide 44). The local connections are better at processing fine details, whereas the longer connections succeed at recognizing global concepts (Eide 45).

Casanova found the widely spaced minicolumns to be highly associated with dyslexic brains. He also discovered that the left hemisphere in dyslexic brains has similarly extensive networks and resembles right-sided patterns (Eide 45). Consistent with the left vs right hemisphere findings, Casanova noted that the widely spaced minicolumns could result in difficulty processing fine detail and could also impair attention, sensory and motor tasks, vision, memory, and language. However, these columns also contribute to creating new ideas, problem-solving, and connecting seemingly unrelated concepts (Eide 48).

Cognitively, dyslexic brains tend to rely on conscious mental resources as opposed to automatic processes for performing various tasks (Eide 49). Researchers Angela Fawcett and Rodrick Nicolson identified the alternate path the dyslexic brain takes during the development of procedural learning and automatic processing (Eide 49). Procedural learning, the cognitive process of learning something to the point that it becomes automatic, is a challenge for approximately half of all individuals with dyslexia. To compensate for the inability to master automated tasks quickly, dyslexics rely instead on conscious compensation (Eide 50).
Conscious compensation is defined as the use of stored information to consciously talk oneself through tasks; a process that can occupy a significant amount of working memory. Working memory, a short-term memory that allows us to hold information in our conscious awareness for active processing, is smaller in capacity than long-term memory (Eide 51). Dyslexic individuals rely heavily on auditory-verbal working memory, which maintains sound-related information in working memory until it can be effectively processed and applied (Eide 51). Due to the dyslexic’s reliance on working memory, some dyslexic people may talk themselves through tasks, may quickly become overwhelmed, and may be slower and more error-prone in routine tasks (Eide 52).

Due to challenges with procedural learning, dyslexic students often require more repetitions to master complex skills than others (Eide 52). Fawcett also noted that dyslexic students may initially understand the rules but without regular use, they may tend to fade over time. To illustrate this, Fawcett and Nicolson coined the term “cube root rule”, stating that it takes a dyslexic person three times longer to learn something compared to non-dyslexic individuals. For instance, with 2 being the cube root of 8, if it took a non-dyslexic individual eight hours to learn something, it would take the dyslexic individual twice the amount of time to learn the same information (Eide 52). Additionally, dyslexics are more prone to forget skills they thought they had mastered if the skills aren’t regularly practiced. This is often perceived as a lack of effort in these students when they may be working just as hard if not harder than their non-dyslexic peers (Eide 52).

Like the findings mentioned above, Fawcett and Nicolson suggest that a reduction in automaticity can also have cognitive benefits. While response time may be longer, information is more likely to be utilized in novel ways. Answers tend to be more thoughtful, innovative, and less routine (Eide 58). In non-dyslexic brains, the initial experience and
information that shaped the skill tend to get stored away as the task becomes more and more automatic, and the capacity to use that knowledge to generate new ideas lessens. However, being forced to revisit that knowledge regularly offers more opportunities to use it to innovate and create (Eide 57).

This unique ability held by the right hemisphere to establish distant connections and draw inferences is how individuals with dyslexia overcome difficulties with decoding language, as dyslexic individuals frequently rely on contextual cues to fill the gaps in information they may have missed (Eide 40). Therefore, right-sided processing might be an optimal adaptation as opposed to a source of difficulty. This perspective can change the perception that the right-hemispheric process is not a shortcoming but rather another type of expertise (Eide 41). Right-sided processing can lead to creative problem-solving, especially for tasks that include intricate contexts and circumstances, past experiences, analogies, or instances instead of strict rules and formulas (Eide 41). All these tasks in which the right hemisphere excels are present within the theater.

**Dyslexia-Related Challenges**

The structural and functional elements of the brain combine to create both the challenges and advantages found in dyslexic individuals. First, we will look at the challenges, which Brock and Fernette Eide break down into six categories: phonological processing, naming speed, visual processing, procedural learning, working memory, and processing speed (Eide 61). Understanding each of these challenges provides a clearer picture of how dyslexia affects actors in their daily, academic, and professional lives.

First, phonological processing, or word sound processing, affects 70 to 80 percent of dyslexics in their attempt to sound out (decode) and spell words. Phonemes are foundational
sound units that make up words and are combined to form spoken words (Eide 61).

Recognizing the correct sounds that make up spoken words is a skill referred to as phonemic awareness. Difficulty with sound perception disrupts decoding due to the underlying inability to match letters with the sounds they make. Phonological processing issues can also disrupt phonological awareness, affecting the ability to analyze word sounds by switching, adding, or dropping sounds from words (Eide 62). As a result, identifying unknown words, correctly using syntax and grammar, and understanding lengthy paragraphs can be arduous for the dyslexic actor.

The second dyslexia-associated challenge, Rapid Automatized Naming (RAN), or naming speed, is a measure of an individual’s ability to swiftly identify and verbalize the names of familiar items. Discord in this process negatively influences reading fluency and speed, although naming speed can suffer in conjunction with or independently of word sound processing (Eide 62). Research has indicated that among dyslexic individuals, approximately 20 percent exhibit challenges exclusively with word sound processing, another 20 percent struggle solely with naming speed, and most of the remaining 60 percent grapple with both. Difficulties when both word sound processing and naming speed co-occur are termed the “double deficit” (Eide 63). Actors with one or both deficits may struggle to quickly comprehend last-minute updates to a script or when reading unrehearsed lines from a monitor.

The third dyslexia-associated challenge Brock and Fernette noted is visual processing. Visual processing difficulties are an example of a fine-detail processing task that plays a substantial role in reading. Visual attention allows the brain to choose what visual information to focus on and what to ignore (Eide 63). Visual attention is measured by analyzing visual span or how many printer symbols one can observe in a single glance. For
dyslexic readers, the visual span is typically narrower than for non-dyslexic readers (Eide 63). In fluent reading, the eyes employ a sequence of precise movements known as saccades, interspersed with brief pauses called fixations. Successful saccades travel just the proper distance relative to the visual space, but not so far as to miss groupings of letters or so close to cause overlap. This requires split attention focus, planning the target for the next saccade while maintaining focus on the current fixation point. This process, known as covert orienting, can pose a challenge to dyslexic individuals (Eide 64). While in fixation, the visual focus remains steady so that all letters in the visual span are registered. If the eyes are not fixed but continue to move, this can cause “blurring, wobbling, or merging of letters in a line of text.”. Blurring, wobbling, and merging can be exacerbated when the text font size is small, is presented in length or densely packed lines, or is written in particular fonts (Eide 64). Therefore, actors with dyslexia may struggle to discern when their eyes move during fixation periods, leading to accuracy and speed problems while reading scripts that are cramped, written in small font, or have several crossed-out lines and/or substitutions.

The fourth dyslexia-related challenge is the previously discussed process of procedural learning. Procedural learning is the acquisition of motor skills and habits, as well as certain types of cognitive skills. As noted, these challenges cause individuals to take longer to proficiently master any skill that relies on rules, procedures, or routines that should become automatic in practice (Eide 65). Academic skills such as math facts, historical dates, and processes with multiple steps such as long division are skills dyslexic students struggle with throughout their education. Deficits in procedural learning can become more and more apparent for dyslexic students when compared to their peers (Eide 66). Having experienced learning challenges and frustrations as a student, the actor may contend with performance
anxiety in daily life as well as professional situations even before the audition process has begun.

Working memory is the fifth dyslexic-related challenge. As previously mentioned, working memory is short-term memory that allows us to hold information in our conscious awareness for active processing. Working memory is most taxed by readers who haven’t mastered basic reading skills and continue to verbally guide themselves through the process (Eide 68). New complex skills or tasks can be introduced that surpass one’s current working memory ability level. Take, for example, a student that excels in lower grade levels and then suddenly begins to struggle when they enter high school or higher education. Working memory potential is not stagnant, increases gradually throughout childhood and young adulthood, and reaches its capacity around the age of twenty-five. As a result, these students are perceived to be “late bloomers.” Working memory is essential to maintaining one’s attention as well as to executive function skills such as organizing, planning, and supervising tasks (Eide 68). Frequently, students with severe deficits in attention and executive functioning receive a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Since dyslexic individuals also tend to demonstrate procedural learning and processing speed challenges, about 25-40% of dyslexic students will also meet the criteria for ADHD (Eide 69). Dyslexic actors with a deficit in working memory may have trouble with things such as detailed verbal notes from directors, last-minute changes in blocking multiple characters, or changes in scene timing, pacing, and tension.

The sixth and final dyslexic-related challenge noted by Eide and Eide is processing speed. Processing speed measures how quickly an individual can absorb, process, and react to information (Eide 69). Low processing speed alone does not necessarily induce dyslexic-type challenges; however, it can intensify the effects of dyslexic-related challenges (Eide 69).
Typically, slow processing speeds noticeably impact reading fluency. Additionally, because information in the brain is being processed slowly, there is less time for the working memory to grab onto new information and use it before it is lost. This can lead to an inability to stay focused and impact one’s capacity to stay organized and stick to a plan. Dyslexic actors with slow processing speeds may need multiple readings to fully understand the script, may take longer to grasp the nuances of a character, or need to be refocused during long rehearsals.

Though the research on dyslexia has largely focused on the challenges it can present, researchers such as Dr. Fumiko Hoeft have begun to look for “protective or resilience” factors that aid in overcoming these challenges. Hoeft and her colleagues identified cognitive and emotional resilience factors that are key to a dyslexic student’s success at various stages (Eide 70). The cognitive factors Fumiko identified include having strong language skills, an extensive vocabulary, general knowledge skills, strong executive function, and attention skills. In addition, developing strong fine motor skills correlates with better attention and procedural learning (Eide 70). The social and emotional resilience factors they identified include self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, realization planning, and goal setting. They found that it is important for the student to possess a strong sense of self-determination, hope, and a feeling of control over one’s choices and actions. The student needs to have a growth mindset, or positive belief in the ability to learn and develop their talents through hard work, planning, and learning from others. Strong and supportive relationships with parents, teachers, and peers play an important role as well (Eide 70). This research is important in that it celebrates tenacity and perseverance as opposed to merely putting a negative label on the dyslexic mind.
Dyslexic Advantages & the MIND Strengths

*The Dyslexic Advantage* introduces a new perspective on dyslexia, insisting that we must consider the larger picture and stop focusing solely on dyslexia's challenges (Eide 7). This larger-picture approach is not meant to imply that dyslexia is not difficult. Nor does it imply that overcoming dyslexia is simple and those with dyslexia will no longer experience shame, ridicule, and exclusion (Eide XV). Rather, viewing dyslexia as a learning or processing style can bring to light the duality of dyslexia and how it can predispose individuals not only to its well-known challenges but also its lesser-known abilities and talents (Eide 4).

Brock and Fernette Eide reveal four cognitive strengths commonly found in dyslexic individuals. The first strength, three-dimensional spatial reasoning and mechanical ability allows for visualization and manipulation of three-dimensional shapes in one’s mind. The second strength, the ability to perceive connections and relationships, allows for connections between unrelated things such as metaphors, paradoxes, analogies, similarities, differences, and missing pieces. The third strength encompasses the ability to recall past personal experiences in vivid detail and use pieces of these memories to complete cognitive tasks. The fourth strength is the ability to identify subtle patterns in shifting or complex systems or data sets and to predict the eventual outcome.

Brock and Fernette refer to these strengths as dyslexia-related abilities or dyslexic advantages. Each of these functions is connected to broader categories including material reasoning, interconnected reasoning, narrative reasoning, and dynamic reasoning (Eide XIX). To simplify the concept, these strengths are referred to as MIND strengths. MIND strengths stem from the same differences in brain structure, function, and development that cause dyslexic difficulties in literacy, language, and learning (Eide 6).
The M-strengths, or material reasoning, comprise three-dimensional spatial reasoning abilities that allow the brain to understand the physical world, including “shape, size, motion, position, or orientation in the space of physical objects, and the ways those objects interact” (Eide 80). The dyslexic brain is proficient in constructing precise 3-D mental models of real and imagined physical spaces or objects and manipulating them by deconstructing them or considering them from a variety of angles (Eide 80). However, this spatial imagery is not strictly visual. Rather, it can be pictured in a non-visual way that includes forces, shapes, textures, or movements (Eide 109). Students with prominent M-strengths are often considered late bloomers. Because they are being assessed according to standards more suited to non-dyslexic minds, results can fail to present the whole picture and suggest slower development (Eide 109) In numerous studies, dyslexic individuals’ conclusions came more quickly and were more accurately when dealing with 3-D mental models compared to fine-detailed or 2-D features (Eide 110). Prominent M-strength students are remarkably creative and tend to be more successful outside of the classroom (Eide 109), often gravitating toward fields such as architecture, filmmaking, aeronautics, surgery, mechanics, art, design, and engineering. This strength may benefit actors as they create the world of the play and enhance their understanding of the stage pictures they make.

I-strength, or interconnected reasoning, is characterized by high creativity, acute perception, interdisciplinary thinking, and innovative connection-making abilities. In these individuals, visual and auditory input triggers connections to other concepts that might otherwise seem unrelated (Eide 132). This can be credited to the dyslexic brain's right-hemispheric processing skills and its interconnected and long-distance circuiting providing the pathway to unique and alternate ideas (Eide 159). Prominent I-strength students often find success as inventors, scientists, choreographers, computer software designers, clothing
designers, actors, and comedians. The I-Strengths could be particularly useful during an actor’s text work, allowing them to see beyond a word’s strict definition to dive into the play’s subtext. This strength could also enable the actor to discover hidden connections throughout the play and explore why a character may use particular words or metaphors.

The N-strengths, or narrative reasoning skills, allow the brain to recall and connect mental scenes from one’s personal experience. With this ability, the N-strength individual can grasp and test important concepts by recalling the past, using the information to explain the present, and then generating potential future or imaginary scenarios (Eide 185). This strength stems from a dyslexic individual’s preference to rely on episodic memory rather than tap into their less developed semantic and procedural memory (Eide 211). Episodic memory is a narrative or scene-based format, in which knowledge is drawn from past experiences (Eide 211). For those with strong N-strengths, this type of memory relives past experiences from an individual’s point of view with a concentration on what was felt or seen in the moment as opposed to the fine details of what was said. Although dyslexia can make reading and writing a challenge, people with strong N-strengths are drawn to careers that involve creating a story or narrative such as novelists, journalists, screenwriters, filmmakers, counselors, ministers, coaches, teachers, attorneys, marketers, and public relations professionals. This strength may support an actor’s ability to connect to their emotional life, leading to a more realistic portrayal of the given circumstances.

Lastly, D-strengths, or dynamic reasoning skills, are “the ability to read patterns in the real world that allow us to reconstruct past events we haven't witnessed, predict future events, or solve complex problems with defined parameters using episodic simulation”. This reasoning skill is ideal for examining past or future problems that include unknown, rapidly changing, or ambiguous elements (Eide 266). D-strengths can help predict the best possible
solutions or a “working hypothesis” when exact answers are unattainable (Eide 244). Although these strengths are similar to N-Strengths in that they rely on episodic simulations, they differ in crucial ways. Whereas N-strengths use simulation on a broad scale, D-strengths use simulation to predict or solve a specific problem (Eide 244). In addition, N-strengths are tied to one’s personal experience as opposed to the D-strengths ability to collect observations from the outside world (Eide 244). Ultimately, those with strong D-strengths often find success in rapidly evolving and uncertain environments such as entrepreneurship, venture capitalism, finance, business consulting, strategics, logistics, economics, farming, and ranching. By using external information, an actor may be able to predict how their character would react in a specific scenario that the actor has not experienced themselves.

Brock and Fernette Eide argue that these strengths are what make dyslexic individuals successful in a plethora of careers. The identification of these strengths provides a sense of empowerment for the dyslexic individual and has become vital not only to this project but also to my personal growth. The Dyslexic Advantage led me to understand better how the dyslexic brain works on a structural and cognitive level and gave me the language to articulate my experiences better. By exploring the advantages, I now understand the benefits of being dyslexic and have started predicting how these strengths could manifest within an actor’s process. While each of the strengths resonates with me, I am unsure how I use them during each step of production and which ones I rely on more. In the following chapters, we will examine two different productions and how the dyslexic challenges and strengths specifically impact my work as an actor.
CHAPTER 2: NOISES OFF

With an understanding of the duality of dyslexia, we can now process a more comprehensive picture of how dyslexia impacts one’s acting process. In this chapter, I will reflect on my performance in a production of Micheal Frayn’s Noises Off to identify how my dyslexia-associated challenges and advantages impact my acting. This process will prove how each of the MIND strengths can lead an actor to a successful performance. It also shows how knowing one’s weaknesses, such as challenges with visual attention or procedural learning, can lead an individual to be more proactive and prepared.

In the Fall of 2022, I was cast as Brooke Ashton/Vicki in the Orlando Shakespeare Theater’s production of Noises Off. Written in 1982, Noises Off follows a traveling troupe of actors as they produce a play entitled Nothing On. Nothing On takes place in an English country home in which two couples, a maid, and a burglar face a multitude of misunderstandings, sexual mishaps, plates of sardines, and well-timed slamming doors. Noises Off gives the audience an inside look behind the scenes of the Nothing On production and how the personal lives of its stereotypical actors, overworked stage managers, and jaded director eventually bleed onto the stage.

In Act One of Noises Off, the audience meets the cast of characters as they struggle through their final rehearsal before opening night. This erratic rehearsal consists of mistimed entrances, forgotten lines, broken doors, a missing actor, and a lost contact lens. While they do eventually plod their way through the entire rehearsal, the increasingly frustrated director eventually resorts to screaming at his ill-prepared cast as the exhausted stage managers scramble to keep it all together.

In Act Two, a month has passed and the Noises Off audience finds themselves backstage with the Nothing On cast and crew. At the top of the act, we learn of romances
gone sour, find that an actor has locked herself in the dressing room, and that another is missing minutes before the show is to begin. The first act of Nothing On - previously seen by the Noises Off audience in the rehearsal phase - begins in front of a live audience. However, as the show progresses, the cast silently confronts each other backstage and attempts to sabotage each other on and off stage, leaving the director and stage management desperately trying to keep the show intact.

In the third and final act of Noises Off, the theater company has been performing Nothing On for two months and the Noises Off audience is now the Nothing On audience. Within seconds of the play’s start, the melee begins as sardines spill, set props fail, an actor faints, another falls down the stairs, and not one but three burglars deliver the same lines. As the play collapses around them, a few actors seem to welcome the chaos, some actors try to fix it, and one actor is utterly oblivious. In an attempt to put an end to the chaos, they decide to end the play. The scene closes with the actors’ final pose being disrupted by the curtain falling on top of them.

Noises Off is one of Michael Frayn’s most successful works and is recognized for its intelligent use of farce. Farce is a type of comedy that uses “physical humor, deliberate absurdity or nonsense, and broadly styled performances” (Penskaya). Other characteristics of farce include misunderstandings, stereotypical characters, mistaken identity, infinite disguises, and ridiculously fast and perfectly timed exits and entrances (Gottlieb). Farce is derived from the Latin word farcire meaning “to stuff” and since the Middle Ages has been inserted into plays of a serious nature to increase audience participation (Dean, Penskaya) and provide comedic breaks in otherwise somber productions. It is believed to have developed through mystery plays (Medieval religiously themed performances) and then rapidly evolved into an independent genre prevalent in English literature throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Penskaya). In the nineteenth century, characteristics of farce were used
in vaudevillian plays popular throughout France. Following that, British playwrights such as Oscar Wilde, Brandon Thomas, and Joe Orton refined farce into the genre it is recognized as today (Gottlieb).

Understanding the production’s style is essential as the style will require the actors to possess specific skills. Farce relies on its physical storytelling; therefore, the actors must understand space well and know how to communicate without the text. This skill aligns with the M-Strengths and a dyslexic individual’s ability to understand how shape, motion, and position impact the physical world. The reliance on physical comedy may also cause challenges for the dyslexic actor as it requires automaticity and expertise in knowing how each action leads to the next. Farce also uses wordplay and innuendoes, which align with the I-Strengths and a dyslexic individual’s ability to make these connections. By considering the style of *Noises Off*, I can better predict the dyslexic-associated challenges and strengths that may be present during the process.

**The Script**

The script of *Noises Off* was challenging to read as it presented several dyslexia-related challenges. Being a Farce, the style impacts an actor’s performance and how the script is written. As mentioned previously, Farce relies on its physical comedy, which leads to the frequent use of stage directions. Typically, stage directions are viewed as suggestions rather than instructions. However, in *Noises Off*, the stage directions are equally important as the dialogue. Stage directions are typically written in italics, are generally succinct, and are used sparingly. In the script of *Noises Off* there are as many stage directions as lines of dialogue and most are very long and detailed (see Figure 1). Any script can present challenges for the dyslexic actor, but these qualities make it more difficult. I find that italics are not dyslexic-friendly as the slight angle brings the letters closer together, causing the word to appear
blurred. This continual shift between italics and non-italics can make the page appear fuzzy as the eye shifts back and forth unsure of which letters to focus on. Being dyslexic, my visual attention can be affected by the font style and density of the text, leading to lower accuracy, and reading speed. In the initial readings of the *Noises Off* script, my visual attention was further challenged when the stage direction for a character was intertwined with another character’s dialogue lines. The capitalization of the character’s name was helpful, but often I attempted to focus on the line and missed the stage direction altogether. This inability to fluently decipher between dialogue and direction meant I had to reread sections multiple times.

![Figure 1: Act One, Page 56 of Noises Off Script showing text's format, font style, size, and frequent use of stage directions](image)

The script for Act Two of *Noises Off* is divided into two columns (see Figure 2). One column represents what is happening on stage, which includes the lines of *Nothing On*. The second column describes what is happening backstage and is therefore primarily stage
direction. As previously mentioned, in this act the Noises Off audience is watching what happens backstage. Simultaneously, they are listening to the dialogue while the action is taking place in front of the fictitious audience of Nothing On. Since the actors' backstage must be quiet while offstage, they are primarily communicating through mime and getting into physical, slapstick-style bits. Despite the separation, the action on both sides of the set happens simultaneously and there are moments in which an action on one side of the set directly affects what happens on the other. Even though the script is written in two columns, visual processing continued to be an issue. Often, I would start to read one column and follow the line into the second column as opposed to following the sentence and reading only one side of the page. The solution was to cover a column and read just one column at a time. However, this approach made it more of a challenge to connect how the two texts would manifest themselves onstage and go together seamlessly.
Due to visual processing issues, reading through the script was challenging and required several hours to complete. For other scripts, I have relied on a computer application created for dyslexic individuals that reads text aloud. However, due to the unique format of the Noises Off script, the application was unable to read the script fluently. Before attempting to read the script again, I brainstormed ways to help guide and focus my eyes during subsequent readings. I decided to use two basic tools: a sticky note and a highlighter. The sticky note was placed underneath each line of text covering what was to come next or over one of the columns in Act Two. This assisted in breaking up chunks of text and allowed me to focus on one idea at a time. Once I was able to read through the entire play, I followed up with the highlighter to help track my specific character and her movements throughout the play.

Highlighting a character’s lines is a tool that many actors use, as it helps an actor find their lines with ease and makes the script easier to refer to in rehearsal. The first step was to go through page by page and highlight Brooke’s or Vicki’s (the character Brooke played in Nothing On) dialogue lines. The next step was to highlight each time Brooke or Vicki was mentioned in the stage directions. Since stage directions are often modified to correspond to the characteristics of a particular production, actors are less likely to highlight or make note of them before the rehearsal process. However, due to the farce nature of the play and the specificity of the directions, I would need to be able to refer to them quickly during rehearsals. Due to the specificity of the script, I found finding every time Brooke was mentioned in the stage directions tedious and tiring. Especially after having perilously read the script to highlight her lines, my eyes started to wonder more, and after the first act, I began to lose focus. However, when I finished this process, I found it rewarding as it led to a more seamless visualization of how Brooke/Vicki fit into the bigger picture. At the end of the process, I had carefully read through the script four times which contributed to a good
understanding of the text and format of the play. With this step complete, I turned my focus on creating my iteration of the character(s).

**Character Creation**

As part of my undergraduate BFA program, I was introduced to a series of questions by my acting professor, Amelia McClain. These questions helped the actor in the process of creating a character. Since then, I have used these questions to develop every major character role I have performed. The answers to the first three questions are discovered through the text and require the play to be read with these questions in mind: 1. What does the playwright say about your character? 2. What do other characters say about your character? 3. What does your character say about themselves? The answers to these questions help summarize the character as seen from a variety of viewpoints. The information can help the actor identify conflicting statements, discover possible biases, establish relationships, and understand how a character is perceived by others and themselves. Gathering these different perspectives gives the actor the ability to sort out their character’s “truth”.

Once the text-based questions are answered, the actor is asked to consider in what ways they are similar to and different from their character and to identify their character’s superpower. Following this is a series of questions tailored to engage the actor’s imagination. This includes questions such as “Do you have any siblings? What are they like?” or “What is your earliest memory?”. While some answers to these questions may be found in the script, others may not. This allows the actor the opportunity to make choices about their character such as their past and their motivations. In this discovery there are no wrong answers; though if one finds in practice that some of these choices aren’t serving the character, they would be encouraged to revisit these questions at any point in the process.
Initially, I was hesitant to use this technique due to its reliance on the written word. However, I hypothesized that these questions would engage a few of the MIND strengths; precisely, the N strengths, which allow a dyslexic individual the ability to recall personal experiences and use them to perform other cognitive tasks (Edie 6), and the D Strengths, which supports an individual's ability to perceive subtle patterns and predict an outcome over time (Edie 6). I also realized that making the effort to read the text again would be beneficial in the long run. Over the following week, I gathered each perspective and completed the paperwork which required three additional readings of the entire script. What I found was that most of the information written by the playwright described what Brooke/Vicki does rather than who she is. However, there were a few descriptions that I found useful, including how she is introduced.

Enter VICKI through the front door. She is a desirable property in her early twenties, well-built and beautifully maintained throughout (Act 1)

The first thing we know about Brooke is that she is young and physically attractive. She also spends most of the play in her underwear, as Vicki and Garry are having a sexual rendezvous at the house. While this describes the character, rather than the actor, it tells of the type of person who would play the role.

The playwright also makes a variety of statements describing her absent-minded nature, as she is forgetful, easily distracted, and often confused. These attributes are at the crux of her character and fit the stereotype of a “hot dumb actress”. She is unable to think on her feet, evident in Act Three, when the play falls apart around her but she continues as if nothing is happening. This stereotype is reinforced by how the other characters treat her and their frustration with her incompetence. Lloyd, the director, makes many remarks about her intelligence and her poor acting ability:

LLOYD. Are you in?
LLOYD. Are you there? You’re out. Okay, I’ll call again. (Act One)

This leads him to scream at her at the end of Act One as she forgets her final line.

LLOYD. What’s that, Dad? Right. That’s the line, Brooke, love. We all know you’ve worked in very classy places up in London where they let you make the play up as you go along, but we don’t want that kind of thing here, do we…….. We merely want to hear the line (suddenly puts his mouth next to Vicki’s ear and shouts) What’s that, Dad? (Act One)

Through both the script and the other characters we learn about Brooke’s hidden romance with Lloyd. We also discover that she is a part of a love triangle, as Lloyd is also involved with the stage manager, Poppy. In Act Two, the audience learns from Lloyd that Brooke has threatened to leave the show.

LLOYD. I keep getting messages from Brooke about how unhappy she is here, and now she’s got herself a doctor’s certificate for nervous exhaustion - she’s going to walk!… I have just one afternoon, while Richard is fitted for a surgical corset, to cure Brooke of nervous exhaustion, with no medical aids except a little whiskey - you got the whisky?- a few flowers - you got the money for the flowers? - and a certain faded charm. (Act Two)

Brooke’s description of herself is mostly a description of her emotional state or one of confusion. What I found most useful was her bio featured in the Nothing On Playbill, which is included in the script of Noises Off.

BROOKE ASHTON (Vicki) is probably best known as a girl wearing nothing but good, honest, natural froth’ in the Hauptbahnhofbrau lager commercial. Her television appearances include Girl at Infants’ School in On the Zebras to Girl in Massage Parlor in On Probation. Cinemagoers saw her in The Girl in Room 14, where she played the Girl in Room 312. (Nothing On Playbill)
Brooke is no stranger to using her body to book roles, as she appears almost naked in her most notable commercial. The next two credits are very small TV roles, giving the impression that those are the biggest roles she’s landed and lending to the idea that she may not be the most “talented” actress. After completing the first three questions, I separated Brooke and Vicki so that I could consider who Vicki was as well. However, it was quickly apparent that Brooke wouldn’t have done much character work and would instead just play Vicki as herself.

With a good understanding of Brooke in the context of the script, I could then reflect on my own experiences; both similar and differing. Finding our similarities helped me tap into the N-Strengths that allow a dyslexic individual to remember personal experiences in vivid detail and use these memories to propose new ideas or create imaginary scenarios. In considering similarities, both Brooke and I are highly visually impaired without contact lenses and have the habit of losing them. When Brooke lost her contact on stage, the visualization of my own experience in a blurry world taking careful steps and mimicking the exact motions my hands make when searching for a contact on the floor came naturally to me. Additionally, Brooke and I are both twenty-somethings, conventionally attractive women who have been judged solely on our appearance and dismissed in similar ways. These personal connections with the character informed and shaped how I personified Brooke and expressed her emotions in some of her most significant moments within the play.

Considering our differences was equally important in that it became apparent I would need to look further into Brooke’s background. Tapping into D-strengths allows me to recognize patterns in shifting systems - such as the culture of her home country while she was growing up - to mentally create the outcome of how this complex process would inform her personality over time. For instance, a difference between myself and Brook lay in our home country and eras. During callbacks, the director noted that this production would be set in
1970s England. Being an American born in the 1990s, I would need to familiarize myself with the cultural references or attitudes specific to her experience. Looking into British culture during the 1970’s I considered the popular culture, social norms, and class structure that may have influenced Brooke’s reactions and social interactions. In the end, both the N and D-strengths assisted in giving Brook a more detailed past in the imaginative questions section. While imaginative questions don’t often come up during the rehearsal process, they do help take the character beyond the stereotype while simultaneously supporting it.

Character work at the rehearsal stage is bound to shift and transform through the rehearsal process, but the pre-rehearsal exercise gave me a good foundation from which to develop Brooke. With this understanding came the confidence to make strong choices in the room and the ability to play off of my cast-mates’ acting choices.

Rehearsal Observations

Rehearsal is when the play comes alive and is the part of the process, I look forward to most. On the first day of Noises Off rehearsal, the cast sat down and read through the script in its entirety. Despite having read through the script multiple times on my own, hearing it out loud connected all of the moving parts and suddenly the play as a whole made sense to me. Throughout the rehearsal process, I noted challenges that presented themselves and how I worked through them. I also observed when and how I utilized the dyslexic advantages throughout the process.

The first rehearsal challenge that I had already anticipated was how visual processing and attention would impact the reading of the script. Highlighting Brooke’s lines and the stage directions made finding my place while in rehearsal slightly easier. Yet, I still found myself having to stop and refocus on finding where we were on the page. After the first rehearsal, I recorded all my cue lines in the voice memos application on my phone. I then
played these recordings and responded to them when working on my lines, intending to be
fully memorized for each act before they were staged. While I was able to be “off-book” for
my lines within the first few days of rehearsal, I still needed to refer to the script while
becoming familiar with the physical action of the show. Having to do this slowed down my
processing speed, impacting the fluidity of my actions, and my thoughts were flooded with
how I was struggling instead of focusing on the task at hand.

The inability to stay focused became a major issue for me toward the end of the eight-
hour rehearsal days. I am one of the 25-40% of dyslexic individuals who have also been
diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). After a long day, I would
struggle to stay engaged when the director wasn’t focused on my character. I would pace
aimlessly, shake my limbs to keep my mind awake and attentive, and eventually just get lost
in thought. There were times in rehearsal when I felt just as oblivious as Brooke. For
instance, once I asked stage management when we would be back from break when in fact
we were never on a break. This became a running joke within the cast as they asked each
other “When are we back?” at random times throughout rehearsal. While I was relieved that
they all made light of it, I found it slightly embarrassing and decided to find a way to improve
my attention.

Fidget toys are small objects designed to assist concentration through tactile means. I
was familiar with fidget toys but was unsure if they would help the situation or turn out to be
even more of a distraction. My roommate, another graduate student studying theater for
young audiences, happened to have a whole box of fidget toys, and suggested I take a few
into rehearsal. Fortunately, these devices were incredibly helpful. When I started to become
antsy, I would manipulate the fidget toy in my pocket. I noticed right away that by giving my
hands something to do, I was able to keep my mind engaged in the task at hand.
An additional challenge, and likely the most difficult to overcome, was the process of procedural learning. A component of the play that wasn’t obvious after reading the script was the incredible pace of the show. The action left no time for the characters to think; rather they just did. While researching farce, I learned that timing, fluidity, and automation were at the crux of this style. I also knew that dyslexics tend to take longer to learn skills that rely on rules, procedures, or routines to the point where they become automatic (Eide 65). Regardless of this knowledge, I had not fully understood how much of a challenge it would be to master the automated cause-and-effect storyline of *Noises Off*.

Knowing that I would require practice outside of rehearsal to master automation skills, I made it a part of my daily practice. Each night following rehearsal, I dedicated a couple of hours to running the material we had covered that day. Drawing upon conscious compensation, I talked myself through each physical action to cement their order and how they fell within the lines of the play. Act Two was particularly challenging due to its reliance on mime-like communication. I tackled this challenge by having a second person read the other character’s lines aloud as I talked myself through the actions, making sure each action and line aligned as they do in the script.

While mastering these skills took an excessive amount of time, when returning to rehearsal there was no worry about getting it right and I could focus on how I was performing. I was free to experiment with my character’s actions to see what was received positively or got the biggest laugh. While these challenges had held me back in the past, being able to identify them and feel confident that I could overcome them led to creative solutions and a more positive overall experience.

Before the identification of MIND strengths, dyslexic individuals may have suspected that they viewed the world differently; but having them defined can be very empowering. For me, the most impactful set of MIND strengths throughout this process was the M-strengths.
M-strengths provide the dyslexic mind with strong three-dimensional spatial and mechanical abilities. This allows dyslexic individuals to “create a continuous interconnected 3-D mental model of the world rather than focus on fine details or 2-D features” (Edie). Coming across this description, I immediately made the connection between this strength and what I was already doing. I hadn’t realized that the way I was using visualization throughout the rehearsal and performance of Noises Off could be defined.

While staging the show, I began to create a 3-D model of the set in my mind. The set was very specific and required seven doors, a window, a staircase, a second story, and the ability to rotate in its entirety. To complicate matters, both the backstage set and the set that would normally face the house each had staircases. For most of the rehearsal process, we worked in the rehearsal studio where the huge set was represented by tape on the floor and a few pieces of rehearsal furniture. Having seen the image of the set design, I matched it to the outline on the floor and was easily able to visualize the missing pieces. I could also see it from different perspectives: from all sides, from where I was within it, and as a 3-D model of the exterior. While this imagery was very clear for me, some of my non-dyslexic cast mates struggled to picture which door led to where and when they were on the second story or the first. I was able to easily find my bearings, keep track of my movements, and keep keenly aware of how the other actors moved in the space as well.

The ability to know where others were at all times aided in mastering the timing of the show. This was especially true in Act Two, while actors were performing on both sides of the set. For Act Two to succeed, everything had to be perfectly timed as the two worlds seamlessly colliding was essential to both the plot and its humor. During these types of scenes, I relied on mental images as well as verbal cues to guide me to the right place at the exact moment. For example, as Brooke exited into the “backstage” she was handed a cactus from Garry as he entered “onstage”. She then had to make it down the stairs just in time to
find Lloyd with his pants down while Dotty pulled cactus needles out of his bottom. If the timing was off, the humor was lost.

The second set of MIND strengths that made a notable impact on the process was the N-strengths. Tapping into episodic memory allows me to recall personal experiences in a narrative or scene-based format which can then be applied to the task at hand. This includes remembering not only the past but also conceptualizing the future, solving problems, and most importantly for the practice of acting — creating imaginary scenarios (Eide 211). My personal experiences and memories helped to fuel Brooke’s emotional responses. This was especially true when her interactions with Lloyd and Poppy caused feelings of jealousy, betrayal, anxiety, and eventually, an attempt to quit mid-show. However, N-strengths really kicked in at the end of Act One when Lloyd is yelling at Brooke.

LLOYD. With exquisite politeness What’s that, Dad? Right. That’s the line, Brooke, love. We all know you’ve worked in very classy places up in London where they let you make the play up as you go along, but we don’t want that kind of thing here, do we. Not two lines away from the end of Act One. Not when we’re just about to get a tea break before we all drop of exhaustion. We merely want to hear the line. Suddenly puts his mouth next to Vicki’s ear and shouts ‘What’s that, Dad? All patience and politeness again. That’s all. Nothing else. I’m not being unreasonable, am I? BROOKE Abruptly turns, runs upstairs, and exits into the mezzanine bathroom. LLOYD. Exit? Does it say ‘exit’? The sound of Brooke weeping, off, and running downstairs.

LLOYD. Oh dear, now she’s going to wash her lenses away. (Act One)

During this portion of Noises Off, the mood shifts from fun and farcical to mean and belittling. While reading the script for the first time, I immediately connected to Brook at this moment. I saw a young actress trying her best, being mocked and yelled at during a rehearsal.
by the director, in front of everyone. Having had that experience, the moment played out in
my mind as if I were watching a movie of my own life. While rehearsing this section, the
actor playing Lloyd, would not truly raise his voice at the point in the script when he was
supposed to be shouting. He had not wanted to make Lloyd look like a jerk. But his lowered
tone made the moment feel inauthentic and I was unable to reconnect to the memory.

I ended up speaking with the actor and director about the moment and told them I felt
we were missing a good opportunity. I felt that Lloyd was a jerk and he would have crudely
yelled at Brook. This rude behavior also reinforced the stereotype of a domineering director
and the power dynamic that often plays out in the theater world. They agreed to try it and it
went very well. Through episodic memory, I was able to get to the heightened emotional
state that Brooke experienced, giving the audience a better insight into the true relationship
between the characters.

The final dyslexic strength that I taped into was the I-strengths. Farce, and comedy in
general, draws upon the unexpected through clever use of analogies, metaphors, and
innuendos. These characteristics align well with the I-strengths and dyslexic individual’s
ability to make unexpected connections. I-strengths lend themselves to comedy of any genre,
including stand-up and improv. While most of the jokes in Noises Off were written into the
script, the cast and I looked for ways to add unique bits. While considering Brooke’s
physicality, I introduced grand gestures and poses that would make her acting style
melodramatic and corny. One of these moments happens when Roger tries to get Vicki to go
back into the bedroom by mentioning that she is in her underwear.

ROGER. Anyway, we can’t stand here like this.

VICKI. Like what?

ROGER. In your underwear.

*Vicki Poses*
VICKI. OK, I’ll take it off. (Act One)

This quick pose, with one hand on her head and the other on her hip, was perfectly timed in taking a beat to show off her body and then continuing with her lines. Later in *Nothing On*, I found a way to call back to that moment. Vicki enters through the window to a frantic Roger who has called the police to report her missing.

VICKI. This is the police? You want the police here? In my underwear? *repeats pose* and immediately jumps back into the moment. (Act One)

This is a convention referred to as a “callback”, which is when a comedian refers to a joke that has already been set and uses it again, often in a new way. While these two moments don’t seem connected, I was able to reframe an existing idea by striking the same pose using seemingly unrelated cues throughout the performance.

Performance & Conclusion

In the end, Noises Off was one of the performances of which I am most proud. The process began as an in-depth look at how dyslexia can affect the acting process. Identifying the challenges was quite simple. Visual processing, slower processing speeds, and inattentiveness are challenges that have been with me always. But purposely drawing attention to them prompted me to find solutions that were quite simple and readily available to anyone willing to make the effort. A lot of additional rehearsal on my own time along with self-talking were also incredibly effective tools.

Surprisingly, it was more difficult to identify my MIND strengths and when they were being utilized. I have enjoyed success as an actor and have been relying on dyslexic advantages without realizing what they were. It was the exposure to the book *The Dyslexic Advantage* that brought on the realization that my thought patterns do contribute to my
artistic success. I just needed to identify and acknowledge the skills that were now defined for me.

Throughout the process, my confidence grew steadily. For instance, I took the risk of making a suggestion to the director that would make the audience more uncomfortable for Brook and think less of a screaming Lloyd. But this small tweak helped define the dynamic between the characters and perfectly set up Brooke’s final line in the act which got a full round of applause by the opening night audience.

BROOKE. (with a murderous look at Lloyd) What’s that, Dad?” (Act One)

I also felt confident enough to experiment with gestures and ended up adding a layer to Brook’s character that was not within the script. While the quick pose was a joke that lasted all of one second, the gesture left a lasting impression, and a photo of this moment was featured in almost every review written about the show. Thanks to this experience, the automaticity of farce is no longer intimidating but a challenge I look forward to taking on again.
CHAPTER 3: HENRY VI- Part One

In this chapter, I will discuss my work on a production of William Shakespeare’s Henry VI-Part One, identifying the dyslexia-associated challenges and advantages that impacted this process. This section will briefly explore the M, I, and N strengths and how these advantages were utilized. A majority of this chapter will discuss dyslexia-associated challenges, such as phonological processes and slow processing skills, the methods used to combat them, and what happens when there aren’t simple solutions. This section will prove that the use of dyslexic reliance factors plays a vital role in the success of a dyslexic actor, even when faced with a difficult production.

Henry VI: Part One is a historical play written by William Shakespeare and is the first of a trilogy that recounts the War of the Roses. Henry VI: Part One picks up after the death of King Henry V as his young son, Henry VI, is proclaimed King and placed under the protection of the Duke of Gloucester. Although Henry VI is king, his uncles, the Dukes of Exeter and Gloucester are truly the ones that hold the power. Meanwhile, England continues to be at war with the French, with Joan of Arc leading the army.

Multiple rivals for the throne begin to materialize. Henry VI’s great uncle, the Bishop of Winchester, suspects that Gloucester wants to seize power from Henry. Richard Plantagenet, who also believes he has a claim to the throne, is no longer in alliance with the Duke of Somerset. The noble houses begin to divide and take sides between York and Lancaster. Each nobleman in the court is asked to take either a red or white rose to show whose side they support: white for the House of York or red for the House of Lancaster.

The war with France winds down and Joan is captured. Charles is persuaded to accept a treaty to save French lives but does not intend to honor it. Henry VI is encouraged to marry to promote peace with France. The Earl of Suffolk arranges the king’s marriage to a young
French princess, Margaret of Anjou, while plotting to take her as his mistress and gain power. Although Gloucester and many other lords don’t think Margaret is worthy of the king, Henry marries her and makes her Queen of England.

I was cast as both a Swing and Prompter C for the Orlando Shakespeare production of *Henry VI- Part One*. A swing is a member of the acting company that understudies multiple roles within a production. These roles are often referred to as “tracks.” A prompter is seated at the side of the stage and feeds actors forgotten words or lines during a production. A prompter is not typically used in modern-day productions. However, this play was produced using “original practices.”

Original practices, also referred to as Bare Bard, is a style of production that attempts to re-create the original staging and rehearsal practices used in Shakespeare’s time. This practice may vary depending on the company: Orlando Shakes abides by the following rules: First, there is no director; instead, it is an actor-driven process. There are also no costume, sound, or scenic designers. This means the company stages the play, creates music or sound for themselves, and pulls costumes from storage. They work on a minimal set and use universal lighting, meaning there are no blackouts, spotlights, or specialty lights. The actors learn their lines from scrolls explicitly made for each actor, which only had their lines and the line(s) that cue their speech. And finally, the actors had one week, approximately 52 hours, to rehearse before opening night.

It can be difficult for an actor to be fully memorized due to the expedited rehearsal process. At any time, an actor may have called out “prithee,” the Elizabethan word for please, and the prompter, seated on stage with the full script, would give them their line. As prompter C, I was to have taken a seat on the stage if prompters A and B had gone on or had doubled as a swing and covered different actors in the production. When offered this role, I was given the characters I would be covering rather than the actors’ names. These characters included
Unlike the original Shakespeare companies, we performed a cut version of the script, (i.e. omitting scenes, lines, or characters) which is routine for modern Shakespearean productions. Shakespeare’s plays typically have a three-hour run time which does not suit a modern audience and are therefore cut down to a more suitable two-hour run time. While the actors were provided with a version already cut down by Orlando Shakes, we as a cast were allowed to make additional changes, provided they didn’t make the play much longer. As a resource, we were given the Arden version of the script. Arden is a series of editions of Shakespeare’s works that include scholarly commentary, cultural context, and definitions that serve as a useful companion text to the script. This allowed actors to compare the scripts and identify cut text that they felt should be added back into the script.

The Script

Each actor is given a specific scroll; however, due to my role as a swing and prompter, I was given the script in its entirety. The script provided by Orlando Shakes used a clear font style and was larger in size, making it easier to read. I found the lines nicely spaced out, making challenges with visual attention less of an issue (see Figure 3). However, there were still aspects of the language that challenged me. Shakespeare can be difficult to read, even for non-dyslexic individuals. The structure of the language and some of the vocabulary differs from modern English. Shakespearean scripts also include different spelling variants which can confuse dyslexic and non-dyslexic readers alike.
While reading this script, I struggled with phonological processing, which impacts a dyslexic individual’s ability to sound out and spell words (Eide 61). Such issues can disrupt one’s ability to analyze word sounds leading to switching, adding, or dropping sounds from words (Eide 62). Therefore, when I came across unfamiliar words, it took time for me to process how they could be pronounced. I was struggling to read fluently and occasionally mispronounced words when speaking out loud. In turn, mispronunciation became an issue during the rehearsal process.

After reading the final cut to be used for the production, I found the copy of the Arden and read through the entirety of the text. The Arden is a wonderful tool as it provides footnotes, definitions, and cultural context on every page. However, it is difficult to read with the amount and size of text on every page (see Figure 4). To make this easier for myself, I found an audio recording of the text which I played while reading along in the Arden, and paused it when I needed to read over the footnotes. Listening to the play made the text much more accessible and paired with the information provided in the Arden, led me to a better
understanding of the text. As they say, Shakespeare was not meant to be read, it was meant to be heard.

Figure 4: Act Three, Page 222 of the Arden’s Henry VI-Part One Script showing text’s format, font style and size, and use of footnotes

With a good understanding of the text, I went about deciding how to keep track of the various roles I would be covering. As a starting point, I reached out to the Orlando Shakes and requested a comprehensive list of the characters and the actors playing those roles. I created a chart to track which characters belonged to which actor and assigned each actor a highlighter color (see Figure 5). For the sake of this document, I have blacked out the actors’ names and labeled them Actor __, with the missing letter being one that corresponded with their name. Then focusing on one actor at a time, I went through the script and highlighted their characters with the same color. This assisted in differentiating the tracks and clarified which characters I would play. For instance, if I were to go on for Actor J, I would be playing the characters Messenger 2, 2nd Serving Man, and the Bastard of Orleans.
While looking for the character Gaoler in Actor A’s track, I searched the script forward and backward and failed to find it. I was perplexed and wound up looking up the character’s name on the internet. That is when I learned that Gaoler is the British spelling of the word jailer. I didn’t initially recognize the word and when I read it out loud, I perceived it to sound more like “GAL-OR” rather than “JAIL-ER”. This is an example of how spelling variants can impact phonological processing challenges.

With the actors in control, the script was an ever-changing document up to the last night of previews. Updating the script was a part of prompter A’s role and I was relieved not to be in that position. As actors read the sections of text they wanted to include in the script, I would attempt to write them down quickly. But by the time I looked up from the page, the actor had moved on. Then in revisiting the notes, the text would be filled with misspellings and missing words. Thankfully prompter A updated the notes directly in the shared Google document so I could easily access it and update my personal script. As the actors created the play, they intermittently determined when music or sound would be added to support the story. Such additions were made so quickly that it was difficult for me to make the new notes and stay in step with the scene. For instance, an actor would suddenly ask “Can someone play
the drums during this transition?” and then another would jump up to start playing, and the scene would just move on. It became apparent to me that my slow processing speed was causing me to feel like I was two steps behind the other actors in the room. This was a challenge that I could not overcome and a feeling that I had to become comfortable with during the process. I wasn’t in a position where I could ask the company to slow down or have the opportunity to revisit these moments through the repetition of rehearsal.

**Character Creation**

To understand and build a character for Shakespearean productions, I rely on an approach that is different from the question-led paperwork used for *Noises Off*. The process for Shakespeare starts with identifying the rhythm of text through its meter and feet, which is a process called scansion (see Figure 6). And while I have combined both approaches for other Shakespeare roles, it was impractical to attempt that with such a large number of characters.

Shakespeare’s verse is most commonly written in iambic pentameter; meaning 5 feet make up the line and within each of these feet, there is a particular rhythm of unstressed and stressed syllables. Inside each foot, there are typically two syllables meaning that most lines are 10 syllables long. If the line varies in the amount of syllables, it can be assumed that the character is in a highly emotional state. The stress patterns may change frequently to emphasize particular words and lines within the verse. Instead of following the iambic pattern of unstressed > stress (da DUM), Shakespeare may use a trochee pattern which is stressed > unstressed (DUM da). While there are several different kinds of feet, these two are the most frequently used. By identifying the amount of feet and patterns of stress, you can learn a lot about the character and their emotional state through the text. Shakespeare employs different
kinds of meters and feet throughout his works. However, Henry VI: Part One is one of his
earliest plays and features simpler verses.

Figure 6: Act One, Page 4 of Orlando Shakes’ Henry VI-Part One Script featuring Earl of Warwick’s lines with completed scansion

Scansion is a rule-based procedure. While I have practiced the procedure and have
gotten faster at it, I still find myself needing to walk through each step, slowly speaking
through every line while counting the syllables on my fingers. I first determine the number of
syllables, then split the line into feet, and then examine the stress pattern. This is a good
example of how slower procedural learning can affect the dyslexic actor. Due to the over-
reliance on working memory, I often tire quickly and am prone to making simple errors. In
all, scanning through the entirety of my characters’ lines took between 7 and 8 hours.

The next part of the process was introduced to me by Orlando Shakespeare Theatre
Artistic Director and University of Central Florida professor, Jim Helsinger. To complete this
task, one needs to have printed the script single-sided, so that when looking at it laid out like
a book, the lines are on the right side and a blank page is on the left. On the left side, three
columns are labeled: Paraphrasing, Images, and Actions.

Paraphrasing is the process of finding new words to represent the same idea as the
original text. This tool is used to align our understanding of Shakespeare’s meaning. For this
step, I use both literal and figurative paraphrasing. I use literal paraphrasing when I am
unsure of the definitions of the word, as we share many of the same words with Shakespeare
but some of their meanings have changed over time. Once I clarify that I understand the
meaning of the word in this context, I then use figurative paraphrasing.
Figurative paraphrasing goes beyond the literal meaning of the words and instead represents its meaning through figures of speech or metaphors. Tapping into my I-strengths allows me to paraphrase the text into my own words and connect myself and my emotions to the words. This also makes it seem like these words are coming from me rather than the playwright.

Included in the Images column are pictures that an actor envisions in their mind's eye. Using N-strengths, I pull up mental images that are dictated by the text or inspired by emotional or abstract concepts. Shakespeare often includes vivid imagery within the text, and by identifying and seeing the image, I can paint a clear picture for the audience.

In the Action column, the word action does not describe a physical act the character performs, as it is used in Chapter Two. Rather, actions are transitive verbs that inform how you give away the information to affect the other (Caldarone & Lloyd-Williams). Actions should be used to help your character achieve their ultimate want or goal, also referred to as their super objective. For example, if Joan’s super objective is to free France from English rule, she may use actions such as to persuade, to challenge, or to inspire. The following figure is what one of Joan’s monologues looks like after each step is complete.

Figure 7: Act One, Page 8 of Orlando Shakes’ Henry VI-Part One Script displaying a section of completed character paperwork for Joan La Pucelle featuring paraphrasing, images, and actions
I have found that the three-column process works very well for me. The paraphrasing exercise helps clarify words that are new to me or difficult to read. Figurative paraphrasing allows me to creatively make the text more my own. The imagery exercise paints a picture of scenes that I will be able to revisit while on stage. And the action exercise ensures that I am staying true to the character’s super objective every step of the way.

Joan La Pucelle was the largest role I would be covering and decided to start with her track. After a few days of working solely on Joan’s track, I had barely finished the first act. I had begun to realize that it would be impossible to do this process for every character I was assigned. While I had used this method before, I had only had to do so for a handful of Shakespearean characters. Given the amount of time I had, I quickly realized that doing this for every character would be close to impossible. At this point, I had decided to focus only on specific characters, which included Joan, Warwick, the Bastard of Orleans, and Margaret. At first, I was disappointed in myself for being unable to complete this process for each character. However, I learned that as a dyslexic actor, I had to be more realistic about what I could and couldn’t accomplish.

Rehearsal Observations

I spent most of this rehearsal process watching the primary actors create the show. There were times when I found the room to be very overwhelming as there were a lot of opinions and ideas and not a lot of time to process them. While I stepped in for actors here and there, it was only for a small amount of time when the actor was being used elsewhere. The part of the show I got to run the most was the fight choreography, as Joan fought a lot in this play. I was appreciative that the cast made time to run the fights with the swings. Fight choreography can be dangerous, and it would be a safety issue if one of us were to go on without having rehearsed it. Since I was unable to use rehearsal time for my own process, I
took advantage of the breaks and would spend that time running lines or getting more reps of
the fight choreography with the other swings.

As the show got closer, I started to worry about my ability to step in for the prompter
due to my challenges with phonological processing and visual attention. I had spent my time
focused on mastering my characters’ lines, but I would have to be able to read any line out at
any time. Also, I would need to closely follow along with the text and read it as quickly as
the actors were speaking it. If I were to lose my place or get distracted, I could give them the
wrong line or make them wait, which would stop the action of the play. As I discussed these
anxieties with prompter A, it was suggested that we switch places for a night allowing me to
give it a try and for them to be able to watch their tracks from the audience.

As a prompter, I used my iPad on stage to read the updated script. This allowed me to
zoom in on the text and make it as large as I needed. In using my iPad instead of the written
copy, I was less afraid of losing where we were on the page. The iPad made it simple to scroll
down, make the previous line disappear, and focus on what was to come. I did, however,
have a few moments where I butchered the pronunciation of the line. For example, an actor
called “prithee” during their speech for the word “sequestration” which I read out loud as
“equestrian.” While that was not the word at all, the actor knew the speech well enough to
know what I was attempting to say. Despite my internal embarrassment when these mistakes
occurred, the actors didn’t hesitate at all, calming my anxiety. I was able to step in as
prompter two more times after the initial attempt and while I still made mistakes with
pronunciation, I grew to be more comfortable and less afraid.

The only dyslexic advantage I noted during the rehearsal process was related to the
M-strengths. Watching the show take shape over the week, I had a strong sense of the bigger
stage picture and the various positions of the actors on stage. This allowed me to easily track
my characters even when multiple actors I covered were on the stage at the same time. And
though the actors didn’t solidify their blocking until previews, I knew the general areas they gravitated towards and how they fit into the bigger picture.

**Performance & Conclusion**

For most of the performances, I was required to sit backstage in costume, so that I would be ready to walk on in case of an emergency. While most days this is what the performance experience was for me, I did end up going on once as the prompter and once as an actor. Since I had been able to rehearse the prompter role, I was no longer afraid and started to have more fun. During previews, we had gotten a note that the prompter read with more expression in their voice to match the actor’s energy. I considered this note when being the performance prompter and decided to try out a joke. There is an old man character in the show and when the actor plays him, he uses a raspy old voice. So, when he called out “prithee” during his speech, I gave him his line in the same raspy voice. This went well, and I got a few chuckles from the audience.

In performing as an actor, I played the roles of Vernon and Princess Margaret. Notice of the opportunity came a few hours before I arrived at the theater, so that time was used to run lines and review the character’s track. Despite feeling fully memorized for the role, I made the mistake of taking the script on stage with me for scenes in which the character spoke. While taking the script on with me was allowed and encouraged, I quickly realized that with the script, I felt compelled to look down and refer to it. As soon as I looked at the words, I began to fumble over the line. I was able to recover but noticed that the less I looked at the script, the more smoothly the scene went.

At that point, it would have been best if I put the script away. I was using it as emotional support as I feared that the adrenaline rush of being on stage doing this role for the first time would somehow erase my prior work and preparation. Though I could have called
“prithee” for my line, I worried that once I asked, I wouldn’t be able to stop and would get stuck in a prithee cycle, continuously calling for my lines. In my final scene, I still had the script, but I never looked at it for my line. Rather, I snuck one look to confirm the cue line for when I entered back into a conversation. The final scene ended up going more smoothly and felt more successful than the first. In retrospect, I realized that if I had ended up in a cycle of calling for lines, I could have just leaned in and made it humorous. If I were to do this again, I would trust myself and leave the script behind.

The entire experience made me realize a few things about myself as an actor. The first is that it would not be advisable to accept another swing position for a Shakespeare production, especially if it’s being produced using original practices. I needed more time to process the language and a week was not enough. Also, I would focus on only a few characters at a time rather than taking on sixteen roles of various sizes. I was unable to give my all to any one character because I was preoccupied and overwhelmed with trying to accomplish the bare minimum for all of them. Additionally, there was little to no time for rehearsal or the repetition a dyslexic brain requires. Cold reading Shakespeare as the prompter was hard enough, but as a swing in this production, there was a possibility that I would go on for someone I didn’t even cover. This process made me incredibly insecure and caused a lot of anxiety.

The second realization was that despite all the challenges, I could persist due to the dyslexic resilience factors that Dr. Fumiko Hoeft identified. Having studied Shakespeare previously gave me stronger language skills, expanded my vocabulary, and increased my general knowledge of the style, which aligns with cognitive resilience factors. I also relied on social and emotional resilience factors, including self-awareness, emotional perseverance, proactivity, and, most importantly, supportive relationships with my cast-mates. These factors kept me from giving up on myself during the process. While the resilience factors aren’t tied
to the dyslexic advantages, they are skills that are developed through being dyslexic. They allowed me to move through the challenges and focus on doing my best, which benefited my acting process.
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

This research has allowed me to examine the specific effects of dyslexia on the actor. Going into this research, I knew that dyslexia could have negative consequences for the actor, yet I also believed it had the potential to be a reason I was drawn to this profession in the first place. I had never found much academic success, yet I became more confident, passionate, and successful in theatre. The new perspective of dyslexia offered by Edie and Edie, which focuses on its unique strengths rather than its deficits, has solidified my belief that dyslexia benefits an actor. This process has also proved Edie and Edie’s statement that “individuals with dyslexia are not good at what they do despite their dyslexia but rather because of it” to be true (Edie 4).

The dyslexic processing style creates dynamic visualizers, creators, problem solvers, and connection makers. These strengths lead dyslexic professionals to succeed in entrepreneurship, engineering, science, and the arts (Edie 5). When learning about both the dyslexic challenges and advantages, or MIND strengths, I resonated with the descriptions and definitions. Yet, it wasn’t until I broke my acting process down step by step that I could pinpoint how they impacted my work and how to use them to my benefit.

*Noises Off* and *Henry VI- Part One* were entirely different productions. One was a 20th-century farce with a typical rehearsal schedule; the other was a historical Shakespearean play done with original practices. Comparing these two plays may seem strange; however, they represent the highest highs and lowest lows of my recent theatrical experience. In *Noises Off*, my dyslexic challenges were present, but were manageable and ultimately did not hinder the process. I was able to identify all the MIND strengths being put to use throughout the process. I used M-strengths to visualize a 3D model of a very complicated set. I relied on I-
strengths to introduce comedic improvisations to the show. N-strengths provided vivid memories that helped create true emotion between characters. And D-strengths shined a light on cultural shifts that helped Brooke become more than a one-dimensional character. The comedy/farce genre came naturally to me and was well suited to my dyslexia processing style. I enjoyed positive interactions with my peers and even contributed ideas that were successfully integrated into the show. My comedic timing played well for the audience, and I left that production with heightened confidence.

In contrast, Bare Bard was a struggle from the onset. Many characteristics of the show seemed to highlight my dyslexic challenges and I found them difficult to overcome. The short rehearsal time, cold readings, continual script changes, rapid modifications, and an overwhelming number of characters to swing for all contributed to a stressful and anxiety-ridden production for me. While I could briefly tap into the I and N-strengths during the character creation process, I felt I was just along for the ride instead of being a contributing cast member. However, it wasn’t a total loss. Although I had considered quitting the show, ultimately, I persevered and completed the task with the help of the dyslexic resilience factors. These factors, along with the M-Strengths, lead to a relatively successful performance when stepping into the roles of Vernon and Princess Margaret. My confidence had been challenged, but I left that production with a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses and a newfound assurance that I could take on even the most challenging productions.

I can now identify that visual attention, procedural learning, and phonological processing are some of my biggest challenges. With that understanding, I can now seek out resources and develop coping skills that help minimize those specific challenges, allowing me to approach different types of roles and productions with more confidence. I have also
identified that my most vital skills lie in my vivid emotional memory, ability to see three-dimensional models, and ability to make unexpected choices. These advantages and the reliance factors ultimately outweighed the challenges I faced. Quick processing or fluent reading does not automatically make one an excellent actor. Instead, material reasoning, interconnected reasoning, narrative reasoning, and dynamic reasoning, together or on their own, contribute to creativity and innovation. While the process might take longer, the result will likely be more interesting, thoughtful, and unique. These qualities can create an excellent actor, proving that the dyslexic processing style benefits an actor.

Knowing my strengths and limitations has made me a stronger actor and person. This process is intended to act as a guide to breaking down one’s own acting process, encouraging the use of coping strategies, and discovering one’s MIND strengths, serving only as a springboard for other dyslexic actors. I plan on continuing this research within my acting practice in order to find more tools that align with the MIND strengths in hopes of accelerating my character-creation process. I have also begun teaching theatre to dyslexic elementary school students, where I have started applying this research to my lesson plans. I hope the continuation of this research will lead to more discoveries of how to make the practice of acting more accessible and continue to encourage dyslexic individuals to pursue their passions.
LIST OF REFERENCES


