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PLAY AS A MEANS OF CONNECTION

by

STERLING STREET

BA Bob Jones University, 2015

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Acting
in the School of Performing Arts
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term

2023

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ABSTRACT

This thesis research and practical application focuses on rediscovering the playfulness of the actor's process and evaluating how that translates into an actor's performance. An actor's confidence can be found in their willingness to play with vocal placement, physical tensions, and emotional and mental patterns and depth. As an actor, my definition of play theory is the act of choosing to be spontaneous, creative, and explorative in the process of storytelling to ultimately lead to stronger choices that develop rich connections. Through the lens of play theory, I demonstrate how play affects our mind, emotions, body, and voice. This thesis presents research on how play affects humanity from childhood to adulthood. I offer practical applications that actors can bring into their individual exploration, audition room, rehearsal process, and performances with the hope that the actor and the audience experiences their storytelling with a deeper level of connection to the text and to their scene partners. I argue that by choosing to approach a story as a means of play, actors can find freedom in their work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: MY STORY WITH PLAY	1
CHAPTER ONE: PLAY DEFINED	5
CHAPTER TWO: THE DEATH OF PLAY	14
Fight-Flight-or-Freeze Response	16
Getting “In Our Head”	20
Self-Consciousness.....	21
Insecurity.....	26
Empathy	28
The Ego.....	29
Anxiety	29
CHAPTER THREE: THE RESURRECTION OF PLAY	33
Erikson on The Benefits of Adults at Play.....	33
Anthony DeBenedet’s: Playful Intelligence.....	35
Imagination.....	36
The S’s of Play: Sociability and Spontaneity.....	38
Spontaneity.....	41
Humor.....	43
Wonder	46

Pat Kane’s The Play Ethic.....	48
Protecting Our Play	53
CHAPTER FOUR: TYPES OF PLAY.....	59
Spectator Play.....	59
Game Shows and Gaming Play.....	62
Repetition Play	63
Solitary Pretend Play.....	64
Social Pretend Play.....	65
Psychoanalytic Play.....	66
CHAPTER FIVE: PLAY FOR CONNECTIONS.....	69
CHAPTER SIX: PLAY IN MY PROCESS	78
“Welcome to the Moon”	78
Shrek: The Musical	87
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	98
An Actor’s Play Checklist.....	99
Written Play.....	99
Media Play.....	101
Observation Play	102
Intention Play	102
Whole Being Play.....	103

Spolin Games	104
REFERENCES	105

INTRODUCTION: MY STORY WITH PLAY

You've been missing something in your life, but you don't know what it is. I know because I've been there myself. What is the missing piece of the puzzle? Play! I can't think of a time when I wasn't telling stories. Perhaps if I had to think of one of my earliest memories as a storyteller, it would be around the spry age of four. In our family basement in Birmingham, Alabama, we had an old bar with barstools and even a vintage Coca-Cola machine (which, in my eyes at the time, was the epitome of all that is cool in the world). I would call my two older sisters and parents down to the basement, pulling them away from whatever they were busying themselves with to take part in something magical. I would put on my very own show for them. Normally, the story would include some fantasy, a little dancing on the bar, a few immature jokes and, if those did not land, I would do something silly like mooning them to make them laugh. At that age, I would do anything to make people laugh and get attention. I began to realize that I loved to tell stories to people. There was nothing that brought me greater joy than playing make believe and seeing people light up with joy or double over with laughter. There was something about play that sparked my interest. However, I was a silly four-year old and did not dwell too deeply on the question of "why" I wanted to take people on a ride with me.

Fast forward a few years, and I am a little league second baseman extraordinaire. In reality, I hated baseball and everything about it. I was only doing it to make my father proud. I was also a little boy in a small city in the heart of the South, and there were two options for me, baseball or football, and I did not want to do either. I told my dad at the end of the season, "Dad ... this is your dream and not mine." What kind of kid says that? This moment set me up to use my voice at a young age and empowered me to go against the major status quo of the snooty southern society I begrudgingly grew up in.

After quitting baseball, I had three years of wandering aimlessly between karate to basketball to science camps, painting lessons and Spanish (of which I received a glorious “D”). I tried, what seemed like to a rising middle schooler, everything. I was friendless and lonely as I did not have a community to be a part of. It wasn’t until middle school that I found choir. In choir, there were all of these expressive kids singing their feelings, performing, and putting on musicals. Although I was deeply insecure due to years of intense bullying and verbal abuse, I felt like I had finally found my place. I auditioned for STARS and Red Mountain Theatre Company (both musical theatre training programs) and received the beginning of what would be the foundation for my career. Yes, I learned how to do a jazz square like every other sensible middle school musical theatre nerd, but I also learned that I never felt happier than when I was singing my heart out, dancing my feet off, or immersing myself in story. I was fanning the flame or rather the initial spark of the joy of storytelling.

Fast forward many years later, I’ve received my Bachelor of Arts Degree in Acting and have been hired to be part of a resident acting company in South Carolina. I would wake up at 5:30 am in the morning, perform two shows of a Theatre for Young Audiences touring musical, go back to the theatre, where I was the Marketing Director, and work a full day's schedule, return home for a few minutes so that I could cram something into my pie hole, and come back to the theatre for a mainstage musical rehearsal until 11:00 pm. Rinse, wash, and repeat. Did I mention we would clean the theatre restrooms in our “free time?” As you can guess, I quickly became burned out. I was working with people who were extremely unpleasant and who valued the dollar over the artistic experience. I grew to resent every part of story; however, although the flame did die down quite a bit, it was never extinguished. There was only one thing that could conjure the corpse of my love for story, and that was play. Play saved me! Play was the IV of life

to my dehydrated soul. It saved my spirit and changed my view of myself, others, God, work, rest, and acting. The desire to rediscover play is what brought me to graduate school in the first place. Have you ever felt that way? That life was so dry and overwhelming that you were struggling to remember why that little kid hopped up on the bar to say “once upon a time” in the first place? If so, I invite you to join me on a journey, albeit incomplete, to fall in love with play once more.

In Chapter One of this thesis, I will share my research on how play has been defined by the leading play theorists from the past few generations. My sources focus on the following: Anthony DeBenedet, Erik Erikson, Carol Hoare, John Kerr and Michael Apter, Pat Kane, Jean Piaget, Philippe Rochat, Olivia Saracho and Bernard Spodek and Viola Spolin. I will address how these inspirational leaders in the realm of play define “play”. Chapter One will conclude with a study on early childhood education and how play originates in children. This will be counterbalanced with how play has become a dying art for many adults. Chapter Two confronts the barriers to play. This chapter is meant to answer the questions, “Why do we not choose to play?” and “What could happen if we don’t play?”. Chapter Three is designed to deepen understanding of what mentally, physically, and vocally happens when we play. Chapter Four will give a broad overview of all the types of play, hopefully expanding views on the many ways play is used throughout life. In Chapter Five, I will answer the guiding question of my thesis, “How can an actor’s play lead to deeper connections to the text they are acting, to their scene partners, and to the audience?” Chapter Six moves into my personal reflection of how I incorporated play into my roles in the University of Central Florida’s productions of *Welcome to the Moon* and *Shrek the Musical*. My conclusion will summarize my research on play, leaving the reader with a practical actor’s play checklist, as well as looking ahead to the hopeful future of

play in my own process and in the ever-changing world to come. My method of writing will follow the model of sharing my personal discoveries, supporting my discoveries with research, and providing guidance for actors. I am also using a funnel approach to this thesis, meaning that I will start by looking at the broad idea of play and end by narrowing my focus on how play led to deeper connections in my own process. So, ask yourself this now, “Can play contribute to our overall well-being, and do you think play can radically change the way actors can build connections?” In the words of Greek philosopher Plato, “life must be lived as play” (Good Reads). Let’s play!

CHAPTER ONE: PLAY DEFINED

“Play” can be a general phrase used to describe many things. It could refer to a night of theatre, children letting out some energy on the playground, or perhaps a sports fanatic's favorite phrase, “play ball”. Play is this and so much more. The Encyclopedia Britannica's number one definition of play is “to do activities for fun or enjoyment” (Encyclopedia Britannica). Play can mean a lot of things to a lot of people, but what really is play? I would like to begin by looking at how the leading figures of play theory define play. Friedrich Schiller, a German playwright (1759-1805), said that play is “the aimless expenditure of exuberant energy” (Saracho and Spodek 3). Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), who was a German teacher and the creator of kindergarten, said that play is “the natural unfolding of the germinal leaves of childhood” (Saracho and Spodek 3). Mark Twain, American author (1835-1910), said, “the great workers of the world (are) the great players of the world” (Twain Quotes). Albert Einstein, German physicist (1879-1955), praised play as the “highest form of research” (Good Reads). Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist and founder of The Geneva School (1896-1980), said that play is “the exercise of already acquired schemes just for the pleasure of doing so” (Saracho and Spodek 120). Erik Erikson, German Psychoanalyst (1902-1994), boldly stated that “the opposite of the play is death” (Hoare 113). Viola Spolin, American teacher and founder of theatre games (1906-1994), viewed play as “a direct experience (that) will free your intuition in a life moment, *right now!* ... Play, for when you do, blood circulates and energy is released into the space, touching and connecting you with everything in that space. You act spontaneously, entering the area of the unexpected, free of the expectations of others” (Spolin 5). Neva Boyd (1876-1963), Viola Spolin’s greatest influence and American early childhood educator, defined play as “an artificial situation set up imaginatively and defined by rules which together with the prescribed rules, is

accepted by the players” (Umerkajeff 134). Anthony DeBenedet M.D., current American author and play theorist says, “Play is an action. Playfulness is a behavior” (DeBenedet 13). Pat Kane, living American author and entertainer, simply says “to play is to engage oneself” (DeBenedet 4). So, as I have demonstrated, from 1795 to the present day, many international leaders in their field (from psychoanalysts to teachers) have showed us that there are multiple ways to define play. All of these definitions prove that play, in its many facets, is a positive addition to our lives.

There is great value in seeing play consistently celebrated amongst historical and current world leaders in education, science, and the arts. It is evident that play moves beyond storytelling and is rooted in the foundational nature of humanity. All the definitions I mentioned (which is only the tip of the iceberg) are foundationally different from each other. Let me carefully approach these well-crafted definitions with my own. To me, play is the *choice* to freely and simultaneously *explore* the use of your body, voice, mind (both logical and imaginative), and feelings personally and in connection with others. Before I elaborate on my own view of play, I will share my research about the origins of play.

Where do we first see play present within the lives of humans? Play originates in infancy as a subconscious response. According to Erik Erikson, a baby begins to show the first signs of play in interactions with their mother.

For infants, Erikson labeled the play space the ‘autosphere,’ the body of self and of mother. This is the initial human ‘geography,’ he wrote, one in which the baby first explores the mother with taste, touch, and sight and later plays within the zone of his or her own infant body. The mother’s facial typography is particularly important, for, to the infant, it is an extension of that baby’s being. In seeing and touching the mysterious protrusions, openings, and flat surfaces of that loved face babies learn all there is to know

about their universe at that point in time ... And in that first sphere, babies try out behaviors, in effect finding ways to attract and habituate others to their needs. (Hoare 122)

I find it intriguing that, as infants, we are exploring new territory and possibilities without even thinking about it. This shows that we are born to play because this is one of our key initial methods of learning. By interacting with our parents or guardians, we are subconsciously expanding our understanding of the world one facial feature at a time. Following facial recognition and sense memory development, Jean Piaget, influential child psychologist, comments on an instance when he noticed his daughter in solitary pretend play. “Beginning early in the second year, children produce pretend actions with familiar objects often while playing alone. Piaget’s (1946/1962) observation of his 15-month-old daughter, Jacqueline, provides a clear example of the type of pretending that emerges during the solitary play: ‘J. (Jacqueline Piaget) saw a cloth whose fringed edges vaguely recalled those of a pillow; she seized it, held a fold of it in her hand, sucked the thumb of the same hand, and lay down on her side, laughing hard. She kept her eyes open, but blinked them from time to time as if she were alluding to closed eyes.’” (p. 96) (Saracho and Spodek 82). Even before children learn to speak, there is something innate in them that tells them to play. Jacqueline was not instructed to take part in pretend play. Perhaps she followed her impulse to engage with her father in an explorative and even comedic way to test the results of that experience.

Play is also seen in young children in social settings. Parent-led pretend play with children is a vital building block for establishing patterns of play in early childhood cognitive development. “Several different investigators have compared children’s spontaneous pretend play under two conditions: when the child’s mother is present but otherwise occupied, and when

the mother is fully available as a play partner ... One consistent finding from this literature is that the mother's active involvement generally improves the child's pretend play. For example, children who were approximately 2 years old demonstrated an increase in the duration of pretend play, greater diversity in pretend episodes, and a longer time spent in preparing or planning pretend episodes when the mother was available as a play partner" (Saracho and Spodek 83).

There is debate as to where the foundations of play originate, whether social (multiple humans playing together) or solitary (solo human play), but I believe the research suggests that both social and solitary play fosters children's growth and cognitive development. "Western researchers, having embraced Piaget's assertion that pretend play is nonsocial in origin, suddenly found their basic premise being directly challenged by some "obscure" Russian psychologists who suggested in their sporadic publications that pretend play is learned through social interactions..." (Saracho and Spodek 35). From my personal perspective and as a Christian, I hold fast to the idea that we are social beings made for community not for isolation. In the book of Genesis in The Bible, it says that God created the first two humans and named them Adam and Eve. Christians believe that before the fall of mankind, Adam and Eve were created to enjoy one another and the creation around them. It is interesting that when God created the first human, Adam, he did not want him to be alone, so he created another human as a companion. The Bible suggests that the first moments of play were when God created the Heavens, the Universe, and all that fills it. When Adam and Eve were the first humans walking the planet, they were told to enjoy playing in this new creation. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it ... Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him'" (*English Standard Version Bible*, Genesis 2: 15, 18).

Although I do see the value of early solitary childhood play, I think the microcosm of

development is within the framework of our homes and our parents, siblings, and consistent players in our lives. “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (*English Standard Version Bible*, Ecclesiastes 4:9-10). This biblical reference is Solomon’s reflection about how we rise by lifting others. It is better to learn in a group setting and have that communal interaction than it would be for us to try to piece together life’s puzzle on our own.

Around eighteen months of age, we begin to see a rise in storytelling. Saracho and Spodek say that,

Somewhere around 18 months, at a time when children are beginning to engage in active pretense play, they also begin to use language to refer to past events. At first ... children are likely to begin adding novel information to their parent’s stories ... Over time, children gradually assume a more active role in the process of ‘co-constructing’ stories with parents and other familiar caregivers. Not only do they insert appropriate words and phrases into adult’s stories, but they also offer their own descriptions of events, both real and imagined. (Saracho and Spodek 90)

The role of parents as partners in cognitive development is crucial. Doing this simple task with children will ultimately set them up well to be excellent storytellers in whatever field they choose to enter in their adulthood. Saracho and Spodek continue saying, “While play is certainly the business of children, part of its richness is also in the hands of caring adults, who arrange for play and periodically assist in its development. Adults’ presence and participation can lead to higher levels of play and longer-lasting, more complex play episodes” (Saracho and Spodek 105). Think of the impact that taking a few moments daily to interact with your children in

creative storytelling will have on generations to come. Support your children by playing “make believe” again! Allow your kids to explore your face and the expressions it can make. Talk to your children and tell them stories or recall memories that you have made together. Be the leader in laying the foundation of play within your home. Parents, it starts with you!

I have discussed how play finds its origins socially within the family home. Now, I will look at the work done within the early childhood educational system. Although I am sure play can be tracked to the beginning of time, let’s look at one of the first widely accepted and organized methods of play within schools. Saracho and Spodek say that “Play has been a part of early childhood programs since the establishment of the kindergarten by Friedrich Froebel more than 150 years ago. The original Froebelian kindergarten curriculum consisted of the manipulation (or rather “controlled growth”) of *gifts*, engagement in craft activities or *occupations*, and the children’s participation in the mother’s *plays and songs* ... While play in the Froebel kindergarten was highly teacher directed, a freer form of play was found later in the Macmillian Nursery School and in the reformed kindergarten of the progressive era” (Saracho and Spodek 4). So, Froebel began leading the pack with heavily controlled and teacher centered instruction. Following the invention of the kindergarten, schools like Montessori were shifting to a model that encouraged building students' freedom into the lesson plans.

This type of teacher and student social play is important, but if the teacher does not comprehend how the student learns best, cognitive and social progress will be much slower. “An educational program for young children should consider children's play and their cognitive style. Young children’s cognitive styles can be determined early in the school year. Teachers can match the curriculum and their instructional strategies to individual child’s cognitive style” (Saracho and Spodek 249). From my personal experience, as a young and energetic boy with

ADHD, my teachers were at a loss with what to do with me. I was a slow reader, and so I was taken out of class and put with a group of other slow readers. It is not that I did not love to engage with stories (quite the opposite), it was that I was a visual and hands on learner. If I was asked to recall information on a handout, and the information was presented in the form of a video, I could fill up a whole page. Unfortunately, at the time, my teachers were not equipped to see me as someone who cared about learning. As I entered middle school, I was put into “resource lab” or a toned-down version of special education. This continued all the way into my early undergraduate college years. I am not one to point fingers, however if my teachers had understood my cognitive learning style and taken the time to allow opportunities for other people like me to succeed, I would not have been so behind in my schooling. This led me to believe the lie that I was not intelligent and that I could not be a person to contribute well to society.

Based upon my lived experience, the educational system where I lived was massively broken and stunted my play development. Furthermore, education for minors cannot be a one size fits all methodology.

One of the popular theories, to this day, is the VARK model. This model identifies four types of learners: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading/writing. Most people are a combination of these four styles, but more times than not, they have a predominant style of learning. Each of these styles has a complementary way of teaching. (Bay Atlantic University)

There is a way for teachers to meet students where they are. Of course, it is important to build upon their dominant learning style, however teachers should come alongside their students first and foremost with lessons geared towards the ways they learn and play best. Once they have a

basic understanding of what they are being taught, they can then be challenged to approach a topic through an alternate learning style.

This is an important thing for actors to ponder as well. Actors should ask themselves how they best learn. Who says you must read a play first? Watch a play first if it gives you a clearer idea of the context of the play, or listen to a play on your morning run. Recently, I was talking to a colleague who is a certified counselor, and they suggested that when our bodies are in movement or at play, we can actually better process information. To supplement lesson plans, teachers should ask themselves what kind of environment they are creating in their classroom. I am not talking about whether you are the teacher who all the kids love or hate, but how teachers set up their rooms to be engaging. “The materials, equipment, and context for play (indoors and outdoors) influence children's play preferences and behaviors. Since play is universal among ... children and influential in promoting cognitive, social, affective and physical development ... understanding the dynamics of the physical and social aspects of the play environment is important because the environment signals to the children what they can do, support their natural play needs, and in large part encompasses the curriculum of early childhood education ... ” (Saracho and Spodek 255). I will never forget the difference between my third and fourth grade education. Third grade was the greatest year of education for me because my teacher focused on kinesthetic learning. We made things with our hands, participated in class group activities and did a lot of fun things that were not necessarily related to our lessons, but that brought joy to us and expanded our creativity. Fourth grade, however, was my least favorite year of education in grade school. I was punished multiple days for not completing my “at home reading” assignments and was kept inside. Our classroom window overlooked the playground. I could see all my classmates having fun and playing games on the jungle gym and swinging high on the

swings. It was as if there was only one way for students to learn in our school, and if you did not meet those standards, you would fall behind. Play was used as a reward or punishment, instead of an integral part of our learning process. While I agree that teachers should have a set of expectations that they hold their students to, is removing play really the penalty we want to reinforce our values? Is not play the area where the most cognitive growth happens? Does play not refresh our minds to re-enter the mundanity that sometimes corresponds with education? The ironic thing is that after both teachers taught me, they were let go. Processing this now, it seems that my third-grade teacher was considered “too fun”, and my fourth-grade teacher was thought of as “too work centered”. Can we not combine them both and find a happy balance? Work can be play, and play can be work. They are best when co-mingled. My next question is, “at what point in our childhood does play shift from a subconscious response to something that adults have to rediscover?”

CHAPTER TWO: THE DEATH OF PLAY

Adult American play is on life support, or at least it has become a lost art. Play is no longer our habitual response (unlike many other cultures, who highly value play and rest), yet it is now an active lifestyle that we have to work towards. Author Carol Hoare says that to German Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson

It was clear to him (Erikson) that too many persons lose vitality, joy, and a sense of wonder en route to full adulthood ... By adulthood, wonder, the ability to see things delightfully anew, had been forfeited, and distrust and cynicism had replaced much of childhood's trust. He saw that identity, in its evolving adult forms, cannot coexist with cynicism, isolation, and rejection ... Erikson saw the suppression of children, and the dual repression and suppression of the child within the adult, as very much related.

(Hoare 113)

Adult play is often overlooked, frowned upon, judged, critiqued, and not encouraged. Adults see the carefreeness of children and associate that with immaturity and a lack of seriousness. So, they move in the opposite direction.

They see children as irresponsible, irrational, weak, and unconcerned about important matters ... Size, responsibility, and burdens reign supreme in adults' minds, leading them to believe they must be more perfect, restricted, serious, and austere than their younger selves. Such beliefs provide a sense of safety and of control; they shore up adults' false notions that they alone occupy the only protected place in the moral universe. Seeing competence in children and in one's prior (playful self), now subverted, child would

unseat security. Dismantling such defenses provokes anxiety; retaining them promotes the illusion of safety. (Hoare 114)

I hope that adults feel challenged by that quote and perhaps slightly offended. Many adults are desperately clinging to the academic utopian view of adulthood. They often believe the lie that childlike playfulness is something out of control and a lack of control equals a lack of security. This lack of security makes us feel vulnerable, and most adults do not welcome opportunities of vulnerability. Hoare goes on to say, “In adulthood, work compartmentalizes and streamlines life, tact and politeness replace directness, and fear of encroachment by dangerous others prohibits originality, freedom, spontaneity, genuineness, and creativity. Role responsibilities required dutiful, not imaginative, attention ... The casualty is play and the result rigidity” (Hoare 124). Life for many adults has become nothing but a gray cubicle task list. Many feel that they are merely cogs in the machine of the American Dream. They either pump out productivity or get replaced. They tend to not make time or space to be creative and to explore. They feel as if there is only time to create more monetary value for Wall Street. Of course, play is not completely dead in adulthood, but is it regarded as highly as with children? If not, how can we get there? “Important as well is his (Erikson’s) reminder that play in the adult psyche means the ability to stand back, wake up, and learn to be conscious of what we’re doing in an ongoing way” (Hoare 142). Adulthood can often be full of chaos. Everyday trials and tribulations are expected. Where did that glimmer of play break down, and what are the root causes of its crumble? There are a few barriers to play that begin to creep into early adolescence. My theory is that the following serve as blockades to play’s development in our adult psyche: acute stress response (also known as the fight-flight-or-freeze response), getting “in our head”, self-consciousness, insecurity, empathy, the ego, and anxiety.

Fight-Flight-or-Freeze Response

Acute Stress Response is a common thing for actors to struggle with no matter their age. Have you ever been in an audition, and you can feel your mind shut down, your mouth get dry, your breathing become shallow, and your body tense up? “Acute stress reaction, again in common with conditions such as PTSD and adjustment disorders, is often regarded as a maladaptive response to severe or continued stress which then interferes with coping mechanisms” (Adleman, “Acute Stress Reaction”). It is interesting that this medical article mentions that the fight-flight-or-freeze response is connected with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. What many actors do not realize is that when they are approaching auditions (which is the primary daily task of an actor) with repeated stress, that it can change the way their brains are wired. Over time their brains could tell them that auditions are scary, and when they are in a scary situation, they should protect themselves. To this end, their bodies and minds may begin to shut down.

My audition journey has been a rollercoaster. I have been auditioning for professional companies since I was a child, and it was an experience that was incredibly frightening to me even as a young adult. As a child I would get so nervous that I would tremor physically, my throat would close up, my mouth would be dry, I would sweat a lot, I would have brain fog, and I would self-sabotage myself constantly. I would tell myself that I was going to fail in some way, that they wouldn't like my work, and that I wouldn't get hired for the role. I had zero confidence in myself as a storyteller and artist. This continued into my life as a young adult. My mouth would continue to dry up, I would have brain fog, and I would believe lies about myself, consistently beating myself up before, during, and after the audition. It wasn't until the past couple of years that I started to love the work of auditioning. I now have feelings of excitement

and anticipation when I receive an e-mail with an audition call. But why was I imprisoned in this place for so many years?

Acute stress reaction symptoms typically refer to symptoms of intrusion, avoidance and hyperarousal ... The symptoms show a typically mixed and changing picture and include an initial state of 'daze' with some constriction of the field of consciousness and narrowing of attention, inability to comprehend stimuli, and disorientation. This state may be followed either by further withdrawal from the surrounding situation, or by agitation and over-activity ... Autonomic signs of panic anxiety (tachycardia, sweating, flushing) are commonly present. (Adleman)

The words that stick out to me are: avoidance, hyperarousal, daze, disorientation, and anxiety. The fight-flight-or-freeze response is a common pitfall for many actors in their journey to freedom when storytelling. Erikson wants adult players to “regain the vitality of the moment-absorbed child, muster the childlike ability to somehow put aside cares and to work within them, and experience the composite of trust, joy, and seeing afresh ... For childlikeness within the role responsibilities of adult life means exploring undeveloped potentials, repelling cynicism, playing with ideas, questioning staid thought, behaving honestly, and engaging freely” (Hoare 117-118). Actors must figure out a way to work through their stress response. Actors have to first acknowledge the scary fear beast that is in front of them. Instead of choosing fear in that moment, they can choose to play in the unknown.

I thought about how children live in a constant state of play, whereas adults live in a constant state of trying to keep up ... As the intensity of adulthood grows, perhaps the playfulness that's inside of us erodes. In other words, the playful part of our personalities – our internal Joylands, if you will – begins to wither away, and we start to abandon the

part of ourselves that sees the world as an amusement park ... Jump-starting the playful part of our personalities is harder. This requires intentional thought about playfulness, as well as knowledge of how it makes our lives better. (DeBenedet 11-13)

I invite actors to continue to put themselves in situations that frighten them. If you approach high temperature situations with a lens of creativity and exploration, I can almost guarantee that in the future (whether that be days, weeks, or even years) you will experience joy in meeting what you love to do.

Let us see these intense situations as an opportunity to test out something new. How can we take high pressure situations as actors and turn them into opportunities for play? “Plato wrote laws that all young animals ‘leap and bound, they dance and frolic, as it were with glee.’ Applied to play, the idea of using the earth as a ‘springboard,’ of testing the ‘leeway’ of prevailing limits, of moving easily, and of returning to ground safely and resiliently appealed to Erikson” (Hoare 124). DeBenedet points his readers to the idea of “transformational coping” and begins his first chapter with imagination. (DeBenedet 19) He opens with a case study from Salvatore Maddi (Doctor in Psychology from Harvard), who worked for Illinois Bell Telephone Company. Maddi studied employee Bill, who was involved in the company during a time when AT&T was thinking of closing Illinois Bell Telephone Company. “(Bill) embraced the uncertainty, excited by the evolutionary process in the industry that was happening right in front of him” (DeBenedet 20). Maddi was amazed at how Bill carried himself during that season, as some of the other frantic employees did not possess the same joy and excitement. How was Bill able to thrive during what most considered a time of survival? “Several key attitudes that thriving employees had in common: they viewed their work as worthwhile; they felt they had power to impact the changes happening around them; they viewed the changes as opportunities for learning and self-

improvement” (DeBenedet 19). DeBenedet points out that the success of Bill was due to transformational coping. “Transformational coping – the notion of imaginatively reframing one’s stressful experience, or at least parts of it, into a positive light” (DeBenedet 19). Reframing difficult or high temperature situations (i.e., an audition, trying something in the rehearsal room for the first time, or the pressure of opening a show) to be experiences of play can allow people to walk with ease. This ease results in enjoyment of the experience and frees us to be present.

Research suggests that “When you use your imagination to reframe situations, the left lateral, prefrontal cortex in your brain is activated” (DeBenedet 30). Why is the prefrontal cortex important and what does it do? The prefrontal cortex “plays a central role in cognitive control functions, and dopamine in the PFC modulates cognitive control, thereby influencing attention, impulse inhibition, prospective memory, and cognitive flexibility” (Siegel, “Neuroplasticity: An Excerpt from Mind”). Scientific studies have proven that play can chemically and positively alter our brains. So, when we approach challenging situations through the lens of play, we can tell our brains, “This is an exciting journey I am about to embark upon. I release fear and worry, and I am curious to take part in the unknown process and witness the outcome.” DeBenedet says, “If you continue to react to difficult situations with fear, then difficult situations will always wire with fear-based emotions in your brain. Imaginative reframing disturbs and helps unsync this ... Criticism and judgment will strengthen the fear-based emotions that we are trying to gently reduce with more resourceful reframings” (DeBenedet 30, 31).

Actors have at their disposal, the creativity and energy to work around fear by recognizing it in heated situations and then moving through it by playing. DeBenedet encourages people to view life as a game with many paths that one can take that will all lead to a wonderful, complex, and full life. “When we exercise our imaginations to reframe a problem, we open our

minds, and our wiring, to a new way of looking at the world. It's almost as if we're inviting the body's processes to work a little differently, helping us to function better and grow and learn from our stressors" (DeBenedet 34).

Getting "In Our Head"

It is a natural human response to overthink what we do. Similar to the fight-flight-or-freeze response, the cogs in our brains are spinning endlessly, but productivity is not happening. For me, not only did I approach auditions with fear, but in rehearsals whenever I would receive feedback, I felt like a total failure. I know now that this response is PTSD from traumatic artistic events from my childhood that shaped my view of myself and caused me to overanalyze every choice I made onstage. It would not matter if everyone around me felt like I was doing a great job, I could not get past the fact that I should have made a better choice, and I was therefore a failure. When it was time to make a new choice, I would then approach the situation with timidity and fear, insisting that I would inevitably fail.

Dr. Daniel Siegel, M.D. explains what happens psychologically when we get trapped "in our heads." He also gives us hope that we can change the way our brain responds to situations over time with attention. Siegel says,

The brain also continues to grow throughout the lifespan ... With shifts in neural activation, the opportunity to change the structure of the brain is created. With shifts in external attention, the opportunity is created to alter the internal neural firings that shape not only the activity in the brain in the moment, but also alter the structural connections in the brains of those engaged in the interactions ... Where attention goes, neural firing flows and neural connection grows. (Siegel, "Neuroplasticity: An Excerpt from Mind")

This research suggests that it is possible to change the way our brains react in situations and move forward with our thinking. It is encouraging to be reminded that our brains are continually developing and that they do not stop changing in adulthood. We can change the way we think through intentional and focused activation. New activations can be built, and this will affect the rest of our brain, just like water flowing down stairs and hitting each step as it lands on the floor. New York Time's best-selling author Jennie Allen, in her book *Get Out of Your Head*, builds upon the science of changing our minds. Allen says, "Every one of us finds ourself at war in our brains every day. We bought this lie that we are a victim to our thoughts ... We are not victims to our thoughts. We have authority over our thoughts" (Allen 1:55). If you are an actor who feels like you cannot get out of your head and into the present moment, keep up the fight. For actors, it is possible to be an active participant in the scene without just being another body onstage. The work starts with recognizing that you are not playing the given circumstances, yet you are having an out of body experience and judging every choice you make. In her work Allen cites Romans 12:2 and reminds us that we must be actively working towards this goal. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable..." (*English Standard Version Bible*, Romans 12:2). Allen's response to this verse is that "it's possible to renew our minds, and that one step can transform everything else" (Allen 6:38). I will unpack more of how we can use play to rewire our brains in Chapter Three. A huge factor as to why we are getting "in our heads" is because of deep rooted insecurity, self-consciousness, and the ego.

Self-Consciousness

In the Summer of 2022, my wife and I had the opportunity to go on an eight-day cruise. First, I highly recommend doing so if you want to get in touch with your inner sense of play.

There is nothing quite like starting the day with a giant buffet and then immediately running to a hip-hop dance class on the ship deck. Maybe not the wisest life choice for digestion, but my wife and I are very active travelers, and it brought us joy. Second, something I noticed during our dance classes is that crowds of couples, groups, and families would congregate around the classes just to observe. Of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting to watch people have a good time, but the dance instructors would invite them to join us and most everyone declined. Keep in mind this is one of the largest cruise ships in the world, so out of thousands of people, only a few joined in. Why this response? Why would you not want to be an active participant in something that you felt comfortable watching and that brought you happiness as a spectator? “A recent survey shows when people are asked to rank their personal fears, from worst to milder, a large majority of them considered the fear of public speech the worse ... Only a few ‘natural’ individuals claim to enjoy public speech. Most people are either terrified or plainly paralyzed, incapable of articulating their ideas in front of a captive audience” (Rochat 107). Now, I understand that dancing in front of a group of strangers is not quite as intimidating as public speaking; however, it is something that requires a certain level of vulnerability and confidence.

In the acting realm, I think that many people overlook how much bravery it takes to be an actor. They forget that it isn't a natural thing to want to get up and act, sing, and dance in front of thousands of people, let alone bear the depths of their souls to a group of strangers. It takes a lifetime to find comfortability and confidence with something that delicate. What is the root cause of this massively sweeping worldwide desire to blend in with the crowd and to go unnoticed? I would say look no further than insecurity and self-consciousness, both of which can mean the death of an actor's career or their flourishing as players.

But what is self-consciousness? Philippe Rochat, author of *Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness*, says, “What makes us different from any other living things is primarily the self-reflective ability we evolved as a species to unmatched levels of complexity. Unlike all other animals, we grow to deal with, and anticipate, and control others' view on the self (we want to control how we are perceived). To be human is indeed to care about reputation” (Rochat 17). Humans have the desire to be in control of the way that we are seen. The reality is that we have glorified ourselves and made ourselves the object of our own adoration. Rochat says, “As no other species have, humans have evolved an ability for recursive thinking and self-contemplation, what cognitive scientists call in their jargon ‘metacognition’ and the ability to regenerate ‘metarepresentations’: the ability to think about thinking, feel about feeling, simulate, monitor, and ultimately control actions by playing them out mentally ... Humans evolved the cognitive ability to distance themselves mentally from the here and now of perceptual experience and to adopt different perspectives of the self onto itself, the self as an object of projection and of evaluation” (Rochat 18). Rochat is explaining that we have objectified ourselves, and in so doing, we can get into a never-ending spiral of thoughts of self.

Actors have to remember that, while acting is a form of self-expression and can be immensely healing to us personally (more on this later), we tell stories for others. As an actor, it is not about you. While the rehearsal process is highly focused on actor exploration and figuring out how best to play a moment, the story is never intended for us to keep. The story is always meant to reach, heal, and move the audience. If our thoughts constantly swirl around ourselves (metacognition), that is the story that the audience will receive.

What is the seed of metacognition, and where did it come from? “The fear of rejection determines how humans relate to each other. Some simple, universal observations of how we live

together and sanction each other support the assertion that the fear of social rejection is the mother of all fears. Nothing is worse than the act of rejection by peers, of being deliberately and systematically *ostracized* from the group” (Rochat 21). In society today, canceling someone is widely celebrated. It's as if we have forgotten that humans are incredibly messy, flawed beings who will make intensely awful mistakes.

I think this fearful experience ties into being an actor. Acting is all about listening and reacting. When we are acting, we have to constantly make choices about how we will respond by playing with our action pallet. Our action pallet could be: to cheer, to harm, to warn, to praise, or to destroy. It is easy for actors to become self-conscious about the choices they make while responding. When actors question their choices, it immediately pulls them out of the present moment and shifts their thoughts to themselves. There is an intense insecurity laced into this thinking. Thoughts begin to spiral into something like, “Why did I respond that way? That was so stupid! I'm so embarrassed. I can't believe people saw me make that choice. The director is probably disappointed they hired me. Will I be replaced during the run of the show? Will I ever work again? Why am I even an actor? I'm not even that good. My performance was awful. I am worthless. I should just quit now.” Do you relate to that kind of thinking?

Whether you are an actor or not, we all struggle with a fear of rejection. Rochat talks about this banter in the realms of first and third person.

The very human experience of the self as object of contemplation and evaluation is a complex psychological matter. It is complex mainly because it entails dilemmas and conflicts between first- and third-person perspectives on the self. Such dilemmas and conflicts are at the core of self-consciousness as expressed in embarrassment, shame, guilt, masking, or acting out. It also corresponds to the universal experience of an

irreconcilable gap between the experience of the embodied self (first-person perspective) and what is actually publicly shared of the self (third-person perspective). (Rochat 26)

It is impossible for us to see ourselves from others' perspective. Yet, many of our thoughts throughout the day revolve around what people think of us. I think it is important for actors to remember that their worth and value is not in the way that they see themselves, how others see them, or even in what they do. I'm a firm believer that it's not as important what you do, but how you do it.

As with any human issue, there is a starting place in this development. Rochat says that humans first gain awareness around six months of age. “What is happening at approximately six weeks of age is a radical new stance toward the world taken by the infant. At the interpersonal level ... infants begin to manifest socially elicited smiling. This smiling is an unmistakable expression of positive affect in the presence of another individual, either interacting with a child or adopting a calm frontal presentation” (Rochat 68). Around six months of age is the typical progression of when humans become aware. The awareness is minor, and thoughts of self-consciousness have not yet bubbled up. Around two years of age is when humans begin to become aware of the way that they are being perceived (or at least try to become aware). “It appears indeed that by two to three years young children do start to have *others in mind* when they behave. The expression of embarrassment that children often begin to display in front of mirrors at around this age is the expression of ‘self-consciousness’... The malaise might result from the realization of a fundamental discrepancy between how the child represents himself or herself from within, and how he or she is actually perceived by others as reflected in the mirror” (Rochat 88). So, if you are a 25-year-old actor, that means that you have been living with self-consciousness for 23 years. That is a long time to feel insecure in your own skin! Children from

a young age desperately want to please their parents, teachers, and friends. This is a heavy weight to carry. This kind of baggage is very unhealthy for humans and actors alike. It is the job of the actor to be able to build a character. If you open the suitcase that is the character, you fill it with the character's life circumstances, their desires, and their fears. If actors have not dealt with their own insecurities before taking on another person's life, it is going to be really difficult for your character to be transparent in the sense that you and all of your personal baggage will shine through the character you are playing.

Insecurity

For adults, one of the leading causes of insecurity is the media. We were never meant to consume the amount of media that we do on a daily basis. We were not made for that. Yes, it is important to be aware of what is happening in another country, but our shoulders were not intended to carry the burdens of the world. Likewise, we were not intended to be able to see into others' lives at any moment of the day through social media. I, just like many other people, love using social media as a creative outlet. For me, it is a form of play that allows me to create something graphically that I might not be able to do as an actor. However, it becomes very difficult to be a working actor and to be bombarded with other people's lives. We began to objectify ourselves and others. "Self-knowledge is a system of representations arising when oneself becomes object to itself via the process of self-objectification ... It is more than an implicit sense of being alive and a body immersed and interacting in a physical and social environment. Self-knowledge is a complex system of re-presentations that entails evaluation and comparison" (Rochat 39). Are you seeing a trend here? At this point, I'm not sure how many times I've used the word "self." We have to be more than what others think about us. If we were not valuable and important, we would have never been created. When we start to objectify

ourselves and others, that leads us down the road of shame, guilt, envy, jealousy, need for approval, narcissism, and ego.

The cause of shame or guilt can often be found in comparison. “This dissonance is a major struggle, expressed in the nuances of self-conscious behaviors that hinder creativity and smooth ‘flow’ of interpersonal exchanges ... In the context of such propensity, *shame* is a central emotion, the epitome of *self-consciousness* ... The word shame captures a profound, complex, and too often neglected emotion: the experience of self in relation to others ...” (*Random House Unabridged Dictionary*)” (Rochat 41, 105). I have always compared myself to other people. As a child, I so desperately wanted to be like the other guys in my school. I thought they were cool and saw that people liked them. They had a lot of money; the girls liked them. They had a lot of friends, and it seemed like they had a promising future ahead of them. I remember there was one guy in high school I wanted to be like so bad that I ended up dressing like him, trying to sound like him, and even trying to respond as he would in situations. There is nothing wrong with being inspired by others and wanting to reflect parts of them in our own lives, but it becomes dangerous for us when we cannot find our own inner confidence, who we are, and what we bring to the table. I began to be very jealous of the guy from high school thinking, “If I was just like him my life would be so much better.” Whereas I don't think those kinds of thoughts as often now, I would be lying if I didn't say envy and jealousy weren't a struggle of my daily meditation. It has taken me almost thirty years to feel comfortable in my own skin. I feel like I am just now able to step out of the way of the characters I am creating to allow for connection to this new person and their world.

“Shame, as an emotion, is the public expression of the feelings and effects associated with social rejection. In its prototypical expression, it is avoidant in the sense of a general

propensity to *hide away* and *flee* from public scrutiny” (Rochat 112). As an actor, I now welcome feedback during the rehearsal process with open arms. I know now that my director is on my side. They're rooting for me, and it is my job to collaborate with them to find the strongest choices. Choices can only be found through playing with as many options as possible and then receiving feedback from the creative team on what didn't work and what was the strongest choice to go with.

Empathy

If anything comes about from this section of my thesis, my hope is that you would take the insecurity and self-consciousness that you experience daily, acknowledge it, and then use that to fuel your empathy for others. Empathy is greater than insecurity. Empathy is not negating the hardships you have faced, it is recognizing the pain that you have suffered and when you see other hurting individuals, saying, “I see you, and I am with you in that.” If actors can develop empathy “Oh, the places you’ll go!” (Dr. Seuss) Empathy is what we need for connection to the characters we are playing, the people we are speaking to on stage, and the audience who is receiving the story. Empathy should be our hopeful response to the barriers to play. Rochat says. “Empathy, as an emotion, also entails vicarious and projected feelings from third- to first-person perspective. Somehow, we perceive and can relate to what others are perceiving of their own mood and affects from within the privacy of their own bodies ... The term *empathy* derives from the German *einfühlung* (feeling for or with) itself derived from the Greek *em* (in) and *pathos* (suffering), meeting literally “in suffering” with or for others” (Rochat 114-115, 170).

The Ego

Often narcissism and ego serve as a barrier to empathy and therefore play. We have all heard the phrase, “Leave your ego at the door” (Robin Sharma). It's true, because if you are an actor who wants attention and validation from others, you should choose another career path. Being an actor is already hard enough; I equate being an actor to being an Olympian. The “Audrey Helps Actors” podcast reminds us that we are Olympic athletes of mind, voice, body, emotions, and work ethic. Adding the weight of needing other people to praise you to feel good about yourself will leave you emptier than you were before. “The privileged source of information and permanence of first-person perspective tends to *prime* an inflated, more positive, and idealized view on the self. In contrast, the third-person perspective (the representation of what others perceive and value of us) tends to prime deflated, more negative values with a general overtone of anxiety and fear of rejection. Attempts at resolving this conflict entail constant negotiation with others and desperate attempts at controlling what we project publicly to the outside world, what Goffman coins the ‘staging of the self’” (Rochat 41). Actors, learn to cheer others on and stop looking at others with contempt. There is room for everyone in this industry. There is room for you, and there is room for me. When you start to celebrate the success of others, the entire process of acting will be so much more enjoyable for you. If you choose empathy over insecurity, self-consciousness, and the ego, freedom in play will spark, affording you the opportunity of rich connections.

Anxiety

I have been speaking generally of the research behind the fight-flight-or-freeze response, getting “in our head” and self-consciousness, but what is the root issue? Anxiety is the destroyer of all play. Anxiety will pull your mind out of the present moment and cause you to lose active

participation in your life. “Life is not a spectator sport” (Jackie Robinson). People are meant to enjoy life and live it to the fullest, but if you have anxious thoughts and they take control of the meditation of your mind, you will be a passive onlooker in your story and not the main character.

For actors, the goal is to live “truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Sanford Meisner). In *Get Out of Your Head*, author Brian Sachetta says, “I would say this fear is a synergy between two forces: our innate fight-or-flight mechanisms and the looping-thinking we engage in, either consciously or subconsciously, over the things that scare us. Anatomically speaking, it's the battle between the rational and emotional parts of our brains, namely, our prefrontal cortices and limbic systems, including the latter's fear producing amygdala” (Sachetta 11). So when we have anxiety, our body is fighting against itself. Does this sound like a situation that will set us up well to be the best storytellers? No, it sets us up for failure.

In my own life, anxiety was my largest struggle. As a child, I desperately wanted to be a performer. I wanted to sing, act, and dance because nothing brought me more joy. I will never forget what my high school choir teacher said during a music rehearsal for *The Wedding Singer* in front of the entire class after I sang my solo. He said that I sounded like I was drunk. I have never shared that publicly before, but with the intention of “the only way forward is with honesty”, all I know how to do is to be an open book. Do you know that one moment changed the way I saw myself for two thirds of my life? That situation (and other instances like it), paired with years of verbal abuse, intense bullying from my classmates, and rejection in my school for nine years, took a toll on my mental health. My experience shows that words have value and to speak kindly to others when giving feedback. That one situation caused me, for many years, to think that I was worthless. The one thing I wanted to do in life was crucified and mocked in front of a crowd of people. That situation changed me into a person who withdrew from others in

times of anxiety to protect myself. For years, in the rehearsal process I have always tried to be the hardest worker in the room, but I often lacked community building skills, because I feared failure. I did not want to go back to that feeling of rejection.

Thankfully, now I know who I am in God's eyes. Psalm 139:14 says, "You are fearfully and wonderfully made" (*English Standard Version Bible*, Psalm 139:14). It took me almost thirty years to be confident in who I am and be proud of what I bring to the table. I needed to realize that I am enough. It does not mean I do not want to grow; it just means I can stand tall (literally because I am 6' 2") and know that my life has purpose. Those truths freed me as an actor to enjoy playing once again!

For those who are struggling in that realm, I invite you to release the idea of trying to think your way out of something as intensely consuming as anxiety. Sachetta says, "If you've ever tried to think your way out of your anxiety, I'd guess you probably found it only made things worse. This is because trying to reason your way out of your head leads to looping-thinking. It's a frustrating process, and it's one of the main reasons, if not the main reason, we stay stuck in anxious states. I call it looping-thinking rather than logic because it doesn't get you anywhere" (Sachetta 15). But how do we break this never-ending cycle of spiraling thoughts?

Sachetta has developed a list of ten simple steps that could help you. I do have to write a disclaimer that there are a lot of self-help books out there, and I am by no means seeking to write my own. We, as actors, must remember that we are first human beings. If we do not take care of ourselves, there is no way we can realize our potential as artists. So, while I don't necessarily think this list is the greatest, most earth-shattering how-to guide, I do think it's a good place to start. Sachetta's list is as follows

1: Breathe, 2: Determine the true importance of what's making you anxious, 3: Evaluate the potential outcomes and reconnect to the one you want, 4: Shift your focus to something positive, 5: Recite a powerful mantra, 6: Stop questioning yourself, 7: Utilizing empowering way to feel good, right now, 8: Get back to the present moment, 9: Remind yourself the worst part of anxiety is the waiting, 10: Remember this too shall pass. (Sachetta 35-36)

Is anxiety something that we can play with? Could these steps potentially lead us to more peace and joy in our lives? Perhaps it could, but we will never know if we don't begin with the choice to play.

In reference to Sachetta's Step 1, why should we begin with breath? Breath is the foundation of acting. I have been learning about how every choice that we make as actors is all rooted in breath, but why is breath important for human beings other than for survival purposes? "... the first thing you need to do is start breathing slowly and deeply, so your stomach, not your chest, rises and falls ... This will engage your parasympathetic nervous system which will, simultaneously, slow down the fight or flight system. The reason this kind of breathing is so important is that activating your bodies innate calming abilities gets you back to the place where awareness and logic live quicker, and awareness and logic help you realize when you're engaging in destructive thought patterns" (Sachetta 39). Therefore, if you are an actor who finds themselves in a situation that causes extreme anxiety, consider playing with your rate of breath. If your breath is slowed down you will be able to think more clearly, allowing you to be more present and connected in the given circumstances of the story. A huge component to actors' play capacity is related to the time they spend taking care of themselves. How can actors fill up others if their well is empty?

CHAPTER THREE: THE RESURRECTION OF PLAY

Erikson on The Benefits of Adults at Play

Why should adults play? Instead of using the phrase inner child, consider saying inner play. It's not that we need to become children again (no, it is a wonderful thing to be an adult), it's that we have to put in the work to regain that childlike sense of freedom. From Erikson's perspective, play has many benefits, and children serve as a reminder to play. "In keeping such defensive needs and mechanisms intact, Erikson saw adults to protect their own fears and negative identities. In this way, adults dominate youth and 'colonize' both their own vitality and children around them in an ongoing way... in his later years Erickson said that play had always been his primary resource, just as dreams had been Freud's. 'Thank God ... for the little children,' he wrote; They '... play it all out before our eyes'" (Hoare 114, 115). It's important to understand our development from childhood into adolescence, so that we can continue to know how to foster that transition. Play is within us; it just needs to be awakened. Hoare says that,

To Erikson, each healthy person, at every developmental level, needed engaged work that alone shows one play. Among children and adults, he believed that genuine play renews the psyche; like refreshing sleep, it prepares one to take up new challenges and demands. Among adults, good work provides release from emotional demands; it permits play with content and ideas. Thus, to the Erickson who remained very much the psychoanalyst in his approach to the topic, play is not that which occurs when one departs from concerns ... To him, good, free, uninterrupted play was the essence of work, a vital, engaged immersion for all. (Hoare 118)

I love this idea that there is a marriage between work and play. They are both interconnected, intertwined so tightly together that the two become one. As Hoare also

mentioned, play is a testing ground. It's not that work is bad and play is good, it's that work is play and play is work. Without play and work, there would be no innovation and without work in play, play would be unintentional (although there is time and space for free play). Hoare says, "Thus play is 'easy and free movement within a set of firm limits,' as well as freedom for those who might curtail initiative or crowd one's psyche. The primary rule of play is to create *Spielraum* (elbow room and clearance), a leeway of engaged, unfettered motion within boundaries ... a free adult is one who extends freedom to others, one who 'increases *Spielraum* for self *and* for interplaying others'" (Hoare 124). Play should be easy, free and inspiring and should make us feel good! Erikson is asking us to make space for ourselves and others to play.

Have you ever worked on a project that required a creative response? Say a Spanish class where you had to lead a presentation, and the instructor asked you to do something creatively in your short presentation. Let us say you made a creative video to a Spanish song that incorporated the vocabulary you were learning. Just think of all the engagements that would happen when you created that music video. I'll bet that you finished that project with a better understanding of the vocabulary than just taking a test. Similarly, Erikson felt that "Playing adults are those who can find and engage the playing child within themselves in an ongoing way and, when their own play has been disrupted in service to consuming, detail driven work, they know how to unshackle themselves, bring their intellects, reclaiming personal choice and initiative, in liberating their spirits. Such adults willingly extend the freedom of such rights to others. Their relationships with others are equal, mutual, and genuine" (Hoare 126).

Through play, adults exercise their rights as human beings. They use their freedom to reject product-oriented societies and choose instead to build intentional and meaningful relationships and connections with others. Therefore, they become better people who contribute

to society in more profitable and successful ways. Players can become more well-rounded members of the entertainment industry, political sphere, as well as in their work and family life. “Self-renewing adults somehow keep their internal youthfulness alive, contributing their energies to work; yet in the play and leeway of genuine work, they resist becoming work’s, an institution’s, or a superior marionette. Giving up personal freedom as work’s slave suffocates the ego and, through a wonderful claim to necessity, creates automatons who are dulled by formalized, or work-habituated rigidities ... This centrality of play and work, and of work with playfulness, is Erikson's main theme and requirement” (Hoare 128-129). The cohabitation of adult’s play and work is a gift.

Actors should view the work they get to do as play, always learning and growing, and becoming better at their craft. We have to shift our view that work is something to despise. I believe that God always intended us to work. In the Christian faith, Adam and Eve as the original humans were working and tending the garden. The challenges and innovations that work presents to us keep us alive as humans. Hoare encourages us to have a “‘naive zest’ for life, vitality, happiness, amazement in nature and in the moment, and an intentional resurfacing of the joy of learning” (Hoare 134). So no, we can't become children again, but through play, we can rediscover our sense of childhood wonder as if for the first time.

Anthony DeBenedet’s: Playful Intelligence

DeBenedet, in his book *Playful Intelligence*, expounds upon his definition of play saying, “Play is the act of throwing horseshoes in your backyard. Playfulness is an inclination to smile or laugh while you’re doing it ...” (DeBenedet 13). Playfulness is a reaction to the chosen action of play. But where do we begin with play, and how can this positively impact our general well-

being? How can play in our personal lives transfer into our careers as actors? In his book, DeBenedet separates play into five benefits: imagination, sociability, humor, spontaneity, and wonder. “We all have the capacity to use these playful qualities in our daily lives, but we usually don’t do so consciously. We also rarely think about the influence they can have on our overall happiness and well-being” (DeBenedet 15). The actor’s goal is to unconsciously choose play as their first reaction, but this takes time and dedication. Actors must sharpen their tool of play daily through their readings, research, warmups, rehearsals, and performances. Play is something innately rooted in us, however, it has slowly splintered and weathered over the course of adulthood through the monotony of responsibilities. Actors need to rediscover what originally made them carefree on the playground as a child and we can use DeBenedet’s five benefits as a tool to replenish our play.

Imagination

In the Summer of 2022, I submitted an audition for a feature film. It took many hours to film the three scenes, not counting the preparation ahead of the audition. After I submitted my audition on Monday, my agent reached out on Tuesday asking if I could completely resubmit the audition by the end of Tuesday without the accent I had initially used. My first reaction was frustration. I was so angry that I had to redo something that I had put so much time and energy into. Then I stopped, laughed a little bit, and thought “I’m literally writing a paper on choosing to play and when I get an opportunity to play again, I’m frustrated?” I pulled myself together and acknowledged that this was an opportunity for me to revisit something, to find new connections to the character and to my scene partner (thank you, Chelsea Street, for being my incredible reader). At the end of the day, I was actually thankful that I got to explore the scene again with fresh eyes. Instead of using an accent as an easy character crutch, I focused more on the images

in the text I was speaking. On the second day, I felt I had a deeper connection to my character's role in the story and his desires.

DeBenedet provides three helpful tips for implementing the tool of imagination into your play. First, DeBenedet says to

Notice your thoughts, nonjudgmentally ... Think about your thoughts objectively, without labels or criticism. Then try to detach any emotion tied to them. A good way to do this is to say the emotions out loud. Hearing the words that describe your emotions will help train your brain to separate your thoughts from your emotions when you are trying to use your imagination to reframe. (DeBenedet 50)

If I was to work on that audition again, I could approach the audition first by saying out loud how frustrated I was. I could give myself permission to name that emotion in order to recognize that I am being emotional and that there is a way to use my imagination to reapproach the situation. Second, DeBenedet says to

Examine your stressor. Sometimes, even after you've untwisted your thoughts from your emotions, your thoughts might still feel like a group of racing thoroughbreds, thundering down the final stretch. This usually happens when you're dealing with a lot of stress and trying to manage it too quickly. You might fail to think about what is (or isn't) actually happening. (DeBenedet 50)

DeBenedet encourages us to ask questions that will bring us back to our thoughts and pull us away from our emotions, thus stopping the toxic emotional spiral. I could have asked myself, "What do I need to do right now? How can I strip away the accent and use my own voice to explore the character's world? Is there a serious threat if I have to film the audition again, or

could this be an opportunity to use my imagination to reenter the character?” By asking myself questions, I further calm my emotions of stress and anxiety and reframe my thoughts to view the task ahead of me as a challenge. Third, DeBenedet says,

The next time you are faced with a situation or experience that you would like to try to reframe, pretend that you are writing a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel. First, imagine two ways in which the scenario could be worse and elaborate on the worse of the two inside your mind. Then imagine two ways in which it could be better and spin a tad more intricate tale about the better scenario ... by doing this, you will be reminded that everything has pros and cons, which will help keep your emotions in check when you are reframing. (DeBenedet 51)

By using my imagination to reframe the frustrating audition experience, I was able to refocus my energy towards a positive objective, moving away from negative self-talk. Had I not used reframing, I could have gotten so frustrated about the situation and chosen to not resubmit the audition. But had I done that, I would have missed out on such a great opportunity to approach the character through a different lens. I was able to become the character in a more grounded way. Through reframing the situation with my imagination, I could more clearly see the images around me and the people who I was speaking to.

The S's of Play: Sociability and Spontaneity

In Chapters Two and Four of *Playful Intelligence*, DeBenedet covers two of the key benefits of living a playful life: sociability and spontaneity. DeBenedet comments on sociability saying, “it's probably more accurate to describe it as a tendency to connect with others in a mutually beneficial way ... I found two consistent themes throughout my research and interviews

... : 1) playfully intelligent people seldom apply preconceived notions about the people with whom they are engaging ... 2) playfully intelligent people usually approach their social interactions with humility and powerlessness, and this manifests as a strong sense of egalitarianism” (DeBenedet 66).

Actors, when you approach your scene partners, you can build community through leveling the playing field. By viewing your scene partner or the ensemble you are collaborating with as your equals, you will build trust, creativity, and that sense of ensemble that makes theater so special. If you want to have a magical show, you have to put in the work as a human to deepen the relationships with your acting and production team. DeBenedet encourages his readers to, “push beyond initial impressions and judgements or (resist) them altogether” (DeBenedet 67). Actors, don't look to other actors to create an environment of play. You should be the leader in this. Although this should be the job of the director, it is more than often not the case because of the amount of work that is on their plate.

I have worked with countless directors, in my short career thus far, who are completely consumed with the final product of the production. They're so obsessed with what people will think of them as directors when they come see the show that they lose sight of playing in the process. I know for me this has been difficult. I love working with directors who see the rehearsal room as an empty canvas that we can splash different colors of paint on just to see what will happen and what new colors we can make. When this does not happen for you as an actor or when you are not set up well in this way, this is where play in your personal rehearsal time becomes incredibly influential. You really should use your private time in your bedroom to try all of the choices that you could make as the character (physical, vocal, emotional) on your own

time and not expect that in a professional setting, the director will have the time, energy, or intuition to create a playful space for you.

For DeBenedet, sociability is a benefit to a playful lifestyle because of how it makes us approachable. That approachability helps us to build stronger relational connections. “In his book *Give and Take*, Adam Grant, a management and psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania Wharton school, describes what he calls *powerless communication*. He notes that powerless communication has four central tenants: 1) vulnerability; 2) listening; 3) tentative talk; and 4) advice-seeking ... As Grant explains, those who use powerless communication can build rapport, trust, and influence much more efficiently than those who adopt a powerful style of communication (e.g. strong opinions, closed statements, and ultimatums)” (DeBenedet 73). Note that Grant does not want people to walk around like frightened little ants; he is trying to encourage people that if you desire to build connections, it starts with being approachable.

Actors, if you come in to the rehearsal process with guns blazing, it can turn people off from connecting deeply with you. Now as an actor who struggles with using my voice at times because I become fearful that people will reject me, please do not hear me saying that I do not want you to use your voice. Stand in your value as a human, have wonderfully strong opinions, be a passionate person, but do so in a way of humility and openness. Those are the kind of actors who continually get hired and who are booked and re-booked. DeBenedet says “When one puts aside his or her judgments and arrives at a social interaction in a powerless, vulnerable, humble way, he or she has a better chance of having a positive, high-quality interaction, which means a better chance of experiencing shared emotional connection and, in turn, a sense of community ... This capacity for empathy also increases their odds of social success” (DeBenedet 82-83).

Again, we see the theme of empathy being the impetus for connection. As an actor you are walking in somebody else's shoes, literally and figuratively, and until you can do that in your personal life, it will be difficult for you to socially and emotionally connect with the characters you play, your scene partners, and the audience. Once you can do that, you are going to fuel yourself up, and you will start to step into the skin of the character. In Jim Helsinger's (Artistic Director of Orlando Shakes and University of Central Florida professor) class "Acting Shakespeare", he had us sit in a chair and face our scene partners. We were supposed to drop our jaws, look in their eyes, and literally imagine taking a key and opening our heart and putting the key in our pocket. If you really want to connect with someone as an actor, I recommend this as an experiment. It is amazing how just by truly breathing someone in, you can deeply emotionally connect with them. Because we live in such a frantic and chaotic society, where actors are pummeled into hustling with every waking moment, this is a great exercise to allow yourself to be seen and to see someone else right where they are in the present moment. "Produced in the brain's pituitary gland, oxytocin was initially studied because of its role in lactation and uterine contraction. But it has since been discovered that oxytocin is also critical for social bonding. When it is released - via a simple fist bump, handshake, pat on the back, or even a gentle nudge - it tells us that the other person is present and ready to listen, or cry, or laugh with us" (DeBenedet 88). When we connect with someone socially, it releases oxytocin! The release of this hormone makes us feel happy. This proves that we are built for connections and that acting is something that can improve our overall well-being.

Spontaneity

We have heard about how playfulness can benefit our sociability, but how can it increase our spontaneity? "There's power in living lightly; psychological flexibility is easier to achieve

when one's grip on life is neither too tight nor too loose” (DeBenedet 165). At the end of the day, yes, we only have one life, but remember that we are finite humans and life is not to be taken too seriously. After all, we are playing make believe! You should be one thousand percent dedicated to the craft of storytelling, while balancing the ability to be spontaneous and flexible. When we are acting, we want to come with a few choices made or actions decided upon for each beat of a scene. But it will better serve actors to have flexibility because your director will often ask you to try something in a different direction than you would have originally thought. As Vivian Majkowski, professor of Voice at The University of Central Florida, would remind me, our first choice to play an action is typically our habitual choice. What she means by this is that we have built up habitual patterns and tensions in ourselves that lead us to play a handful of actions in our first gut response. She encouraged me at the end of the Spring 2022 Semester to throw away my first choice as an actor and to bring in my second choice into the rehearsal room.

I had an audition for a short film in 2022. It was a quick turnaround and because of that I found myself making choices that were habitually comfortable for me to play. My amazing wife, Chelsea Street (who is a marvelous actor), encouraged me to keep what I was doing, but add on another layer to the character. I loved it! After filming a new take with that direction, I knew that was headed down the right path. By having the flexibility as an actor to take the character multiple directions, I felt that I was able to flesh out the character in a short amount of time. DeBenedet comments on flexibility saying “In many ways, System 1 (deactivation) is what allows us to engage in spontaneous activities. Our gut instincts and impulses, both of which fuel spontaneous action, come from System 1, as is the courage or nerve to spontaneously break away from our daily routines. In personality science, this is called ‘openness to experience.’ ... with spontaneous activity, one's mind naturally becomes more psychologically flexible toward and

comfortable with the unknown and unexpected” (DeBenedet 168-169). Flexibility, in terms of DeBenedet’s understanding of spontaneity, helps us to reframe difficult situations in a positive light. DeBenedet gives an example of someone making social plans, and the plans falling through. Well, what do you do? Do you go home and cry or do you take the opportunity to do something fun that you've always wanted to do but haven't had the time to do?

This requires actors to have a fairly high level of optimism. If a director is giving you a note repeatedly and you just cannot seem to apply it, don't get defeated, consider trying it another way! Chances are you will get there eventually through following your spontaneous impulses. “But if we don't lose sight of how spontaneity – whether it manifests as psychological flexibility or generosity - can move us into better mindsets and improve well-being, we can position ourselves to find little pockets of joy amid the crazy-busy days” (DeBenedet 190). The Declaration of Independence says that we have the freedom of “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence). “‘Liberty’ is the freedom to be spontaneous” (DeBenedet 192). My hope for you, actor, is that you will use the freedom you have to walk in the lightness of spontaneity. This lightness will lead us to humor, and humor will bring us joy!

Humor

How many times have we heard, “Why don’t you act your age?” or “Oh grow up!”? Young children’s play is being suppressed in the classroom, at home, and in public spaces. We are instructed to sit up, straighten up, and shut up. Yet, humor still latches onto our sense of play like a hero clinging to a cliff edge in the latest action thriller. DeBenedet’s third chapter reminds us of the lighter side of play. He gives evidence for the kinesthetic response to humor saying, “The domains studied most have been humor’s impact on the immune and cardiovascular

systems, as well as its moderating effect on physical pain ... It's likely that laughter chemically triggers a reduction in the perception and experience of pain ... It appears that laughter may be associated with short-term elevations in heart rate and blood pressure, analogous to what happens during exercise" (DeBenedet 107-108). This evidence suggests that finding humor in stories and everyday life can lead to longevity of life. As actors share humorous stories, they are also healing the audience on a chemical level. "(Humor) says to others that it's safe to explore, play, and nurture a relationship together ... Healthy humor produces positive results – like better connections with others" (DeBenedet 111, 119). Humor breaks down the barriers of fear and skepticism built up in our psyches over many years. If actors can approach a role and their scene partners with this kind of playfulness, whether they are performing a comedy or a drama, the vulnerability needed for connection will be more free flowing.

DeBenedet presents a case study on Vivienne, a woman who as a young child in the Philippines traumatically lost her mother. Vivienne grew up with a serious father, and it wasn't until meeting her husband Dan that she discovered the power of humor. "Dan started to see how humor could help him connect with others. He saw how it helped people, including himself, drop their personal walls and engage more openly and vulnerably during conversations" (DeBenedet 115). Sadly, Vivienne's health took a turn for the worse. "Her aortic valve was leaking, and blood was backing up into her lungs ... 'Viv tried dying on me several times'" (DeBenedet 115). Although Vivienne could barely communicate, she traversed rock bottom with a humorous mindset. Multiple surgeries and amputations later, Vivienne dared to laugh as life hit her on all fronts. "If you ask Vivienne and Dan about using humor to connect with others, they will tell you, 'We're not necessarily always making jokes when we are with people. We know when to be serious. It's more about looking at things lightly and humorously'" (DeBenedet 119).

This directly applies, although not as severe as Vivienne's situation of course, to the hardships that actors experience to embody emotionally taxing roles while fighting negative self-talk. Actors are athletes of the mind, body, voice, heart, and soul. Telling stories well demands that you take on someone's full life experiences day after day. This can wear on actors and that leads them to feel defeated, doubtful, burnt out, and exhausted. Acting loses its zeal, and many actors grow to resent the work of storytelling. Therefore, the power of humor must be added to the toolbelt of any actor. This humorous approach to formidable situations in the acting process enables actors to experience flow with the text and with the company of actors looking to them for support and collaboration. "Laughter is thought to have developed as a way of engaging and bonding with a larger group. The area that controls laughter in the brain is the subcortex, which also contains structures that are responsible for automatic behaviors like breathing and muscular reflexes ... Laughing easily ... can be considered humans' built-in survival mechanism to signal that it's safe to connect and bond with each other" (DeBenedet 122). Humor, in a harsh industry, helps give actors longevity in their careers. Case studies from North Korean and Nazi camp survivors found that, "Using humor ... and telling jokes to each other gave them a sense of control ... Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. Humor ... can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds" (DeBenedet 137). Humor can lead actors to a feeling of power and control, as we have limited control as storytellers in the areas of body, voice, emotion, and thought. Many actors can be crushed under the weight of long hours of rehearsals, countless directors giving them notes, unrealistic self-expectations, and, on top of that, having to bear your soul to thousands of people you have never met. "Charlie Chaplin once said, 'To truly laugh, you must be able to take your

pain and play with it” (DeBenedet 135). So, I invite actors to dive headfirst into the chaos of storytelling, ready to connect with a giggle or two.

Wonder

I suggest, before continuing with this chapter, listening to “Wonder” by Shawn Mendes. His song embodies that urgent feeling we should have as we run after curiosity ... Did you listen to it? Now, we can continue.

Wonder, the feeling as one explores the unknown, is what keeps our childlike sense of curiosity alive. When we are acting, we are portraying people who have never experienced these moments of life before. They have complex desires and fears, and they are constantly testing things out to see what they can do to get what they want. This should inspire actors to do the same.

How does approaching play with a sense of wonder affect us physically? DeBenedet asks,

What does the playful quality of wonder look like, psychologically? On a neurophysiological level, wonder is an emotion. Nearly all emotions involve the limbic system in the brain, a group of subcortical structures that includes the hypothalamus, hippocampus, and amygdala. Wonder also involves the association cortex within the cerebral cortex. When a sensory stimulus provides new and expansive challenges to our existing limbic and associative circuitry, that's when we feel wonder. And while we are feeling wonder, the limbic system and the association cortex work together to process what is happening and assign significance to it. (DeBenedet 214-215)

I am amazed when I hear research that proves that play has a positive effect on our bodies.

Actors, how fun is it to make a big bold choice? Even if it is not the strongest or final choice, doesn't it bring you excitement to mine the possibilities in any given scene? Whenever we use wonder as a tool of play, our brain tells us that exploring new possibilities is fun, and we feel good when we have fun. As I've mentioned before, it is the actor's job to be present moment to moment, and wonder can accomplish this for us. DeBenedet supports my claim, saying that "Wonder does this by stopping us and urging inaction rather than action in this sense, it is different from most other emotions, which usually prompt us to act. This inaction reduces inflammation in our bodies, which helps stave off cardiovascular disease and cancer. It allows us time to regroup and reflect and also to become inspired, trusting, and supportive" (DeBenedet 215). Who does not want to reap the benefits of wonder? If we can remember that acting is just playing, our wonder will allow us time to pause and sit in the moment. Wonder develops empathy, it allows the hamster running on the treadmill in our brain to take a break. When we take a break, that is when some of the most valuable realizations happen.

Actors, in order to make space for wonder, do not be afraid to do nothing! Sometimes just sitting still and breathing and thinking about how crazy it is that our heart is beating, that oxygen is keeping us alive, and that in an instant our lives were created out of thin air is beneficial. Take time to appreciate the little things of life and awaken your five senses. When was the last time you smelled a flower? Can you recall the best glass of wine or iced latte you've indulged in? Can you feel your clothes against your skin? Does it bring you comfort? What about the feeling of your bare feet walking on the sand? Think about the phenomenon of the color blue that can only be found in the wide-open sky. Do you hear birds singing outside your window? Do you notice that no bird has the same tone of voice? It is time to reevaluate the art of sitting still and doing nothing. "The idea is that slowness creates more opportunities for experiencing wonder. If you

are moving through life too fast, nothing will ever catch your eye or be interesting enough to elicit wonder” (DeBenedet 218). That is an act of play in and of itself. DeBenedet builds upon this with a powerful point saying that, “... the playful quality of wonder is about *how* one is seeing and experiencing the world ...” (DeBenedet 216-217). This is why it's so important to live playfully as a chosen lifestyle. It's not always about the “what”, as much as it is “how”. “But real mastery comes when we were able to experience wonder in the absence of the grand majestic ... Thinking about experiencing the world from a more wondrous predisposition means having a low threshold for wonder itself” (DeBenedet 217). This is seeing the world through the eyes of a child. We are not trying to be a child again, but we are rediscovering the world and all of its inhabitants as if for the first time. This lends itself well to acting because, if we're working on the play *It's a Wonderful Life*, we are not standing in the real home of George Bailey. We have to imagine the cracks in the floorboards, the smell of the musty air after it rained in the aged house, and the sound of your kids creating a cacophony of noise on a frigid and frightening day. It is a luxury to do site-specific theater, but, more often than not, we are rehearsing in a black box rehearsal space with a mirror and a few rickety boxes. If the skill of wonder is in our play tool belt, we will be able to create George's world from the ground up.

Pat Kane's The Play Ethic

Kane says the meaning of “Play is to engage oneself” (Kane 4). Kane comments on the fact that society only, “Allow(s) ourselves to recover in moments of permissible excess” (Kane 4). Throw the idea away that play is not something that is productive. Kane opens with a moving story from wartimes. “It's a truism among aid workers that when traumatized children of war start to play again, they have begun the process of managing their grief ... Yet here we see a darker element of child's play: war children consciously playing with the very technological

violence that has turned their towns to rubble, killed their relatives and battered their psyches. Playing, as it were, with the very chaos, instability and fatedness of their lives - with their very lives” (Kane 6). I think the imagery in this quote is something to ponder. It is important to recognize that our lives are very difficult and can be immensely painful. Kane is not saying to lessen the pain of life, but he is commenting on the healing that can happen when we meet our pain with play. The example of children playing with wartime technology is striking because this reflects what actors do when they take on a role. Actors are exposing the deepest parts of their souls and heavy emotions and playing with those in front of people they have no relationship with. When you enter that level of chaos, it is like being on a battlefield. You are completely surrounded by your enemies telling you that you will not be victorious. You stop and you bask in the piercing noise of the moment. That is when the magic of theater happens. When you are willing to rip yourself open and, pardon the metaphor, play with your guts, something miraculous will happen. The connections of you to the character, you to your scene partner, and you to the audience will strike an unsettling and yet moving chord.

“Much of the benefit of play, as a method of self-development, is that it helps us to make reality amenable to our will. It renders the real virtual. And gives us a chance, through our games and simulations, to test out our future options” (Kane 11). I love this idea that actors can take something in our minds and bring our thoughts to life. We can think a thought, and then follow that impulse to see what happens. Kane reminds us that there is a benefit to play in and of itself. “Too many people out there think that when they're playing, it's fooling around, an escape from things. Yet I know that I couldn't provide a service to anyone if I didn't do a huge amount of playing - exploring, testing, putting myself in the place of something else, seeking beauty” (Kane 11). There is major intentionality behind play. Play is not a waste of time. It is the best use of our

time! I couldn't agree more with Kane's idea of putting yourself in someone else's shoes. That is why we need empathy when we are acting, and play gives us that.

I appreciate that he concludes his statement with the word beauty. Aesthetics have always been an important part of my life. I like to surround myself with beautiful things that make me feel good and inspire me. As actors, are we not always on the hunt for beauty? There is so much beauty in an audience member seeing their lives, the trauma they have lived played out on stage. It is a cathartic experience for an audience member. It is equally a gift to get to transport audiences to another dimension or a world. We get to give audiences the sense of wonder that we have as we create a fantastical story! Kane says play is beneficial for: play, imagination, and selfhood. "Play in education, as healthy development ... play as art, as scientific hypothesis, as culture ... play as freedom, volunteerism, personal happiness - the expression of individuality..." (Kane 15). Play is a means to test out our ideas in a safe environment. Play can also be a form of self-expression. Through play, we can learn to better know ourselves or present colorful parts of ourselves to others in a confident way.

But don't forget that play is fun! We can play for the sake of playing. We don't always need an intention to play, sometimes we just want to do something just because we love it. Kane sees play as, "Frivolity ... This kind of play - laughter, subversion, inversion, tomfoolery - is both ancient and modern..." (Kane 15). I'm going to tell you a secret ... acting is fun. It is! Graduate School has made me fall in love with acting all over again. In 2022 I was understudying at Orlando Shakespeare theater, and one of my professors asked if I was tired because I was understudying one show while finishing another. I told them that I was so glad that I was an understudy for the show because, unlike the past, I was so ready to hop back into another story. Even though I wasn't acting onstage in every rehearsal, I was having the time of my life because

I was able to take part in something I love and develop new skills in my craft. I think actors have so much fun because we are literally playing dress up with our friends and that not only brings you joy, but it also does the same for others as well. What could be better than that?

Kane says play is also a beneficial lifestyle for actors because it, “Is a deep, natural and lasting resource for modern humans ... The moment of play is identified as a generator of originality, energy and new development ... It is a world composed of surprises and emergences, risk and enterprise, chance and imagination; a world receptive to our own passionate intentions, but demanding in its own right, requiring an evolution of our characters in responses” (Kane 41). The words that stand out to me are: lasting resource, generator, surprises, enterprise, chance, and evolution. As an actor, I am my own brand. I am the product I present to casting directors. It is important to take Kane's words and to see ourselves as a business. Because we are what we promote, we should always be taking steps forward. It doesn't mean the road is going to be a straight path. There will be twists and turns, but we should always be chugging along with forward motion. Think of a major corporation like Apple. Would anybody be interested in Apple if they still had the massive computers that they originally created? No! People want the latest and greatest sleek cell phone with all of the bells and whistles. When we play as actors it does not mean we are always going to be hitting the target right in the center every time, but I definitely think the more we practice play, the better we will become at it. “Play therefore ensures the progress of ourselves, our society and our species” (Kane 41).

Kane doesn't stop there, he says,

Play makes you live longer. Play for adults improves their memory; it can even make them happier, more elated ... many parents still fear that play is a distraction from their child's progress - rather than being its precondition ... for many primates, the very act of

playing seems to strengthen and extend the number of neural connections in the brain ...
play as progress is the way we reinvoked the brimming energies of childhood – to better to
face the thrills, spills and challenges of the adult world. (Kane 44-45)

I like that Kane says that play is a precondition. He is saying that we should start with play as the foundation for life. Life is play, or at least it was intended to be (we have muddied that up a bit), and everything comes out of that. Play is the nutrient that the workplace needs to not only survive but to thrive. Kane says that play is life giving in the workplace because, “The group at play thrives only when everybody participates, so frustrations are reduced, and team coherence and direction is more solid. Play lets you experiment, explore and take risks with ideas without fearing consequences that might happen in ‘real life’ ... People at play are more present, more engaged, more passionate and better performers” (Kane 85).

Are you convinced yet? In my thirty years of life, I have worked many jobs. I have been a professional actor for theatre and film, a school and university teacher, a communications coordinator, a marketing director, a social media manager, a fast-food worker, a teaching artist, a camp counselor and director, a scriptwriter, a director and assistant director, to name a few jobs. I have worked a lot of great jobs and a lot of terrible jobs. The companies that I have seen thrive the most are led by people who play. The people that play well are good listeners, empathetic souls, creative thinkers, innovative strategists, and collaborative teammates. The companies that have played well are still thriving to this day. It is interesting to see that the leaders of the companies I worked for that did not value play, have swiftly been let go or replaced. People want to work with people who play well with others. Maybe we should have all listened to our parents a bit more on the playground when we were young. Play is the life blood that keeps the heart beating in successful companies. Do you want to be an artist who has longevity to their career?

Do you want to be the Google, Apple, or Amazon of actors? I'm not talking in terms of monetary value, but in terms of playfulness that leads to a certain level of fulfillment. "Spiel macht frei (Play will make you free.)" (Kane 283).

The final point I want us to meditate on from this thoughtful book is the value of play in art. Reflect on Kane's words when he says, "Great art might be the only thing that stops us being trapped in our 'personal hypertext', the 'broken mirrors' of our cultural preferences, and gets us to face each other's raw humanity:

'Art has always been a communication protocol to restore the unity of human experience beyond oppression, difference and conflict. The paintings of the powerful in their human misery, good sculpting of the oppressed in their human dignity, the bridges between the beauty of our environment and the inner Hells of our psyche... [these] are all media to go beyond the inescapable laborers of life, to find the expression of joy, of pain, a feeling that reunites us, and makes this planet livable after all'" (Kane 227).

Play in art has the earth-shattering power to shake the world to its very core. Through telling a story as a player, we have the privilege to bring communities together in times of tragedy, to affect people to think differently on challenging issues, to radiate the simplistic spectacle of humanity in its most raw form of tragedy and its most splendid form of overwhelming and cathartic joy. We as actors have the power to overcome darkness. Will you use play to be a light? It is in our hands to change the world one story at a time.

Protecting Our Play

If play is clearly valuable for human existence, it must be something protected at all costs. I have a lot to learn in this regard. I always want to be the hardest worker in the rehearsal

room. I am not concerned about being seen by others as a hard worker, more so I'd say I'm a very driven and focused person. When I am passionate about something, I often make sacrifices to step forward in my goals. What this looks like for me as an actor, is that I have often worked myself to the bone. For instance, in Spring of 2022 I was in a production of *Shrek the Musical*, and I became sick. I fell into the illusion that I didn't have time to be sick (I actually said those words to my wife, Chelsea). Sometimes my drive works well in my favor, but a lot of times it means that I sacrifice taking care of myself to achieve my goals. After I became sick, I didn't stop for self-care, in fact I pushed harder. I believed the lie that if I didn't show up for rehearsal and my understudy had to go on, it meant I was weak, and that I couldn't handle it. One day in the middle of the night I got up to use the restroom, and I hit my head on the shower, collapsed, and passed out. I'm not sure whether this was related to my sickness or standing up too fast in the middle of the night, but it was not a great way to spend my evening all the way into early morning. After the emergency medical paramedics came to my house and hooked me up to all their machines and noticed that I wasn't doing well, they felt it necessary that I go to the Emergency Room to be checked out. It was a long exhausting multitude of hours receiving multiple IV bags of fluids and getting tests done. You want to know the worst part? After all of that, I went to rehearsal that evening. I felt awful, drained and embarrassed. It made me feel ashamed that other people could be just as busy as me, but my body decided to shut down. Thankfully, my wonderful director and the stage management team allowed me to leave for the evening, and my incredible understudy took over for the night. But of course, I didn't learn my lesson overnight. I went to class the next day even though I was miserably tired. Praise the Lord that I had a professor who noticed I wasn't doing well and forced me to go home and not come to

any more classes or rehearsals the rest of the week. My cohort even gave me the gift of a float spa session (I highly recommend this for self-care).

My main end of the year feedback from the graduate faculty was that I needed to take care of myself. It's difficult for me to fully grasp how to do that in today's "hustle" culture. I want to be doing the work because I love it. I want to be booking acting gigs because it brings me joy, but for me to have a long and sustainable *career*, I need to be able to learn to take care of myself. If anybody reading this can relate, let me just say that while I don't have all the answers, I hope this will be a nice foundation for you to consider ways to truly nurture your soul. A friend of mine once mentioned to me that it is a lot easier to take care of ourselves on the forefront than to pick up the pieces of the aftermath. I couldn't agree more! We have seen the science behind why play is so beneficial to our health, so let us reflect on a few simple ways that we can protect this precious lifestyle.

First, one of the most beneficial ways that actors can allow their bodies to heal is by getting adequate rest. I'm not just talking about quantity of hours slept, but, even more importantly, quality of sleep. Creating a nighttime routine is immensely helpful in allowing us to feel refueled for the next day to come. Consider pushing up your bedtime by 30 minutes and sticking to that plan for one week. Take time to reflect on how that week made you feel. Did you have more energy? Did you feel like you had more endurance throughout the day? Perhaps this could even help with brain fog, giving you cognitive clarity. As an actor who often works seven days a week from early in the morning to late in the evening, high quality of sleep is needed. If you're not sleeping well, perhaps you need to consider seeing a doctor to investigate methods that could increase your time in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep.

Second, it may be helpful to find pockets throughout the day where you are on vocal rest (complete vocal silence). This is a hard one because as an actor, singer, and teacher, I use my voice during most of my waking hours. However, our vocal cords are a muscle, and muscles can get fatigued. For me, this meant that I gave myself permission to use rehearsal as rehearsal. There would be times where I would wake up early before my 9:00 am musical theatre class and rehearse my music multiple times before I went to class. Then, I would attend several classes where I was a student and a teacher, using my voice for long spurts of time. Then, I would come home and practice music before my *Shrek* rehearsal. I would end the night with a four-hour rehearsal singing extremely difficult music repeatedly. Yes, I did gain vocal stamina throughout this season, but also I'd often get to the end of the day and my voice would feel fatigued. Sometimes this could be due to technical vocal issues I needed to work on but also vocal overuse. We are not superheroes. We are limited beings who can only handle so much in the day. Don't be afraid to guard the time that you use your voice. This may mean sending someone an e-mail, rather than having a phone conversation or telling a boss, professor, or director that you will be vocally marking the time that you speak. Vocal marking means that I am still technically supporting my sound with breath, but I am giving myself space to not overextend my vocal cords. Of course, any vocal health expert would tell you to stay hydrated, but I have also found steaming my vocal cords to be incredibly beneficial during vocally strenuous seasons. Steaming is the most immediate way to hydrate your vocal cords.

Third, set aside time throughout the day to not think about work or rehearsal. Find that thing that fills you up and spend a few minutes throughout the day doing that. That could be reading a few pages of a book or watching an episode of your favorite TV show. By giving yourself that time to take care of yourself, you reduce the time that you have to spend in recovery

on the back end of an exhausting day. For me this looks like watching a few minutes of lifestyle YouTube videos in my home alone or a quiet spot in a theater or workplace. This allows my brain to calm down, so when I re-enter rehearsal or work, I'm ready to go.

Fourth, find a way to create something. For myself, I love to plan little photo shoots with my wife. It brings me joy to find a fun place to take a photo and find clothes that match the aesthetic of the environment. This creative experience feels like a way that I can tell a story in a way other than acting. That is a part of the reason I love social media because I can express my creativity through another medium. I have also taken an interest in pottery and interior design. Is there a way that you can connect with your creativity outside of being an actor? Find the thing that lights you up and build a few minutes of free play with it each day.

Fifth, go out in nature. I know, virtually every self-care book mentions this, but maybe it is for a reason. Being out in nature is proven to improve our mood. Personally, my favorite place, the place that I feel most alive/safe/closest to God, is on top of the mountain. Currently, living in Florida, it has proven to be challenging to even find a hill. I've been running outside and being active for several years now, and I love it. I feel like I am able to de-stress from the day, and it makes me feel good. I also like the idea that I'm taking the time to value my health.

This leads to my sixth point, consider fueling your body with balanced meals. I will be honest and say that I haven't always had the best relationship with food. At times, I have overindulged in food and other times I have restricted my diet, neither of which contributed to my well-being. Are you eating enough carbs, greens, and proteins to fuel you for the rigorous hours ahead? Do you feel good after you eat, or does your food make you feel sick or sluggish? What foods can you eat that make you feel energized and light? I am not a nutritionist, so I

cannot advise you on specifics, but I do know that when I have a balanced meal, I have what I need inside me to traverse through the day.

As an actor, my seventh point is that it's important to be inspired by entertainment. I encourage actors who want to do theater, film or television to take part in attending or watching entertainment consistently. Not only will you learn so much from watching others, but it will also give you a feeling of excitement to go back and do it yourself.

My eighth suggestion comes out of a point of frustration in my life. There was a season where I was an actor with a company, and I passed a Broadway performer who was in a touring show that I knew was in town. I asked her if she felt like she was still learning and growing in her process, and she told me, “No ... I feel like I've learned everything I need to know.” I remember being so disappointed with that response and thought that I never wanted to be anything like her. The following evening, I went to rehearsal and shared that interaction with my director, and they said that they felt the same way. The best way to keep growing as an artist and a human is to be in classes and to learn new things from people, whether that be in a theater, film studio, community center or even a church. Hopefully, continuing to grow on our journey as humans makes us more informed actors and people. When we learn new skills or different ways to achieve a goal or task, it makes our lives that much richer. We should always be learning from others until the day we die. It doesn't mean that we are learning rocket science; sometimes we're just learning about a new acting method or how to make your own pasta. Whatever it may be for you, I encourage you to not let yourself get to a point where you feel like you've learned it all because that often allows pride to enter our lives and as we have discussed, the ego is a barrier to living playfully. It is incredibly valuable to take care of yourself! By doing this, you create a consistent lifestyle that supports and maintains the healthy habit of play.

CHAPTER FOUR: TYPES OF PLAY

There are so many types of play that humans utilize daily beyond play in the workplace and in educational curriculum. A few means of play are spectator play, gaming, repetition, pretend, narrative, and psychoanalytic play.

Spectator Play

I come from the South, in a place that bleeds for sports. Sports are such a huge part of the lives of communities in the southern states to the point that it seems odd to this outsider. There are a lot of people who say they are sports fans, but until you attend an Alabama versus Auburn football game, I'm not sure that you understand the impassioned synergy that takes place in an arena. I have never been a huge sports fan, and it has always been really confusing for me to understand why someone would care about throwing a ball into a goal, hoop, or hole. Until I understood what spectator play was, I was not able to appreciate that when you attend a sports game, you are taking part in play. It is not that I am a huge sports fan now, that is just not the way I'm made, however I have grown to appreciate that magic energy that takes place when thousands of fans are screaming for their team to win. Spectator play is when people come together to be a part of an experience without directly taking part in the act itself. While the spectator in a football game is not playing the game, they are still a part of the overall experience. So, when people go see a game, they feel as if they are playing the game in the sense that they are so invested in the players. What makes spectator play so thrilling is the shared energy among the onlookers. You feel that if you just yell a little bit louder, somehow the quarterback will lead the team to victory. Being a part of spectator play is not just about the game itself, it is also about the connections that you build within the sports community. Through

taking part in this shared experience (whether that be the game played or the events lead up to the game like tailgating) emotional bonds are formed with strangers who align with your level of play. Let's not forget about how playing a sport is a game in and of itself. “(Harry) Edwards (American sociologist) ... defines sport as ... activities having formally recorded histories and traditions, stressing physical exertion through competition within limits set in explicit and formal rules governing rule and rule position relationships, and carried out by actors who represent or are part of formally organized associations having the goal of achieving valued tangibles or intangibles through defeating opposing groups ...” (Kerr & Apter 44). While Edwards may not consider professional sports to be play, it is evident that play is seen in his definition of sport. The element of competition is another type of play as seen in sports. The drama that is played out on a basketball court with two opposing teams, could reflect that of the English and the French in Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Teams train so diligently to be the greatest players, so when you put two opposing teams together in one arena who both want to beat each other, how can you not see the play present within that situation? “Each of these types of sport is considered to be a game concerned with physical progress, but perceived in fundamentally different ways by the participants” (Kerr & Apter 45). Although every sport is widely different, just like acting they all have a set of game rules, players assigned, an objective (to win) and an obstacle (their opponents).

Another form of spectator play could be seen in taking part in entertainment. Andrew Coulson names this phenomenon “Cognitive Synergy”. “Synergies are proposed to have the effect of increasing arousal. Consequently, they tend to be sought and enjoyed in the paratelic (playful) state (being experienced as ‘fascinating’, ‘magical’, or even ‘funny’...” (Kerr and Apter 72). There is something satisfying about being an audience member and taking in a story. Stories

that draw me in as an audience member are stories that challenge my thoughts, that allow me to see myself on stage or screen, or stories that tug at my heartstrings emotionally. Think about when you watch a scary movie. There really isn't a way to be a passive spectator. You are immersed in the world of the story so much that you are curled up in a ball on your couch shouting “don't go in there!” to the girl running away from the serial killer. So, while you are not an actor in the entertainment you are consuming, you are an active player in the story.

Entertainment is meant to be a shared experience. In comedy, we find strongly opposing forces funny. For instance Kerr & Apter say, “One of the most successful series in television history, namely *M*A*S*H**, (is a) comedy set in an army hospital in the Korean War ... (of which) the tragedy of war (is) juxtaposed with the comedy of those caught up in it ... True comic material has an underlying sense of optimism, playfulness, in the promise of a happy (at least non-serious) ending...” (Kerr & Apter 75). We are attracted to the element of surprise in comedy.

When a character is laughing hysterically and suddenly their laughter turns to tears, that is funny because it is unexpected. But what makes dramatic entertainment so appealing? Why would we actively choose to take part in something that will be sad, intense, or aggressive? Coulson points us to the power of empathy on the human psyche. “While character development along the lines of apparent-inferiority/real-superiority are common, these are not the only within-character synergies to be found in drama. One of the most interesting, for example regards the union of alienation with empathy...” (Kerr & Apter 76). Perhaps it is the human response of empathy that draws us into drama. As a spectator, we imagine what it would be like to be in the shoes of the lonely kid in the hallway or the struggling single mom. Our hearts hurt when they are low. We feel that if we give them our full attention, we can somehow heal their trauma and support their situation.

Game Shows and Gaming Play

Game shows and reality competitions are also a niche type of entertainment that welcomes participants as spectator players. When we are watching a game show, we feel that we are stakeholders in the game. As the contestants compete to win big, we compete alongside them. We feel that if we get an answer right at home, we have somehow won with the contestant in the gameshow. There is a collective synergistic energy that ignites us to cheer on a game player. Kerr and Apter say that “Perhaps the most widespread feature of all is what has been termed ‘ritualized conflict’ or conflict within a structure ... Common synergy involves the juxtaposition of winning and losing, which often accounts for much of the arousal experienced by a viewer or spectator. Two athletes, contestants, teams, or horses that are equally matched, or neck and neck in a game or race, provide far more excitement than that reduced when a player or side is winning by a wide margin” (Kerr & Apter 79). Humans love conflict. We love to align with either the underdog or the front runner. We become loyal to our favorite players or contestants, simultaneously feeling the defeat or sweet victory of the player. “Sports champions or quiz show prodigies are indeed mortal, yet nevertheless they appear to attain feats or perform skills outside the range of normal human ability or capacity” (Coulson 79). I think that when we watch this type of entertainment, we somehow feel immortal. We begin to play with the idea that we can achieve something beyond our limits. We move past the role of a consumer and take on the role of an engaged participant. This can also be seen in the world of video games. I think there is something exciting to the 12-year-old boy lounging in his bedroom who is controlling a muscular secret agent on the screen before him. Through video games, the player is able to explore a world that they wouldn't be able to otherwise. They can investigate life choices without the repercussions. “Every major theory of play, especially those theories which are centered on the child rather than the adult, has pointed to the way in which, where a safe space is created for the

individual, it is possible for him or her to use this to practice new behaviors and skills without fear of serious negative consequences if anything goes wrong” (Kerr & Apter 168). I want to add to this and say that there are fabulous opportunities to play for both children and adults. We do not get to an age in our lives when play becomes less necessary and valuable. We need play, but in order to play, we must create more opportunities for that to happen.

Repetition Play

Jean Piaget says that another type of play can be found in repetition. Saracho and Spodek say that “Piaget defines pretend play as an act of ‘pure assimilation’ in which activities are repeated solely for the functional pleasure which the reenactment of a sensory-motor schema brings ... For Piaget, the simple repetition of the act is a source of pleasure in itself” (Saracho and Spodek 36). You could see this kind of play in the child that wants to dance to the current trending song on repeat. I know many parents that are driven crazy by the number of times their kids ask them to play the same song over and over again. I get it, just like anybody else I don't want to hear a song played twenty times in a row. However, there is an unparalleled joy present in the ability to repeat an action and experiment with that action multiple times. I have heard countless directors say that the only way that a show will get on its feet is through repetition, and I agree. It is the very act of playing with something multiple times that inches us closer to a goal. When you are training to be a professional golfer, chances are you are not going to make par every round. It is going to take you repeating an action hundreds of times before you feel like you take steps forward. Repetition can be tedious, but when viewed through the lens of play, repetition can be enjoyable.

As I've mentioned, I once did a touring Theatre for Young Audiences musical, and we ended up performing the show over one hundred times. It was astounding that even when we closed our run, I was still making new discoveries about the choices I had made or could make. I was still playing with how a choice could better engage audiences. Saracho and Spodek discuss an example of repetition similar to mine saying "An example of this behavior occurred when Piaget's daughter Jacqueline, at 18 months of age, closed her eyes and put her head up on a pillow as if she were going to sleep, though it was not time for bed and she did not actually appear intent on sleep. Such ludic rituals gradually come to be accompanied by signs of pretend play such as smiling, verbalizing, acting on an absent object (such as well-known gesture of bringing one's hand to the side of the head to imitate a pillow), or using ludic symbols involving other substitutions (such as holding onto to a donkey's tail as though it were the fringe of a pillow)" (Saracho and Spodek 36). This leads me to the next category of play, pretend and narrative play.

Solitary Pretend Play

Piaget presents two types of play, solitary and social pretend play. Solitary pretend play is when an individual plays make believe alone. Of course, this would be most often seen in children. Have you ever observed a child who is content playing alone? You see this a lot with those who are the only child in their family or when there is an age gap from the youngest to the oldest child. Those kids feel so comfortable playing alone in their bedrooms with their dolls or action figures, all the while giving each figurine their own voice and characteristics. This is such a valuable form of pretend play because this is where many of us develop the skills to create a narrative. We learn how to build a beginning, middle, and end into the flow of a story through solitary pretend play. "Narrative is one of the essential modes of communication through which

people express their thoughts and feelings. Just as children learn about the physical world through logical problem solving, they learn about these social-emotional world – the world of people – through narrative...” (Saracho and Spodek 88). This quote is saying that pretend play can be a way of expressing ourselves.

I once talked with a friend of mine who is a father, and he mentioned that it was difficult to have conversations with this child. He said that the way that he was able to hear about their day, what made them upset, and what brought them joy, was through getting on their level and playing with their toys with them. This is a great way for parents to build relationships with their children who may be guarded emotionally or who may not have the tools to express their feelings yet.

Social Pretend Play

A reason I love acting is because it is a way that I can express myself. Even though I am telling stories that are not my own, I am able to cathartically express my deepest pain and anxiety or elation. Although I believe the roots of pretend and narrative play to be found in solitary play, I also believe the way that we can grow our ability to tell stories is through doing that in social settings. “Social pretend play, particularly role play, encourages children to imagine the world from someone else's point of view. When you assume a role with the gusto of a young pretender, that is, when you eagerly become patrolman or driver, you appreciate temporarily a perspective that is not your own. Because appreciating someone else’s viewpoint is a major accomplishment of adult life, we might wonder whether the role play among two- and three-year-olds is a precursor to higher levels of thought” (Saracho and Spodek 85). Again we see the theme of empathy returning. When we play with others, we see life through their eyes, and we can better

appreciate them as people. Approaching life with this childlike sense of play is also going to build communities of gratitude. Remember career day in elementary school, when kids said that they wanted to be a garbage man or mail delivery driver? A lot of kids probably laughed at them. When we laugh at people when they choose to play, it inhibits their freedom and causes insecurity and shame. I always feel most loved when people ask me questions. This is also a way I try to show people love, because I know it brings people joy to share their story and life experiences. I think communication in this regard (what some might deem “small talk”), is a really valuable method of nurturing our peers. Through investigating their lives, we are able to remind them that their lives are valuable. So, I encourage adults who want to rediscover the social play they once had as children, to start small. Just begin playing by asking questions. By giving someone a few moments of your undivided attention, you cannot comprehend how that could change their life.

Psychoanalytic Play

Play can also be a means to heal trauma. In psychoanalytic theory, “Sigmund Freud (1959) suggested that play was wish fulfillment and allowed children to act out uncertainties, anxieties, and wished for outcomes and therefore to master traumatic events” (Saracho and Spodek 121). As far as this applies to my own story, play has been incredibly healing for my chronic anxiety and fear. As I have mentioned, there were years where I barely slept, I felt so insecure with who I was, I questioned everything I did, and self-hatred cornered me into isolation. I saw a counselor for a few years in my mid-twenties who implemented playful activities into our sessions. There was a time when he asked me to draw something, anything I wanted. I honestly thought, although I love art, that it was a stupid idea. I was at a point in my life where I wanted my counselor to fix me and make my problems go away, but that was not

going to happen. Anxiety does not just go away overnight; it is a lifetime struggle. I think that my counselor asked me to do this so that I could process my pain with him, while not putting all of my focus on our conversation. I think when it comes to mental health, it is important to play with all of the options that may pull us out of the bog. Mental health is not a one-size-fits-all model. It takes time to figure out practical tools that can help you to heal. I know that when my wife was struggling with mental health, her counselor had her try an exercise (EMRD, eye movement desensitization and processing) that was beneficial in healing her past trauma. Her counselor held two flashlights in her left and right hands and as Chelsea was sharing issues from her past, the counselor was turning the flashlights on and off, bouncing the light from hand to hand. It was Chelsea's job to let her eyes follow the flashing lights. She mentioned to me that this was a helpful experiment and that counselors try this method of healing trauma because it can rewire the way that we think about past issues. Looking at the case study of Sheila R. in *Playful Intelligence*, DeBenedet tells us that her

Mother was young, single, and barely able to care for herself, let alone an unwanted baby. She took Sheila straight from the hospital to her grandmother's house – and walked away ... Her chances of a good life seemed insurmountable ... But she also recalls, even this early in her life, drifting to an imaginary, better world. Playing games in her mind, she was able to find temporary reprieve from her living nightmare ... Fortunately, Sheila's high school art teacher introduced her to painting, opening a new, creative world for her. Finding solace in painting and drawing, Sheila reflected her peaceful, imaginary world in her art, rather than her dark past. There, she was not just a fairy Princess, but also a warrior, a skater, an artist. (DeBenedet 22-24)

This is only a part of Sheila's remarkable story. Because of her extraordinary art teacher, Sheila did not end up as another statistic. Had Sheila not encountered someone who valued play, her life could have taken a very different and dark turn. Just through the simple act of drawing, Sheila was able to run away to another world of light and freedom. This act of playfulness allowed her a few moments to feel safe during horrific events. After Sheila suffered from breast cancer, major debt and divorce,

She made a vital commitment: 'I'm going to enjoy every last bit of my life.' From then on, Sheila lived her life with a sense of adventure ... Happy to be alive, Sheila had adopted a playful outlook, free from regret about the past or fear of the future ... (Sheila) wanted to pass on to her family an important lesson that she had learned in her life: 'try to let things go more easily, and live lighter than you are. You end up hurting yourself if you don't'. (DeBenedet 26-27)

As you already know, if there is one promise with life, it is that it is going to be painful. People are going to treat you wrongly, you will experience the sting of death, you are going to make mistakes, there will be things that you wish you could change in your life and regrets that leave you feeling empty. Choosing to play is not about acting as if there are not hard things in life, it is learning how to dance in the rain. My sister Gabrielle, a wonderful person and an intelligent counselor, told me once that grief does not go away; we just learn how to grow around it. I think that correlates to play. It is okay for life not to be perfect or to not be where you thought you would be, but play can help us overshadow the darkness with light. It doesn't mean the darkness goes away, it just becomes fainter.

CHAPTER FIVE: PLAY FOR CONNECTIONS

When we take part in a story, what do we hope that we leave with? We want to be moved emotionally and challenged in our thinking. We want to witness conflict and experience the catharsis of resolution. We want to be exposed to chaotic beauty. We want to be immersed in the swirling images of the text. We want our five senses to be activated and sparked. But above all else, as humans we long for *connections*. Genuine connections are what we are all searching for in a story. We go to the theatre or the cinema to be titillated by authentic connections between actors to the text, their scene partners and their interactions with the audience. This yearning for oral and physical story is laced in the fibers of our humanity. We are walking stories, who desire to participate in other stories that ignite something in us on a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual level. There is no life without stories. But what happens when stories are lacking their playfulness? When play is not chosen, what kind of story is being presented and can this move audiences in the same capacity? The late great University of Central Florida professor, Mark Brotherton, always said, “after all, it’s called a ‘play’ and not a ‘serious.’” Choosing play is what actors must do day after day, rehearsal after rehearsal, and performance after performance. Play is embodied by deep connection, which is comprised of specificity in story, aesthetic chaos, exciting conflict, powerful resolution, emotional release, cognitive engagement, sensory curiosity, safety of the soul yet foundational uncomfortably, and kinesthetic embodiment. Play is what actors need to choose in order to find the pure connections they are so desperately searching for.

How can we use Spolin’s *Theatre Games for the Lone Actor* as the foundation for finding connections in the acting process? First, I will reflect on how Spolin’s work can be used to find connections to the characters we are performing. Second, we will use Spolin’s games to inform

our connections with our scene partners. Third, we will see how Spolin's work on play can be used for developing stronger actor to audience connections. My guiding question for Spolin's work is, "Why are games a valuable component in an actor's process?" Let me begin by reflecting on the poem "Crystal Ball."

To the witch she did go to find out what the future holds and to the seeker the following was told: Present time you must find and within it dwell, for in there is the key that opens the door to the great mystery and the future you will see. But hark! If in present time you cannot dwell you'll have no future to foretell. Trapped in the past you'll always be. So she went forth to dwell in present time. But alas! Present time like the divine is most difficult to find. (Theatre Games for The Lone Actor xii)

The need to be present as an actor is the highest aim. Being present is what storytelling is all about and for an actor to experience the moment-to-moment images of the text, they must be present. "Do not think of present time as clock time but rather as a timeless moment ... you're right there; you're connected and you don't know what's going to happen and that's where spontaneity is, and that's where the joy is ... the never-ending spiral" (Theatre Games for The Lone Actor x).

I have compiled a list of Spolin's games as evidence for my claims and which can be used as a tool for actors wanting to build more play into their work. For ease of use, Viola Spolin's games are bulleted in the text below. In compiling my list of selected games from *Theatre Games for the Lone Actor*, I would begin with her "Basic Warm-Up Exercise." Because actors need to build a character from a place of neutrality, a simple exercise focused on breath and awareness will quiet the actor's soul and prepare them to be moldable. Spolin's instructions read,

- “Feel yourself sitting in the chair! Feel the space all around you! Now let the space feel you! Roll your head around! (let the weight of your head do the moving.) Shoulders at ease! You stay out of it!” (Spolin 10).

Spolin leads the actor through easy movements to make room for active engagement as both a character and a side coach. She talks about the value of side coaching saying that it, “Is a guide, a directive, a support, a catalyst, a higher view, an inner voice, an extended hand, you might say, given during the playing of a game to help you stay on focus” (Spolin 7). I find this tool especially helpful in the beginning of the actor's process while they are looking to shed themselves and their habitual tendencies and tensions. Before we take on the circumstances of someone else, we must first interact with our own in order to let them go.

Previously, I have mentioned the importance of playing with silence and stillness. I believe that silence is just as powerful for actors as vocalizations. Many of the best creative impulses happen when we sit still. In “Sit in Silence” Spolin reminds actors that

- “True silence without subvocal or unspoken thoughts or words creates an openness as the objects in the immediate environment come to life. Reaching out is also reaching in. Deeper personal resources are reached” (Spolin 14).

Are you able to sit still without your mind swirling in many different directions? If not, is there something that you can do for yourself that will help you to be more present in the “not doing”? I think this also goes back to what I said before about not being able to fill up someone else if we ourselves are drawing from an empty well. How can we expect to fill up a character with fully realized choices, if we ourselves are restless, drained, and burned out.

I find this next exercise to be very useful in becoming aware of how the character moves throughout space. “Space Walk: Exploration” instructs actors to

- “Walk around the room and feel the space around and against you. Physically investigate it as an unknown substance and give it no name” (Spolin 17).

Actors, as you walk throughout the room, think about the tensions that you hold beginning with your feet moving all the way up into the top of your head. Can you let each of your tensions go one by one, trickling away into the floor? Ask yourself questions like, “How do my feet typically meet the ground? Do I walk toe heel or heel toe? How do my arms swing? What is my leading center? What is the pace with which I walk?” Can you let all that go? Now, while continuing to walk throughout the space, ask that kind of questions about your character. The point of this exercise is to slowly explore the tensions of the character you are embodying. Do not fall into the trap that you need to go with your first choice. Play with many different options until you land on one to bring into the rehearsal room. Once you bring a litany of choices into the rehearsal room, you have the flexibility to be able to adjust according to your scene partner.

This next game is a magical exercise for getting actors out of their heads and into their bodies. If you ever get stuck with feeling like you are over analyzing all of your choices, you can always come back to this exercise. In “Physicalizing an Object”, you should:

- “Select an object, animate or inanimate, and handle and use it, communicating the life and movement of this object. If the object is a bowling ball, for example, you must show what happens to the ball after it has left your hands. A few other examples of objects that can be physicalized are a fish, a bird, a pinball machine, a kite, a yo-yo” (Spolin 25).

This is a tool to get actors to use the full availability of their bodies. I would recommend thinking of an object that your character would interact with, say a bouquet of flowers. See the bouquet of flowers on the ground. What does it look like? How heavy do you think the flowers are? Get specific with the colors and textures of the petals and stems. What do you think it would be like to pick up that bouquet of flowers? Now pick it up. How heavy was it? What do the stems feel like in your hand? Take a big whiff of the flowers. Do they have a scent? Does that scent invoke any memories? Pick off some of the pedals and toss them onto the floor beneath you. What was that sensation like? How did that make you feel? Find a few ways to interact with a bouquet of flowers. Now put the flowers back down on the floor, and take note of that experience, keeping in mind all the sensory details.

“How Old Am I?” is a game to continue to physicalize a character with more specificity. This exercise asks actors to find the subtlety in the physicality of the character’s age. Spolin discourages actors from showing their age and encourages actors to focus on the simple characteristics in the range of motion on the age spectrum. There is something powerful about her approach to sit in a chair and think about your character’s age and play with physical tensions. If you are forty-five years old, how might you hold yourself? I think a lot is dependent on the circumstances of the character, for instance their income status (poor, middle class, wealthy) or job position. A forty-five-year-old who is a baker would have a different way of carrying themselves than a forty-five-year-old insurance agent. How would their career affect their alignment? Are they hunched over at work all day in front of a computer screen? How physically active are they? How is their health? Do they have neuropathy in one foot that makes them walk with a bit of a limp? Get specific with the tensions that live in the age of your character’s body, but also be wary of showing the audience your age through over exaggeration.

A great exercise to increase the actors understanding of their physical environment is “Emerging Where”.

- “Decide on where. Without preplanning, center, and by focusing on the where, physically contact all the objects, touching, hearing, seeing, smelling, showing that which emerges in the environment” (Spolin 37).

Sensory work is key in an actor's ability to connect with an audience through painting pictures through imagery. A simple way for actors to incorporate this in their process is to open their door to their home or apartment and step outside. Go through your five senses and be aware of what sensorial experiences you are being bombarded with. Can you hear a dog barking a few houses down? Can you smell the trash can from that house across from you? Can you feel the humidity pool on your skin? Getting specific with place will also pull you more into the present moment to allow deeper connections with your scene partner. It will ground you in a scene so that your actor brain is not spinning while you are sharing a story. If you do not know what is going on around you, how can the audience receive images?

So far all of these exercises have been unvoiced. Here is a fun exercise that actors can do alone or with a scene partner.

- “Gibberish” is a game focused on using creativity to make up conversations without speaking in a real language. This game is useful for “the flow of sound and body expression to become one. Gibberish helps remove concern and preoccupation with the lines in the script” (Spolin 40).

This is a fun way to play vocally and to allow your voice to fill a room in a way that is equally risky and safe. It is risky because it takes bravery to speak gibberish and to be silly. It is safe

because you are not married to the words on a page. This can help actors to get out of their heads and to stop trying to make a moment happen in a scene emotionally. This allows them to focus on their scene partner and the very act of connecting with another person.

“Slow/Fast/Normal” is a beneficial game to play with pacing and a character's inner tempo rhythm. Spolin instructs actors to do a simple task that has a beginning, middle and end slowly, quickly, and moderately paced. I would say start this game by suggesting an action. Once you play with all of the variations of pacing of your character's action, reflect on the discoveries made about how pacing can reveal the emotional and mental state of the character. Once you go through this repetition a few times, play with adding some improvised lines. How would your characters inner tempo rhythm differ from your own? This will enable the audience to understand the internal life of the character.

Continuing to build upon letting your voice fill the room, actors can then experiment with “Extended Sound”.

- “Stand in the middle of a room and send out a sound (not a word) to an object in the room and let it land. Contact other objects in the space for the sound” (Spolin 67).

This game could be played solo or with a partner. The purpose of the game is to let your voice reach your target. Spolin advises actors to start off with a word and then graduate to a full sentence. Can you envelope your target with sound? Are you breathing properly to allow that to happen?

To build upon that exercise, actors can implement “Spelling.” In this simple exercise, actors will be, “spelling the letters of the words aloud instead of speaking the words” (Spolin 73). I find this exercise beneficial because I know in my own work, I can often forget the importance

of every word in the story. Sometimes I find myself struggling to find the operable words in a sentence or trailing off at the end of a sentence. I think this could be helpful for actors because it forces you to slow down and reflect on the images that every word carries. At the same time, you are deepening your connection to the text you are acting.

This next exercise “Attitudes: Others” is exciting because it makes you more conscious and empathetic towards the emotional state of those around you.

- “As you move about a room, physically pick up a facial or body attitude of someone you know very well. You will be physically exploring that person's facial and body attitudes, not feeling or thinking. After all of the side coaching, look into a mirror and release!”
(Spolin 84).

The best actors are thoughtful people watchers. Through walking about a room and investigating all of the habits of people around you, you can slowly start to pick up their tensions. Examine how that makes you feel. How does it affect your attitude? Spolin asks actors to take on one tension at a time and sit with that for a bit. That way actors do not become overwhelmed by all of the ways to embody someone else. She invites actors to make the tension as big and small as possible. How does that affect your attitude now? Does that raise or lower the stakes in the present environment?

The final Spolin exercise I recommend actors explore is “What's beyond? Entering/Exiting”.

- “Communicate where you (a character, who) have been and what you were doing with whom, if anyone. If you have a script, you know these things; If improvising, let your

inner self decide: a fight, a love encounter, a sick child, for example just before “action” is called, or just before your stage entrance, coach yourself as follows” (Spolin 95).

I end with this Spolin exercise because I think it gives intentionality to the beginning and end of a scene which are often the biggest things that the audience will remember. There should be a character arc from how you are coming into a scene and how you end a scene. If you do not know where you have been prior to the incoming conflict of the present moment, the stakes will be lowered and you as an actor will have to warm up during the scene. The audience will take note of that, and it will decrease your connection to them. They will see you using the scene as a warmup to get what you want, as opposed to coming in with intentionality. If it is not listed in the script, get creative with where the character could be coming from and what led them to this moment. That will give you an indication of why the character needs what they need in the present moment. That will in turn give them the push they need to exit the scene in search of their next objective. I chose Spolin’s work as my foundation for play in the theater because her games are creative, thoughtful, and will ultimately help you to make discoveries that will propel you into more connections on stage. Now that I have researched and reflected upon the many play theorists in history, I will reflect on my own methodology of playing as an actor who is looking for deeper connections.

CHAPTER SIX: PLAY IN MY PROCESS

“Welcome to the Moon”

The performance component of my thesis is found in the productions *Welcome to the Moon* by John Patrick Shanley and *Shrek the Musical* by David Lindsay-Abaire. I am approaching this chapter like a journal reflection, meditating on and evaluating my process in the two productions. First, in *Welcome to the Moon* I played Artie, Man, and Barkeep. There is something inherently playful about playing multiple roles in a night of one act plays. This production in general has a playful spirit. The themes of loneliness, the search for love, and the pain of unrealized dreams, are woven throughout each storyline. These themes help to connect the audience to the storyteller in that the audience has empathy for the characters in their unrequited love. The symbol of the moon continues to serve as a distant longing for a better life, something which all humans can connect with.

My first guiding question is, “When was play present in my process?” I originally did not want to be a part of this production. In the beginning, I thought the play was a little odd and perhaps a bit boring. It was not until the first table read, hearing the story read aloud, that I fell in love with the story and the characters that I was playing. I remember the first night of rehearsal I asked if the directors wanted us to try accents, to which they replied that they did. I was so nervous because one of my characters, the older the Irish bartender named Artie, had an accent. So, with all of the preparation that I had done, I went for it! I was surprised to hear people laughing when I started to read as the character. From those first few moments, I began to pick up on how this character could emotionally move audiences. After the read through, the director, Tara Kromer, said she laughed because she did not expect the accent, but she loved it. She felt it was humorous, while also being authentic to the character. I think originally the character was

supposed to be Irish by descent, but perhaps not have a thick Irish accent. I am so glad I chose to play vocally on that first day because I discovered some of the comedy in the character's vocal patterns and pacing. That evening, I started to invest further into the County Cork accent. I love Artie's story because at the end of the entire production, he gets to sing a beautiful love ballad called "Sweet Sixteen" (an old Irish folk song). A lot of my vocal research came from audio and video footage of people from Cork. Through working with dialect coach, Vivian Majkowski, I studied the vocal inflection patterns and the habitual tendencies of the oral tract in the Cork accent. Vivian helped me come up with a guiding figure to model my accent after. The key phrase that broke down the accent was, "The Cork accent is a very particular thing." We looked at the placement of the tongue in the oral tract and how it differs from my habitual tendencies. We talked about the pattern of inflection and how it has a subtle bounce. Although it is bouncy, it isn't quite as melodic as other Irish dialects. We looked at how the gentleman in the video we were studying carried a lot of cheek tension and how his bottom lip was very active. All this vocal work gave me a nice foundation to play with in Artie's world. With Vivian's help, I was able to move past a stereotypical Irish dialect (a la Lucky Charms leprechaun) and I found the specificities that make the Cork accent unique. This was my way into Artie's world.

The other key factor to finding Artie was his internal rhythm. A part of his comedy and humor is rooted in the fact that he is a very physically slow person. He has been a bartender for a long time, and he is not in a hurry to do anything. Therefore, when he is walking from the bar to take a person their drink, he moves at his own comfortable pace. Because I was able to find the vocal and physical choices that differed from my habitual tendencies, while staying true to the character as written in the script, I felt that I could slip into his skin easily at any given moment. I had a fun time in the rehearsal process playing with the comedy of when I could take a longer

amount of time to do something like pouring beer into a glass and counting to five, and when I needed to speed movement up. I also explored a higher pitch register than I would use habitually. My sweet grandfather, who I called Granddaddy, very much reminded me of this character. I played with embodying my Granddaddy with how his chest was slightly collapsed and the tremors he had. It was fun to have an actual person from my life who I studied physically for years and then to be able to apply a few of his habits on to Artie. Even though my granddaddy passed away many years ago, I remember studying him so much as a child and teen. He was always so slow and was never in a rush to do anything. He had a minor tremor in his head and hands that became more apparent as he aged. I used my imagination to try and capture his mannerisms and infuse Artie with my Granddaddy's spirit. Even though Artie did not say much, by including these specific physical and vocal elements, I could communicate the depth of his story to an audience.

My play journey with the character of Man centered around imagery and wonder. Both Jim Helsing and Vivian Majkowski have given me tools to dissect the images in the worlds of the characters I play. This was the best way for me to understand Man's world as a tortured soul who is literally haunted by ghosts of his past. In order for me to play in his world, I had to first understand why he was so depressed and his relationships to the ghosts that were haunting him. After reflecting on the text from the script, the director as well as my fellow actors and I collaborated to build the dynamic between Man and his ghosts. We knew that one ghost was my mother, and then we chose the other ghosts to represent my ex-fiancé and my past self during war times. This opened a whole world of physical and vocal choices because then we could investigate further how each ghost would physically torment Man. As the scenes progressed, the ghosts would crowd around me sucking out my mind, heart, and soul like dementors from *Harry*

Potter. I imagined that they began slowly picking parts of me off and then as the scene grew in intensity, the ghosts' torment grew larger, and Man's energy depleted. Typically, in the production each character has their own "inner demons" or things that haunt them. To have the opportunity to physically embody the anguish of his soul, helped to deepen the images that I discovered in the text.

The weighty darkness of the first scene is what is contrasted with the cosmic playfulness and spontaneity in the second half of the one act. When Woman convinces Man to open his heart again, she invites him to explore the universe of love. In this one act, Woman and Man jump out of a 1940s dark bar into an unknown universe, landing on an otherworldly planet. My scene partner and I were able to use the images we created for the universe and play physically and imaginatively in the new space we were exploring. I could see the galaxies around me, the stars shining so brightly, and I could feel the hopefulness radiate into the soles of his feet and out the crown of his head. I played with the energy that was produced in him kinesthetically as his walls came down and as he opened himself to her. It was as if I was truly experiencing this other universe and all the colors, objects, and energies around me were spontaneously exploding. I have never felt so free vocally and physically to imaginatively play. I felt like I was flying, like I was in a dream. Getting specific with imagery helped me to build two strongly opposing and specific universes. The images helped to transport me to these otherworldly places, and yet they rooted me in the circumstances of the present moment. I connected, on a soul level, with the character woman. We could communicate so much through simple breath and connection with our eyes. It is an odd balance to be completely transported, but at the same time aware that you are sharing a story with an audience.

As for Barkeep, what helped me most to understand his world was playing with actions (with what he wanted). This role had the fewest lines of all the three pieces which forced me to understand his importance in the overall story. The Barkeep's job was to keep the peace and to stand for justice. Since this one act was set in the Wild West, Vivian worked with us to find our Texan southern drawl. I played with a lower pitch register for this character while also finding comedy in stark switches between higher and lower pitches. I gave the Barkeep a wider stance than I would habitually have, which helped me to find his old western sense of duty. Despite this being a minor character, I was able to tell his truth which added conflict to the protagonist's actions. Overall, I feel that these were some of the freest moments I have ever felt on stage throughout a multiple week production process. Although it was physically and emotionally demanding, I felt that I set myself up well as I played during the rehearsal process so that I could continue to make new discoveries once the show opened.

My second guiding question for the performative aspect of my thesis is "When was my play inhibited? What were my barriers to play?" In reflecting upon my experience playing Artie, I noticed that knowing that I was going to sing at the end of the one act (the finale to the production), I felt a growing sense of anxiety. I have been singing my entire life since I was a young child, and yet early on in the process I could not shake my nerves. I found that I started to make character choices that related to how I was feeling personally and stamp those onto the character. I think my pride started to come into play a bit because I did not want to let anybody know that I felt nervous about that. I was also thinking, "How can I be nervous after I have been singing in front of people my whole life? Isn't this something that I should be over at this point?" A lot of swirling questions began to bombard my mind like "Will people think that I sound good? Will this song be impressive? What happens if I cannot vocally sustain the show and I

lose my voice?” It wasn't until the moment that I could accept my fear that I could move on and learn to play through it. I met with Vivian about this, and she gave me some life-changing advice. She instructed me to focus less on how I felt like I sounded and more on the images that live in the text that I was singing. The moment she said that, it was as if everything clicked. That is not to say that I was not nervous occasionally, but I had a target to focus on that was different than being good or impressing others. When I was trying to sound good or impress others, I was just telling my own story and not Artie's story. My self-consciousness was due to my pride in that I didn't want to be rejected in front of a group of people. I was scared that I would not be good enough and that people would think that I was bad. But when I dove into the images that he was singing about, invested into his back-story further, and pondered why he was singing this song now, I could better tell the story as Artie. I grew to love singing that song every night and to look forward to it. I could see the images so clearly in my mind and I had a focus because I took the time to be specific with what he wanted and who his target was.

In reflecting upon the experience, I realized that my breath changes depending on the temperature (pressure level) of the room. In a post-production meeting with Vivian, I was telling her about how on opening night I felt that I could not connect to full and deep breaths. I believe that my breath was constricted physically because of the mental pressure of the room. Not only was it opening night, but I also knew that quite a few faculty members were attending the performance that evening. Because the black box theater is so small, there were times that I could see outlines of them in the audience and I think that created a high-pressure environment for me. I tried to breathe deeply into my ribs, but it was a struggle for me that evening to fully support my sound with breath. Following that evening's performance, I felt much freer with

breath, but it left me wanting to know more about how I can more fully breathe through heightened circumstances and rooms (opening night, auditions, interviews, etc.).

My biggest barrier with the character Man was letting go of physical tension and the feeling that I needed to make an emotional moment happen. Something that I started to learn is to allow myself to relax more physically when moments heighten emotionally. This is the exact opposite of what we think we should do when we are embodying intense situations. I started the scene off sitting in a chair, staring into the abyss and contemplating the fears and anxieties that were attacking me. I encouraged myself to let tension fall into the chair and the floor and when I did this, I noticed that I had an easier time expressing emotions of sorrow and pain and connecting emotionally to the character's circumstances. What was not successful is when the emotions were not coming (because I had run the scene so many times) I would physically and emotionally try to push emotions of sadness to happen. This took me out of the present circumstances and put me into my own actor's mind. It was as if I was me telling a story of wanting to be able to cry on stage and less about the actual present circumstances of the character. This has happened to me many times before because I have often been cast as emotionally vulnerable men. It becomes difficult when you get to a certain place emotionally in rehearsals and you try to rediscover that throughout the long production process. Sometimes the tears were not coming in moments that we had chosen for them to happen, and so that became a barrier to my play. What could have helped me in that moment was to shift my focus to my actions and what I wanted to do and less on trying to manufacture an emotion that was not there. It was hard for me to not feel like that if at the end of the scene tears did not come, that I did not do my job well and the audience could not be as connected to the story as when I was crying. This is something I would like to look into further because I know that I will be put in these roles

for the rest of my life. I do not want to play an emotion or try to show the audience how I am feeling, but I am still not sure on how to find longevity in emotional vulnerability.

I had similar struggles with playing the character Barkeep. There were some moments where I felt tempted to play the comedy of the moment rather than the action. This role was particularly challenging for me because it was an odd balance of comedy, action, and drama. Throughout the process I tried to make sure that my focus was on my target and not on getting a reaction from the audience. Sometimes this felt weird because it is so much easier to play with a big and bold choice that you know will get a laugh. It feels uncomfortable to stand in the characters' truth and pursue what they want without any expectation of an audience's response. I think that I was close to getting there by the end of the production process, but I still think I could have invested further in his role in the overarching story.

With regard to *Welcome to the Moon*, this play did lead me to deeper connections. When I approached this script from a curious perspective, I was able to craft whole universes for each character. This was a unique experience in that a lot of the characters' backgrounds are not laid out in the text. Shanley only gives the actor a limited foundation to build upon. I appreciated the direction of our three guest directors (Tara Kromer, Joshian Morales, and Peter Cortelli) who encouraged me to really mine the text as much as I could for details on the characters' background before creating it out of my imagination. This made my choices more rooted in the story while also giving me a springboard to connect the dots. Because each one act was only a few pages long, and due to the fact that our rehearsal process was lengthy, I had a lot of time to grow attached emotionally, mentally, and sensorially to these characters. Choosing to play helped me to feel rooted in the characters in a way that I had not felt on stage before. The curiosity of "what would happen if" developed an excitement in me to attend rehearsals. I

noticed that I started to fall in love with telling stories again and enjoying the process was a natural outcome of rehearsing. I do feel like I was able to paint the images for the audience to allow them to see into the world of the characters I played, while also hopefully connecting with them on a raw emotional level. There was something about approaching a character with the mindset of play that made me feel like I could not make a wrong choice, but that there were only stronger choices. This mentality gave me a lot of physical, vocal, mental, and emotional freedom that I have not experienced since I was an undergraduate student many years ago. I think this process also reminded me that I can let go of the heavy weight of trying to please or impress people as an actor. Although I struggled in the beginning with difficult feelings that I wasn't enough or that I was going to fail, play helped me to walk throughout this process in a way that felt light. There is something special about educational theater that makes me feel safe to explore acting choices without the weightiness of a contract. However, I do believe that this lightness will carry over into my career as a professional actor. Even in the Spring of 2023, working at Orlando Shakespeare Theatre, I can see the positive effects that play has had on my life. I have auditioned more this past year than I ever have in my life. I now love to audition, tell stories and sing for people. This does not mean that I do not get nervous or have occasional moments or seasons of getting into my head, but playing in *Welcome to The Moon* made me excited to just tell a story with any opportunity that I get. I think that mindset is a necessity for every actor. It is rare that an actor starts their career and immediately achieves success that leads to a lifetime of opportunities. I am training to be the best that I can be. This does not mean that I will be the best of the best (this effort can lead to comparison, envy, and jealousy), but I can seek to achieve my greatest potential. So, I remind myself to play like an Olympian. If I do that, I believe I will experience greater joy in my craft and fuller connections in the process.

Shrek: The Musical

Shrek was one of the greatest theatrical experiences of my life. Everything about the essence of this musical and the role of Lord Farquaad screams “play!” Playing Lord Farquaad was a dream role that I did not give any credence to, because I thought it would never happen. As I was preparing for the audition, I remember thinking “Uh oh, I really want to play this character.” When it came time for the audition, I remember having a lot of fun and feeling freedom to make big choices. I think playing Lord Farquaad made me fall in love with the power of storytelling through song again. I have never performed a more demanding musical role than Lord Farquaad and yet I would not change anything about the experience. Lindsay-Abaire's book built so much comedy and depth of story into Lord Farquaad. Having such a marvelous script and fleshed out character made it easy for me to play.

Of course, the most striking element of Lord Farquaad is his short stature. This role required me to be on my knees throughout the three-month process. One of the things I have always most desired in a role is to completely be able to transform. One of the greatest ways to do that is to play physically, but nothing could have prepared me for this experience. It took me quite a while to get physically comfortable performing on my knees. It did not matter how great my knee pads were, my knees were bloody and bruised by the end of the process. I loved the challenge though of finding his confidence and standing tall (or rather short) in his (tiny pointed) shoes. I studied both the film and the Broadway musical to get a better idea of how he moves. In the past I have not been a fan of watching a filmed version of a show prior to being in a show as I found it led me to get in my head and compare myself to the original actor. However, Jim Helsing once encouraged us in an acting class to watch a filmed version of a production before beginning our own rehearsal process. His idea was that if a choice worked in the past, chances

are it would still be effective in the present. He encouraged us to find choices that stuck out to us in productions we were watching and “steal” them. When I say steal them, I mean find small moments that achieved the actor/scene partner/audience connection that we were hoping for and figure out a way for us to truthfully embody those actions in our own process. It does not mean that I would be copying what the actor did, however I would be reflecting the essence that they brought previously to the character. Since starting to apply this in my rehearsal preparation process, I feel that it has opened my imagination to all the variations of ways that you can play a character. Through watching the animated version of *Shrek*, I discovered Lord Farquaad's power and tenacity. As I watched the Broadway version of *Shrek*, I studied Christopher Sieber's flamboyant and charismatic version of Lord Farquaad. I would then come to marry these versions of the character with political dictators from the past. I researched the horrible leaders Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Idi Amin, Joseph Stalin, Muammar Gaddafi, and the Kim dynasty in the Netflix documentary “How to Become a Tyrant.” I watched how they moved throughout a crowd, how they addressed an audience, how they smiled and posed for pictures, how they interacted with their citizens, how they carried themselves physically and how they responded when they felt that things were going in their favor or against their will. At the end of the day, Lord Farquaad is a humorous and exaggerated representation of all of these leaders who have sought power through total control. As my mom once reminded me, “hurting people hurt”. Finding clips of actual people who lived and being able to embody some of their traits physically and vocally helped me find a window into Lord Farquaad's world.

The balance of Lord Farquaad's absurdity and his humanity was a tough thing to find. The way that I embodied Lord Farquaad was eccentric and over the top, yet hopefully the audience felt empathy for him once they understood why he became so proud. In Michael

Wainstein's (Director of The UCF School of Fine Arts and *Shrek* Director) acting class, he had us work through a Michael Chekhov exercise where we physicalized how a character was feeling in a heightened way. Once I was able to craft a physical pose that exemplified his aura, I could stand in that pose and immediately drop into him. When I opened my knees wide, put my fisted hands on my tiny waist, pursed my lips and raised my left eyebrow, I could feel Sterling leave the stage and Lord Farquaad take over.

This rehearsal experience was beneficial with playing with how I could fill the 2,700 seats in the Walt Disney Theatre with big physical choices. If the choices physically were not large, they would get lost in the back row of the second balcony. I think I was successful with radiating my energy to the back of the house while keeping my actions true to Lord Farquaad. Because this character is larger than life, it was a difficult journey for me to find those honest choices. A note that Michael continually gave me was to make sure that I was not milking a moment just for laughs, but that I was always playing the action. It was challenging for me because certain choices began to be ingrained in me overtime, so it was tough for me to pull some of those moments away. What was difficult for me was when Michael still felt like I was playing the bit rather than the action, yet I was genuinely seeking to get what Lord Farquaad wanted. There is a difficult collaboration when the director, as an audience member, is seeing something that you do not feel that you were seeking to communicate. Yet, because of Michael's honesty and critical eye, I then knew what moments I could play up the comedy and what moments needed to propel the story along.

I used Jim Helsinger's method of script analysis for this process. Jim has actors in his class line-up a blank sheet of paper on the left with the script on the right. He guides his actors to breakdown moments into beats and then within those beats to analyze the actions, imagery, and

paraphrase of the text. This method helped me to understand what Lord Farquaad wanted and the variations of actions I could play. This analysis also allowed me to find specificity with images and to fully develop the sensorial experiences present. Through completing this paperwork I also gained an understanding of the subtext beneath Lord Farquaad's words.

Playing vocally as Lord Farquaad was a fun experience because I wanted to push the limits of how he could sound. I discovered some of the comedic moments in the switch between my upper and lower registers. Something that Vivian taught me in her voice class was that the emotion of the character lives within the vowels and the images live within the consonants. This was beneficial in that it reminded me that if my consonants were not crisp, the audience would not receive the full image I was creating. I played with over articulating my consonants because I felt that might give a little bit more power to Lord Farquaad vocally.

Finding a way to support my sound with breath was another challenge. Because I was performing on my knees, I was off my physical alignment throughout the entire production. This meant that it took months for my body to adjust and for my muscles to figure out which tensions I needed to hold myself up and which tensions I could let melt into the floor. Vivian worked with me to make sure that my head was floating free, forward, and up and that I was breathing into my ribs. I have never felt my ribs swing more in a production because I learned to breathe for the size of the space. What I mean is that, when in rehearsals, I didn't breathe for the studio that we were rehearsing in, I always tried to breathe for the enormity of the Walt Disney Theater house. I thought of breathing in my target all the way to the back row of the second balcony and I could feel my ribs swinging out while my belly was pushing my insides down making room for my lungs to fill up with air. I imagined that I was breathing through my knees into the floor. Because

I incorporated this into my rehearsal process, once I stepped foot on stage, I felt as if I was prepared and like I could fill the house with my voice not reliant upon the microphone.

I have also found success in keeping an acting journal. I know, we hear this all the time as actors, but the kind of character journal that I do is different. During a show, I like to sit backstage throughout most of the show. This helps me to stay present and focused, I also feed off the energy of people on stage. After I am in hair, makeup, and costume, I sit in the wings and journal as the character. For Lord Farquaad, I would write a declaration every night before the show for the people of Duloc. These letters helped me to get into the mindset of Lord Farquaad. I could begin weaving his manipulative story and I would imagine that after I completed the letter, it would be posted around my kingdom. Typically, it would go something like this:

“My dearest Dulocians,

I come to you today from my royal bedchamber. I look delicious in red velvet. I will do whatever it takes to become king. Take note and don't stand in my (big) way. I will lead us to a brighter and more powerful future for me and you. Stand back and let me take the reins.

Your supreme commander,

Lord Farquaad”

Another journal entry was:

“People of Duloc,

If you don't get on my side, I will destroy you ... kidding (sort of). Rest assured that I will do whatever it takes to get to the top of the Kingdom, the realm, the world, and the

universe. I will not stop until I have order and control. Don't mess with me and trust that I have your best interest at heart. Just follow me.

Your soon to be King,

Lord Farquaad”

Of course, keeping an acting journal is important, but just like physically dropping into a character, this allowed me to think as he would think outside of the text given to me. I could find my own passion and comedy as I spoke in words outside of the script. I began doing this exercise when I was playing George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life* in college (my most cherished theatrical experience). George was an incredibly tremendous person to become, however the emotional range that an actor needs to become him is expansive. I needed something, a tool rather, that could quiet my mind and focus my intentions before stepping on stage. I think if an actor does not have some kind of ritual like this, they will end up using the first scene or two as a warmup. No one wants to pay to see an actor warm up. You should walk onstage so present in and connected with the character's internal rhythm, breath, and images that you shed your own skin, walk on stage and take your first breath as the character.

Of course, I would be remiss if I didn't reflect on playing with Jenine Tesori's remarkable score. I prepared for my process with multiple voice lessons from two different vocal coaches Tara Synder and Richard Crawley, as well as Music Director Heather Langs and accompanist Terry Thomas. When I was working with Richard, he mentioned to me that this role was one of the hardest vocal roles to sing and that supporting characters' music is often more challenging than the leading players. I am not sure if I was comforted by that statement or if it frightened me, but either way it made me want to work harder. It made me want to walk away from this process

knowing that I gave everything I could with nothing held back. After all, how many times do you get to perform for 15,000 people? Just like Vivian reminded me before, it was all about the story. I had to first know why I was singing, what I was saying and for whom. Once I knew that, some of my nervous energy that was keeping me in my head about the music drifted away. Richard and Tara worked with me to pull my sound forward and place it into my cheekbones. Richard noticed that I wanted to pull my sound back or place my sound in my nose, so we worked to find the balance of a forward placed sound for Lord Farquaad. Towards the beginning of the rehearsal process it was a struggle for me to vocally sustain singing for four hours after speaking all day, not to mention that I needed to be able to access a falsetto belt to baritone notes that were beyond the lowest part of my range. Growing up I knew that I could sing high. I am a tenor through and through and if you give me something to belt into the stratosphere, I can make it happen. However, if you gave me something that went into my baritone range, it would make me feel exposed and insecure. I did not feel like I could give those notes the same power that I gave the notes in my upper register. Through working over the three-month process, I was able to healthfully sustain the music and alter the parts that felt like they were not setting me up for success.

When was my play blocked throughout my process as Lord Farquaad? As I mentioned previously, this role was equally exciting and scary at the same time. The most challenging part for me was figuring out where to place this incredibly rangy music in my high tenor voice. Initially I would get very nervous before rehearsals, and my mind would be struggling to be present throughout the day as I knew an upcoming rehearsal was about to take place. I worried about if I would have enough voice to sing in the rehearsal, how would I be able to sustain the energy needed for the role, and how could I balance this major role with all the other things that

were on my plate. I am so thankful to have had the opportunity to play Lord Farquaad because it showed me that I can achieve something greater than the expectations I have placed upon myself. I remember almost losing my voice in our first music through rehearsal on Friday of the first week. I was so vocally fatigued because I had not built up the stamina needed yet for the role. Even though I was singing almost every day of the week, nothing could have prepared me for playing Lord Farquaad six days a week, while also taking classes, auditioning on the side, and teaching. I would be so hard on myself that I felt like I couldn't sing Lord Farquaad's famous "ah, ah, ah, ah, ahhh" (Elphaba moment) in the rehearsal room. I would practice it over and over again in my house and then I would get into the rehearsal room and I would crack, it would not be well supported, or I would occasionally hit the mark. It made me feel weak and I thought "What's wrong with me? I should be able to do this. I feel like I'm embarrassing myself in front of all these people. Maybe they should have cast somebody else for the role." The first part of the rehearsal process I struggled with a lot of anxious thoughts and getting in my head. I would even be apologetic to our Music Director, apologizing for not meeting expectations for the evening. It was so encouraging to me when she said, "Don't worry ... by the end of this process I promise you this role will be in your voice so much that you could sing it in your sleep." She was right. By the end of the process I felt so confident in the music that I was singing because I had taken the time outside of rehearsals and inside the rehearsals to play with the music in my voice so that I could feel good about how I was singing. Tara worked with me on an exercise where I would sing notes like a barnyard animal. She asked me to sing the notes that were giving me trouble as a goat. I know it sounds strange but think about when a goat vocalizes and how their "Bah" is placed forward in their oral tract. I would begin singing the notes as a goat, and then move into an "ah", and then finally sing the notes on the words in the score. I worked on this for many

hours in the rehearsal process so that I could feel good about the music. However, the Lord Farquaad Elphaba “ah” music section was consistently proving to be a struggle for me. I have always struggled with speaking up, mainly because growing up I was told that my voice was not worth hearing. But in this instance when it came to the final dress rehearsal, I met with the Music Director and the Director and asked if we could lower that section. I knew that it was not what we wanted, but I felt like I had done everything in my power and ability to make something happen that was ultimately not going to set me up well. I think what was immensely difficult with that moment was the endurance of performing two scenes and two songs, running around the stage on my knees, running up a flight of stairs, and then having to belt at the top of my range. When both the Director and Music Director agreed for me to lower it, I felt so valued as an actor and that my voice had been respected. I am proud of myself for going out of my comfort zone to be my own advocate. If I have learned anything in my 30 years of life as an actor, it is that no one is going to look out for you like you will and that I have to be my own advocate. For the lower sections in Lord Farquaad's ballad that were proving difficult to sing, I found a way to speak/sing those notes in character. If you go back and listen to the Broadway version, you would be surprised by how much Lord Farquaad speak/sings. I think it reminded me that it is okay to make a roll my own and there is nothing weak about wanting to put myself in the best light possible for the sake of the story. I needed to let go of the shame that was accompanied with needing to make adjustments and the idea that I needed to be perfect to tell his story. Although Lord Farquaad does indeed demand perfection, that does not mean that I as the actor must be perfect. I believe perfection does not exist in humanity and I find that we are more beautiful because of our messiness. As I began to let go of my perfectionism, I loved singing the music and could not wait for it to be my turn to take the stage and sing. Without play, I would not have

been able to get to that point, and I would have been stuck spiraling in negative self-talk which only sends us round in circles.

Do not hear me say that the rest of my process was all rainbows and butterflies, it was still incredibly hard work and I occasionally found myself thinking about how I sounded on stage rather than seeing the images. When that happened, I would try to remind myself that those thoughts were not helpful and to focus on the basics of what I wanted and who I was singing to. I also wish that I would have been better about protecting my play as I was in rehearsals. A strength of mine is that I can be all in on something, but sometimes being all in on one thing means you have to sacrifice many other things. I know that sacrifice is a part of the actors' life and I accept that, but I do wish that I would not have sacrificed so much of my well-being for the role. I would not have changed how hard I worked, I would have just taken better care of myself mentally, physically, and vocally. I would have made sure that I was not running myself into the ground at the end of each day. My thoughts overall on this process are that through playing, personally and in the rehearsal and production process, I was able to achieve a deep connection to Lord Farquaad, to my scene partners, and to the audiences. By the end of the performance experience I felt like I could play off of the audiences' reactions, while maintaining the integrity of the story.

This is a role that I would gladly play the rest my life, but if I did that I would need to make a few adjustments. I would work with a vocal coach to play with the notes that were giving me difficulty and find an alternative version that was equally as fantastic. I would continue to dive deeper into the truth of what Lord Farquaad wanted while also keeping my mind open to comedic bits that could live within the truth of the moments. I would also set aside daily time for physical and vocal rest. I would make time for a massage or float spa session, something that

would allow my over fatigued muscles to relax. I would take even better care of my voice so that when I came to rehearsal, I was not already vocally tired. I would also give myself more grace, in that, this role was so demanding and it would be a challenge for anybody to play. Overall, I am proud of confidently showing up daily in the face of adversity and not letting it push me down. I am glad that I fought the fight because the reward was getting to bring joy to people in the audience and hearing about their experience with the show at the stage door. I began this show as a performer trying to care less about what people thought of me and instead focusing my energy on what I can give to others. It was such a wonderful experience to stand tall and to know that there is a place for me in this industry and in this world as an artist and as a human being.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In conclusion, play has been proven to be a means for actors to achieve deeper connections. In Chapter One, play was validated through many leading historical figures and defined as a necessary part of the human experience. In Chapter Two, the idea was presented that play is on life support due to the following human struggles: fight-flight-or-freeze, getting “in our head”, insecurity, self-consciousness, the ego, and anxiety. Chapter Three discussed the benefits of play specifically: sociability, spontaneity, imagination, humor, and wonder. Methods of protecting play were presented in an effort to increase the longevity of play. Chapter Four shared the many ways in which humans can play both in solitude and in society. Chapter Five provided practical games and resources to enable you to play throughout your life in and in your own processes. Chapter Six was an analysis of my process in both *Welcome to the Moon* and *Shrek the Musical*. I shared the successful ways in which I applied play and the ways in which I needed to continue to play.

Of course, this thesis is an ongoing journey to more consistently choose play in my process. As I look ahead to my future career, many of my thoughts reflect on what that will look like. The questions that I am left with after this thesis process are: As I move from an educational system to being a working actor, how can I continue to keep my play alive? How can I better care for my play when I’m without the safety net of an educational institution? What are other ways that I can take care of my play while seeking to be the hardest worker I can be? How can I build up the business of me as an actor while living lightly? As I seek to support myself through acting, how can I approach auditions with choosing to play knowing that my career depends on my booking rate? What does it look like to be a working actor who is continually learning and growing? How can I continue to be honest in my struggles with play while giving myself grace

for being wherever I am? How does applying play in the world of film acting differ from acting for theatre?

An Actor's Play Checklist

I want to leave you with a practical lesson plan to increase your play in your process. My goal for this checklist is for you to have a tool to bring creativity into your rehearsal, warmup and production processes. My hope is that you use this checklist the next time you are preparing for a role or if you find yourself stuck or frustrated during your process. I have compiled a list of the things that I do in preparation for and in during my own process. I have listed five categories with ten items. I invite you to use this lesson plan as a means to explore your character. Perhaps these activities can expand the bounds of how you can approach your character work. May this exploration serve as a breeding ground for inhabiting your character's world, finding authentic connections to your scene partners, and moving audiences to emote. I give you the freedom to use them checklist in order or out of order. I encourage you to try each task at least one time before deciding to add or subtract it from your process. You never know which activities could surprise you and lead to exciting discoveries!

Written Play

These activities can follow your read through of the script. Grab your computer, acting journal, or some paper and something to write with. Let these activities ignite your brain!

Creative Character Analysis

- The character analysis is a foundational tool to help you to flesh out the world of your character and their circumstances.

- The character analyses that I use are linked in the bullet point below. I have been using this helpful document for many years now and it has expanded my understanding of the characters I have played. It is broken up into five categories: Character Analysis Questions, Uta Hagen’s Nine Questions, Seven Steps to Heaven, Character Biography, and Short Form Role Analysis. I suggest that you use the first two activities Character Analysis Questions, Uta Hagen’s Nine Questions. Uta Hagen’s Nine Questions are wonderful to answer if you are looking for a broader bird’s eye view of your character's circumstances. If you are looking for a more detailed approach, answer the Character Analysis Questions. Answering these questions could help you to understand your character’s physical, social, psychological, and play qualities more deeply.
- [Creative Character Analyses](#)

❑ Character Journal

- As mentioned previously, before rehearsals or performances I sit backstage with my journal and write in character. I encourage you to think as your character and write stream of consciousness thoughts that your character is thinking at the moment. Sometimes I will write my thoughts in character reflecting upon what is happening right before my first entrance. This propels me into my first scene and gives me cause to respond. This method of improvised writing may quiet your “actor thoughts” or thoughts of your own life’s circumstances and pull you more into the present moment work.

Media Play

In an effort engage multiple learning styles, I have listed three different methods of engaging your creativity.

Pinterest Board

- I invite you to build a photo collage for your character. During my process of *Welcome to the Moon* I began an ongoing Pinterest Board for the production. I began collecting images that were reflected in the script. I pulled images of lovers in the 1950s, The Civil Rights Movement, the moon and galaxies surrounding it, artwork of lonely and tormented people and interracial couples getting married. The collection I developed ranged from photographs to stylized art pieces. I tried to find both literal and representational images that could enhance the imagery to play with as Man. Pinterest is a fantastic method of creating online collages, but you could certainly make a physical copy as well if you are more hands on. Ultimately, all of the images that you put together will only heighten your connection to the images in the story.

Character music playlist

- Creating a playlist for your character is fun! Use your favorite music app (I use Spotify) and compile a list of songs that your character would listen to. Perhaps include some songs that reflect the script as a whole. Try using these songs as background noise while you are doing your physical warmup or getting in costume and makeup. This is a great way to play with the ethos of your character.

Watch movies that can inspire your character

- Typically, when I am acting, I try to watch a few movies or TV shows that are similar to the production that I am in. As I am watching the episode or film, I am looking for characters whose qualities reflect the character I am playing. I watch their body language and listen to their pitch, rate, and volume. I analyze how they interact with their surroundings, and I try and pull some of those qualities into the character I am playing.

Observation Play

This activity will allow you to intentionally notice the habits of real people as they go throughout their day.

People watch

- First, pick a public location (a park, grocery store, shopping mall, etc.). You want the location to be highly trafficked. Second, choose a person that is similar in age and type to your character. Third, observe the person you chose. What is their leading or energy center? Do they move or talk slowly or quickly? How do they engage with others around them? Watch them for a few minutes and then take note of the experience you just had.

Intention Play

This is a two-fold means of mental play that will help focus and protect you.

Set an intention before the show

- As I have mentioned, it is very difficult to tell the same story multiple times a week. In an effort to keep your mindset fresh and engaged with playing in the

story, set an intention before the show. Because the process is ever changing, think about what you want to bring to the story today and focus on that as you tell the story. There are so many mental pressures happening while you are performing, it is helpful to focus on one new thing for each performance to focus and calm your mind. Recently, I performed as Wilbur in *Charlotte's Web* and before each performance I would find a quiet space backstage and choose a word to inspire that day's production. Some of the words I focused on were wonder, childlike belief, loneliness, the pressure to perform, friendship, and sacrificial love. I felt like if I could focus on one word each performance, it would inspire me and quiet all of the other things spinning in my brain.

❑ Play protection schedule

- Most things will not last if they are not well thought out in advance. I encourage you, in order to protect your play meter, to set a few play protection guidelines before you enter the rehearsal process. One example could be, “every day I want to spend one hour doing something restful”. Another example could be, “I will work on my script for thirty minutes a day outside of rehearsal and once that time is complete, I will leave the rest to be explored during rehearsal.”. If you want to be energized and ready to play, you need a plan to project your voice, mind, body, and emotions.

Whole Being Play

This list is all about engaging yourself fully from head to toe!

❑ Physical and vocal warmup

- First, create a thirty-minute physical warmup for yourself. My current physical warmup is a combination of stretches that I have pulled from multiple professors. My focus is on releasing tension, energizing my body, freeing my breath and marrying physical movement with vocalizations. Have a shortened version of your warmup, so that when you only have ten minutes, you have something to pull from. You can use your thirty-minute warmup as a foundation and mix and match the most essential components to allow you to warm up with less time.
- Second, the vocal warmup is the same as above. You want to establish a longer vocal warmup that you can then shorten in times of need. Make sure that you are playing with expanding your range, activating your breath on vocalizations, forward placing your sound, and warming up your articulators.

Spolin Games

- Finally, choose one Spolin game to include in your warmup. Play with one of the many games Spolin created in *Theatre Games for the Lone Actor*. This could take you two minutes and will free you to have a playful mindset going into rehearsal or performance. Sometimes I use her game “Space Walk” (Spolin 17) and walk around my bedroom or studio and have a moment of solitary play. Playing a game in my warmup, not only relaxes and makes me laugh, but it also breaks up my warmup so that I don’t get in a habit of going through the motions.

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