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THE HEALING PROCESS: FINDING ONESELF THROUGH CHARACTER

By  
Jody-Ann Peta-Gay Henry  
B.A., Nova Southeastern University, 2011

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Theatre Arts  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

August 2014

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A Thesis Approved on

May 16, 2014

By the following Thesis Committee:

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Dr. Lundeana M. Thomas

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Professor Nefertiti Burton

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Dr. Edna Ross

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and friend Jennifer Henry who constantly reminds me that I can do all things through Christ Jesus. It is also dedicated to my professor and mentor, Dr. Lundeana Thomas who believed in me and constantly pushed me to achieve excellence.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey at the University of Louisville would not have been possible without the support of my mother, Jennifer Henry and family who reminded me that I should not be afraid to spread my wings and fly. I left home three years ago and found a new home at the University of Louisville. Thanks to my professors and mentors at the university who helped to bridge the gap. I would like to express my special appreciation and thanks to my thesis committee. Thanks to my thesis advisor, Dr. Lundeana Thomas for believing in my talent and to Professor Burton for her kind spirit and listening ears and Dr. Edna Ross for her time and input.

I would also like to thank my theatre professor at Nova Southeastern University, Mark Duncan who encouraged me to pursue my master's degree and persuaded me to attend the University of Louisville.

Last but not least, Jesus Christ, my Savior, without whom I would not be here. My abilities and talent is only because of Him.

## ABSTRACT

### THE HEALING PROCESS: FINDING ONESELF THROUGH CHARACTER

Jody-Ann P. Henry

May 16, 2014

This thesis examines my journey as an artist. It chronicles my beginning as an actor and the development of my skills and gift as a performer and educator. It also represents how theatre has been a major part of my self-discovery and continues to foster my growth and development. I describe how I fell in love with theatre, and what inspired me to pursue a career as an actor. I highlight my life changing experience at the University of Louisville, where I was challenged not only as an actor, but also as an individual. I discuss my most challenging experience at the university, which was approaching my thesis role Madame Alvarez in *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*, the rehearsal process and its challenges as well as my final performance. I conclude discussing my overall experience at the University of Louisville, what I have learned and my future plans as an artist.



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## INTRODUCTION

I have heard the adage of “art for art sake” but I do not accept it for myself. Just as we are created with certain inalienable rights, each of us is blessed with extraordinary gifts. One of my gifts is acting. When I perform it ignites an electrical surge in my body somewhat akin to the Vitamin B-12 shot or a high like cocaine. I am lifted to another plane and can therefore inspire and/or affect an audience with the performance that comes from this gifted person embodying the electrically charged individual. Only God can do this and, therefore my performance is not nor can be “art for art sake”. This ordained, sanctified and God-induced formula this is for his glory alone.

I believe that theatre is a reenactment of one's reality or a display of one's imagination in order to entertain, evoke an emotional response, teach or arouse a desire for change politically, socially, or economically. While I believe that these are all important reasons that theatre should be performed, I also believe it is most important that theatre produce healing powers that create a therapeutic experience for all parties involved. At times great emphasis is placed on the impact a performance has on the audience, but little attention is paid to how the performance can impact the actor. I can attest that not only is it fulfilling to move an audience, but it is also fulfilling to explore a character through which I connect with my inner self and in turn become more aware of who I am.

Artists such as Amiri Baraka combined theatre and politics as a means to shed

light on racial inequalities and to educate whites and blacks. Augusto Boal used theatre as a tool to reach the oppressed and teach them solutions to their oppression. Rhodessa Jones used theatre as a means to reach female inmates and allow them to tell their stories. In her Medea Project, theatre was also a means to employment for the inmates so as not to be a part of the revolving-door process. It gave them a chance to change their lives. All three artists had specific purposes for their art and have all tremendously impacted the lives of their audience members. Their work allowed researchers to look closely at the effect of their performances and production on their audiences, but less focus was placed on the artist themselves and the effect their work can have on them.

Actor and psychologist, Levy Moreno combined both drama and therapy and coined a system called dramatherapy which originally was to help the mentally ill. Later, it was discovered that it could be used to heal and was therapeutic for its actors. Most actors experience a catharsis during the read-through or rehearsals of a play as they explore and discover the emotional life of the character and learn the character better. Dramatherapy has been seen as a healthy way to allow individuals with mental or psychological issues to face and to find a safe place to work through their issues and find a cure. Like those patients, actors can also experience therapeutic relief by exploring human conditions and obstacles through theatrical performance. The difference between Dramatherapy and theatre is the playwright. Generally, in Dramatherapy the actor is also the playwright, while most times in theatre the actors are usually working with a text that has been given to them by a playwright with the exception of improvisation. The patient in Dramatherapy is essentially portraying characters that are from his or her everyday life. However, the actor gets the chance to portray a character that first existed in the

mind of the playwright and is then expressed on paper. It becomes a creative experience when the actor takes words from the character, adds a physical life and then breathes life into it making it alive. Through this process of bringing the character to life, the actor forms a bond with the character. In order to create a character that is three-dimensional, the actor absorbs the mind of the character, which helps to make the performance believable. Actors also generally subscribe to various acting techniques, which will enable him or her to better connect to the character physically, vocally and emotionally. I have found that a combination of the Konstantin Stanislavsky and the Sanford Meisner technique have helped me concentrate on both the external and the internal life of the character. Both techniques allowed me to embody the character, but most importantly to connect emotionally. I sought to find where the character resonated in my body and how different or similar it was for me.

While I strive to have a moving impact on the audience through my performance, the performance in fact has an even greater impact on me. I am affected as I encounter a psychological experience by taking the character off the pages of a script and giving life to it onstage. Building a character provides an opportunity for me to constantly re-evaluate myself and do a bit of soul searching. Hence, why I believe that “theatre functions as the mirror not only for the audience, but also for the actor” (Scheiffele 144). Writing this thesis is one of the many times that I have had to question and assess myself. Daily, I had to self-evaluate and be in touch with my emotions. I have had to be vulnerable on stage and completely reveal myself to the audience in order for the audience to experience their own sense of vulnerability while watching my performance. Vulnerability allows an actor to bring truth to the stage and adds depth to one’s acting.

The lack of vulnerability can cause the actor to externalize an emotion and makes it obvious that there is no real connection to the character or the actor. When I acknowledge my inadequacies and my susceptibility to pain and hurt, I am able to reveal my true self. When I embrace my vulnerability onstage I connect to the character's own vulnerability and it adds authenticity to my performances because the emotions are coming from my heart rather than fabricated in the mind.

The mirror and my vulnerability allowed me to see my deepest darkest secrets and wounds. I am able to look at the ugly side of myself that gets covered and dressed to face the world every day. I am able to go beyond the image of the perfect person that I strive to create and reveal my imperfections through a character. This has not always been true for me. As a beginning actor I struggled with understanding my self-worth and embracing my personality which somewhat hindered me from reaching my full potential in performance. I constantly tried to overcompensate by indulging in educational endeavors. Luckily, I chose to indulge in my scholastic studies rather than other means of increasing my own self-worth. While excelling in school made me feel as if I was one step closer to perfect, theatre made me feel that I could blot out my imperfections for these few moments I was onstage.

In Spring 2006, my high school acting teacher John Manzelli stated that "the audience was interested in seeing the pimple and learning about the scar on your butt" (Manzelli, March 20, 3006). His statement at first repulsed me, but I later understood what he meant was the audience wanted to see real people who were facing real conflicts and struggling to overcome them. Therefore, while we strive for perfection within ourselves as actors and individuals; it is important to recognize that perfection does not

exist except in God. However, this does not deter one from continuously striving for it. Manzelli's advice encouraged me not to strive to portray perfect characters, but to reflect their struggles and victories to discover what each character can teach me about myself.

My struggle with accepting myself still plagued me upon entering the Master of Fine Arts program in performance at the University of Louisville (UofL). It was my biggest weakness and I spent my entire three years striving to overcome it. Some professors saw my potential despite my timidity and others questioned my talent and dedication. I used my weakness as a crutch. The need to feel valued, loved and accepted as I felt at the age of five lingered at the beginning of my journey here. I was trapped in playing the roles of young girls in and out of the classroom. I needed to mature, but did not quite know how.

It was through portraying a series of young female roles that I began to realize that it was the role I played comfortably whether on stage or not. At home although the older of two girls, I was still treated as a little girl. At school I am usually the shortest of my peers thus treated as the little one. In public spaces I am often mistaken for being younger than I actually am. At UofL, I was the youngest and smallest in my cohort and was often reminded of it. It was not until I started my tenureship at the UofL that remaining the little girl proposed a real hindrance to me.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how theatre has played a major role in my healing process and has aided in my growth as a young black Caribbean woman. I argue that theatre serves as a therapeutic experience not only for the audience, but most notably for the actor. The actor draws on his or her own life and brings himself or herself to the character. I searched through my insecurities to bring truth and spontaneity to my

characters. I will also argue that falling into being typecast is not always bad. It can actually be therapeutic and helps on the journey to self-discovery. An actor may self-reflect to understand what qualities about him or herself make the casting director typecast him or her in a particular role. Sometimes it can be an aura that the individual has or simply how the actor is physically built. I was diminutive and carried a young gentle spirit, which caused me to get typecast in younger roles.

This thesis is divided into six chapters in which I will trace my metamorphic development as child who enjoyed acting as a means of escape to an artist who is able to use her life experiences as tools to create truth on stage. My experience at the University of Louisville and the roles I have portrayed whether in main stage productions, in class skits or performances that toured throughout the Louisville or Indiana area have taught me about myself. And through learning about myself I have embraced true adulthood as a maturing actor.

## CHAPTER ONE

### APPEAL OF THE FIRE

*“Acting is not about being someone different. It's finding the similarity in what is apparently different, and then finding myself in there”*

-Meryl Streep

Like fire, theatre has erotic qualities that are appealing to the senses. As a bystander the risk involved is not as obvious, but the bright lights and energy that it emits can be appealing. It took daringness and curiosity; both led me to pursue theatre. Though very cliché, theatre has always been a passion of mine. It has been the medium which allows me to discover who I am and allows me to understand the human mind and behavior.

Theatre has been a safety net throughout my entire life. I cannot imagine myself not being involved in acting and I contribute all of my success to my involvement in theatre. It alleviated the burdens of fear I lugged through life and it provided an opportunity to develop my confidence and acceptance of myself. Frankly, looking back at my upbringing I had no reason to be insecure, yet I have been overshadowed by fear throughout my entire life. This has been debilitating and limiting and actually prevented me from reaching my full potential. After much self-reflection, I concluded that I am my biggest critic and can be the main reason why I sometimes do not perform at my full potential. My mother has always been my greatest fan. For the longest time, I thought she was my only fan because she supported and stood by me through all of my successes and



failures. I constantly felt that if I failed or if others knew my failures, I would not be loved. Therefore, love from anyone besides my mother was conditional and I needed to earn the love and acceptance of others. As I examined my upbringing I realized that I presumed the way others thought about me based on my own perception of myself. I still struggled to accept compliments because at times it was difficult to recognize my own beauty. Acting, however, provided the opportunity for me to recreate myself onstage.

My need to adjust in order to please others proved to be beneficial for me on the surface because it pushed me in the right direction academically. Even at the age of five in preparatory school I had been a diligent student. In my first grade class I would put forth maximum effort in studying my vocabulary words because I wanted a one-hundred percent on my spelling test. I loved being known as the student who earned the highest grade in my kindergarten class. Failing meant that I not only failed my test, but I also failed my teacher and my mom. I will never forget the day my school principal, Mrs. Angela A. Moore selected me to deliver the 1997-1998 Monsignor Colin Bryan Preparatory School's graduation speech. This was the highest recognition for my academic excellence. This honor was better than the gold stars I received for excelling on a vocabulary test. Speaking in front of a crowd was a major task at the time, but I relied on the same wit and quick memorization skills that I used in studying for my classes. I stood in front of a full auditorium and with great expression and articulation delivered the speech. This became the defining moment as the first time I realized I felt at home speaking to an audience and allowing my voice to fill a space. The stage became my playing field to explore, to be, and to do so freely. I felt safe.

This was the beginning of my self-discovery journey through theatre. As a young

girl I yearned for the safety and freedom that I felt while delivering the speech at my school's graduation. This desire attracted me to performing onstage and theatre became the medium by which I escaped. It allowed me to go beyond the walls of the coy and reserved character that I had created for myself. I no longer depended on excelling in my schoolwork as a means of escape. I was able to travel to worlds I never visited, live lives that heightened my curiosity and became individuals only my imagination allowed me to witness on stage. I was not only seen as the shy child who loved to read and excel academically. I could be loud, vulgar, mischievous, loving, and vulnerable. The opportunities were endless. And for that reason I fell in love with theatre. My unending relationship with theatre blossomed from that moment and I gained confidence and became comfortable and finally less afraid of my voice. My drama instructor J. Diana Henry and Principal, Mrs. Angela A. Moore enrolled me in Inter-Prep drama and speech competitions to represent my school. I became involved in dance as well. I had found mediums of expression, which allowed me to love and embrace who I was and who I was becoming.

Of all the relationships I have formed throughout my life, my relationship with my mother and my sister, and my life changing relationship with theatre have been the most constant. They played important roles in my development from a child to an adult and gave me the opportunity to overcome my fear and insecurity. Acting became both work and leisure and could not be separated from who I had become. It then became an integral part of my identity and aided me in weathering the storms throughout my life. In order to capture the many ways theatre became the umbrella, which gave shelter during

the journey, I will highlight some of my struggles throughout middle school, high school and college.

### **Middle School**

I was at the peak of my success in school academically and artistically when my family decided to migrate to the United States of America (USA) in 2001. Migrating to the USA felt like one of the worst decisions my parents made. Little did I know that it would be a stepping stone to me fulfilling my dreams in a country where I could practice and study my craft as an actor. However, upon entering middle school I felt out of place and was mocked and jeered by other students because of my lack of fashion and thick Jamaican accent. After a year of torture, I had to reconnect to my safety net, theatre. In fact, during my first year of middle school when I was not involved in theatre, my academic performance suffered. I earned average grades in my courses, which was never the case previously. Eventually, I auditioned for the drama magnet program and was accepted. My relationship with theatre was restored and once again, it became my way of escape. I was able to take classes that separated me from the overcrowded rambunctious classrooms at Norland Middle School (Norland). Even though I felt comfortable in my drama classes because I was amongst other outcasts, I was still overcome with feelings of nostalgia and displacement because I was not home in Jamaica.

Once again, I hid behind my peers and often spoke only when others spoke to me. No one quite understood why a young girl so timid and shy would be interested in acting. However, at the time it was a distraction from the issues I dealt with at home. My mother had recently been diagnosed with Cushing Syndrome, a rare hormonal disorder and became a guinea pig for doctors as they were unsure how to treat her. My father was not

consistently there for my mother, sister and I so I felt as if I was losing both parents. My broken family was more broken than it had ever been. However, the one structure that remained intact was my chance to step onstage and recreate my reality. I was saddened when it was time to graduate. Norland had become my home, yet it was time to move out and move on. I was certainly not ready to do so. Moving was one of the things I most hated.

### **High School Years**

My years at the New World School of the Arts (NWSA) were the best years of my life. I was reassured of who I was as an individual and a Christian actor. I wrestled with the idea that I could be a devoted Apostolic Christian and still be a successful actor. During my years in high school (2004-2008) I searched to have a personal experience with God. I was no longer satisfied with only accepting what was preached to me by my church assembly and my parents. I was told by several of my brothers and sisters in Christ that it may not be a good idea to pursue acting. They thought it would sever my long-term relationship with Christ. For the first time, I questioned my decision to pursue acting, which was the one thing that had sheltered me through what I thought was my hardest time. I questioned God and myself on how to find a way to make my relationship with God and my involvement in theatre co-exist. How could I go forward with my gifting and how could it be used to glorify Him? Consequently, I placed several limitations on what I would do or say onstage because I thought it was a compromise between me and God. I do not regret that I stood true to my standards as a Christian, but I do regret that it became a block in my exploring and reaching depths with the characters. From the start of high school until graduation I became less conservative.

Through my relationship with theatre I began to form an understanding of myself and soon began making my own rules. This is not to say I forfeited my beliefs in God or strayed from the teachings of the church or my parents. But the rules became my rules. I began to realize that my relationship with God was more important than anything else in the world. I realized that I needed to loosen up the image that I had created for myself and that I should be comfortable with myself. I COULD BE ME. My thoughts mattered. My creativity was worth something.

At the end of high school I was an eighteen-year-old optimist who was on a quest for excellence and was determined to expose Christianity to the theatre world. I was not ready to choose between the two things I loved the most, God and theatre. I accepted that I could be both a child of God and a successful actor. The Apostolic church embraced great singers and nurtured the artistic abilities of their young people. However one's artistic abilities are generally considered a hobby and not worth pursuing as a career. I never felt as if my church family supported my decision to become an actor. My brothers and sisters in Christ constantly questioned whether or not I was still interested in acting as if they expected me to change my mind.

I started to feel a bit supported when I became heavily involved with the drama ministry at Pentecostal Tabernacle and worked closely with the resident playwright, Annette Taylor Spence and director, Winston Miller. Pentecostal Tabernacle saw the value in using theatrical performances as a way to minister to the community. It became clear to me that my talent was accepted and could be used in the church. I was even more convinced that being Christian did not mean that I had to abandon my love for the stage. I was more convinced of this when I visited a professional theatre company, Sight and

Sound Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 2007. I felt inspired and encouraged as I walked across the stage and met actors and other theatre practitioners whose goal was to tell the stories of the Bible. I knew I needed more theatre training and a college degree so I began to research in-state universities that offered degrees in theatre and communications.

### **My College Years**

I was determined to strive for the highest level in my career by attending college as a reward to my mother for her relentless sacrifice of walking away from her dreams in Jamaica to make mine a reality. I knew it would require my leaving home and that I was not ready to do so. I remained in my comfort zone. I convinced myself that my family needed me. I started Nova Southeastern University (NSU) which was in close proximity to home in August of 2008. What I perceived at first would be a mediocre experience actually became a turning point in my life.

My three years at NSU allowed me to put in use all that I learned at NWSA. New World School of the Arts was a highly competitive performing arts high school. The theatre students were not allowed to perform in main stage productions until their junior year. Consequently, I spent more time in the classroom than on stage. I was excited that at NSU I had the opportunity to be in a production every semester. I had several first time experiences there. The first production was the ensemble driven *Dining Room* (1982) written by A. R. Gurney and directed by Jett Canary. For the first time I had to tackle a full script and discover my acting process. I played several roles ranging from five to seventy-years old. Character development and analysis was vital during this process. My high school script analysis course and acting classes became much clearer as I had to use

all I had learned from those classes as I approached the play. After tackling this challenge and being a part of a great show my confidence was boosted. It was at Nova Southeastern University's Theatre Department where I performed in my first musical *Baby* (1983) by David Shire and Richard Maltby, Jr.; my first Shakespearean play, *Twelfth Night* and Oscar Wilde's 1895 *The Importance of Being Earnest*. It was also at that university that I stage-managed my first main stage production and directed my first ten-minute show.

At the end of my college career reality hit me. Once again I faced my personal struggles with fear and insecurity. I knew I was a strong actor who had the ability to tackle roles, but I still lacked the personal strength and confidence to take on the theatre industry. I refused to take off a year from going to school for an ordinary nine-to-five job. I knew that once I graduated I would be expected to get a prestigious job. In my family I was considered the scholarly one who could work enough to support the entire family. I was not ready to assume that responsibility. Frankly, I did not think I could. I knew how to be an excellent student, but not quite how to be an excellent adult. "What were my options?" I thought. My answer was graduate school.

My professor Mark Duncan encouraged me to apply for graduate schools and to attend the University/Resident Theatre Association (URTA) and the Southeastern Theatre Conference (SETC) auditions. It was during this process I realized how badly I wanted to be an actor. I moved around New York City for the URTA auditions in the cold and alone trying to find where different universities were hosting private auditions. Each night I would call or email to set up an audition. I left each morning with a list of auditions and interview appointments and I had no idea of how to get to each place. I did not quite

understand how relentless and determined I was until that week in New York. I realized I was not as shy or dependent as others thought.

In the summer of 2011 I left home to complete an internship at Brevard Music Center (BMC) in North Carolina. What I thought would be a great experience turned to one of the most trying times of my life. I had never been away from my family more than a week, so I felt homesick. After a summer serving musicians, cleaning bathrooms, sweeping pavements, moving instruments that weighted more than I did while setting and breaking down orchestra pits, I was frustrated and tired. For the first time working in the theatre made me unhappy. I loved everything about theatre and enjoyed working with artists, but my time at BMC sapped that excitement from me. I left that internship certain more than ever that I only wanted to be actor, not a technician. I gained a greater appreciation and respect for individuals who worked behind the scenes of a production. At the end of the experience I was inspired by the dedication of the other interns, they enjoyed working the long hours and hauling the heavy instruments. They were passionate about orchestral performances and technical theatre. What I took from my experience at BMC was that passion, dedication and hard work would be vital as I went forward in my career.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE BURN

*“You got to pay some agony for the ecstasy”*  
- Smokey Robinson

My mentor, Dr. Lundeana Thomas often reminded me that one has to go through the agony to get to the ecstasy. Reflecting on my years in middle school, high school, undergraduate and graduate school I could not find that statement to be truer. May 2011, I graduated from Nova Southeastern University (NSU) and was midway in my journey to theatre, but was still not completely healed from my fears and insecurities. I entered graduate school as a timid and shy young girl, inspired and anxious to learn. Little did I know that the next three years of my life would come with challenges that would be a major part of my healing process and growth. I considered my three years at UofL to be my furnace experience. It was my first encounter with being burned figuratively, the stripping away of the self I had created in order to discover my true personage.

Upon entering graduate school I had little professional experience and often times felt like the underdog. Now that I look back I am not sure how much of this insecurity was fueled by my environment or by the mental block that I created. However, I knew if I stayed focused that I would achieve my ultimate goal, which was to receive my terminal degree in acting. This was a personal goal of mine and at the time I knew that a terminal degree could allow me to teach at a collegiate level if I desired in the future. The first year of the program at the University of Louisville was a challenge. My work and

confidence in myself had never been challenged as much as it was in my first semester. I felt that faculty constantly questioned my ability to act or whether or not I was capable of becoming a successful actor, as I questioned myself. My quiet demeanor was not comforting or helpful. It did not aid in removing their disbelief. I looked young, shy, and timid and quite frankly did not fit the profile of a graduate school candidate. I knew that was not true and that God had not brought me this far in my theatre training so that I would fail and he had not brought me to Louisville, Kentucky to embarrass Him or myself. I knew that to prove everyone wrong, I would have to work really hard and I did. I had always been academically smart and achieved the highest level of excellence in whatever I did. I was accustomed to praises from my peers, teachers, family and community. Therefore, I never quite felt the need to neither assert myself nor prove my abilities to others. I was accustomed to being lauded and not used to being given harsh criticism of my work; the slightest critique tore me to pieces. Despite being told how perfect I was all my life, I certainly did not believe it so there was a constant barrage of encouragement trying to uphold my self-confidence. Therefore, it was difficult being in an environment in which I felt that everyone was against me.

## **Classes**

### **Graduate Acting and Movement with Professor Tompkins**

My first semester of acting was a psychological and emotional roller coaster. I never had a professor or instructor who had a similar teaching style as Professor Tompkins. The entire semester focused on twelve line scenes, which had no given circumstances or defined characters called Open Scenes. I understood the purpose of the assignment, however, it was not appropriate for where I was as an actor nor was it

tremendously helpful in honing my skills. I constantly felt like a failure and found it difficult to grasp exactly what Professor Tompkins expected. His expectations were not coherent with his classroom outcome described in the syllabus. My prior training in theatre proved to be worthless in this class. I allotted my evenings crying from frustration because I could not decipher what were my mistakes, why they were mistakes or how to correct them. I spent more time trying to create a workable scene that would please the professor than focusing on character work. I did not find the critiques given in class to be helpful. Instead they were mere deconstructive criticisms which were not consistent and often left me confused. Eventually, I realized that I simply had to make bold and confident acting choices without focusing on pleasing him. When I aimed to please I took away from the truthfulness and realism of my performance.

After much frustration and late night rehearsals, in the middle of the Fall semester, Professor Tompkins told me that he was not sure if I would be successful in the theatre profession and that I did not seem to have what it would take to succeed. For the first time I sincerely began to question my relationship with theatre. I figured maybe I used theatre as a crutch to deal with my fears and insecurities, but needed to reconsider if it was worth pursuing as a career. I felt that most persons in the department shared Professor Tompkins sentiments and I began feeling as if the department was against me. I was too shy, too quiet and not assertive nor confident enough to pursue acting as a career. I was haunted by the fear of my voice, years of being easily unnoticed, and ignored. Although it was devastating to feel the doubts of not only my acting professor, but the doubts of the department I decided to rise to the challenge. I turned Professor Tompkins' comments into motivation. He made me realize that I should not wait for the stage to

recreate me. I had to exhibit the vibrancy and enthusiasm offstage as I did onstage. I discovered that I did not need my peers, teachers or family to remind me of my worth, I had to recognize my own self- worth. Professor Tompkins' crushing remarks led to the beginning of a major healing process that continued throughout my three years at UofL.

### **Kristin Linklater Voice Training with Dr. Rinda Frye**

When I started the program I considered my voice as one of my strengths. My voice was open; it resonated in a room without me pushing. I had good diction and could articulate well. My only problem with my voice was my Jamaican accent. I had always been conscious of it ever since I started school in the US. I worked with my high school voice teacher, James Randolph in minimizing the accent and speaking American Standard English for the stage. He along with other directors and instructors at NSU helped me to make it almost unnoticeable.

Besides my accent, I loved the soft and soothing quality of my voice. I had not recognized that my voice needed more resonance until my voice class with Dr. Rinda Frye. She taught the class based on Kristin Linklater's vocal progression, which was designed to help the actor free the voice and understand the natural function of his or her vocal instrument. At the beginning of my vocal training with Dr. Frye I discovered that I mostly used my mouth resonator because it gave my voice the vocal power that I associated with strength and dominance. It was easier for me to access my lower registers such as the chest and mouth box resonators than the high registers like the nasal and dome resonators. This was difficult because a higher register meant weakness and vulnerability.

In November of Fall 2011, I remember that I started to cry uncontrollably during

one of the voice classes. The class had decided to do a sound circle which was a vocal game done in the dark in order to free an actor's mind and voice. We lay on our backs, with our eyes closed. As each person felt led he or she made random utterances. At times it seemed as if we started conversations by just making sounds and speaking gibberish. At first I was reserved I made deeper and softer sounds. I started to feel like the little girl I once was. I played with going from lower and deeper tones in my chest resonator to higher pitched tones in my nasal and dome resonators. As the game continued, the more liberated I felt I began to cry. Once I allowed my voice to be free and access the higher resonators, the more I had awakened my sense of vulnerability. I had avoided using the higher resonators because they made me sound like a little girl, but I constantly, subconsciously felt more comfortable being presumed as a young girl. It was through self-assessment that I discovered this internal struggle. I then decided to work on increasing my range so I could choose to use either the high or low resonators whenever I wanted.

### **Movement and Acting with Erin Crites**

I returned my second year with more vigor, energy, and discipline after an eye opening first year at UofL and I felt as if I still had to prove my talent and myself. I was enthused about my acting and movement classes with Erin Crites. Both classes were both geared towards ensemble work and devising solo and group performances. This was helpful because at the time I had not had much experience in writing and creating my own work. The focus of the acting class was on physical theatre so it helped to increase my awareness of my body and its use in storytelling. The movement class came at a pivotal point in my educational career as it improved the confidence I had in my own

creativity. It focused on Commedia dell'arte, which focused on the use of the body and voice to tell the story.

The movement exercises allowed me to relax and trust my instincts instead of constantly trying to create in my head. My favorite was the movement with sound exercise. The instrumental version of a song started to play, I stood with my eyes closed, allowed my mind and body to be free and let the music move me. This exercise simply allowed my body to move through space and instinctually reacting to outside stimulus. Sometimes while on stage I overthought this and tried to preplan everything. I became a critic of my work and actions and sometimes found it hard to move to the next moment because I was so stuck on the mistake I had made. Learning to free the body has helped me to be more present and alive on stage. I learned to trust my instincts and not to be worried if my choices on stage were wrong or right. I have learned to listen, react, and connect my body and voice. This class certainly helped me to create characters that were physically alive and engaging. I was physically awakened and my improvisational skills improved.

### **Acting with Professor Daniel Hill**

Daniel Hill attempted to bring a new perspective and insight to his students regarding acting and the business of theatre. His classes were not geared towards simply completing scene work and studying acting philosophies and techniques. Instead students were expected to work on studio productions so as to utilize the tools that one learned in other acting classes. This afforded me the opportunity to work on a role in a learning environment where each class session was a rehearsal. In his classes we put on studio productions of Louis Norwa's *Così* (1992), Stephen Guirgis's *Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street* (2003),

Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1895) and Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1978). The first studio production was an abridged version of Guirgis' *The Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street* with twelve characters who reunited in a Harlem neighborhood after the death of a beloved nun, Sister Rose and the mysterious disappearance of her body. I was selected to portray the role of Sonia, the awkward outsider who claimed to be in town to support Sister Rose's niece, Marcia who never appeared throughout the play. I had the challenge of being on stage for short periods without uttering a word. I found it challenging to be present and engaging on stage without drawing focus. This was a great lesson to learn, as I may not always play the lead role in a production. However, I began to feel slighted as I was the only one with the least number of lines and I spent more time observing my classmates rehearse than performing.

Instead of allowing my frustration to build I took it as an opportunity to observe Professor Hill's pedagogical style. I found this experience rather interesting and timely as I was scheduled to teach a section of Acting for Non-Majors the following semester. I admired the way he was able to coach and motivate his students and I wanted to be able to do the same. I did not want to approach the class with the same antagonistic deconstructive method of teaching I encountered my first semester of Acting at UofL with Professor Tompkins. Daniel Hill encouraged his students to keep discovering the character and to make choices throughout the rehearsal process. He made the classroom a rehearsal space where the actors felt comfortable to make choices. His feedbacks were generally specific so the class was clear on what he expected. I would create a similar learning experience for my students. I learned to be specific with my actions, create images, internalize and not to externalize the emotion of the character. He encouraged me

to make bold choices that were grounded, find the subtly in the scene, give oneself stage business. For example, when I performed scene two of Act two and I portrayed Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* I had to justify why Lady Macbeth did not see the bloody sword Macbeth carried with him. In the beginning of the scene she made short responses as he mumbled on and on. At first I felt awkward because his speech went on a long time. I decided that the character was more afraid to get caught than to console her husband. This is the reason it took her so long to notice the obvious. I found a moment midway his speech to exit the stage and return. I realized that I did not need to have constant movements, but the choice to be still and listen then move made my movements more impactful.

I was disappointed that my personality was judged and misunderstood in the classroom. It was disheartening to learn from reading my Fall 2012 midterm evaluations that Professor Hill thought I did not want to be in the class and did not care about the work. He also claimed that my classmates were concerned about me. This was shattering to learn, as Professor Hill showed no sort of concern prior to the note on the midterm evaluation. Despite this misunderstanding I was still able to learn an effective way to approach a role and learn from the way he conducted his class.

### **Voice and Shakespeare Acting with Professor Daniel Hill**

I had an epiphany in the first semester of my final year while discussing breath support in Daniel Hill's voice class. Kristi Papailler, asked the professor to briefly explain the difference between the Kristin Linklater's vocal work and Tadashi Suzuki's training. The professor responded that Linklater focused more on deep breathing and softening the belly, which allowed the breath to easily flow in and out. It did not focus primarily on



sustaining the breath and building a strong core. Suzuki focused on the mechanism of breathing and sustaining the breath. It teaches the actor to center oneself and find the energy from within by being connected to the ground. I found that I struggled with breathing and relaxing on stage. I should have identified the differences earlier, but they were concepts I took lightly and did not further investigate them. Hence, at the end of my training I felt the need to quickly decipher how Linklater and Suzuki differed and which was best to help improve my vocal abilities. After Hill's response I started to combine Suzuki exercises in order to strengthen my core and continued to use the Linklater training to improve my deep breathing.

I enjoyed my Shakespeare acting class with Professor Daniel Hill because it challenged me. I learned how to score a Shakespeare script, use scansion, and mark the operative words. I can now enter an audition for one of Shakespeare's plays with the cold read of a side and not feel terrified by the words. I can now better make the words more conversational and connect what I am saying to how I use my body. I left the class with two additional Shakespeare monologues, sonnets and having performed in an abridged version of *Macbeth*.

### **Performances**

"Theatre serves as a tool for communicating ideas and concepts, teaching morals and social values and also as a source of entertainment" (Counsell and Wolfe 77). Its purpose is to present real life situations in a staged performance in order to evoke an emotional response from its audience which might encourage the audience to cause change in their communities. Therefore, theatre should be a place of both learning and entertainment. I believe it has to have a purpose; it cannot just be for theatre's sake.

Whether intended or not, a performance should always have something to say because the playwright has chosen to use the medium to showcase his or her work and to tell a story. It was produced for the pleasure of an audience. Theatre-makers, directors or actors, also have a responsibility to their audience. The responsibility of the actor is to create a believable performance with realistic characters that are well developed physically and emotionally. Therefore, the focus on the audience and character is essential to creating purposeful and engaging theatre. Focusing on both allows me to tap into the human experience and allows me to impact or reach my audience greatly.

As an actor, I also have a responsibility to the audience which is to create change within the audience. This change could be emotional, which allows the audience to experience catharsis. It could also cause the audience to reflect on his or her behavior, start a dialogue between audience members and/or encourage the audience to create change in their community. While theatre has a significant role in communicating ideas and experiences, the actor plays an even more important role in embodying and creating a believable character thus creating believable moments, which connects them to the audience.

My goal as a performer has changed over the years. It moved from not only performing for myself to actively wanting to communicate to an audience. Performance was a means of escaping my reality and entering an alternate one. Currently, I would like to take the audience with me on a journey to this “alternate reality.” I would like to give them an opportunity to escape with me into the world of the play. If I can evoke a verbal or emotional response from the audience at the end of the play or if they were moved somewhat, then I know I have accomplished my goal. I want to create an experience that

is more than entertaining, but also a cathartic and therapeutic experience that allows the audience to forget about their problems and peak into the character's life.

The theatre then becomes a place of reflection because sometimes one may not objectively analyze one's behaviors because in our eyes our decisions are reasonable and justified. The theatre allows the audience an opportunity to reflect on their own behavior and tendencies. I want to tell stories and represent characters that my audience can relate to or introduce the audience to characters they have never met, so my performances can become teachable moments.

Most of my performances at UofL not only helped me to grow as an actor but also taught me life lessons. They allowed me to confront human struggles and pleasures which I did not anticipate in the near future. Pearl Cleages' *Mad at Miles: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth* (*Mad at Miles*) taught me self-defense and reminded me of my place in society as a black woman. *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* taught me the value of community. *Once on this Island* taught me lessons of love, how to believe in myself and how to overcome obstacles.

### ***Mad at Miles: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth***

My first production at the University of Louisville was *Mad in Miles: A Black Woman's Guide to Truth* (1990) written by Pearl Cleage and directed by Dr. Lundeana Thomas. Being a part of this production proved to me that even in the midst of the fire the Lord will provide a soft wind to quench the heat. The cast made me feel at home and I was able to bond with the other ladies not just as cast mates, but also as sisters. Being a part of the cast became my turning point in the department. Because I felt safe and

accepted in turn I was motivated to put extra time in my work to improve my acting skills and to prove I was worthy investment.

My goal as a performer in this production was to tell the stories of women who experienced domestic violence and to empower women in the audience to stand up for themselves. I had been empowered working on the show and my hopes were to have the audience experience it too. Rehearsing for *Mad at Miles* was a highly therapeutic experience. It provided the opportunity for me to pour out the negative energy from the day and refill myself with love and positivity. At the start of rehearsal the cast stood in a circle with a candle and talked about their day. I felt safe because I was encouraged to talk about issues that I faced and I felt loved and supported. Besides personal growth, I had also grown as an actor by being a part of the show. It taught me a lesson in character development. I learned to make specific character choices with my body and voice so as to make each character I portrayed different. I portrayed an Amazon woman, an abusive husband, and a victim of abused and Pearl Cleage's husband Zaron Burnett Jr. I had to do specific character work for each of these characters and be able to commit to them instantly when needed. I thought of the Amazon women as spiritual beings that embodied the souls and struggles of women. Therefore, how one uses her body and voice to embody these women became important. My body and voice had to portray the strength, joys, pain and fears of the women. Thus, my characterization and vocal freedom needed to be improved for the production.

### ***Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery***

I was surprised to learn that I was cast in the lead role of *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, an African American Theatre Program (AATP) production. This role was among

my most challenging experiences at University of Louisville. I was very grateful to have been given this opportunity to portray Rita, a young twelve-year-old girl. I was nervous at the task as it was my first time being cast in a lead role. Though I knew it would be a challenge, it was one that I was willing to accept and I knew with hard work that I could do well. At the end of the run of the show I was proud of my performance. This was not to say by any means that my performance was perfect.

In preparing for the role I used a mixture of Konstantin Stanislavsky, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, and Lee Strasberg's methods of acting. At the beginning of the rehearsal it was important to first focus on the character's physicality then on the emotional life. I decided on Rita's physical traits. I asked myself four questions; what does she look like, how old is she, how does she move and talk and what are some unique traits and mannerisms that are unique to her character. I had to learn how the character resonated in my body. I tried to make Rita different from the others I have portrayed and shied away from making her a stereotypical little girl. I did not want to make the character look and move and sound like the actor, Jody-Ann. Besides focusing on the physical traits of the character, I was also concerned with the emotional life of the character. A character with a strong physical presence and well developed emotional life forms a complete person instead of a caricature. The emotional life was important because it was a primary element that the actor used to create believable moments and get the audience to empathize and understand the character.

During the rehearsal process I had difficulty sustaining the emotional life of the character because of the constant shifts in time during the play. I tried to create images in my mind that would evoke the feelings that I needed for certain moments during the play.

For example, in Act two scene five, Rita was at the funeral of her mother. This scene was a challenge that I had to confront. I had a difficult time dealing with the character's absence of a mother especially since she lost her mother due to suicide. I tried to shy away from the character's feelings of loss because it made me feel vulnerable on stage. There became a constant battle between the character and myself. I experienced several moments as a child where I came close to losing my mother. I did not want to revisit these feelings, but for believability in the portrayal of the character I had to give myself permission to experience moments of loss.

After a while this became draining, especially in rehearsals. It was easier to commit and go moment by moment as the cast and director reworked small sections of the play. However, it was certainly difficult as the cast performed full run-throughs of the show. It was also hard in making sure that I was still going moment to moment with each scene after rehearsing the show so well. I found that as we approached technical rehearsal I was performing the physical movements, but there was not enough emotional life during the moment Rita discovered how her mother died. By the time the show opened I had to find a different method besides mental images to keep me emotionally connected with the character. I first placed my awareness inward to see how I felt physically and mentally. Then I used Konstantin Stanislavsky's sensual awareness exercise before rehearsals which helped me focus and enhance my spatial awareness and sharpen my attention. I created images to help me jump from one scene to the next because often times the next scene was a snap shot of a single moment in the character's life. So Rita jumped from one encounter with Aunt Mae and then in the middle of another encounter with Miss Corine. She was also a narrator to the audience as she tried to draw them into

her story. The asides were frequent and interrupted somewhat intense moments in the play. The challenge for me was to maintain focus, character and presence while breaking the fourth wall. The search for balance between my character in the asides and my character in the scenes meant that I had to allow a different kind of relationship with the audience than I had with the other characters in the play. In fact, I saw the audience as an additional character that I wanted to tell my story. This helped to keep me grounded in the world of the play instead of feeling scattered most of the times. Additionally I changed from being older to younger at the beginning of the play and back to being older at the end.

I had to eventually trust that I knew my lines and blocking and allowed myself to be the character. I kept up my energy during my performances, stayed connected with the audience and maintained stage presence throughout the play. I believed the high points of my performance were the moments I was able to sustain the images, which helped me to be present, and also moments when I was able to really connect with the others on stage. The idea of making choices as an actor and taking the blocking and making it mine really came home after being a part of this cast.

In my last semester of graduate school, a month shy of graduation my mother transitioned and went to be with the Lord. I immediately thought of my portrayal of Rita in Fall 2012. Little did I know that this play would prepare me to face the reality of losing my mother and embracing the community of matriarchal women that God placed in my life. After confronting this fear in 2012, I was better able to come to grips of what life could be like without a mother. Although I was overwhelmed by loneliness and despair, I found some comfort in the Big Mamas that were present in my life. I was reminded that

with God all will be well and like Rita I could go on and make my mother proud. No one can fill the emptiness one experiences from such tragedy, but the love of the community can help one to carry on. Prior to working on the production my mother and I never discussed what to do in the event of her passing. *Shakin' the Mess Outta of Misery* allowed me the opportunity to have conversations with my mother and myself while she was alive. I, like Rita, had a Big Mama and the best way I can ensure that she lives on is to carry on her legacy of love and sharing. Like Rita says, "I was blessed to have so many women, so much love. I keep their gifts in my hearts, and I know to pass them on" (2.5.45).

### ***Once on this Island***

In the spring of my second year, I faced another challenge, which seemed like a nightmare experience from start to finish. I was cast in a major role, Ti Moune in an AATP's production of *Once on this Island*. I walked into that audition room with much confidence. I sang a rendition of R. Kelly's *I Believe I Can Fly* like I had never done before. I knew it was that audition which had landed me the role. However, it was one thing to have a great audition, yet another thing to make it through the rehearsal process and deliver a great show. The confidence I had in the audition disappeared. I could not get over the fact that I was not a strong singer and merely having few vocal rehearsals and training did not help either. I was crippled by my own fear, but I knew I had to get through the show. It was the lack of confidence and presence of fear that shortchanged my performance. Moments when I did not have to worry about singing I was able to fully connect to the character. I knew I delivered a good performance when I did not focus on how I sounded while singing. I had a story to tell and that was more important. I could



not fix my voice over night and sound as great as I wanted to, therefore, I was going to either remain self-conscious or perform the best I could.

I needed and still need vocal lessons. The ability was there, but the training was surely lacking. This was not my strongest performance. I faced a fear that was hard to overcome. Being on stage in front of a theatre filled with my students, friends, professors and peers while knowing that I did not sound as I wanted was daunting. This drastically affected my performance because after each song I was anticipating the next song and then the next. Quitting was not an option so I stood my grounds knowing that I did not sound like an archangel as I hoped and sang my heart out. I never saw myself as a musical theatre artist or even quite musically inclined. However, working on this production allowed me to recognize a weakness and in order to make myself marketable and expand my range I needed to take voice lessons.

### **Teaching Experience**

#### **TA 207 Enjoyment of theatre**

Teaching TA 207 Enjoyment for Theatre was as much of a learning experience as it was a lesson in how to teach effectively. It taught me to assert myself and be confident. It also taught me to embrace a place of power and authority. I was thrust into this experience a few weeks after the start of the semester and it was not long before I became comfortable with my class and led class discussions. At first, I did not feel as if I was capable to teach these students, especially since a short five or six months previous I was sitting in their seats in front of a lecturer waiting to be taught. My knowledge of theatre, particularly Shakespeare, was challenged and I realized how much I knew and how much I did not know about my craft. I also realized there were topics in theatre history and

technical theatre that I needed to review. Grading papers, meeting with students and juggling my course work became a task and I certainly learned how to manage my time wisely. I also learned that not everyone would take my craft seriously. I had to find ways to keep students engaged and realized that the arts can improve my students as people and help them in whatever career field they chose.

### **TA 324- Acting for Non-Major**

At the end of the 2011-2012 school year I realized that I had a natural affinity towards teaching. I knew I enjoyed working with young children in a daycare setting but was never sure if I would be able to manage a classroom of older students. My biggest concern, like always, had been to gain the respect and trust of my students. I was always afraid that students would not take me seriously because of my stature, but one thing I discovered was that if you establish yourself as the person in charge, students would respect you. Spring 2013 was the first time I taught a section of Acting for Non- Majors. I used the generic syllabus provided by the department. However, I realized that it was hard to get through all five performance assignments and I did not get the chance to really teach because so much time was spent getting through the assignments. I realized this too late. Therefore, for the three sections of Acting for Non-Major, which I taught in the Fall of 2013, I used a holistic approach and focused less on getting through all the assignments. I wanted to ensure that the students were learning. I tried to assess each of my students individually at the beginning of the semester to see where they all were in terms of acting. I knew that not everyone was on the same level; some were better actors than others. For some students it would be a great accomplishment to learn the lines and to add some physical choices because they were not accustomed to relaxing and engaging

the body. I learned that even though I may be prepared to teach a lesson I needed to be flexible in order to adjust to the classroom dynamic and the needs of my students.

### **Community Service**

By the end of Fall 2012, I had already had a year's experience teaching college students, yet I wanted the opportunity to teach in an environment with younger children. In the Spring of 2013, I had the pleasure of working with Louisville Central Community Center (LCCC), which offers after school courses in the arts, and tutoring for academic courses all year round. I had the privilege of teaching Beginning Drama to four elementary school students from January to March of 2013. The class began with approximately seven students, however, because of conflicting schedules some students had to drop the course and only four students attended consistently. Every Monday evening for an hour and fifteen minutes I had the chance to introduce to these young people elements of theatre using games and various storytelling methods.

Throughout the course, the students were able to demonstrate an ability to stand comfortably in front of an audience by participating in group warm-up activities, introducing themselves and answering interview-like questions. They also performed simple improvised activities as well as single-handedly and in groups wrote fairy-tales. Students also learned some theatre jargon and the parts of the stage. My assistant Kavin Moore, a freshman musical theatre major at DuPont Manuel High School taught sessions on musical theatre and choreography. At the end of the course the students performed a short five to seven minute play for their parents and other community members.

I was proud of their accomplishments. They were able to focus, memorize their lines and enjoyed the process. One of the students, Genesis, started very shy and not

confident in her own ideas. Nonetheless, by the end of class she was not as shy or afraid to make character choices performing as the grandmother in the play and I had no problem hearing her. This sort of growth in the students made this teaching experience fulfilling and worthwhile.

I discovered that unlike the TA 324 Acting for Non-Major class, I had to spend more time disciplining and keeping the students' attention. I also had to quell disputes between students who for example wanted to play the same role. I had to play mother and counselor at times when students did not have a good day at school and I needed to cheer them or give them a little confidence booster. In a sense working with these students helped me with my Acting for Non-Major class. I gained more patience and was able to explain in a simple way the general concept of what acting was and how to portray characters on stage.

Students in both classes did not start with a pool of information or knowledge about theatre. So while theatre is a serious craft for me, my students might not appreciate it in the same way. Nonetheless, it becomes important that they understand its seriousness and the discipline that is required while simply having fun. I knew that I had done my job if I was able get my students to have fun creating stories and presenting them in front of the class, overcoming the issue of stage fright and being able to commit to the characters they create for a small moment onstage.

Teaching at LCCC was a valuable experience especially for one who has considered teaching theatre. It takes a different level of patience dealing with young children. However, I enjoyed knowing that I was leaving an impressionable mark on those children and the fact that I was their introduction to theatre. It was a joy being a

part of discovering a talent. It was also great working with children who were playful with colorful imaginations. While working with these students I was able to become a child again.

### **University of Louisville Repertory Company**

I became a member of the University of Louisville Theatre Repertory Company during the 2012-2013 school year. This was another great opportunity for me to work among children. It was certainly a life learning experience. I was able to be a part of a team; punctuality and ensemble work became important. My improvisational skills were challenged and improved. It was advantageous having an improv/Commedia dell' arte class while being a part of the repertory company. Having both experiences simultaneously helped to give me confidence. Seeing that I had a passion for young children, but I never had the opportunity to blend both my passion for theatre and children, repertory company allowed for this blend. Although, I was often exhausted and not always in the mood to do one show let alone sometimes two performances in the early morning, but seeing the children excited and encouraged me. It awakened the child in me. The students responded to the characters during the shows. For example during the musical *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* there were students who would sing along with each song. Some would verbally acknowledge which of the two sisters they liked.

The classes, performances, and internships helped me to grow as an artist. My knowledge as a student-artist expanded and I was left with resources and experiences that have further enhanced my talents. The knowledge I have gained from my educational experience at the University of Louisville has allowed me to fall in love not only with the stage but also the classroom. I consider both places to be performance spaces. On stage I

can entertain and educate the audience. I can do the same in the classroom. In both places I get dressed in my costume and take on roles I thought I never could. Performing teacher, student and actor for the last three years has certainly taught me about my strengths and weakness as one can learn while performing different roles on stage.

CHAPTER THREE  
THE WOUND HEALING PHASE

*“By creating art we extend the range of the ego's potential for consciousness. The means of insight into our past and present, our inner and outer reality; outer reality can be our mental plaything, offering sameness where we has assumed difference and differences within identical” -R. M Simon*

By Spring 2013, I completed my second year at University of Louisville’s Theatre Arts Department also referred to as the furnace. I began to notice my growth as an actor and my maturity as a young woman. I had developed my own acting process. My interest in African American and Caribbean theatre was sparked. I was more confident as I was given opportunities to portray lead and supporting roles in several productions. I was also more comfortable teaching college-level acting classes. At the end of my second year I was proud of my accomplishments thus far. Nevertheless, the heat of my experience was about to move to a higher level in my final year as I approached my thesis role, Madame Alvarez in *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*. The pressure increased as I strived to continue to do well in all of my classes while teaching three sections of the Acting for Non-Majors course.

**Why this role?**

I was drawn to the role of Madame Alvarez because I was intrigued by the complexities that lied within her and because she was able to break barriers of feminine stereotypes while not losing her stature as a woman. I was excited to finally portray an

adult woman on UofL's stage. I knew it would be a challenge for me to assert myself as a woman of the house as well as present myself convincingly as the mother of two older children. I knew this would be difficult especially since my acting partners looked older than I was. I did not want to resort to portraying the qualities of an older woman or make her a stereotype. Therefore, in order not to create a stereotype but a person, I started focusing on the character's outward appearance and her physicality. I first began with animal and Commedia dell'arte characters as I had studied both in my second year acting class with Erin Crites. This allowed me to find the physical nuances of Madame that were different from me. My main goals when approaching the role were to make bolder choices and allow my research to show in rehearsal and affect my choices. I needed to internalize because it would give a stronger emotional life and presence to the character. I also needed to assert myself and continue to work on adding color and vocal variety to my voice.

### **My acting process**

Each actor has their own method of acting and how they create their character. They each have a process which has to be developed and will change over time. The starting point of every character development begins by reading the script first to get a general idea of the plot and gain an understanding of the world of the play. I read the script three times, first just to understand the story, second to learn about the world of the play and third to better understand the character, learn how the given circumstances informed who the character was and her relationship to others. In preparing for the role I took advantage of every source available. I started researching the playwright, previous productions and historical background of the play. I read several books, watched French



videos and movies as well as different film versions of *Tartuffe*. Once I completed my research and had a better understanding of the character, I wrote a character biography and filled in the missing pieces of Madame Alvarez's life. The only thing left was to allow all the research and knowledge I gained to influence how I created the character physically. I searched for various techniques such as Commedia dell'arte and Suzuki that helped to add physical life to Madame Alvarez.

I started basic research on Haiti during the late Nineteenth Century and the effects of the Haitian Revolution, which resulted in Haiti gaining its independence. Toussaint L'Ouverture's book, *The Haitian Revolution*, helped me to understand the power struggle between the French colonials and the native blacks of the country and their fight for equality. Black leaders like Toussaint L'Ouverture rose up and he along with the slaves revolted against their slave masters at the end of the Eighteenth Century. Haiti became the first black republic to overthrow its European colonial forces. Haiti became a motivation for others in the Caribbean and United States who were enslaved or were living under the ruling of European forces. Although Haiti became a free nation with its independent government, it still suffered internal turmoil and warfare. No longer was it the whites against blacks, it became blacks against blacks. The country moved towards a tyrannical rule as several leaders such as Henri Christophe and Alexander Petion fought to take full control of the country. The country divided into two parts, the Republic of Haiti governed by Alexander Petion and the Kingdom of Haiti governed by Henri Christophe.

The social stratification of the country was redefined. Social stratification is the classification of groups of people based on their socio-economic status and class.

Remnants of prejudice lingered and anything associated with Europe or whiteness was still considered superior. In Bernard Barbier's book *Social Stratification*, he explained that during the Nineteenth Century there were mainly two social classes. One was either a part of the upper or lower class. "Wealth sometimes secures direct admission into upper ranks of society on its own account. More often it is allowed to count as compensation for deficiencies in the intrinsic personal qualities normally belonging to members of the class" (Barbier 43). The upper class consisted of the elite, who were wealthy and educated; and also those who had alliances with the government. While the elite group exclusively composed of French speaking mulattoes, the military was a great way for light and dark skin Haitians to become a part of the upper class. Don Pascal's family was part of the group who gained status by an alliance with the government. His mother married a military leader, thereby gaining the house, the acres of land, and money. Madame Alvarez, on the other hand, was not exposed to this wealth as a child. Her father finally became a military official and served for six years. However, he later developed lung tumors and passed away. Her family gained some wealth and with her brother, Gustave following in their father's footsteps as a military leader, the family was able to continue up the social ladder.

After researching the locale and time period of the play, I began to focus on the major themes. The main ideas that I chose to explore for my research on *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* were religious hypocrisy and female sexuality. The religious hypocrisy helped me to understand the importance of religion in the play and the focus on female sexuality helped me to understand Madame's status as a woman of the house and

how she used that to her advantage. I questioned what it meant to be a woman and the gender roles and expectations during that period in history.

Playwright, Roger Furman adapted a classic French play, *Tartuffe* (Moliere) that addressed religious hypocrisy of Seventeenth Century France to analyze a similar religious turmoil in Nineteenth Century Haiti. During the Seventeenth Century France was plagued with religious wars between the Protestants and the Catholics. France became an absolute monarchy and the Catholic Church became a powerful force. Because the church had a great deal of power they were careful about what playwrights and writers presented. The church felt threatened because Moliere addressed the topic of religion. He pointed out how religion can be used as a justification or a cover up for bigotry and sin. A similar struggle between religions took place in Haiti during the Nineteenth Century. Catholicism was the religion of the state, however, many of the people mostly practiced Voodoo, which comes from the Dahomean words vodu or vodun, which means deity or spirit. All three words are acceptable in referring to the Haitian religion. Leaders in Haiti opposed Voodoo because they feared that people had used it as a means to overthrow the French during the Haitian Revolution and could possibly use it against them. Article three of The Code Noir stated:

We forbid any religion other than the Roman [sic], Catholic, and Apostolic Faith from being practiced in public. We desire that offenders be punished as rebels disobedient of our orders. We forbid any gathering to that end, which we declare to be conventicle [sic], illegal, and seditious, and subject to the same punishment as would be applicable to the masters who permit it or accept it from their slaves (1).

This lack of freedom to practice Voodoo openly continued and the Catholic Church gained major influence with the political transactions of the country. *Tartuffe* and *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* revealed the danger of using a religion, like Catholicism, as a mask to promote a political agenda. It was not about true religion in order to maintain peace and to spread ideas of love or spirituality. Religion was simply a means to create order and maintain power. *Tartuffe* and *Baptiste* were symbols of hypocrisy as they represented how true religion defiled in order to secure personal gain.

Like, in Seventeenth Century France, religion and spirituality were an essential part of Haitian culture and history. There were traditional African rituals and beliefs that were brought to Haiti by the African slaves which have their influence on the voodoo religion. The concept of religion permeates the play and while it started as the cause of the family's problems, it also became their solution. Monsieur Baptiste falsely used religion to gain Don Pascal's trust and acceptance. Don Pascal's gullibility towards Baptiste's feigned devotion to Catholicism proved how much value was placed on an external display rather than true devotion. Holiness was measured by one's action instead of true spiritual connection to God. Don Pascal reveres the Catholic religion and according to Madame Alvarez, "he frowns on any kind of Voodoo practices" (2.2.40). However, in the end it was Dorinea's Voodoo rituals that helped to save the Alvarez family from misfortune. This proved that voodoo was a viable religion and should not be stigmatized as evil.

In his book, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti*, Leslie Desmangles explains that Voodoo "is a religion that, through a complex system of myths and rituals, relates the life of the devotee to the deities who govern that

life" (2). By 1860, Roman Catholicism had made its way to Haiti. Before then there was not an official presence of Roman Catholicism in Haiti. Despite the suppression of Voodoo, "Haitian culture was imbued with Voodoo practices" (47). Even devoted Catholics practiced Voodoo rituals, however, they did not consider themselves a part of the Voodoo religion. A majority of Haitians believe in and practice at least some aspects of Voodoo. According to George Eaton Simpson a "majority of voodooists are Catholic, this old tradition persists that African Gods are real to them and they cannot rely solely on the church" (Horowitz 504). Some validate their decision to continue participating in Voodoo practices by saying that "God condemns Voodoo, but permits Laos" (504).

Loas are spirits that are assigned to family and passed down from generation to generation. Some of them are actually African gods and others are native to Haiti. They protect the family from adversity and assist them through good times. The families pay the spirits with gift offerings and blood sacrifices in return for watching over them. The loas are mediators between God, man and spirits that exist under the water corresponding with spirits in heaven on behalf of man. Some people believe that the saints are loas, but not all loas are saints. Voodoo specialists, like Dorinea also act as mediators between the loas and people through premonition and divination. Dorinea prayed, called on the spirits and entered into a trance which occurred often when Voodoo specialists called on the loas. The dead also acted as family loas and are consulted to cause misfortune, protect the family or advise or warn the family of upcoming misfortune. Dorinea's mother and grandmother are examples of loas who were called upon by living family members in times of adversity. Through a connection with the spiritual realm they were able to create changes in the cosmos and cause misfortune for Monsieur Baptiste. Voodoo was shown

as a source of good rather than evil as it was usually depicted. It brought the family together and cast fortune instead of misfortune on them.

From the inception of the Haitian Republic, women were discriminated against and seen as lower-class members of society. Women were considered minors and were accountable to their husbands. According to Article Nine of the Preliminary Declaration of the 1805 Haitian Constitution, “No person is worthy of being a Haitian who is not a good father, good son, a good husband, and especially a good soldier”(1). This excluded women, thus indicating the superiority of men and that those alone are considered good Haitian citizens. Don Pascal perpetuated these ideas of inferiority in women as he reminds Dorinea that “a woman, like a child must be seen and not heard” (1.2.29). He asserted his manhood by reminding her also that he was the head of the household and his word was the law. He chose whom his daughter Valerie would marry and had the freedom to change his mind when he decided. Don Pascal as the sole breadwinner of the family had control over the family financially, but Madame being the one who took care of the house and helped raise the children essentially had some power. She enlightened the children and encouraged them to become independent adults. He went on his business trips every so often and left the house in her care. Although the main man in her life, her husband did not recognize her power, Madame Alvarez still fought to assert herself with the help of the Voodoo Gods. She also used her feminine charms to tease her husband and get him to comply with her plans. He was surprised by her assertion and she demanded to be heard. He became humbled, yet still struggled with submission as he tried to refuse to obey her.

Subtly the play depicts strong female characters that saved the day. In fact,

marginalized groups and religion, women and Voodoo both become the source of redemption for the family. I learned from Beverly Bell's article, *A History of Haitian Women Involvement* that women, even in Twenty-First Century Haiti with the establishment of women rights group such as the National Coalition to Advocate the Rights of Women (CONAP) in Haiti, were still marginalized and discriminated against. While the law prohibited discrimination, the law was not followed as it was intended. Currently, women are now allowed to hold public offices and attend school. However, because of the socio-economic issues, many young girls are forced to drop out of school to earn a living and help their families. Nonetheless, the women in *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Mon* with the exception of Valerie were strong, independent and had great intuition.

*Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Mon* depicted the dominant figures as reasons for the downfall of the family. Don Pascal was a well-respected man who should be strong, educated and wise yet he behaved feeble-mindedly, weak, foolish and gullible. He allowed the false pretense of another man to fool him. This showed that men in all their wisdom could make foolish choices, which can lead to their own destruction. Catholicism which was well respected and seen as more sophisticated than Voodoo became the object of hypocrisy and deceit. This shows the irreverence and dishonesty that can exist in a religion even though it should promote a better life and how to become a better person.

### **Getting to know Madame Alvarez**

Upon completing my basic research on the world of the play and the main themes of religious hypocrisy and the depiction of female sexuality, I began an in-depth character analysis of Madame Alvarez. I had noted from my second reading of the play what she said about herself and others and what others said about her. I had marked all of her

physical actions, which helped me to understand the playwright's vision of the character. I paid attention to her relationship to the other characters and how she responded to them. I visualized her physical appearance, her movements, and tone of voice, mannerisms, quirks and style. Even though the script gave a substantial depiction of the character's life before the start of the play I thought it necessary to fill in her backstory. I chose to write in first person as the character would if she were to write her own biography.

I am Catherine Pernelle Alvarez, a 32-year old woman married to Don Pascal Alvarez. We got married after six months of dating. We first met at a Mardi Gras soiree at my friend's home, Geraldine Christophe. At the time I was not interested in meeting anyone romantically. I had been heartbroken by a previous relationship and my friends wanted me to come out and have fun so I consented to attend Geraldine's soiree. I will never forget when he offered me some punch and I declined soon after he made a corny joke. I laughed nonetheless to appease him. He continued talking for the rest of the night. O how he loved to talk. I sat there listening and laughing since I had nothing else to do for the rest of the night. Eventually, he asked me to dance just before I left. I was reluctant at first because I was embarrassed to be seen with an older man, but his charm swept me off my feet. I agreed to dance with him. We had a ball of a time doing the cakewalk and the waltz. I had not laughed so hard in a while and I might admit he was not that great of a dancer, but by the end of the night he caught on. I did not see him for a while after that.

Two weeks passed before I saw him again at another gathering. It took another few months after that to see him again. I left Geraldine's home and went



back to the country to stay with my brother since my mother was ill. I stayed in Cap Haiten and helped my mother and older sister, Madeline. My father had passed away after developing lung tumors. He was injured at a battle in Port-au-Prince and was later considered a hero. So my family became well off because of his benefits from the army after he passed. My brother followed in his footsteps and became a general too. My family became well respected because of their dedication and commitment to the government and politics. My mother was excited to marry me off to Don Pascal. One, because he was wealthy and she would be sure that I would be taken care of and second, because she was proud that at least one of her daughters would be married. My older sister, Madeline was forty and still not married. She was the opposite of me. She did not speak much and preferred to stay at home inside the house with my mother. I had always been the favorite of the two girls because I was more artistic and outgoing. I enjoyed singing, dancing, painting, cooking and writing poetry. Dorinea performed most of the cooking, but I liked to prepare some meals for my husband as a sign of my love for him.

I had a local education up to high school at the St. Martinique Secondary School where I learned reading, writing and arithmetic, and home economics. I spent a few months in Paris studying at the Sorbonne School. I studied French, English, Portuguese and history. I also learned quite a bit about the arts, dance and painting. I loved to read novels and plays. Because of my education I am a free thinker and more outgoing. I liked thinking I was not the woman of my time. I was alert and knowledgeable of what was going on in my environment. Therefore

I was observant and more insightful rather than talkative. I tended to hold things then explode which I hated about myself because I disliked being loud and aggressive.

I was raised Catholic and have always been a devoted Christian. However, I was introduced to Voodoo practices because my grandmother practiced it. I did not like to openly admit this because of awareness that to be involved in Voodoo would lessen my status and social class. I have never actually participated in the Voodoo rituals, but the power of the spirits was not foreign to me. This was the reason I became afraid when Dorinea offered to use Voodoo to get rid of Monsieur Baptiste. If anyone else found out about this, my family's status could fall. Voodoo was for the uneducated and the heathens. I could not be associated with either group. My family and I had made sacrifices to move up the social ladder to a better social class.

I was quite social and fashionable. As a little girl I spent hours with my mother making figurines and clothes for my dolls and flower clips for my hair. I used to spend a lot of time in the mirror to make sure I looked my best. I grew out of my self-centeredness, but still liked to take great care of myself. I also enjoyed playing outside with my brother and his friends. At age eleven, I fell out of a tree and hit my head very badly. I ended up with a mild concussion which left me with headaches ever since. We were playing hide and seek and being the genius I was I thought it would be clever to hide in the tree because no one would look up. I lost my balance and fell extremely hard.

Whenever I was stressed or I got nervous I would shake mildly and I have

massive headaches. My heart would race and I could become light-headed. I tried to avoid being in stressful situations because it made me ill. I never allowed myself to get angry very often and I tried to avoid arguments unless pushed. Sometimes I was forced to stand up for myself especially when it came to my mother-in-law. She loved to boss me around and found fault with everything I did. She constantly compared me to the first Madame Alvarez, which made me feel inadequate. I had to remind myself that I was the woman of the house. She thought that she was better than I was, but I knew about her family lineage and her background. I know that her mother had been poor. Her grandfather was a farmer and her mother had married a rich man in the army so she was not born into wealth. However, her father had left her mother so she knew poverty, but she tried to raise her children well and gave them a good education. This was her reason for being so protective of Don Pascal. She could not seem to realize that I am not her competition. Her son loved her very much. The children loved her too, but she was too strict on them.

I loved the children greatly and understood Valerie's love for Andre and I wanted to be there for her like a mother. Sometimes she acted immature especially since she was the younger of the two children and the only girl. I realized that she was good at dancing so I wanted to encourage her in that area. She catches on to things quite easily. She reminds me of myself as a young girl, vain and in love. Jean Paul was a little difficult to handle because he was headstrong and extremely stubborn, but nonetheless he was working towards manhood comfortably. He admired his father a lot and I loved the fact that he was trying to grow up and take

responsibility for himself. I tended to have great moments with the children and I really tried to listen and be there for them. It took them sometime to warm towards me. But we had all found a life happy and successful until the day my husband brought Monsieur Baptiste home and announced that he would be living with us permanently.

I worked to bring myself to the role first by trying to see how I could or could not relate to the character. After completing the biography, I discovered how I could see myself in her. Though our given circumstances were not the same, I can liken my three years at the University of Louisville to her experience as the first lady of the Alvarez family. Like me, Madame Alvarez had a silent strength that could easily have been mistaken for weakness. What I liked most about Madame Alvarez was that she tried to stand her ground as the woman of the house in a lady-like manner. She was femininity displayed in the Nineteenth Century while Dorinea was the opposite. Dorinea was seen as a sassy, aggressive, and perspicacious woman who was not afraid to challenge the male figures in her life. Madame Alvarez on the other hand appeared to be genteel, sophisticated and fashionable. She was a devoted Christian who valued her family and was willing to go to the length to save them.

Madame experienced a period of transformation and growth throughout the play as I did at the University of Louisville. The similarities in experience caused me to recall moments during my tenure as a graduate student that helped me relate to how Madame Alvarez felt at particular moments during the play. In the first scene of the play, one can see that Grandmother Alvarez disrespects her even in front of the children. She tried to

stand up for herself but failed. Her respect for her elder was enough to prevent her from completely dismissing Grandmother Alvarez and expressing how she truly felt.

I can liken her frustration with Grandmother Alvarez at the beginning of the play to my first semester at UofL which was also filled with frustration and out-of- place feelings. Similar to Madame who started her journey into marriage hopeful and happy, I started my journey into graduate school filled with excitement and expectations. Her marriage to Don Pascal had its ups and downs. Grandmother Alvarez and Monsieur Baptiste had been thorns in her flesh. Don Pascal also had old fashion views of how women should behave. “He claimed a woman like a child should be seen and not heard” (1.2.29). According to him, “a wife must stay in a wife’s place” (2.1.49). He also challenged her honesty as he accused her of plotting with Jean Paul against Monsieur Baptiste.

Madame Alvarez’s story throughout the play had been an encouragement to me. Just when she felt empowered that everything was working as planned, she discovered that things were falling apart and the family was about to lose their home. However, in the end all things worked together for the good. It proved that despite how gloomy a situation seemed prayer still changed things.

Like me, Madame made small steps towards growth. She tried to stand her ground with Grandmother Alvarez, but still got trampled. She tried to convince Monsieur Baptiste not to marry her stepdaughter, Valerie. However, Jean Paul intercepted that plan. Those bumps in the road overwhelmed her; nevertheless, she was willing to do what was necessary to get rid of the imposter, Baptiste.

Madame’s turning point occurred during the Second Act after being possessed by

Dorinea's ancestral spirits. My turning point occurred after portraying the role of Daughter in Shay Youngblood's *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*. Madame's encounter with the spirits empowered her and gave her the strength to stand up to her husband and Baptiste regardless of the challenge. Madame Alvarez's encounter with the spiritual realm was not foreign to me as a born again Pentecostal Christian who had frequently encountered the Holy Spirit. Pentecostalism and Voodoo although not the same treated the possession of the spirit as a similar experience. Persons could have similar reactions when their bodies were taken over by the Spirit. After the possession was completed it left one feeling refreshed and empowered. I was able to call upon my encounters with the Holy Spirit to make my portrayal of Madame Alvarez's possession seem believable. I recalled how much stronger and bigger I felt after prayer and speaking with the Holy Spirit. However, when I first approached Act two Scene I was quite afraid because of my preconceived notions about Voodoo.

In my community in Jamaica there were individuals who practiced Voodoo also known as Obeah. It was really an African religion that dealt with the supernatural. Nevertheless, in West African countries and the Southern American states it was mixed with Christian religion in order to be disguised so they could practice it freely. There was a negative stigma attached to Voodoo and it was not really considered a religious practice as it was in Haiti, but was considered a way to cause evil on others. Obeah worshippers as they were sometimes called, were feared in the community and often consulted to set spirits on others, to prevent an individual or family from succeeding, to cause illness, to break up or bring couples together and sometimes to cure a sickness. Therefore because of the predominant negative connotations of Voodoo I was afraid to emerge myself in the

Voodoo ritual that was portrayed on stage. However, when I likened it to my experience with the Holy Spirit and researched the origins of Voodoo my fear was erased.

Understanding Madame Alvarez's history determined her relationship to other characters onstage. It also created a moment-to-moment motivation for my character's action onstage. I made a clear psychoanalysis of my character's thinking. Once I understood her mentally, I needed to understand the style of the play and history of the time period in order to bring her to life physically. Research on Commedia dell'arte stock characters, archetypes as well as Tadashi Suzuki's training technique helped me find the physical life of the character.

Moliere was fond of Commedia dell'arte, therefore it became the basis for many of the characters in his comedies. Commedia dell'arte is a physical form of theatre that relies on the body to tell the story. The commedia characters wore masks and each character had a specific costume that represented various social types. Each character possessed particular personality traits, which helped to define the character's entire person. The emotional masks worn by the actor became important in displaying the character's emotion, but also challenged the actor to make sure his or her body projected the emotion as well. I understood the physical traits and movements of the character when I started to look at Madame Alvarez in terms of the commedia stock characters. I did not attempt to play any of the stock characters when I was in the rehearsal room, but I believed it helped to color my performance of her and interpretation of the Madame.

Having recently completed a movement class that focused on Commedia dell'arte, I began to identify a few stock characters in *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con man*. I discovered that Madame Alvarez was a combination of the Innamorati, a young lover and

Columbiana, the wise strong-headed woman. Her grace and style was much like that of Commedia's young lovers. She was elegant, attractive and courteous. As a young lover she was prim, dainty, but as Columbiana she could be bold, but not crude or vulgar. She was intelligent and in a sense was a voice of reason. She could be playful and wise, strong and attractive. She was autonomous, self-sufficient and had no negative attributes. She was able to read and write, was fond of books, sang, and loved to dance. Madame Alvarez needed Dorinea, the maid because she represented that sassiness and dominance that the Madame lacked. She tried to stand up to defend herself but when things became too heavy and pressuring she became sick and nervous and had to run. So she needed Dorinea's support. She tried to stand up to the Grandmother, but was not bold enough to face her and shut her down. She made attempts but did not go all the way.

My research on stock characters developed an interest in archetypes. According to Webster's online dictionary an archetype is "an inherited idea or mode of thought in the psychology of C. G. Jung that is derived from the experience of the race and is present in the unconscious of the individual" (1). They are qualities that can be supposedly found in all humans. It dictates an individual's personality, thoughts, actions, and beliefs. Discovering Madame Alvarez's archetype helped me to find ways to connect with her. Especially, since some of her given circumstances are foreign to me. However, I can connect to her emotionally as a nurturer and fighter.

I started researching Suzuki training techniques which emphasized the importance of the actor's body over the text of a work. I took some of the Suzuki training exercises in order to build strength and stamina. It also helped to improve my breath support and strengthened my diaphragm and core. During my occasional workout exercise I would try



to repeat lines while doing various movements. Suzuki training focused on the body, especially the feet. It brought an awareness of the entire body and reminded the actor to be centered and that the energy came from the earth. It focused on developing the diaphragm so as to maintain breath control during physically challenging activities. This allowed me to strengthen my diaphragm, control the body and the breath allowed me to relax and not hold tension in my body. I was aware that Suzuki could cause an actor to have a stereotypical mechanical Suzuki voice. Therefore, I focused on two of the basic exercises, rhythmic stomping and statues. The rhythmic stomping helped to strengthen the body and the breath support. I did not do this exercise as often, because I did not have the space with the appropriate flooring and I did not want to hurt myself. However, this exercise reminded me to stay grounded which created reserve energy in my body. It helped to place my body in a relax readiness position.

The second exercise I used was known as the Statues. This exercise helped to strengthen my control over both my body and voice while forcing me to use my diaphragm. I started in low-crouching positions with both hands to the side. Then I slowly rose attempting to have my heels touch the floor as my head rose up. After doing this a few times then I added text. I would slowly rise while repeating the text. I made sure that I was not at a complete standing position until I was through reciting the monologue. Therefore, I could feel the strain on my legs. At first this was distracting, but it allowed me to refocus my attention on the breath and forced me to breathe and speak clearly. Besides physical and vocal strength this helped to develop a greater concentration. After repeatedly doing the crouched position, I would recite the monologue while switching into various poses ensuring that my balance shifted. I

sometimes stood on one leg while tilting from the waist with one arm extended outward and the other up.

Most of my basic research was completed but I still needed to learn more about the neoclassical style of acting. I was able to get a better understanding of the movement and timing of the style from watching various versions of *Tartuffe*. I thought this would help me to make appropriate choices for the character and the style. I watched the 1973 film version starring Robert Hirsch as Tartuffe and Claude Winter as Elmire. The actors spoke in French; therefore I could not understand the dialogue. However, I focused primarily on the movement and the body language of the characters. I learned how to move gracefully through the space by watching that video. I also watched the 1983 film version of the play which starred Nigel Hawthorne as Orgon and Antony Sher as Tartuffe. I focused on the physical acting in this video and the etiquette of the women. I found it most difficult to follow the Hungarian-staged version of the play. But I noticed in that production that Madame did not seem genteel. The actor chose to make Madame meek in her interaction with others but showed her disgust or contempt during subtle moments to the audience. This reminded me that Madame was respectful out of duty to her husband and Grandmother Alvarez as her elder. It led me to think of pretense in Madame when she was around her husband and mother-in-law. The video helped me to think of how she masked her true feelings without coming off as a weak and submissive to the audience. Watching those videos gave me a better understanding of the posture, the different ways a woman sat and the way she moved in such restricted heavy clothing. They also allowed me to see the different ways Madame could be portrayed. I did not copy the choices the actors made, but I certainly understood the grace, power and

complexity of Madame. Some actors chose to portray their character demurely and some chose to portray with more power. I wanted to find a balance between the two.

Understanding the way women, sat, stood and moved was much easier than learning the dialect and the rhythm of speech. Besides completing the thesis, my greatest fear in approaching the thesis project was learning the dialect. After the first read through I requested a French tutor from the French department at the University of Louisville. Arielle Webster graciously agreed to meet with me. In our first meeting she pointed out the vowel substitutions sounds between English and French and the placement of each sound change within my mouth. I recorded her reading some of the character's lines. This helped me somewhat because I am accustomed to learning a dialect simply by listening to it being used constantly. I also liked writing down the sound changes so I could link my visuals with something audible. I listened to the recording of the dialect while I walked home or just in my pastime. Listening to the recording helped me to get familiarized with the rhythm of the accent and it also helped me to learn my lines.

French tutoring and the recording were not enough because Arielle Webster simply read the lines so I found myself falling into that speech pattern when memorizing the lines. I thought that the French speakers were monotone and lacked inflection, but after listening to various videos and French movies I realized that was not true. In fact the French have their own rhythm and they emphasized certain words. It also seemed that they elongated and stressed the vowel sounds more than the consonants. This was especially true for Caucasian French in France. Black French speakers in Haiti still had the sense of African and black rhythms of speech. The rhythm tended to be choppy and the vowel sounds were shorter.

I continued to listen to the recordings of my French tutor. I also watched videos of News Reporter, Melissa Theuriau along with French talk shows like Boomerang! Melissa Theuriau and talk show host Erik Haartman who all sounded conversational so I got a better understanding for the rhythm, tone, inflection and vocal variety within their voices. After watching the video everyday it did not seem as if it was simply trying to speak a foreign dialect. I had begun to sound natural. My voice was free so I was not simply trying to hit every sound and in turn over enunciated while being muddy and hard to understand onstage. My session with Dr. Rinda Frye was also helpful and indeed timely as I sought to make the dialect softer, more understandable and conversational. Instead of simply listening and recording her I recorded both of us reading the script together. I was able to hear the change of inflection and the playfulness in her voice as she read with feeling.

Researching the historical period, identifying the main themes of the play and how they influenced my character were all a part of my preparation for the character. Learning the movement and etiquette of the Nineteenth Century by researching Commedia dell'arte characters and archetypes along with Suzuki training techniques helped me to find the foundation of the character's physical life. I learned to further explore Madame Alvarez's physical life as I watched a few film versions of *Tartuffe* that were posted on YouTube. Once I had a good grasp of the dialect I was able to match the character's movement with her voice. My research proved helpful during the first half of the rehearsal process because it enabled me to make discoveries about the character and her relationship to the others. I had to take the character off the page and place the character in my body before putting her on the stage. Understanding the heart of the

character was important, but feeling the character in my heart in the rehearsal process and allowing it to take over my body was more important.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SCAR FORMATION PHASE

*“It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end”- Ernest Hemmingway*

After a burn, your skin goes through several phases of healing. First there is the wound-healing phase which simply requires cleansing and dressing of the wound. The second phase is the scar formation phase, and lastly, the maturation phase where the skin may return to its natural skin tone, but thicker than before. My first year at UofL was my experience of getting burned. I felt crushed and needed to rebuild my confidence. I spent my second year caring for those burns and covering the scars. I sought to care for my wounds by working hard to prove myself as an actor and challenge myself in ways that I had not done before. It was not until my last year that I truly began to heal from the wounds. By my last year in the graduate program I had restored my confidence, rediscovered my strengths and recognized my weakness and how to overcome them. The burns from my first two years were a necessary part of my journey to maturity. Without the challenges from my professors and peers along with the challenges I faced with each performance I would not have achieved the internal growth that was needed for this time in my life. The maturation phase of the healing process began Fall of 2013 as I started rehearsing for my role in *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*. It consummated after I finished my thesis performance of *Madame Alvarez* and began to write this thesis. It

allowed for self-reflection and evaluation that has made me appreciate my journey to self-discovery.

According to the Encarta Online dictionary, a journey is “a gradual passing from one state to another regarded as more advanced, for example from innocence to mature awareness” (1). Although a journey is long and tedious it requires persistence and purpose to be completed. The journey is of utmost importance because it leads to internal and external growth which only allows one to discover his or her strengths and weaknesses. It is not as important for one to receive a prize at the end; it is more important that the individual gathers lessons that aids in his or her growth. These lessons are the prizes. The rehearsal process for *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* was the last journey for me as a theatre artist at the University of Louisville. It was of paramount importance because it tested my growth. I recognized how the hurdles I encountered in the classroom and with other productions prepared me for my final performance at UofL. It was through that production, I realized now, that I developed a mature awareness over the last three years and that I had grown to be an independent young woman. It allowed me to recognize how I redefined my acting process and goal as a performer.

I entered the rehearsal process with much anticipation and excitement. I had done a challenging and exciting role. I was not as confident as I should have been because it was my first time working in a French neoclassical style. However, I felt safe entering the rehearsal space and was certain that the director, Dr. Lundeana Thomas would not tolerate unpreparedness or bad choices on the stage. Therefore, I knew if I moved in the wrong direction I would be pointed in the right way. I looked forward to be working with the cast especially after watching their auditions and witnessing how seriously they took

the process. My cast mates took the time to prepare for the auditions and the calls backs. I watched as several of them read and took notes and made a variety of choices they could make. I admired their determination and looked forward to this same kind of hard work throughout the month and a half of rehearsal. I observed the actors actively fight for a role and striving to make distinctive vocal and physical choices, which would set them apart from the other actors.

In both nights of audition energy and presence were in strong measure which each actor brought with them. The first night of the auditions I sat observantly with my notepad and pencil scribbling down the names of the actors I connected with the most onstage and those I saw owned the text. I left the first night knowing which of the actors I would love to work with, however after seeing all who auditioned the second night I was no longer sure. The callback auditions were even more intense because all the actors came prepared. After seeing the competition in the room I felt privileged not having to audition and also having had the opportunity to spend the summer studying the script. Nevertheless, I did not feel like so much of an expert during my first reading in the auditions. I stumbled over lines and my body felt stiff. The individuals that auditioned made choices that I did not anticipate which required me to adjust my preplanned choices. Nonetheless, I felt less pressure since I knew which role I was cast as and used the audition as a way to start settling the character in my body

The first challenge was over, auditioning. The Alvarez family was formed. We had a one-month hiatus between the auditions and the start of rehearsals. This gave the actors time to prep for what was their next major hurdle, the rehearsal process. Once cast, it was a challenge for them to learn the French dialect and perform in a Nineteenth Century



neoclassical classical style. As an ensemble we had to work on changing our contemporary rhythm of speech, walk, mannerisms and gestures to that of the time period. It became a struggle especially since the actors were at different levels in their training and some grasped the dialect and style quicker than others. However, we never lost a sense of togetherness. In fact, the challenges allowed the cast to draw closer. Of all the casts I have worked with at the University of Louisville, the cast of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* taught me the most about the importance of ensemble. They taught me to fight to overcome my obstacles despite the frustration I experienced during the rehearsal process. Giving up was not an option for any of the cast members. Together, we struggled to bring to life Roger Furman's play *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*. Struggling made us become a real family.

During the first read through it seemed as if the cast members were connecting with their characters and each other. The room cackled with laughter. We were finding the humor and the emotion of the play while making instinctual choices. I first discovered the transformation that my character, Madame Alvarez experienced from the beginning of the play to the end during the first read through on September 17, 2013 I believe this realization of transformation and change was missing from Ti Moune in *Once on this Island* and Rita in *Shaking the Mess Outta Misery*. In those two productions I was so focused on just pursuing goals and relationships and developing the characters so that I did not think about the gradual change that occurred in the characters from start to finish. I was able to capture the youth and innocence of both characters successfully, but did not excel in capturing how much they matured tremendously throughout the play.

I frequently had private rehearsals with Takayla Williams, the Grandmother in order to make new discoveries and to find interesting new choices. These rehearsals helped me to become comfortable with speaking the text out loud and moving independently. I benefitted greatly from these meetings because I previously spent hours researching; therefore, I had a good intellectual understanding of the play and my character. However, at the time I had not transferred what I knew about the character into how I would portray it physically. In one of our private rehearsals, I discovered that I naturally used my hands while speaking. However, the character used her hands only to make emphasis at particular moments. I started using a fan in rehearsal which was useful because it gave me something to do with my hands rather than contemporary hand gestures. At the beginning of the rehearsal process my primary focus was the physical life of the character because I was so stuck on the style. Wearing heels and using the fan helped me tremendously because it allowed me to find the status and posture of the character. This became the start of me finding the character in my body and becoming comfortable moving as she would.

During the hiatus between the first read-through and the start of rehearsal, I assessed my strengths and weaknesses as an actor. This enabled me to be independent and be responsible for what I put onstage rather than to constantly await the approval and instructions from the director. As for my strengths, I have always been well organized even to the point of being overly meticulous. It started as a part of my obsession with the future and perfection. I had been afraid of failure, failing others and myself. Consequently, I methodically prepared before the start of the rehearsals. I read the play, did my character analysis and memorized my lines as much as possible before the first day of

rehearsal. Hence, some of my struggles were eliminated during the process. However, once in rehearsal my biggest issue was taking the research I had done and using it in the creative process to my advantage. I tend to be extremely technical and I focus on the external part of the character. So it took time and effort for me to find the character in my body and connect on a deep emotional level. Nonetheless, I felt free to play and explore once I was able to embody the character and allowed my understanding of the character to mold how I interacted on stage.

In previous productions, I recognized that I had an issue of wanting to give the director exactly what he or she expected and when I could not figure that out I became discouraged. I struggled with this during *Shakin the Mess Outta Misery*. During moments of uncertainty I hoped that the director or the acting coach, Clyde Harris told me what to do versus figuring it out myself. These same feelings of uncertainty lingered at the beginning of the rehearsal process for *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*. My work was shallow and tainted with fear and frustration of pleasing Dr. Lundeana Thomas. I timidly made new choices because of the fear of being wrong. I knew this was a major weakness of mine going into rehearsals for *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*; therefore I challenged myself to go into every rehearsal with at least two new ideas every night. My fear dwindled and I was able to make discoveries and be present. I learned that I had to trust in my work and felt safe to try new things. Also from prior productions I recognized that during the run of a show, I was able to easily drop character once I walked off stage; mainly because I was not connected to the character and had not internalized its emotional state. I was good at committing, then quickly letting go of a moment. I could easily get into the character, but sustaining it was a challenge because I did not want to

get lost in a character. However, I had come to realize that the actor needed to believe the illusion of the reality he or she was creating onstage as much as the audience should. In order to create a believable performance the actor must commit. I struggled with committing to the reality of a moment on stage. I was aware of the technical elements, the audience, my blocking and the other characters so much that I did not completely immerse myself into the world of the play. I sometimes had an issue of knowing the other characters' lines well enough that I was almost taken out of the moment. Therefore, instead of living moment to moment it was as if I had already moved into the future and predicted what would happen next.

I would like to continue working on connecting with the characters I portray as well as work on my physical instrument; my voice and body. In terms of projection and clarity, I am vocally strong. I had no problem being loud enough and filling a space with my voice. Projection was not one of my weaknesses, enunciating was not another issue either. In fact, I tended to over-enunciate. I over emphasized my consonants so a goal for me was to live in the vowels. Elongating the vowel sounds instead of hitting the consonants as well as peaking a bit faster helped me not to over-enunciate my words. Focusing on the vowel sounds also helped to add color and variation to my voice. I mostly used my mouth and head resonators instead of using all of my resonators when I spoke. So my voice did not have as much color to it or playfulness as I would have liked. It was a reflection of my calculated mind, natural order and structure. It was also from my refusal to be vulnerable, but always to appear strong and confident even when I was not. It prevented me from accessing those resonators and finding vocal variety within the delivery of my lines.

My greatest strength is my tenacity and unwillingness to quit. Even if I could not achieve a perfect performance during rehearsals I would continue working towards it until the show closed. I knew portraying the role of Madame Alvarez would be a challenge and a challenge I embraced rather than rebelled against. In recognizing my strengths and weaknesses, I was better prepared for *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* rehearsals. It allowed me to have specific goals and a benchmark that needed to be achieved in each performance of Madame Alvarez. I felt more in charge and confident of my performance because for each rehearsal I knew which part of my performance I wanted to improve. I assessed myself at the end of each rehearsal to see if I had achieved my goal and decided how I could improve on it the following rehearsal or what else needed work.

The things I constantly needed to work on were:

1. establishing the character's age;
2. living in the moment even when I am not speaking;
3. connecting and establishing relationships with the other characters onstage;
4. listening and responding; and,
5. staying out of my head

We started rehearsal on October 1, 2013. I anticipated a fun-filled learning experience where all the actors including myself would learn and grow while enjoying the process. My main goal at the beginning of the rehearsal was to develop the character physically and establish her age and status. It later became important to establish a strong relationship with each character and also to truly listen and react in the moment. My main

goal for the rehearsals changed as relationships became more important. I realized that my relationship and interactions with each character changed what I initially thought for Madame Alvarez. After having conversations with Byron Coolie who played the role of Gustave Pernelle, I began to think of Madame as having more power. She played a matronly role, but was a clever woman and indeed a force to be reckoned. She married Don Pascal not solely because of love, but also because of necessity. Marrying Don Pascal was another way of securing wealth for her family and upgrading her social status. Gustave was aware and supported Madame's reason for marrying Don Pascal. This was why Madame reached out to Gustave in Act one scene one because they were both aware of the overwhelming family to which they have attached themselves. This also explained why Dorinea told Gustave that Don Pascal treated Baptiste better than Madame. Dorinea understands the relationship between the brother and sister. Gustave was protective of his sister because he knew that it was not easy dealing with the obvious elephant in the room, Grandmother.

I made one of my biggest discoveries at the end of the rehearsal on November 10, 2013. Dr. Thomas briefly mentioned the concept of journey and transformation in regards to the characters. I went home that night and thought long and hard on both words. It was then I began to contemplate on Madame's transformation. The previous rehearsal I was having a block as I was not feeling the transformation and acknowledging that Madame was no longer acting on her own free will. She was being led by powers greater than herself. I began to realize that it was also a freeing of her inner frustration that she kept under control. She had endured the disrespect and challenges from Grandmother Alvarez, the disrespect and being taken for granted by her husband and the violation from

Monsieur Baptiste. She put up with all kinds of foolishness from Don Pascal, his mother, the children and the houseguest, Baptiste.

The moment her husband challenged her:

**Don Pascal:** Come my dear there is nothing to see!

**Madame Alvarez:** Excuse me! What would you say if I were to show you that we are telling you the God's Holy truth? They say seeing is believing. Right? Well then old doubting Thomas how would you like to see it with your own two eyes? (2.2.55)

This was a very pivotal moment for the character because that was the first real manifestation of her change. I realized that her transformation should be gradual, but also obvious. Madame Alvarez did not necessarily notice her own transformation and even tried to avoid it before the incantation. The moment the spirits were unleashed she was no longer the dainty woman who got trampled over. She stood up to her husband and challenged him. That was the first time she stood up against any of the characters and gained the respect that she deserved as the woman of the house. She tried to stand up to Grandmother Alvarez, but got walked over. In Act one scene one Grandmother shut down the soiree and embarrassed her. My initial instincts were to be sarcastic and somewhat aggressive with Grandmother Alvarez. I constantly wanted to unleash the character's frustration during this scene, but I reminded myself of the etiquette of the time. It was not proper for Madame Alvarez to disrespect her elder. I had to use my words to pierce her instead of using modern day body language and attitude. I became more aware of the character's status and how status was represented in the Nineteenth Century. During the aforementioned scene with grandmother my goal was to explain the situation

which helped to maintain the character's composure because I constantly got the note that I should not be nasty to her. Madame Alvarez stood up to Baptiste and tried to reason with him. She tried to let her stepson, Jean Paul see things her way, but he refused.

Like me, Madame may have appeared to be meek in the beginning of the play, but in fact had a lot of strength. She made small strides to gain respect as the woman of the house, but was not successful until the spirits gave her the strength and she became empowered. She did not need to command the space in the way Grandmother Alvarez did her presence alone changed whatever room she entered. I understood that she was smart and she made wise and deliberate actions. With this understanding I no longer saw her as a victim, but was sure that she had a plan to outsmart and challenge her husband as well as Baptiste. This discovery gave me new intentions for the character and it allowed me to move away from playing a quality; an innocent victimized young woman. It also affected the way I interacted with the other characters.

Besides Madame's transformation, I also began to understand the importance of social class, pretense, false identity and the role of women in the play. The women were portrayed as strong independent women. It was the matrons in the family that helped to save the family home. Madame helped to bring out the truth, Dorinea called on the spirits of her mother and grandmother to aid in restoring the family. Madame Alvarez and Dorinea stood as power heads in the play. They were the primary forces that affected the pivotal action of the play. Even Grandmother Alvarez was as a strong force although she naively played a role in the family's near catastrophe. She had status and obviously her opinion controlled her family because she was the elder. While Dorinea and Madame Alvarez helped to save the family, it was Grandmother Alvarez's confidence and



admiration for Monsieur Baptiste that helped him to deceive the family. She encouraged the family to obey him. While they noticed his deception and false pretense, she upheld his actions in high regards.

Monsieur Baptiste was not the only one in the play that was pretentious. Even the family was striving to be better than their familial history. Madame Alvarez reminded Grandmother Alvarez that “we are all bastard offspring of former slave masters to be exact my lady friend” (1.1.3). One can assume from Madame’s statement that the family was not born into wealth, but earned it. Therefore, it became important for them to adapt the etiquette and lifestyle of the elite group in Haiti. They strived to educate themselves, indulged in the arts and spoke French because they were all associated with the upper class. This was an effort to be someone other than themselves. Therefore, Baptiste was not the only one who was spurious in order to gain status.

The cast made steady progress in the beginning as we made new discoveries about our characters and worked on posture, movement, etiquette and dialect. The ladies wore corsets, long skirts and character shoes. My rehearsal clothes immediately changed my posture and status. I felt like an upper-class woman like Madame Alvarez. Moving and speaking while wearing the corset made me realize the need to work on my breath control. I had to work extra hard to strengthen my diaphragm so as to sustain enough breath so that I was not straining and pushing the sound from my throat or taking shallow breaths. I also continually worked on my rhythm of speaking and also on finding different intentions and double entendres within the lines. I made every effort to connect the thoughts and not to break up the phrases in order to deliver the full meaning of the line. This helped me to bring new ideas to the rehearsal every night. I had to force myself

to find new things because I had a tendency to stick with a choice that worked instead of continuing to explore to find other choices that could work.

I was forced to keep my performance slightly different each time as I made the effort to make discoveries while working with Dathan Hooper, who also made the effort to persistently try new things. Hooper taught me a great deal about constantly exploring and feeling free to make choices whether or not they were right or wrong. Working with him in rehearsal kept me alert because I was never quite sure how he would deliver a line or what his reactions would be. Therefore, I always felt in the moment. I admired Hooper's liveliness onstage because it forced the other actors to make interesting choices and react in the moment. I got a taste of this from the first time I read-through Act one scene two with him during the auditions. Once I knew my character well enough I stopped presenting the character to the audience, but transformed into character. I stopped focusing on how she walked, sat, spoke. Instead, I focused on my scene partner and honestly responded as Madame to whatever my scene partner gave.

After the first few weeks of rehearsals it became unbearably frustrating throughout the rehearsal process. Actors were getting frustrated at their own lack of progress. Some actors wrestled with giving over to the director's vision of the characters. The director, Lundeana Thomas, often gave the same notes constantly to several actors which did not make her work much easier. Sharing office space and classes with several of these actors I understood that the semesters workload was becoming quite stressful. As a result they did not spend as much time outside of rehearsal preparing for their role. I too struggled with finding time within my busy schedule to dedicate all the time needed in preparing for each rehearsal. This lack of preparation right across the board affected the

rehearsal process. This frustration climaxed on November 4, 2013. The cast seemed to be on edge that evening. We were still skipping lines, messing up the blocking, lacking energy and slowing down the pace of the production. One actor who seemed to struggle with her role for the majority of the rehearsal process exploded. She expressed her frustration with the role. The atmosphere of the rehearsal shifted. I failed at standing up as a leader. I was appalled at the disrespect, but I was not sure how to react so I resorted to my usual response; I remained silent. Many of the actors expressed their frustration with the process outside of rehearsal, but did not dare explode as the young actor did. However, it was a much-needed explosion because it became the turning point in the rehearsal process. The cast regrouped and discussed the difficulty they were having and became encouraged by it. We decided to complement each person on what we thought each person was doing well in the rehearsal. This was helpful for some of the actors especially since in rehearsal only our errors and shortcomings had been pointed out which left them feeling like failures. We reminded each other of why we did theatre and the importance of pushing past ourselves in order to deliver a great performance.

The cast was twenty days away from opening and I was beginning to go through the motions while anticipating my partner's actions. I became frustrated with myself as I felt I was no longer making progress and my choices were becoming predictable and stale. I began to get several line notes and started to feel as if I was waiting to be instructed to try new things. The confidence I gained to try new things was slipping. As the pressure and frustration in the rehearsal room built, I began to second guess my choices and sought the approval of my director. I recognized the crippling fear that often overtook me was creeping in and I did not have time to allow it to make me fail. I

decided to constantly lock eyes with my scene partner or partners and actually listen to what was being said. This helped me to focus on the world of the play instead of checking for the director's approval.

Despite the struggles, the cast developed great chemistry and became an ensemble. During times of frustration we encouraged each other. Often times the cast felt as if they were failing. Which to be honest the cast was not making the strides that it needed to make because of the resistance to taking notes, taking blocking or preparing before rehearsal. I have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Thomas on several productions where both the director and cast bonded, but this time there seemed to be a major disconnect. I felt that I could have taken more responsibility in bridging the gap. However, at times I felt the need to focus on my work in rehearsal and outside of rehearsal. I did not want to allow the atmosphere of the rehearsal process to entirely affect my progress. Instead I focused on my scenes and the struggles I was having with each of them. I tried to connect individually with each of the actors which helped to build our chemistry on stage.

At the end of the rehearsal process I was proud of my cast mates. I realized there was a wide range of talents and experience. Some of the actors had never had a large role, some of the cast members were second-year graduate students, undergraduates and professional actors. Most had never worked on a period piece or had to use a French dialect. Therefore, there was a great deal to learn. The actors also had to surpass or at least live up to the expectation of the previous production of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* so there was a lot of pressure. However, once the show opened I was proud of the

work the cast produced. Despite the difficult rehearsal process the cast stuck together and this was evident especially on the last night of the performance.

Despite how frustrating the rehearsal process became for me I must agree with Ernest Hemmingway when he stated, “it is good to have an end to journey toward but it is the journey that matters in the end” (1). It took hard work and persistence to achieve excellence, which caused some agony and frustration. However, it was all worth it when the end result exceeded my expectation. I felt growing pains during the rehearsal process for *Monsieur Baptiste*, *the Con Man* as I was challenged and had to constantly think of ways to improve my performance. Though the rehearsal process had its trying times I embraced it and saw it as another challenge I could overcome and thereby learn from it. I learned how to be independent and assess my progress without depending on the director. I overcame my fear of being wrong in the rehearsal room. I learned how to focus and strive to make steady progress and not allow the frustration of other actors to affect my process. These are signs of maturity as an actor and I am grateful that I was shifted from my comfort zone and challenged. Although the performances were my favorite part of the journey, I benefited more from the rehearsal process.

CHAPTER FIVE  
THE MATURATION PHASE

*“Such trials show the proven character of your faith, which is much more valuable than gold--gold that is tested by fire” - I Peter 1:7*

The journey of the rehearsal process ended November 19, 2013. I left dress rehearsal that night knowing that despite the trials and frustration of the rehearsal process the performances would be great. I had to remind myself of the common saying, “you go through the fire, but you will come out as pure gold.” If I was not challenged during the process then there would not be any growth. I struggled to maintain the maturity, age, status and respectability of the character and simultaneously I was challenged in those areas of my personal life. My journey as an actor creating the character of Madame Alvarez throughout the rehearsal process was very much like my journey at the university developing myself as a mature actor. I had not realized the connection until the opening night of the performance.

After six weeks of rehearsal and giving birth to the play I was ready to perform in front of an audience. I was ready to hear the laughter and feel their energy in the theatre. For too long in rehearsal it was about picking out the faults and shortcoming of the actors and striving to get them to reach their fullest potential. I personally needed the energy of an audience to drive my performance. Just as the cast approached the technical rehearsal week I became ill with feelings of nausea and dizziness that became a frequent complaint. I tried not to be transparent and let everyone know about my discomfort.

Everyone simply assumed it was the exhaustion from the rehearsals. At the time I was also enduring personal issues at home with my family and battling my own internal struggles. It became overbearing just when I needed to focus on my performance. I knew it was not appropriate to allow these obstacles to seep into my work and destroy what I had worked on during these six weeks of rehearsals. At this time it became important for me to stick to my preshow regime. I had to remember why I started acting and the therapeutic effect it had on me during times of hardships. I reminded myself that onstage my problems did not exist. My life had to freeze the moment I stepped onstage and life would continue once the play was over. My struggle was not the character's struggle. I needed to focus on the character's goals, obstacles and tactics. Madame Alvarez's biggest concern was to save her family. She needed Monsieur Baptiste to leave because he was destroying her household. Before every performance I reminded myself of the given circumstances of the play. I took time to look at myself as I applied my makeup realizing the transformation from myself to the character. I literally felt myself disappear as the character took over. I listened to upbeat gospel music that made me smile on my worst days to put me in a positive upbeat mood for the start of the play. Once I got dressed I reviewed my lines and began the mental transformation from Jody-Ann Henry to Madame Alvarez. I stepped onstage and was no longer aware of the pain and discomfort I felt offstage.

My goal for each performance was to immerse myself in the character and to always be in the moment. I did not want to constantly worry about correcting the notes I received from the director or worry about how well or how poorly my performance might be. I had to trust the work my fellow cast mates and I had completed throughout the

rehearsal process. If I focused on my scene partner and what I wanted from him or her and listened and responded then I knew I had accomplished my basic goal of staying in the moment and being connected. Dathan Hooper made this easy every night because I was never actually sure what he would do onstage. There were times when a line was delivered with a different intention and I had to adjust. On opening night in the moment he decided to hop over the furniture as the character when Baptiste attempted to have his way with Madame Alvarez during Act Two scene two. He had never done that in rehearsal so it was not expected, but it worked in the moment. I was not just worried about him attacking me, but how he dared to defile my fine sofa. This made me genuinely shocked, afraid and upset.

I did not leave The Playhouse theatre feeling confident about my performance on opening night. The director validated that feeling with the notes that were given to the cast. We were still making slight mistakes. Many of the cast members felt discouraged that night and felt that regardless of their efforts their performance would not be satisfying. However, I did not observe anyone giving up, but pressing to give their best to their roles. I, on the other hand, was not satisfied with my seduction number in Act Two with Monsieur Baptiste; it was not as solid as it had been before. I struggled with capturing the essence of the moment and the director's vision. I struggled to hear the soundtrack of *Habanera (L'amour est un oiseau rebelle)* from George Bizet's opera, *Carmen*. The music did not start in the same spot every night. The speed and the delivery of the lines during that scene each night also shifted the timing. I tried to be consistent in keeping on time with the music. However, I certainly needed more variation in my movements. My voice did not fill the space as it should and I sacrificed the authenticity



of dialect remaining understandable and clear to the audience. I needed to remind myself of the performance space I was in and allow my body and voice to adjust.

My overall performance that night lacked energy because I was nauseous and my energy was low halfway through the show. I tried to preserve my energy and refocus my mind. A few of the acupuncture points taught to me by Kristi Papailler came in handy during these moments as I was not comfortable sharing how I felt with others. Before each rehearsal the group would do vocal and physical warmups along with high-energy games. I knew I had to find a slightly different pre-show regime to get warmed-up, to connect with the cast and still preserve my energy for the show. I was able to connect to the character and to preserve my energy by doing the general group warm-up, reviewing the lines and dialect along with meditation, prayer and one of my favorite genres of music, reggae.

Although my opening night performance was lacking and I made improvements the next few nights I knew I still needed to make adjustments to perfect my performance. Especially since three iconic theatre practitioners were going to be in the audience; Jasmine Guy, Woodie King and Voza Rivers. Jasmine Guy, an excellent actor and director who I grew up watching as the character Whitley on the television sitcom *A Different World* came to watch the performance on November 23, 2013. By this time the cast's performance had improved. We had hastened the pace of the show, the line deliveries were much faster, and the actors were connecting more. I owned the space and felt more comfortable moving in my heavy costumes. I felt a relaxed readiness and ease onstage which gave me the confidence and elegance of Madame Alvarez. It also helped me to be ready to respond honestly to whatever my acting partners gave me without feeling

flustered. I had slightly changed my preshow warm up routine. I continued to warm up with the cast in order to get connected with the ensemble, but I did not use full energy during the energy exercises. I spent more time doing yoga and deep breathing exercises to center myself. This helped me to improve my breath control so I was able to better fill the space with my voice. I discovered that listening to the soundtrack of *Habanera (L'amour est un oiseau rebelle)* from *Carmen*, the opera before Act Two helped me to move in time with the music. All these changes in my preparation helped to improve my performance.

I was nervous because I wanted to impress Jasmine Guy with my performance. She worked in the theatre community in Atlanta, where I was interested in moving in order to pursue my acting career. I thought of my performance that night as an audition. Hopefully, I was unforgettable after that evening. I knew at least she was impressed by the production because she stayed to see the entire performance despite mentioning that she would only stay for a portion of it. It was understandable because she spent the earlier part of the day at the Muhammad Ali Center. It was in her workshop on Friday afternoon that I realized she was so down-to-earth unlike the character she portrayed on the sitcom. I was always conscious of a person's physical image and the energy a person carried with them. I noticed that though she was slender and not much taller than I was she was able to fill the space and command the attention of those in the room. She was sure of herself, therefore did not need to timidly approach the students. I truly admired her presence, her confidence, yet the humility she displayed. I developed a new respect for her not only as an actor, but also as a woman who had a passion for what she did. Therefore, when I saw her backstage in the green room, I was overwhelmed with joy and honored that she was impressed with the cast's performance.

It was not only Jasmine Guy who saw the performance, but Woodie King, founder and director of the New Federal Theatre and Voza Rivers, a leading theatre producer were also in the midst. I was honored to have these two men in the audience who both enjoyed the performance. Voza Rivers knew the playwright of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* personally and had seen the original performance. Therefore, I was nervous to hear his opinion of our production. It was an honor meeting Woodie King in person before the show and again he encouraged me not to be afraid to pursue my craft if I was passionate about it. He encouraged me to take the risk, move to New York, and audition as much as possible. It does not profit one to play safe, because consequently one will always feel limited. I felt encouraged and challenged to prove to myself that I indeed had grown from my experience at UofL. I knew that I was more confident and resilient than I was when I first started the program. I knew I learned to be patient with myself and to be independent. I discovered my acting process and regime to get me prepared for a performance, but after my exchange with Woodie King I wondered whether or not I was ready to go to New York. I decided to let go of that negative thinking and asked myself why would I not be ready for New York. If Woodie King saw potential in me, then I should embrace that potential and act on it. I felt more confident about my performance.

I had the opportunity to watch a video recording of Saturday's performance and I was pleased. I captured the stage with energy and life. I seemed to be responsive to what was happening on stage to decide whether or not I was just present during the scene or actively participating in the conversation. I noticed that while my body was alive my facial expressions were unexpressive. I could have reacted more with my face. In other productions I tried to work against being too expressive with my face because it seemed

too exaggerated and not internally connected to what I was doing, feeling or saying. However, during this production I noticed at times that my facial expressions were too small as if I had no facial reaction at all. Despite the lack of expression, I was able to believably portray a thirty-two year old woman. I captured the age, maturity and social status of the character. I was most proud that I was able to maintain the dialect at an understandable level. Breath support was vital for me during this production and I was aware of filling the space and ensuring that I breathed from my diaphragm allowing the breath to control the sound versus pushing from my throat to be louder. I became much more aware of the importance of the breath when we moved from the rehearsal room to the main stage in The Playhouse.

The vast continuum which one calls space can be defined, created and changed through its use by an actor. It is the responsibility of the actor to define the space using their body and their voice. They must learn how to adjust and redefine any practical space into a theatrical space because each space affects the performance, performers and audience. The cast of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* learned this valuable lesson of adjustment as the play was done in three different locations with and without spectacle. The show was first performed in a rehearsal space in the Studio Arts Building. Secondly, it was performed on set at The Playhouse theatre and lastly in the courtyard of The Playhouse. Having performed in three different spaces, I found that the actor's interaction to the space, to the other actors, and to the audience was the determining factor in changing an ordinary space, creating a set and setting up the world of the play. A change in physical location changes the performance, however it is up to the actors to maintain

the setting of the play and create a believable world regardless of where they are performing.

The cast of the production rehearsed for weeks in what seemed to be a small studio space in the theatre arts building. The actors moved around the same room a few hours prior to each rehearsal which served as their acting and voice classroom. Walking into the space before rehearsal the actors are forced to visualize the room as if it is a mansion in Nineteenth Century Haiti. Performing in this space required a great deal of imagination and spatial awareness which can be frustrating when trying to develop a character and connect with fellow actors on stage. The director constantly reminded the actors to interact with the space, a room that was only marked by tape, as if it was the actual set. In addition to the tape which indicated levels and stairs, doors and walls, the actors had a few blocks which represented the ornate loveseat, table and chairs. As one of the actors, often times I felt silly performing in this space because I was expected to literally mime going up and down stairs. I was constantly made aware that the space was not just a rehearsal room, but to think of it as the actual set. The stage manager would remind me that I fell off the stage or I was about to fall because my feet smashed the tape on the floor that outlined where the set pieces would be located. I had to adjust my imagination and my body to the space in order to make my performance in the rehearsal space, as it would be in The Playhouse. In the rehearsal room I did not have costumes or the actual set so I had to rely on my instrument to inform the audience of who I was. Therefore the added costumes, lighting and set only enhanced my performance. Once we moved into the theatre I realized that my characterization of Madame Alvarez was not

expansive enough and subtly did not work in large performance spaces. I had to be more specific with my movements and gestures as well as be much clearer vocally.

Moving into the actual performance space affected my performance because my spatial awareness expanded. It became less about using my imagination and being aware of the tape on the floor plus my scene partner, but also how to practically use and move about the set to fill the entire auditorium. It took more effort and energy to actually run up and down the stairs. However, because my body was accustomed to miming the action it was not as difficult adjusting to the stairs and levels. It had frustrated me every time the stage manager reminded the cast to be aware of the space in rehearsals. I had imagined that once the cast was on the actual set, one would see where the end of the stage was and would not risk walking off and hurting oneself. However, this heightened sense of awareness made it easier to adjust to the actual staged space. I did not imagine beforehand how much my body would have to adjust to The Playhouse. My gestures, facial expressions and voice had to become bigger, open up and project in order to fill the space. The interaction with the audience and the acknowledgment of their presence significantly changed my performance. In room 133, I consciously tried to ignore the watchful eyes that filled the room. It helped me not to focus on the critics and prevented me from judging my performance while onstage and from being afraid to make choices. However, in The Playhouse acknowledging the audience helped me to relax and be more comfortable on stage. I was not checking for their approval, but being able to see into their eyes as I looked into the audience was not as frightening as I had expected. It almost seemed as if a communal bond was formed and I knew they were suspending their disbelief and going along with me through the story of the Alvarez family.

I did not quite understand the strength of the ensemble I was working with until the last night of the performance. It will be a performance that I will talk about forever. I truly felt as if I was not only a part of an ensemble, but part of a family. In the middle of the possession scene in Act two, the fire alarm blared through the auditorium, "Please exit through the nearest exit!" It took me a moment to realize what was going on. As I opened my eyes I noticed the audience dashing for the doors and my cast mates exiting the stage. We grabbed our coats and dashed out to the courtyard of The Playhouse in what felt like twenty-degree weather. I felt dismayed as I could not believe that for any show this could happen, yet it had to be my thesis performance. This feeling did not linger long as the cast came together and decided the show must go on. Both the actors and audience were required to adjust, creating and redefining the performance space. Now performing outside in twenty-degree weather called for a different level of adjustment in how the actors used the space, their bodies and voices and how they interacted with the audience. Again, there was no set or props and this time there was no layout on the floor of how the set should look. Don Pascal, Baptiste and myself took our coats off and entered what became our stage space. We instructed the audience where to sit and continued from where we had left off. Madame Alvarez demanded that her husband cooperate with her and hide behind a pole which was supposed to be a table. Baptiste entered and the voices of my cast mates became the sound track that accompanied my movements. I had a major adrenaline rush as energy sprung through my body. I was overtaken with the spontaneous adjustment to the current circumstances. I felt like a professional actor who must be prepared for any change. My improvisational skills kicked-in and I did not have the chance to over think and preplan my performance. The cold weather did not bother me

and I felt more free and alive than I had onstage. The enthusiasm I had about performing at the start of the rehearsal process was restored. Actors like me who constantly got the note to fill the space in The Playhouse suddenly adjusted to the noise of the traffic and passerbyers and became louder. My main issue throughout the rehearsal process was my breath support and sustaining the sound without shouting. However, while performing outside I found that this was not an issue. My voice adjusted to the space, the breath would flow freely in and out when needed and supported my voice. My body also adjusted to the temperature outside. Before getting on our makeshift stage I was freezing since my costume had a backless part to it. But knowing that the show must go on my body was forced to adjust.

An actor can define space with his or her body, but they can also change the space for the audience. In the outside version of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* the actors were able to transform the space for the audience. The cast was able to capture the audience's attention. They suspended their disbelief and as a team the actors and spectators transformed the space into a Nineteenth Century mansion in Haiti. Despite being able to see and hear the cars driving behind the actors, feeling the gush of wind that passed through every so often and the sound of passerbyers, the audience was just as drawn into the performance as they had in the warmth of The Playhouse. I was surprised to see that half of the audience stayed in the cold to watch the rest of the play. They bundled up in small groups and clung to their winter jackets and scarves to get warmth. No one left before we were finished performing outside. I think they were curious to see how we would adjust.

The fact that we had to change the space made the performance less predictable.



Although the actors had particular blocking and we knew what was supposed to come next, our performance had more spontaneity and life than it had had in a while. We had to be more present and had to listen and watch each other. In a moment we had to decide the exact lay out of the space based on how we remembered the set looked. I felt trapped as Baptiste tried to lure me in and have his way with me. I knew according to the blocking I should have been sitting on a table, however, with the outside performance there was not a table. At the moment my goal was to stop Baptiste and ensure that he does not take full advantage of me. With the outside space I could in fact run or use more of the space instead of being stuck in one place, the table. So I made a choice in the moment to move around which made it harder for Baptiste to get me. Otherwise it would have seemed as if I stayed there wanting him to take advantage of me.

Despite the obstacles faced during the rehearsal and performance processes. I was proud of my performance. It was one of my best performances at the University of Louisville. There was room for improvement; however, I was able to connect vocally and physically to the character. I was able to stay in the moment, connect and adjust. I was able to learn a dialect which I thought would have been the most challenging and difficult thing to do. I was able to find the nuances of a character that was different from me. I worried whether or not I would believably portray the mother of two older children. I believe I was able to capture a sense of maturity and maternal care towards the young adults who were my stepchildren. This was reflective of my own maturity. I do not think I could have accomplished this when I first started the program at UofL. I needed more life experience to cause me to toughen. I was timid, which I partly attribute to my upbringing and the fact that I had never left home for as long as I did prior to attending school in

Louisville. I was much like the character, Valerie in terms of being naïve and dependent on my parents when I started the program in 2011. My perception of life changed as I had to become independent and did not always have my mother to be the captain of my ship. I had grown accustomed to having my mother fight my battles and was able to run to her with every issue I faced. However, over the three years I learned that I had to stand up for myself. I was able to recognize injustice and prejudice that was real and if I wanted to put a stop to it I had to let my voice be heard. I continued to be respectful and humble, but I did not allow others to take advantage of me. I was able to translate the lessons I learned and my own transformation from a twenty-one year old naïve young adult to a twenty-four year old experienced adult into the character of Madame Alvarez. I no longer had the naiveté that I displayed most notably in the role of Daughter and Ti Moune along with the characters I played in other productions. It was not until I started my character work and sought to see how I connected with Madame Alvarez that I realized how similar we were. She had a similar ease, tenderness and care for others as I had. She also had class, status, and brilliance, but struggled to maintain power in the home, likewise I struggled to prove myself to my peers and professors.

The run of the show taught me the importance of connecting with an ensemble and becoming a family. I also learned the importance of being independent and responsible for one's performance. It was important to have my own technique in order to stay committed, present and connected to the other actors. I should never allow outside forces to affect my performance negatively.

## CONCLUSION

### THE FINISHED PRODUCT

Dramatherapy is generally used to help others reflect, acknowledge and come to grips with psychological, social or all kind of issues in their lives. Actors embody human conditions through the characters they portray on stage. Hence, it becomes a safe way for them to encounter a variety of human emotions that they may typically experience or try to avoid in their personal lives. Therefore acting like, dramatherapy can be useful to actors. I find this to be true based on my experience with theatre. It allowed me to come to terms with myself and to explore and express parts of myself that I have never had the privilege of exploring. I have learned about myself and with the discoveries I have embraced true adulthood as a mature actor.

I strive to bring more of myself to my acting. In the last few years it has really become clearer to me that I had not truly accepted who I was, but constantly strived to live my life through the eyes of others in order to meet their expectations. What I liked and thought was not of utmost importance as it was to please others. Theatre became the perfect place for me to remove those masks. I wore so many different masks that in a sense I felt I was devoid of a personality. I was closed off and did not want to feel vulnerable before others. Through theatre I was able to become anything and anyone. In the last few years I realized that I was not portraying characters who were unlike me, but

exploring parts of myself and the person which I had not explored. So instead of acting to be someone I was not, it was more effective to bring to the table, my instincts and my flare to the role.

There are intuitive connections between roles and texts for actors. These connections may cause an impact on their lives. The actor may experience a surprise encounter rather than a conscious unfolding of an experience that enables the actor to gain insight and understanding of oneself. I can attest to the connection between the roles I portrayed on stage and the person I am offstage. The roles I portrayed in *Mad at Miles*, *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, *Once on this Island* and *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*, all at UofL enabled me to assess and gain insight about myself. I confronted issues of loss, fear, rejection, love, displacement, motherhood and death. All of which prepared me to better deal with these issues in my personal life. They were also opportunities for me to be challenged and to grow from. I was challenged to move out of my comfort zone. I was given the opportunity to be cast in my first lead role in a straight play, my first lead role in a musical and first time playing a supporting female role in a classical play.

By the end of my second year of graduate school I felt more mature than I did when I first started the program. My personal struggles coupled with the challenges of graduate school helped to open my eyes to the world and made me realize I was no longer a little girl. Prior to UofL I grew accustomed to being seen as the young, naïve, quiet and humble young lady who did not need to prove herself to anyone. My tenure at UofL made me realize that I needed to be more outgoing and assertive otherwise individuals may mistake my humility for insecurity and thus a lack of talent.

I faced my ultimate challenge at the beginning of my third year as I worked on my

thesis project. I have noticed my overall growth as an artist by the way I approached my thesis project. I allowed my research to affect my choices versus constantly waiting for the director's approval. I was more playful in the process and took on every challenge instead of becoming overwhelmed and frustrated. I strived to take the notes I received after every rehearsal and work on coming into rehearsal the next day with improvements. I focused on relationships, listening and responding and being in the moment. I believe I was more successful in those areas in the production of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man* than I have been in my other performances at the University.

I was confident in my performance of this role because I was not constantly in my head onstage. I trusted in the work I put in before and during the rehearsal process. I had to give myself the freedom to become the character during the run of the show and not use the performances to continue trying to create the character. An actor will continue to make discoveries about his or her character even during the run of the show. However, I find that when I am constantly thinking in order to come up with a new way to deliver a line or move onstage; it takes me out of the moment of the scene and in fact it becomes the artist who is moving and speaking instead of the character being brought to life. I know I was completely invested in a role when I walked offstage and not realized how much time had passed. I also knew I was committed to a role whenever I could focus on what was happening in the moment instead of being careful to accomplish the notes I received from the previous performance. I felt that I was able to do this during my performances of *Monsieur Baptiste, the Con Man*. I was proud of the way I handled the dialect. This was a major accomplishment because prior to the start of the rehearsal process I was most nervous about whether or not I could be able to sustain the dialect on

stage. I thought if I was not able to get past the dialect, then I would not be able to reach my fullest potential with the portrayal of Madame Alvarez. At the start of rehearsal I was in my head about the dialect instead of being concerned about the acting. Therefore, I spent several hours listening to several videos on YouTube and meetings with Arielle Webster and Dr. Rinda Frye. My session with Dr. Frye was the perfect way to put a cap on my handle of the dialect. My session with her was conversational. I already had an idea of the sound changes, but I needed to work on the rhythm of speech. I was able to understand the flow of the words and the attitude that comes with the different expressions. Confidence with the dialect helped me tremendously with boosting my confidence in my performance.

Now that I have performed the role, if given the chance to do it again I would try a different approach to the character and give her more energy and age. I walked with an upright posture, moved gracefully throughout the space, and used my lower resonators in order to establish the age and status of the character. If given the chance I would not only use my physical instrument. I would also focus on Madame Alvarez' relationship and how I asserted myself with the other characters in order to establish my status as woman of the house and stepmother of the children. I would also emphasize her relationship with Don Pascal which would fuel her intentions. I would love to see how my performance would be different if her sole intention was not to save the family, but to secure her wealth. I think this intention would add some power to the character. She would be more aggressive and pretentious while still trying to appear lady-like and genteel. Even though she did not spend much time with her brother, Gustave, her subtext during that conversation could be a plea for help because they were about to lose their position and

wealth if the disorder and uproar continued in her home. Gustave was just as invested in what went on in the Alvarez home not just because he was concerned about his sister health, but also her and his security. He knew that Don Pascal was almost twice the age of his sister. However, Gustave encouraged her to marry Don Pascal so he could become his brother-in-law and friend and possibly a business partner with Don Pascal.

I would love to portray this role a few years from now when I am older, a mother and possibly married. I would love to see how maturity and experience would alter my performance. I think I might be able to play the age and status of the character at an older age. With that being said I still believe I delivered a good performance. I enjoyed the research, the rehearsal process and the creation of a three-dimensional character along with the delivery of the performances. It was an extraordinary closure to my experience at the University of Louisville. I have proven to myself that I am capable of succeeding, but it required persistence and hard work. I will encounter naysayers along with those who believe in my craft in the future, no doubt. However, it is important that I first believe in myself. I have also realized that in doubting my ability to succeed as a performer I doubt the one, Jesus Christ, who has made it possible for me to reach this pinnacle.

There is certainly still room for improvement. I am a twenty-four year old young lady who is moving into the next phase of my life after the university. There are tons more to experience outside of school which will only enhance my acting. Though, my experience at the University of Louisville, both in the classroom and onstage, has built my confidence and strength as an individual; I am fully aware that there is more to learn and further to grow. Therefore, while overcoming my weaknesses I have been able to

discover other areas of weaknesses, which means I am still a work-in-progress. This reminds me that perfection is not always achieved, but it is something worth striving to achieve continuously.

At the end of my three-year tenure at the university, I was interested in teaching theatre and researching cultural history along with performing. Being given the opportunity to teach at the collegiate level allowed me to assess how much I have retained after studying theatre for over sixteen years. It allowed me to better reflect and critique my own work on stage. I enjoyed working with young actors who were hungry to learn more and also students who did not see themselves as actors. It was always a joy to see the transformation in students who considered themselves shy then become confident. Those students reminded me of myself as a child. Theatre for them can become a way to work through their own insecurities and to find a means of expressing and being themselves without reservation. They are better able to explore who they are and discover more about themselves through the characters they portray.

In the future, I would love to teach acting to young adults and children. In teaching a class at the Louisville Central Community Center I realized the joy as well as the challenge of working with young children. This was yet another challenging experience that did not deter me but sparked an even greater passion for teaching. The maturity level might be different between my college and elementary students, but it takes a similar amount of energy to get them to focus and to being comfortable on stage. Fostering growth in my students has always been important for me as it parallels with my experience as a child growing up. It also aids in my continuous growth as I strive to become a better performer and teacher.



Not only do I plan to continue teaching acting, I would like to continue my research on Caribbean theatre. I am only at the tip of the iceberg. There was much more to discover. I dream of travelling the Caribbean diaspora, spending some time working with artists in that area and documenting my experiences and research. This firsthand experience would allow me to better develop a course in Caribbean theatre and its history. It would also be a great opportunity to teach history through the arts and a way to turn the mirror on one's culture in order to assess one's cultural identity. My desire is to make this research more than just a study abroad research project that will allow me to combine my interest in cultural history, teaching, performing and traveling. This is a long-term goal of mine which I am determined to accomplish.

Upon graduating the MFA program at the University of Louisville I wish to continue to gain experience as a professional actor so as to create a better legacy for my students. I also wish to continue to teach and develop my skills as an educator. I wish to get practical training by performing in the Atlanta area and eventually moving to New York before returning to school to get my doctorate degree. In the mean time I will continue to foster my growth as an educator, actor, mother, explorer and a lover of knowledge.

My last semester of graduate school was a trying time for me as it seemed God answered my prayer of change and transformation. I did not want to use graduate school as simply a way out instead of thrusting myself into the harsh business of theatre. However, I knew I was not mature and needed to gain some life experience, which would make me an intuitive actor. I wanted to be challenged in a safe space and I still needed a community of artists who indirectly or directly could stand as a support system during my

years of growth. I made a vow to myself that when I graduated I would be a changed person. I wanted to be more aggressive, determined and less naïve. I must say I have accomplished all three. It seemed as if my challenges onstage and in the classroom were not enough, so God had to give me another challenge to test my strength. Within the last months of school my mother became increasingly ill and passed. It was as if a part of me was ripped away. I gained more responsibilities than I wanted, as I had to care for my child, my sister and myself. Therefore, I, like Madame Alvarez, was tested from the beginning of the play until the end. However, all the tests endured in the furnace only proved my strength, tenacity and passion.

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APPENDIX

JODY-ANN HENRY AS MADAME ALVAREZ



## CURRICULUM VITA

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DOB: Old Harbour, St. Catherine; Jamaica - March 01, 1990

EDUCATION & TRAINING: Master of Fine Arts; Performance  
African American Theatre Graduate Certificate  
University of Louisville  
2011-2014

Bachelor of Arts; Theatre  
Minor: Media Studies and Arts Administration  
Nova Southeastern University  
2008-2011

Miami Dade College  
2005-2008

### TEACHING:

TA 207- Enjoyment of Theatre (2 semesters)

TA 324- Acting for Non-majors (3 semesters)

TA 363- African American Women in Theatre (1 semester)

### TEACHING ARTIST:

Actors Theatre of Louisville (2012-2013)

Louisville Central Community Center (2012-2013)

### INTERNSHIPS

Stage Crew Intern; Brevard Music Center (Summer 2011)

Arts Administration Intern; Mosaic Theatre (Summer 2010)

### AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Irene Ryan nominee

Life Star Award- NSU Theatre

### MEMBERSHIP

Delta Epsilon Iota honor society

PUBLICATION: *Save and Soothe the Soul*: a collection of poems; 2008