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AERIAL ARIAL: A LESSON IN STRENGTH AND STAMINA

By

Ashley Elizabeth Smith
B.A., University of Kentucky, 2009

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Colleges of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Masters of Fine Arts

Department of Theatre Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2014

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A Thesis Approved on

April 7, 2014

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Dr. Amy Steiger

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the strongest women I know

my mother

Ms. Donna Kaye Smith

and

my instructors at Louisville Turners Circus

Cindy Law, Alyssa Meyer Schlimm, and Meg Johnson Wallace.

ABSTRACT

AERIAL ARIAL: A LESSON IN STRENGTH AND STAMINA

Ashley Elizabeth Smith

04/07/14

This thesis serves to argue the importance of skills related to strength and stamina in the field of theatre performance, particularly in regards to engaging young audiences by applying physical spectacle to classical theatre works. This thesis explores the physical theatre theories of Tadashi Suzuki, Mary Overlie, Rudolf Laban, and the theatrical style of Commedia dell'Arte as applied to my role as Ariel in *The Tempest*. It also reflects on the use of aerial silks in the same Shakespearean production, serving to prove that the skills required for such a strenuous physical activity are useful for actors as they attempt to both create an engaging visual experience for the audience, while also serving the text and making it easier to understand. The application of aerial acrobatics to a Shakespearean production required extensive training and preparation, and also proved difficult in the rehearsal process. Even so, the preparation required proved to be necessary and rewarding for a final product that engaged, entertained, and clarified otherwise difficult language for the audience. The strength and stamina, as well as the focus required for such a performance, has served as an excellent standard going forward for the dedication, energy and specificity required as I create interesting characters on unrelated projects and productions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
DEDICATION.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
EARLY EDUCATION	5
Undergraduate Theatre Training.....	8
PROFESSIONAL WORK AND GRADUATE SCHOOL.....	14
Year 1.....	16
Year 2.....	19
Italy Intensive.....	22
THEORIES OF BODY AND IMAGINATION WHEN DEVELOPING ARIEL.....	25
Body and Imagination Theory.....	25
Non-Human Gender.....	26
Physical Exhaustion.....	31
Imagination.....	32
Stanislavski’s System.....	38
Tadashi Suzuki.....	43
Mary Overlie’s Viewpoints.....	45
Rudolf Laban	54

DIFFICULTIES OF INTEGRATING BODY, IMAGINATION AND TEXT IN REHEARSAL.....	58
LESSONS APPLIED MOVING FORWARD.....	74
Third Ariel: Repertory Company.....	74
Brechtian Theory Applied.....	79
Strength and Stamina as a Dog.....	82
Conclusion.....	84
REFERENCES.....	88
CURRICULUM VITA.....	90

INTRODUCTION

One of the many challenges that theatre practitioners have faced over the last few centuries is their attempt to keep audiences interested in wordy and poetic works, such as those of William Shakespeare. Often the audience does not possess the same knowledge and passion for the works as the director and actors participating in the production. At the University of Louisville we also face this issue, as the department produces a Shakespeare or classical production every year. In the department every student is required to attend each play in the season, and many of them are in the acting for non-majors classes and have had little exposure to theatre. As an instructor for these classes, I have witnessed the many groans leading up to these nights at the theatre, and as an actor I see the confused or sleeping faces in the audience.

So the question is, how do we make these shows as interesting as possible, sparking an interest for the classics without stepping on the beauty that is Shakespearian language? Yes, Shakespeare has withstood the test of time for a reason; his work is really good. The stories, although many borrowed, have an interesting and sexy spin, while the language is brilliant and witty. The characters and situations are timeless and relatable, and this timeless appeal has led to hundreds of thousands of productions worldwide. However, it often takes patience for a young audience to become invested in the language; it is a labor of love for much of society. As a lover of Shakespeare myself I have always wondered how I could spread the Shakespeare fever. During the rehearsal

process and production of my thesis role as Ariel in *The Tempest*, I discovered that one answer to this dilemma is to use physical strength and stamina to create a visually interesting spectacle that not only intrigues the audience, but also supports the detailed language and intricate story.

During my second year of graduate school I was approached with the opportunity to combine a newfound passion, aerial acrobatics, with a Shakespearean role on which I would write my graduate thesis. I was delighted to be offered the role of Ariel in *The Tempest*, and even more intrigued to see how I could incorporate aerial silks. Through this role I have discovered the value of physical strength as a skill for an actor. A performance that includes a full body movement experience for the actor can do the job when it comes to not only keeping the audience's attention, but also providing them with a deeper understanding of the characters and their relationships within the tales.

This thesis serves to prove that my preparation through physical activity as an active human being, as well as the discipline I took on to train my body and my voice, served me far more in creating an interesting character than simple character study and script analysis would have on their own. The prep work for my graduate thesis role started long before casting, long before graduate school, and even long before my exposure to Shakespeare. Various athletic trainings and disciplines would allow me to create a character and an aesthetic spectacle that would help a production become successful in terms of entertaining and alluring an audience to a Shakespearean production, especially one with such a magical premise as *The Tempest*.

During the rehearsal process our goal, as a company, was to really accentuate the idea of fantasy in the piece. *The Tempest*, one of Shakespeare's later works, is considered

a counterpart to his earlier play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The two comedies stand out amongst the rest because of their play on magical and lyrical qualities. In *Shakespeare: A Survey*, Sir Edmund Chambers says, "like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play must interest the spectator less through a strictly dramatic appeal to his emotions, than by the strange romantic charm of its setting and its sensuous realization of the delicate and the grotesque in the mysterious personages whom it brings before him" (Chambers, 304). In the production done at the University of Louisville, it was our mission not only to create interesting characters and relationships, but also to highlight the unique fairytale qualities of the piece.

Also, unlike many other of Shakespeare's works, the *Tempest's* protagonists, "are not men and women but imagined beings, taken partly from folk-belief and partly from literature" (Chambers, 304). I was given the challenge to create the physical life of Ariel, a non-human spirit that should evoke the feeling of another world. Such a challenge was met with spectacle created by physical feats and a playful imagination that was readily connected with my favorite instrument, my own body.

Combined with my physical training in athletics and acrobatics, I used several theories and theatre practices in order to create the dynamics of the end product. I explored Konstantin Stanislavski's method in order to utilize focus and imagination. I explored the physical and breathing practices taught in Tadashi Suzuki's method in order to discover a strength that could support difficult and exhausting physical performance. I found variation and interesting visual pictures by exploring Mary Overlie's Viewpoints. I also explored the theories developed by Rudolph Laban, an expert in all things movement, be it physical theatre, dance, or every day life.

After the intense submersion into physical theatre while playing Ariel in *The Tempest*, I learned that being an agile and physically creative actor is a valuable tool when storytelling and creating visual meaning that helps establish an audience that is able to understand and be captivated by the performance. It also proves helpful when exploring the lines of gender, and how that changes movement, carriage, gesture, and vocal placement. Since performing in my thesis role I have toured two pieces of children's theatre with the University of Louisville's traveling Repertory Company. I have also worked on a mainstage production, a lighthearted comedy called *Sylvia*, where I worked on a character that is actually the family dog. Because of my newfound understanding of the importance of physical creativity, I have been able to create characters that capture the audience's attention, and whose physical carriage and movement can support and enhance the meaning of the text itself.

CHAPTER 1: EARLY EDUCATION

I was always a competitive child, strangely athletic despite the DNA passed down from my parents, and from a young age I took part in countless physical activities. I would run the neighborhood playing pickup games of kickball and basketball, trying to impress the older boys by volunteering to sit under their skateboard ramp. When in the third grade my best friend told me to come see her perform in a play because it was cooler than my new tennis racket, I was challenged and intrigued. As I sat in the audience watching the Pied Piper lead those poorly costumed rat kids across the stage, I thought, “I have to try that!” The next week I had my mother enroll me into drama school.

I had no idea that over the next couple of years this art form would become the driving force in my life, competing with my athletic pursuits. Performance became a source of fellowship, joy, creation and an outlet for my ideas and dreams. By the time I was ready for high school, I realized that the only satisfying option I had was to study it more in depth. As a freshman I was an acting student at a performing arts high school, as well as a catcher for the junior varsity softball team. The two worlds often collided, leaving me with choices between team conditioning and the school and local auditions. For a while the team had seemed to win out, until I lost my front teeth with a fast pitch to the face. A catcher who is afraid of the ball has little place behind a plate, and at fifteen I chose to leave my athletic ambitions behind to pursue acting wholeheartedly.

I was not a dancer, by any means, and as a stocky and chubby adolescent, I avoided acting styles that included much physical movement. I claimed that musical theatre was for the ditzy shallow type, and I instead was more suited for Shakespeare. I'm sure at the time, awkward body and all, I was a talking head. My love for language was much surpassing my physical capabilities, despite the theatre department's required movement courses, where I was forced to face myself in the mirror daily in tights and leotard.

From the fourth grade through the eighth, I studied and performed at a local program, Ursuline School of the Performing Arts. Although an expensive program, my single mother did her best to get me find scholarships and extra money to pay for the experience. It was here that I learned about the auditions for Louisville's Youth Performing Arts School, where I would go to high school. This academic transition is what led me to pursue performance as a career, and to view it as a serious discipline that would require my full attention and dedication.

During the first two years of high school I was forced to undergo movement courses, taught by a former circus clown (later discovered to be a criminal of the child pornography type. This has nothing to do with me, but it was an interesting and disturbing character trait to attach to a clown growing up.) In his classes we wore black tights and leotards, and spent countless mornings pretending we understood his lectures and exercises in Stanislavski, Laban and Alexander. My acne covered face donned a clown nose or commedia mask made out of a shoe box and crayon wax and I did my best to, as he would say, "move and be moved." Despite his clear hatred for young adults and the institution of the public school system, Robby Edwards was a god figure to me. I

dreaded his class, and at the same time was fascinated by it. I learned to think on my feet and use my body as a means of expression, at least to an extent. These days you couldn't pay me to reenter his classroom and endure the discomfort again, but I suppose this was the beginning of my "movement" experience, thus creating a very interesting foundation for my later education.

Although not movement based, another instructor from high school who influenced my work greatly was William P. Bradford II. He taught voice and period acting, and was both feared and loved by the student body. It was in his class that I learned that theatre was a discipline, and if you weren't willing to put in the time and effort to train your instrument and your knowledge of theatre, you might as well just forget it. I have found this to be a principle that many of the other programs I've been involved in are lacking in their instruction. Theatre and performance is certainly something you should love and have fun doing, but if that is the extent of your ambition and dedication, you can't market yourself and stand next to heavily trained actors.

Also in that class, mostly with period work, we learned a lot about posture and the carriage of the body. It was important to him that we were deliberate and specific in our movements and that we were able to carry ourselves in both neutral and stylized manners. I was pretty self conscious in my body, slovenly in my carriage, and complacent. But through his instruction (and a large stick) I learned to adapt my body to the role and to have the posture necessary for balance and grace. This has helped me going forward in any movement classes as well as my silks training, because I have the body awareness necessary to adapt to new methods.

After high school, I enrolled in the theatre department at the University of Kentucky. Before then, I had never touched a light fixture, turned a hem, directed a student-written play, or built a flat. The University of Kentucky provided me the opportunity to do all of these things. Now, although I'm focused on acting and teaching, I am grateful that I acquired the skills that will be valuable as I continue my career in theatre.

Undergraduate Theatre Training

My undergraduate experience was completely opposite of my high school experience. While high school in a performing arts school allowed me to focus and specialize in the discipline of acting, the setup of the curriculum and standards at the University of Kentucky was completely opposite. When I arrived to the college, the department was in a period of transition. They were changing from a BFA program to the more liberal setup of a BA. Because of this, there were no auditions to get into the program, and the curriculum and major requirements were ever shifting. Before I arrived, there were movement courses required, but by the time I started they had done away with all of the movement classes that they offered, instead focusing on a few acting classes that revolved around scene study. Acting One did require the students to dress in movement attire, but most of the exercises were experimental and the movement theories behind them were vague at best. Many classes in theatre history were offered, but theory was not mentioned much in the classes.

I was concerned that this was going to prove problematic in my growth as an actor, because physicality and comfort in my body had always been a problem for me.

Most of my instructors would give me comments and criticism about how stuck in my head I was as an actor. I am a fairly intellectual person and at that point in my education I had a very hard time getting the mental work to translate in the physical body. I was told that I was a very technical actor, and my intuition and physical freedom were way behind the curve. I tried to work on this in every piece that I did, but it wasn't until my second year that I decided to find outlets that would aid me in finding a sense of comfort in my body and to learn how to rely on the body that I had in order to communicate the creative work that was easy for me to envision in my head.

Many students who go through campus life have been known to gain that "freshman fifteen." Thankfully, my finances and meal plan didn't allow this to happen to me, and I actually lost weight during college. However, my first year I led a fairly inactive lifestyle, so part of the weight loss was also owed to a loss of muscle mass. I was insecure about my body, and a breakup during the summer between freshman and sophomore year did not help. Despite being a dorm room potato my freshman year, I took it upon myself to get into better shape by attending the campus gym. Having had several movement and dance classes in high school, I thought that a solution to the lack of movement classes in the theatre department would be to enroll in a modern dance class at the university. My new attendance at the gym as well as being a participant in a dance class was probably the spark of a lifestyle change that would later lead to the desire to become a more physically adept performer.

Despite the lack of movement courses offered within the department, there were certainly a few physically intensive moments, and one stands out particularly contributing to my work as a physical actor in *The Tempest*. During my last year of school at the

University of Kentucky I played Sister James in the play *Doubt*. During the rehearsal process there was about a week where we focused on the animal qualities of each of our characters. We were asked to choose, research and study the animals to which we thought our characters were most similar, physically and mentally, and then we were to come to rehearsal with a prepared piece. This involved five minutes alone onstage as the animal we studied, showing various nuances and behaviors that animal possessed, and that we thought we could apply to the physical life of our character in the production.

At first I found this to be a ridiculous assignment, and I was not excited to act like an animal. But not wanting to fail at any assignment, I chose the meerkat to show Sister James' hyper awareness to everything going on around her, quick isolated motions when accomplishing tasks, and meekness in the face of threats of larger animals. I also chose the animal because the television show, *Meerkat Manor*, was often on Animal Planet, making the research aspect fairly simple. The exercise actually proved to be very helpful, and I was able to use several of the physical nuances in performance.

I have used this technique to some degree several times since then, and I would suggest it to any actor who is struggling in creating the physical life of the character and focusing on the body and not just the mental state of said character. Since then I have revisited the animal exercise in two different movement classes exploring all different kinds of animals. And I must admit that the meerkat has made an appearance several times, in contemporary pieces as well as several roles I've performed in the works of Shakespeare.

My first exposure to Shakespeare came during my junior year of high school when I joined the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival's high school conservatory program,

the Globe Players. Throughout the rest of my high school career I was with them when they produced both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet*. During my time there I grew to have a love for Shakespeare's poetry, fancying myself as an actor who has a way with words. Although I enjoyed both the physical comedy in *The Comedy of Errors* and the sword fighting I was able to do as Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*, mostly what I loved to do was hear myself talk. Looking back I imagine myself as an actor who had not quite merged the body and voice to create a fully dimensional character.

During my first year of undergrad I played Lavinia in our department's production of *Titus Andronicus*, and my head got bigger and bigger with the hot air of a "Shakespeare Actor" (she says with as much breathiness and articulation as possible). When it came time to audition for *The Tempest* during my sophomore year, I thought that I had the role of Trinculo in the bag. I put together an audition piece with his first speech, a comical bit when he finds Caliban under the gabardine, and I was excited for the director to hear how witty I could be with my words.

Later, during a tearful meeting with this professor, I was told that I didn't get the role because I was not connected with the physical comedy enough to play such a clown-like character. Instead, to my displeasure, I was cast in the role of Ariel. This would have been fine, except that four other actors would also be playing Ariel with me. It would be an amalgamation of spirits, with different bodies and personalities personifying the one entity together. I was not pleased to be a part of these misfit actors, and when rehearsal started I had a lot of trouble getting into the group mentality, especially since the director wanted "Ariel" to be super physical and animalistic. Together we were asked to create dumb shows, songs accentuated by movement pieces, and jarring physical composure

that juxtaposed the human characters we were on stage with. We even had to put together a dance number when we sang a goofy classic medley of songs for Miranda and Ferdinand's performance conjured up by Prospero.

Many of the rehearsals involved the director asking us to just "give him some weird stuff" and to show him what we could come up with. I felt awkward in my body and was easily frustrated when I didn't like the direction the group was going in, especially when I was uncomfortable with how I looked. I was often asked to leave my brain at the door, because it was getting in the way of the creative process for me, and bringing the group down. This is something that I would hear a lot moving forward, as I still struggle with getting out of an intellectual trap in order to work intuitively. Although I understand this bit of common of criticism, I do not find that the body or the mind can be mutually exclusive. Some actors' strengths may lie more with the intellectual side, and instead of telling them to get out of their head, perhaps the solution can be found in using that strength of mind and finding ways to connect the intellectual and physical.

After many weeks of frustrating rehearsal that resulted in me crying or throwing something when I got back to my dorm room, I was able to sink into a kind of comfort with the role. If I couldn't be intuitive, I could at the very least work hard towards a muscle memory that could be consistent. This sounds like it would result in a stiff and unimaginative performance, but personally the repetition allowed me the comfort to settle in and begin to play with the character, connecting the words to my body and creating a character that was attached to the group instead of being an actor standing on the outside.

Since then, whenever I have had trouble physically embracing a character, like when I played a clown for kindergarteners or when I played a man in *Richard III*, I have

used this tactic I employed in my first *Tempest* experience. Repetition has been my *modus operandi* as a way to get comfortable in the character before I begin experimentation in a journey to physical freedom. This may seem counterintuitive and may very well not work for some actors, nor is it how I would wish my rehearsal process to go. But when all else fails, muscle memory and physical repetition is a tool that can do the job.

CHAPTER 2: PROFESSIONAL WORK AND GRADUATE SCHOOL

Over the next several years, physical fitness gradually became a huge part of my life. I graduated a year early from the University of Kentucky and immediately started looking for acting work. The Kentucky Repertory Theatre, a struggling company in Horse Cave, Kentucky, hired me as an acting apprentice. As soon as I arrived I realized that I was going to be doing work in areas in which I had little or no experience. All facets of this small company excited me. I found myself wanting to learn more about the educational outreach program, as well as the producing and fundraising departments. Not only did I grow as an actor in Horse Cave, I also became much more aware of the variety of skills it takes to work in and run a theatre company.

Horse Cave only had 2,200 residents, most of them over the age of 60. Needless to say, the experience was not a highlight of my social life history, and I had to find many ways to entertain myself. But one can only read so many books and watch so many television shows on Netflix before she starts to get a little stir crazy. My roommate and I decided to make a deal with one of the neighboring businesses to use some of their exercise equipment for a small fee. Next door to our building was a strange business; half of it was a diner and antique shop, while the other half was used as a Taikwondo studio. Behind the studio the owner had some weight lifting machines and a few treadmills that my roommate and I were able to use during the morning business hours. By using this

strange little gym I was able to pass some time while also developing an exercise regimen that I have maintained since then.

It was not until I started touring children's theatre in Central New York that exercise, physical strength and stamina became not just a way to feel good and pass the time, but imperative to both my health and sanity. As a company member I was touring through the Central New York area, around Syracuse, Buffalo, Rochester and the Adirondacks. We would wake up before the sun rose and be on the road as early as 5am, and often not return home until 6 pm. We performed theatre for young audiences, doing two performances throughout the day, often in two schools that were in separate towns. We drove giant sprinter vans that carried our set, and as performers we would also load in and load out our set at every venue. The daily grind was physically and mentally exhausting, and finding ways to stay energized and alert became a constant struggle. Not to mention the amount of winter weather we were working with, driving through areas of ice and snow for six of the eight months of residency.

The conditions began to drive me a little batty, and I was desperate to find a way to both build my stamina and also find a stress relief that would allow me better sleep at night. So I joined the local YMCA in Auburn, New York and took up Spinning classes. Indoor cycling was something that I had tried once in college, hated, and then refused to do again. But if anything can build stamina, it's an hour or two on a stationary bike with a loud and demanding instructor. Though my work schedule was taxing, I was able to find several times during the week to attend, at one point taking up to six classes a week, and occasionally two classes in a row.

The effects on both my performance and my mental health were drastic. Of course I had always been told that as an actor I should take care of my body, and I always thought I had been doing so by not eating a Big Mac everyday and occasionally getting to the gym. But this lifestyle change provided the energy and the motivation needed to make it through my tenure in the icy land of Central New York. Since then I have mostly maintained the regimen, often changing up the activity and trying new methods of fitness to stay interested and challenged.

Year 1

My first year of graduate school was certainly difficult to get accustomed to. My cohorts and I were taking voice, graduate acting, movement and script analysis, as well as teaching undergraduate courses and being in a mainstage production. Even when the work was not intellectually difficult, the time and energy investment was enough to drive any student crazy. I had not taken a course specifically mapped out for movement since I was sixteen, and wearing white tights and leotards while being evaluated by a LeCoq expert was extremely stressful.

In that movement class, led by the long time University of Louisville Professor, James Tompkins, we focused on strength and specificity. We covered a whole gamut of mime exercises that concentrated on isolations and repetition; movements entitled “skiing” and “picking apples.” The expectations and standards were set so high that I could not help but get butterflies in my stomach before each class began. At the end of my first semester I received the standard review after the faculty met, and Professor Tompkins had been sure to tell them that I looked like I was going to cry everyday in his

class. After that first semester I was determined to toughen up and excel in his lessons and activities, and that meant I needed to further develop my stamina and core strength so that I could execute the work with economy and confidence.

It was also during my first semester that I was introduced to Linklater, the voice technique on which the program mostly focuses. We learned a whole progression of exercises that were meant to strengthen the vocal diaphragm and allow the exploration of voice in all of the vocal resonators. I did not quite have the vocal strength to support all of the vocal dynamics in various registers, and I struggled with relaxing my jaw and neck in order to allow the voice to flow freely. We worked on the Linklater progression all semester, and were even required to lead the rest of the class in the progression as though they had never experienced it before. This vocal work and attention to breath support really followed me throughout the rest of my performance experience in graduate school, especially when it came to my work in *The Tempest*. My cast mates and I used the Linklater progression as our rehearsal and performance warm-up each night, and that vocal support was imperative for creating a voice that would carry while I carried my body off of the ground.

My second semester I produced stronger work in both my movement and voice classes, gradually becoming more comfortable in my body and confident in the images and sounds it could produce. That being said, I felt I could still do some work to strengthen both my core and upper body strength, as the movement work during that semester contained a lot of Yoga and balance work. During the spring I decided to look outside of the department for extracurricular activities that could work these areas, and this is when I came upon aerial acrobatics. I had attended a circus performance at the

local American Turners Circus, where gymnasts and acrobats of all ages showcased their skills in silks, trapeze, trampoline, Spanish web, and more. Although I had gone to support a family friend, I left with a new desire and ambition, reminiscent of that first exposure to theatre as a third grader. I immediately signed up and began attending classes in aerial silks. At first it was very frustrating, as I couldn't even lift myself up off of the ground without simply jumping and hanging there like a cat stuck in a tree. But I kept at it, working outside of class doing pushups and pull-ups to improve my upper body strength.

Never before had I seen such a change in my body so quickly; instead of goofing around with little weights at the gym, I was lifting my own body weight several times a week. I continued to meet new goals day by day, climbing higher each class and improving my stamina in order to stay up in the air for longer durations. I was able to see the gradual improvement in my strength and ability, as well as the muscles in my arms, back and abdominals. I was also able to see improvement in movement, able to hold poses longer and find more dynamic poses when creating organic movement pieces with my classmates.

Once summer came, I was disappointed to learn that the aerial gym did not have air-conditioning and would not be holding classes for over two months. Although there would be open gym to work at your own risk, I was not happy with this limited amount of work, worried that improvement and progress would be stunted. Although my strength was growing and my list of skills and tricks was lengthening, I was anxious to get to a level of ability where I could create a fluid performance. It was at this point that I was

advised to take up another extracurricular activity that would aid in my improvement as an aerial artist: pole dancing.

There is a negative stigma attached to pole dancing, but as a performer my training in this aerial art has become endlessly useful. It is an amazing physical workout, using many of the upper body muscles that I had been using in silks, as well as improving my flexibility. The classes that I was taking were focused on aerial moves that required inversions and climbs similar to ones being used in silks, only the apparatus is stable and not in constant motion. In addition to the strength that I built during this training, I also became a lot more comfortable in my own skin. This helped immensely when later, during the run of *The Tempest*, I would be put in a skintight royal blue unitard. Also, there was, in the production, what was considered a “fireman’s pole” so that my character could ascend and descend when traveling between the top level and the stage. Without having taken the pole dancing classes, it would have been a very awkward and unsightly attempt to climb the pole. This could have hindered the audience from suspending their disbelief and really buying into the fantastical quality of Ariel as a spirit of the elements. Although the method of moving about the space created an interesting spectacle, it would have been a lost cause if it only created a distraction.

Year 2

When I returned to school after a summer of intense physical workouts, I was extremely enthusiastic about increasing my ability and skill in physical theatre. I was much more comfortable in class and got good reviews from there on out; no more comments were made about looking like I was about to cry. Professor Tompkins seemed

to notice the change, and made many comments on how much improved my form and my attention to detail were. My second year of graduate school quickly improved upon the first, as the added physical activities had allowed me to not only have the strength and stamina required for my class and performance work, but my mental health and stress levels seemed to be much more at ease as well.

That year, in addition to continuing my training in aerial acrobatics, I decided to take some electives offered by the university in order to keep my exercise on a consistent schedule. I enrolled in a beginning swimming class the first semester and then an advanced swimming class and weightlifting class my second semester. Obviously each class contributed to building strength, but swimming especially built both my stamina and breath support. Day by day I was able to stay in the water longer, swimming greater distances and growing my ability to control my breathing and reserve energy for each new lap.

During this second year, my cohorts and I did not have any voice classes, but instead were loaded up with more movement courses taught by James Tompkins and a new instructor, Erin Crites. With Professor Tompkins we continued to work on mime and isolations, but then moved into a unit that, although I found it silly and a little humiliating at the time, proved to be the base work for much of what I would construct as Ariel in *The Tempest*. That unit was made up on lessons surrounding the elements: water, wind, fire, and earth. We talked about each element individually and the aspects and adjectives we would use to describe each element. Then, without much instruction or guidance, we each got on stage alone and performed the elements for our instructor and classmates, who were sitting in the middle of the auditorium. I cannot adequately describe the

confusion and anxiety that comes from standing on a bare stage in white tights and leotard and being told to “be fire,” or “be the earth.” The instructor was not pleased if even your pinky toe was not displaying and being inhabited by the element, and no amount of energy or vigor was enough. I acquired many a bruise when throwing myself around on the floor trying to be a wave hitting the coast. Although the exercise was extremely frustrating and exhausting, it became extremely useful in production, since Ariel is said to take on all of the elements. I did not have to do any extra work in studying how a creature of water or wind should move, and it was easy to fall back on the muscle memory created in this semester of movement.

That second semester the program gained a new instructor, Erin Crites, who had been trained in physical theatre at the Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California. She was an expert in movement and taught us an entire semester of mask work and commedia dell arte, a physical form of theatre developed in Italy before Shakespeare’s time. The mask work forced me to put focus in every inch of my body and be extremely specific with each movement, because I was unable to communicate with my face, as I was so accustomed to doing. It also was a lot of fun, filled with improvisation, silly voices and cracking dirty jokes. Up until this class, improvisation was my least favorite part of theatre and I avoided it at all costs. But I had always been interested in classical theatre and the Renaissance, and this Commedia unit really inspired me to get more involved and invested in physical theatre.

Italy Intensive

Another experience that has shaped me as an actor and influenced my work in physical theatre is an acting intensive I attended in Arezzo, Italy. I learned of this program during movement class when we were presented with brochures and a speech from a guest artist doing a workshop on improvisational movement. Despite my lack of funds, I knew I had to find a way to make it happen. After many fundraising efforts and many extra hours selling underwear at Victoria's Secret, I collected the money and bought a plane ticket. I went into this program with the class's instructor, Erin Crites, and two undergraduate students in our department. The program was a study in the works of Dario Fo, a Nobel Laureate playwright whose works were greatly influenced by both Commedia and politics. We were taught by one of his protégés Michele Bottini, and from him we learned the art of storytelling, Italian style. We used the works of Dario Fo as our textual jumping off point. Through these workshops I learned much about language, both verbal and physical, and how to tell a story when your audience may not speak your language.

When reading an essay by Ferdinand de Saussure called "Sign, Signifier, Signified," I learned that words are merely signs and can be exchanged for ideas. This means, to me, that words by themselves are not reliable in portraying messages. By incorporating signs and symbols created by movement and physical gesture, you have a better chance of relaying your intended meaning to your audience. I had not connected my storytelling work in Italy with the theory of semiotics until I came across a passage concerning exchanging words for something else in order to communicate to your

audience. "In the same way a word can be exchanged for something similar; an idea. Besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value therefore is not fixed so long as someone simply states that it can be 'exchanged' for a given concept" (Saussure, 32). Such a concept supports the idea that sometimes words alone cannot do the job of communicating your desired action, emotion, or characterization, making the deliberate and specific use of the body more important than ever.

If a word does not have value on its own, it can be exchanged for another word. This makes sense to me. But I also think it can be exchanged for something that is not of the same nature. For example, a word can be exchanged for a sound. And if this sound also cannot stand on its own, then with a sound and a movement joined together. I know that this article is mostly speaking of communication and signs in term of words and sounds. But it reminds me of a new technique that I started studying over the summer. When I was in Italy studying with the Dario Fo project, we were given the task of taking a script and making it into a story told by one person. A main focus in this exercise was to be able to tell the story physically, as our instructors were Italians, and some of the students spoke various languages as their native tongues. The goal was to make the story universally understood, despite the language barrier.

One exercise that we used was a silent storytelling exercise. Each actor had a Dario Fo script he or she was working on, most of which were derived from biblical parables. Individually we had to get up in front of the group and attempt to tell the story without using any words. This exercise was to make sure that we, as the storytellers, knew all of the details of the story. After we went through this, we were allowed to tell

the story adding sounds to gesture, using onomatopoeia and made up words to carry the action. Through this experience, even later when we were allowed to revisit the tales with English, we were able to help the audience follow along by using the specificity, detail work, and larger than life gesture.

After we had learned our stories and were telling them in English while using our bodies as much as possible, we were instructed to get rid of the language. We used a technique called Grammelot, which in essence is a gibberish made up language. Dario Fo apparently did this all the time. We were not substituting English words with words from other languages, but instead using sounds and nonsense words that held no meaning on their own. This was extremely difficult and frustrating as an actor. But occasionally students were able to find sounds and movements to put together that delivered the same plot point, character or emotion as the original passage. On such an occasion when the stars aligned and the actors fully connected with their individual stories, the results were astonishing, captivating everyone in the room regardless of native tongue. Having seen this occur, it is easier for me to understand semiotics and signs found in sounds and movement.

The importance of physical specificity, largess, and expressiveness was something that I was inspired to carry through when I returned to the United States and immediately began working on Ariel in *The Tempest*. Knowing that Shakespearean language can sometimes be equivalent to a foreign language for audience members, I was driven to create a physical life for my character that would allow the audience to follow her arc as she earns her freedom from a master that she both loves and hates.

CHAPTER 3: THEORIES OF BODY AND IMAGINATION WHEN DEVELOPING ARIEL

Body and Imagination Theory

When performing the role of Ariel in a production of *The Tempest*, the two performance elements that I focused on the most were the body in performance, as well as imagination applied to the body. Because the role was performed mostly from aerial silks, the physical component of the performance stood out. And being up in the silks, I had to be creative when choosing hangs and drops to suit the action of the play. Using strength to accomplish the required physical exertion, in conjunction with an imaginative use of choreography, my goal was to achieve a fluid performance that served the role without standing out from the plot and the rest of the action of the play.

In addition to the role requiring a lot of strength and full body movement, the costume did little but highlight the shape and movement of the body. The royal blue unitard left little to the imagination, and it required full consciousness in terms of the lines and shapes created by the body. When executing each move, I knew that it would stand out if a leg wasn't straight, or if the curvature of my back wasn't pushed to its flexible brink. Warming up properly was key to this execution, but even that wouldn't help if I was not focused during performance. It was imperative that I rehearse copious amounts so that the muscle memory would kick in during performance. It was important

to remember that the task was to perform the role of Ariel, a spirit, and not just to give an aerial silks show.

In addition to the body awareness required in terms of the personal instrument, it was also a huge requirement to be aware of the body in space. Many heights and levels were incorporated in this production. There were two sets of silks, the equivalent a fireman's pole, and a second story level. My concern was that by having Ariel on many of these higher levels, I would draw focus from the actors and the actions below.

Although I trusted the director and her choices of staging and blocking, I wanted to do all I could to aid in this effort.

Little could be done to keep the audience's eyes from being drawn up, but the best technique I could think of to apply in this case was stillness. When on the upper level in Act IV, I tried to stay as close to the ground and remain still while conversation was happening below. Directing my attention towards the action gave direction to the audience as to where to focus. It was not until Prospera called out to Ariel that I popped up and moved to acquire focus. From different reviews and responses, I have heard that the audience still had a hard time not watching the silks while the rest of the action took place, so there were definitely things that could have been done to more successfully achieve this goal of appropriately directed focus.

Non-Human Gender

In many cases the main message and goal for an actor is to get the audience to question their views on gender. However, I do not believe that was my goal, nor do I think that Shakespeare wrote this role specifically to explore gender related concepts. If

anything, I hope the audience left thinking that the most intriguing goals, qualities and emotions of Ariel are universal, and not gender specific.

Exploring gender while playing the role of Ariel greatly affected me as an actor because it challenged me to consider my own physical body, the importance of gender in character development, and how the audience perceives gender. The gender of this character was unspecified in our production, and this change gave me a lot to consider during the rehearsal process. Without a textual explanation that could be used to back up the director's decision to make Ariel a non-gendered spirit, it was up to me to make specific decisions and then broadcast the conclusions to the audience by using deliberate physical choices.

The role of Ariel presents some issues for a female actor, as textually Ariel is written with masculine pronouns. That being said, directors are often changing this up and casting female actors in the famous role. Besides the pronouns, there is nothing particularly male about this island spirit. So the gender of Ariel seems to change with every new production and with each director's view. In Julie Taymor's Broadway production it was played by a female puppeteer, but in the film version the actor was male. In 1945 when it opened on Broadway under the direction of Cheryl Crawford, a female, Vera Zorina, played Ariel. Then, in the 1960 television version, Roddy McDowell played Ariel. Having played the role before during my undergraduate career, I knew that gender in performance was going to be something I was going to need to explore and consider for my thesis role in *The Tempest*.

One example of how Ariel's gender can be manipulated can be seen with my experience at the University of Kentucky. As discussed above, my sophomore year of

college I was cast in the role of Ariel. However, I was not the only young actor slotted to play Ariel, but instead the director decided to cast five actors to create an amalgamation of qualities and personalities that would make up one non-human spirit. Within this group were three young women and two young men.

Many things were difficult about this arrangement, as there were five different opinions, not including the director's, on how to create and execute one character. That being said, gender was not a factor that I spent too much time thinking about. Because the male gender was already represented in the "Ariel group," I felt free to treat my role as a female/feminine aspect of the spirit. Also, the costume designer put me in a short, muslin off-the-shoulder dress. This made it clear to both the audience and myself that I was a woman.

This time around, six years later, it was not as clear-cut for me. The very first rehearsal I was taken aback when Dr. Frye's, first note for me was that I was acting "too much like a girl." She explained to me that she was going to leave the pronouns in the masculine form, but other than that she did not want to address gender at all; in her mind, Ariel was non-human, which meant that the spirit didn't need to have a specified gender. This was extremely frustrating for me as an actor. I understand this from a conceptual point of view, but as an actor it seemed lazy and non-committal to not address the gender, but then try to not act my own natural gender as a female. On stage and in performance, when I choose to not act like a female (which is difficult) the only way to justify that in my mind and translate it with my body is to "act male."

In the past I have played male characters in Shakespeare. My first experience was to play Benvolio in *Romeo and Juliet*. We chose to keep the name as it was, but I played

the character like a sword-fighting girl who wanted to be buddies with the guys. This was easy for me, as I have always been an athletic tomboy. I didn't need to think about it much, and the audience seemed to have no problem with the switch.

The next time around I played Rivers, the queen's brother in *Richard III*. This was also a University of Louisville production under the direction of Rinda Frye, and in this instance I was given direction to play male. The costume designer put me in clothing that was meant to mask my shape, with the addition of stippled on makeup stubble. I still found this to be difficult, especially since most of the production I was standing next to two men playing men, and there was very little cross-gender casting other than myself. And even with a stippled on beard, I looked like a prepubescent boy in a Justin Bieber wig (at least that's what some of my students wrote about in their reviews). I tried my best to put on some male swagger, but I was very self-conscious about my performance and learned that I am much more comfortable being a female character.

That being said, as soon as Dr. Frye told me I was playing too much of a girl when experimenting with Ariel, my heart dropped. I was not eager to have another go at bending gender, even if it was an ambiguous questionable kind of gender. And this was before silks and aerial acrobatics came into play. As mentioned before, silks performances are expected to be graceful and lyrical, and trying to disguise my naturally feminine frame and movements proved very difficult while wearing a skintight unitard and trying to execute difficult moves with grace.

Vocally I was given the note that I needed to get into the lower register and omit any sing-songy qualities. I believe the term "robot bird" was mentioned, which seems to contradict itself. I felt like physically I was able to achieve a more lyrical quality and

vocally I could find that sexless non-human android quality the director had asked for. But for most of the rehearsal process it proved nearly impossible to put the physical and vocal together without it being very clunky and unnatural. It took many rehearsals to find a nice balance between the two, and my only hope is that it came across to the audience as the nuances of a character and not the struggle of an actor exploring gender. Or at the very least, I hope the dichotomy of the physical and vocal did not prove to be distracting.

Although I have not done any direct research to gauge the audience's reception, the performance communicated that gender was not a factor the audience needed to focus on. If it were, we would have gone through greater trouble to hide my own gender. By not choosing a specific gender and attempting to eliminate gestures and behaviors that would make the gender obvious, we allowed the audience to view Ariel as a spirit and a slave, but not necessarily a female slave, or a male fairy, which are loaded types that could distract.

As Elin Diamond suggests,

Gender refers to the words, gestures, appearances, ideas and behavior that dominant culture understands as indices of feminine or masculine identity. When spectators 'see' gender they are seeing (and reproducing) the cultural signs of gender, and by implication, the gender ideology of a culture (Diamond, 79).

Considering the gestures and appearances that Diamond speaks of, it is my assumption that the audience never once asked the question, "is Ariel a man or a woman?" No one was fooled; my body couldn't have been more revealed unless I was naked. Despite attempts to speak in a lower register and demolish any "sing-songy fairy" qualities, it was

very difficult to maintain this while exerting the physical energy required to pick myself off of the ground and perform aerial acrobatics. Not to mention my inability to sing actual songs in anything but a mezzo soprano range.

That being said, I can only hope that the question or concept of gender did not distract the audience from my main focus when performing the role of Ariel, as my main goal was to express and explore Ariel's relationship to Prospera, as well as Ariel's relationship to captivity and freedom. I think that if the audience was not focused on "is Ariel male or female?" then I am pleased.

Dr. Frye believed that the best way to emphasize that Ariel was non-gendered was to put emphasis on physical qualities that seemed non-human. She suggested obtaining some bird-like qualities, so I employed a still body with quick movements of the head. She also was interested in the lack of emotion and feeling that Ariel speaks of, and asked me to explore an artificial intelligence take on the creature. I joke, but I really did try to achieve a kind of bird/robot, when applying physical nuances to the character, especially when Ariel came down from the silks and stood amongst the other characters. Some of these nuances that I applied were staccato movements, darting eyes, and a cocked head.

Physical Exhaustion

Besides all of the character choices made that involved my body and the silks, another aspect of the body came into play that I have not experienced before when working on a role. That is physical exhaustion. Yes, I have played many energetic and active characters. I have even danced it out in a few musicals. But it turns out that that was nothing in comparison to performing Shakespeare while performing aerial

acrobatics. I struggled with breath support and muscle fatigue to an extreme. There was a point during technical rehearsals when I lost feeling in both of my arms from the elbow down. I panicked and had to come down and do the rest of the run from the ground.

There were many moments throughout the rehearsal and performance process that I doubted my body and thought that I was in over my head. Why had I agreed to do the silks? Had I thought too much of my strength when I committed to the experience? Even up to the last day, when there was both a matinee and evening show, I worried about my stamina and being able to work through the pain. It took everything in me to ignore what my muscles were telling me and just do the work I had invested so much time into. This issue of exhaustion was a huge obstacle, which I will discuss in depth in the next chapter, which deals primarily with the difficulties that came up during the rehearsal process.

Imagination

I also found that, in addition to the body being a major theatrical element for this performance in particular, the imagination was an element that required a lot of attention. Of course imagination is always a part of theatre and creating a character, but this role especially required me to stretch my imagination through play and experimentation. In the text Ariel says lines that indicate the spirit's ability to show up out of thin air. She says' "I drink the air before me, and return ere your pulse twice beat" (V.i.78). Another textual example is when Ariel responds to Prospera's calls as though she can read her master's mind, stating, "Thy thoughts I cleave to. What's thy pleasure?" (IV.i. 70). I felt I had to be creative in finding ways to show that Ariel was omnipresent and could appear out of thin air. The range of my physical ability as well as the options

dictated by the atmosphere created by the set, allowed me to pop in and out of the scenes, or drop in conspicuously from above.

It was important to focus on imagination and out of the ordinary spectacle for this play in particular because of the nature of the text. *The Tempest* is categorized as one of Shakespeare's comedies, but it is quite different in that some of the themes are darker and it has the quality of magic that makes it somewhat of a dark fairytale. Most other Shakespearean comedies, save for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, do not focus on magic or fantasy. Because the quality of fantasy is present, it was important to find ways to create this illusion without the special effects one might be able to use when making a film.

Having played this role before, I had the interesting predicament of trying to ignore the work I had done in the past and try to create something new. To avoid making the same decisions, I had to ignore my first instinct and try to move on to alternate creative choices, especially when it came to how Ariel physically carried himself, his vocal quality and placement, as well as the line readings. When going through the lines I could hear myself saying the lines the same way I had six years earlier. It took a lot of openness and creativity to imagine a character that was different than the one I had played before.

I have never performed silks within a production, much less choreographed my own silks routine. I felt a lot of pressure while experimenting with the silks to find moves that also served the script and the events of the play. I tried to use my imagination to create images with my body and the silks to go along with the text. For example, early in the script Prospera describes the time that Sycorax, the previous witch of the island,

enslaved Ariel and trapped her in a pine tree. I wanted to create a picture that reflected this moment in Ariel's history. By doing a trick that involved knotting my ankles and hanging upside down, I was able to use the surrounding silk tails to wrap my body up as though I were trapped inside of a trunk-like cylinder. It seemed to be effective and present the image I was going for, as every night I could hear vocalization and chuckles from the audience.





Another example of my imagination at work when choreographing a moment was during a scene with Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban. In this scene, Ariel uses magic to put words into Trinculo's mouth. The silks were actually pretty successful in this scene, because they created the distance between Ariel and the other characters. It is written as though the others do not see or notice Ariel. Originally we were running this scene with Ariel on the ground, following behind Trinculo, but I really pushed to get Ariel back up into the air. I believe the silks give a hint of the distance between human and spirit, and by keeping Ariel aerial, it is an aid to help the audience with their understanding and suspension of disbelief. Up in the air I was able to do tricks in between lines to show the character's playfulness and mischievous nature.



Throughout the process I experimented with several other theories to get to the end result. The first one was a theory that I actually came upon during high school in a movement class. Knowing that this role involved much more movement and choreography than I was used to, my inclination was to go to my Laban book. Rudolph Laban is a dance and movement theorist that explored dynamics between space, time and exertion. There is a lot of emphasis on notation of the movement, which I was not focused on. But I was greatly aware of finding movement that changed up the dynamics and finding tricks that fit the feelings of the character and the tension in the scene.

Space was something I was very conscious about anyway, because of the limitations of the space once the set was put in. It was fairly close to the riggings, and the silks length was shorter than I was use to. I normally work on silks of 25 ft, but these

were on 16ft. Knowing this I had to choose tricks that could be compact and safely executed.

I thought about time in both of its extremes. I wanted to use moves that were quick in motion, especially drops, to both shock the audience and emphasize the eagerness of the character when trying to please Prospera. However, there were several scenes that I wanted to move gracefully and slowly (and also with little tension and exertion). During scenes where Ariel is not seen by the other characters, when the spirit is being sneaky and mischievous, it would be counterintuitive to move quickly. I also chose a slower dynamic when I did not want the focus on me, during those moments when I needed to be onstage to prep for big moments, but was not suppose to be the focus of the action in the scene.



As far as exertion goes, most moves require a lot of it, so it was a challenge to find moves, and more specifically sitting and lounging positions, that also appeared to require less physical exertion. At other times I was going for the opposite effect; moves

that looked like they required lots of physical tension, but that were not too exhausting for me to hold for long period of time. For instance, the moment I spoke of earlier where Ariel is under Prospera's control and is being reminded about being trapped in a tree. Hanging upside down by a knot, although not entirely comfortable, required less flexibility and strength than many other tricks. However, because I had more strength to play with, I was able to control the amount of tension that Ariel appeared to be experiencing, without wearing myself out.

Stanislavski's System

Another theory I put into practice was that of Stanislavski. Konstantin Stanislavski, who is considered the father of modern realism, created a grammar for acting and system for delving into a state of mind and body that I was able to use in creating the character and physical life of Ariel. Born in 1863, he experienced three major revolutions before his death in 1938. "He witnessed three great revolutions: realism's overturn of nineteenth-century histrionics, modernism's rejection of realism, and Russia's political move from monarchy to communism" (Carnicke, 1). Most people hear the name Stanislavski and automatically think realism, which is logical as he was a revolutionary in the field with his work in this style. However, he was involved with many different theories and practices, focusing on symbolism in the start of his professional career.

One would think that using realistic methods like those of Stanislavski and playing an ethereal and non-human role like Ariel would contradict each other. However, it was a huge concern of mine that the character become one-dimensional and more of a vehicle for the plot rather than a character with a personality and viewpoint. I chose to

explore Stanislavski's "magic if" to put myself into Ariel's head and relate to the spirits experiences of being enslaved and in a power struggle with Prospera as master. This was something that I had a hard time relating to, but through the character analysis and questions that Stanislavski provides in his practices, I feel I was able to give a different perspective through Ariel. I hope that through this work I was able to allow the audience more of an understanding as to why Ariel behaves the way that he/she does.

According to the essay "Stanislavsky's System: Pathways for the Actor," Sharon Marie Carnicke expresses the importance of imagination in the system. "The System values an actor's capacity to treat fictional circumstances as if real, to visualize the details of a character's world specifically. And to daydream or fantasize about the events of the play" (Carnicke, 6). I spent a lot time thinking and daydreaming about what it would be like in Ariel's position. I had to visualize the island as it was to Ariel, a playground that had been limited by a higher power. I had to find the subtext in everything that Ariel was saying, asking myself "does Ariel really feel so indebted to Prospera? Does Ariel enjoy herself in this moment, or is the spirit being sarcastic and petulant in this moment?" Using these tools my goal was to provide more depth of character in my mind and for the audience.

Despite my work in this production being mostly physical and based on non-realism, I did use Stanislavski's system as a jumping off point. In researching for this role I was able to use some of the concepts and vocabulary that Stanislavski coined in starting my preparation. The first concept, which is a cornerstone in his work, is the importance of concentration. When he speaks of concentration he addresses both mental and physical concentration, focusing on the importance that the actor tune out anything outside of the

world of the play. In his theory he speaks about “circles of attention,” encouraging the actor to establish three imaginary circles around themselves (small, medium, and large) and be able to move their mental focus and attention between the three areas. In his own teaching he would use pools of light to establish these areas.

I normally use these circles of attention in my work to first establish an inward focus on my character and then the space around me, allowing a complete sense of awareness of my mental state, physical being, my environment, and also my fellow actors. I feel like this is important in all performance, not just realism. It is especially important in aerial acrobatics as far as safety is concerned. As a performer you want to maintain focus so that you are always aware of what is going on around you, and below you. This awareness and focus makes it less likely that you would miscalculate a move and slip, or hit something or someone in your space. It also takes an immense amount of focus to control your physical being while still being present in the world of the character.

There were many times that nerves and fear would take over, and I could only focus on my body and the knots holding me in the air. Focus was especially important because there was no room for error; even from the beginning of the rehearsal process crash mats were not provided for me. Never before had I worked with silks without even a sprung floor beneath me, and I would not recommend it for anyone. I was making up my own choreography while working through the scene, and the margin of error was great considering the improvisational nature of the process. It was only thanks to a lot of focus and some luck thrown in there that I didn't fall and greatly injure myself. Through repetition I was able to increase my comfort level and slowly add in more factors to focus

on, such as lines, non-verbal communication and relationships to other characters. By performance time I was able to shift between the circles of attention, moving my focus from my own personal kinesthetic sphere, to the entire stage and audience space.

Another important aspect that Stanislavski pushed which can be applied to all performance and not just realism is the importance of imagination. He believed that it was the actor's job to have the ability to see the fictional as real and be able to envision the character's world in detail. I've always been taught that if the actor can't imagine the world of the play, the audience has no chance. This is especially important in non-realism, because you don't have the naturalistic set to work with. As an actor you have to establish in your mind what the space is and how the character is using it.

All of Shakespeare's plays involve many different scenes in different settings, but the stage picture never changes. When he was writing for the Globe Theatre he had the playing space and a platform above, but minimal scenery. It was the actor's job to create the scene as the characters moved between settings and venues. Nowadays you can have sets that move and change, but more often than not scenic designers and directors stick to Shakespeare's method of staging, as it is simple and cost effective. As stated previously, our production used minimal scenery, with the most elaborate set piece being the central box that created an upper level and an inner below. During the course of the script the characters move through several different locations on an island, but with a simple set that never changes, and it is the actors' job to create the space, not only with their lines, but also how they use their bodies to establish their environment.

In the first production of *The Tempest* that I was a part of at the University of Kentucky, the stage was covered in a giant pile of real sand. Although it was annoying to

find sand in all of your undergarments and crevices for weeks, it was a great way for the actors to get into the imaginative state of being trapped and lost on an island. At the University of Louisville, however, it was solely up to the actors to create the feel of the island. Without anything physical to grab hold of, the actors can use another concept created by Stanislavski; the “magic if.” If the actor does not have real experiences they can use to relate to the script, they can use their imagination to as themselves, “what if?” “What if I were lost on an island? What if everyone I knew had just died in a shipwreck? What if I had never encountered another human besides one of my parents?” By thinking on this level actors can find some sense of relatability to their character, and hopefully this kind of imaginative preparation can come out physically in their work.

In my case, I struggled to find a connection to Ariel’s relationship to Prospera. I had to ask myself several “what if” questions in terms of slavery and abusive relationships because I personally have no experience with such things. So instead I had to think about more tangible things that I could relate to, like what if I were trapped in a job that I hated, or what if I had a significant other or superior that was constantly making promises and breaking them, as Prospera does with Ariel’s freedom. This gave me a better mental understanding of the character and a jumping off point for diving into the emotional life of the role.

The physical silks that I had with me onstage were also very useful in combining my imagination and the life of the character. I was able to use the fabric to tie myself up or trap myself, and although I personally knew how to get out of the knots, I could imagine that at times when Prospera was threatening to Ariel, that the spirit lost all sense of his ability to free himself.

Tadashi Suzuki

Another theory that I have come across during my acting training is that of Suzuki. Many of the things that I learned while working on such a physical piece can be supported with Tadashi Suzuki's theories. He states that, "Expression in the theatre does not merely consist of dance-like motions of the body. What makes theatre theatrical involves all the variations of the body when speaking" (Suzuki, 17). Although I have not been fully immersed in the work, I have done several in-class exercises over the last couple years, and I found a few of the techniques imperative to my performance of Ariel in *The Tempest*. I have also read many excerpts from his most famous book, *The Way of Acting*, where he delves into his theories on the grammar of feet, human experience, and ensemble work. For two semesters now I have worked with a professor, Daniel Hill, who has a huge love for and knowledge of Suzuki. In his classes we have done exercises that pertain to ensemble, supporting the voice, and inhabiting the body. The ensemble exercises, although very interesting and surely important going forward, were not so much a part of my process for this particular production. I did work with other actors in the show, but mostly Ariel was separated from the other characters, so I was less focused on ensemble. However, the other work became very helpful as I struggled with breath support throughout the entire show.

In the first chapter of his book, "The Grammar of Feet," Suzuki discusses an actor's control of their body, with the various positions of the feet being the base for rest of the body, saying, "There are many cases in which the position of the determines even the strength and nuance of the actor's voice" (Suzuki, 6). Although I did not use the different feet positions that he promotes, I did take to heart the idea that the actor must

have a solid center with which to work from. Balance and strength must flow all the way up from the feet and into the core in order to support all movements that stem from there, as well as the voice. We did several exercises in Daniel Hill's class that involved strengthening and tightening the core while walking methodically and rising slowly from a squat, all the while speaking with a fully supported voice. Often the exercises were painful and exhausting, resulting in quivering thigh muscles and sweaty brows. I used what I learned in these workshops, both while stabilizing myself in the silks, and when Ariel stood still on stage or from the above platform.

One instance in particular took place during Act 3 Scene 3, when Ariel appears as a harpy and berates and horrifies the King and company, shouting, "You are three men of sin, whom destiny ... hath caused to belch up you, and on this island where man does not inhabit, you 'mongst men being most unfit to live" (III.iii. 60). I had initially used a move called the twirlie bird, which had me spinning from a seated position about 12 feet from the stage. Whenever the silks slowed to a stop, it never failed for my back to be facing the audience, no matter how well I had thought I had maneuvered the wrap. During the rehearsals I realized that I would need to flip over into my stomach in order to face the audience as well as the characters I was speaking to. With the silks wrapped tightly around my waist, and my arms supporting my upper body by holding onto the silks over my head, it took everything in me to create the breath I needed to support the speech, Ariel's longest chunk of text in the script. I employed the Suzuki core work that we had done in class, pulling the breath from deep within to create a monstrous and intimidating sound from my lower register. Suzuki exercises also trained me to endure the pain that came along with such a physically exhausting position.

Many of the questions that Suzuki asks and tries to remedy are ones that I find extremely applicable, and I find myself asking the same questions on a daily basis now, as I move on to other projects that require me to create interesting physical life for my characters. A passage from *The Way of Acting* that can be easily applied, not only to my performance in *The Tempest*, but to all of my work as an actor focusing in physically dynamic theatre is as follows:

How does an actor weave such bodily situations and physical movements into a connected series of motions? And how does he maintain the necessary physical equilibrium so that, without disrupting his breath control, he can vocally articulate the theatrical image he is striving for, whatever the stage language involved?

(Suzuki, 20)

Mary Overlie's Viewpoints

During the semester of this performance I was also taking a class in performance theory. It wasn't until several weeks after the show closed that we touched on the work of Mary Overlie and the Viewpoints that she created as a means of composition. During our class final I collaborated with another student to create a scene that played with the idea of implementing viewpoints into a rehearsal process, and showing how this process can lead to a more visually interesting performance.

Since my goal for *The Tempest*, as well as this thesis, is to prove that physical stamina and creativity lead to a much more dynamic and interesting performance for the audience, I felt it would serve this argument to evaluate my work as Ariel through the ideas and vocabulary of these physical viewpoints. This was not a method that I was

actively considering during the rehearsal process, but I feel there was so much physically going on in the production that breaking it down in such a way after the fact can both be helpful and insightful.

Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, members of the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, have done a lot of work with the Viewpoints. In their book, *The Viewpoints Book*, they explain each individual viewpoint in clear and understandable language, breaking them down into two categories of space and time. They also shed light on the creative process of composition, a way of combining the elements that make up viewpoints in order to create new works. Although *The Tempest* itself is not a new work, when composing the different physical and visual elements I explored all of the viewpoints discussed in their book.

Shape, “the contour or outline the body (or bodies) makes in space,” (Bogart, Landau, 9) was an element of viewpoints that I focused most on when choreographing the various silks series. I wanted to make sure that I gave the audience a variety of shapes, with both lines and curves. Shape can also be both stationary or moving, and it was important to keep the audience’s attention by being creative with the types of shapes I took, be it in a pose, a spin or in a drop.

Spatial relationship is “the distance between things onstage, especially 1) one body to another; 2) one body (or bodies) to a group of bodies; 3) the body to the architecture” (11). As far as space is concerned, Ariel inhabited more space than any other character in the show, drawing the focus of the audience not only up and down stage, but also up to the ceiling and down to the floor. Ariel spent more time on the upper platform than any other character. Ariel also traveled through space in many different

ways. He climbed through space and dropped through space when using both the silks and the fireman's pole that stood next to the platform. Ariel crept through the space, moving undetected by the King's clan and Caliban's clowns. And whenever being sent off to do Prospera's bidding, Ariel flashed through space, often cutting across the entire stage or running through the vomms. In addition to simply traversing the space, much meaning can be taken from the space between characters. When Ariel is fearful of Prospero, as she is in many of the scenes, she may keep a deliberate distance from her master. On the occasion where Ariel feels eager to help in order to gain her freedom, she may bridge some of the gap between them. Often we had Ariel separated by distance from most of the characters, keeping her up in the air as she spies on and manipulates those on the island. The space between Ariel and the rest of the characters further establishes the distance between the human and spiritual elements. The one moment when Ariel touches Prospera does not come until the very end, when space is crossed for a brief moment, as Ariel and Prospera touch hands and the spirit is set free. But as soon as the moment occurs, the picture set up is broken, as Ariel dashes off stage, never to be seen again. Often the distance between characters can communicate more to the audience than the words themselves.

Architecture is "the physical environment in which you are working and how awareness of it affects movement" (10). The architecture was an interesting aspect to work with in this show. Although the set was fairly simple, it allowed for a lot of play in terms of levels. Naturally, the silks were an intricate part of the architecture, with a height of sixteen feet. During the rehearsal process, as I was choreographing and experimenting with the silks, we used them in several ways. The first way was as a cocoon for Ariel to

emerge out of after the first fifteen minutes in act one. Although this was visually interesting, it proved to be difficult to get in and out of gracefully or quickly. So we scratched that idea once we began to put the scenes in order.

In the opening scene when the shipwreck begins, we used the silks to change the space by making them sails. I and another actor moved around the space shaking them vigorously to give the illusion that the sails were being moved by the horrifying sea storm. This simple manipulation of the architecture dramatically changed the atmosphere and energy of the space, starting the play off with something frenetic and alarming. Never again during the script is a “tempest” taking place, save for the occasional thunderclap, so this was a good way to get the audience familiar with the circumstances and the severity of the storm.

The aspect of architecture also leads to the topography of the show, another important element of Viewpoints. Topography is “the landscape, the floor pattern, the design we create in movement through space” (Bogart, Landau, 11). Because of the many levels available to play with, as well as several entrances and exits, the architecture of the space allowed us to create an ever changing and unpredictable topography that was visually stimulating to the eye of the audience.

Most sets that I have dealt with in my artistic career have not had many levels to play with. This one, however, had a set that had an upper level and an inner-below that you could enter and exit from. This doubled as Prospera’s living cell as well as a lookout point where Prospera could observe her manipulation at work. As Ariel I made several entrances from the ladder behind the upper level, and used the fireman’s pole next to it to

descend to the bottom level. Ariel also climbed up the pole during the performance of the Goddesses.

There was quite a bit of repetition (another important viewpoint) in the physical life of Ariel. Several of Ariel's nuances were revisited during moments of rest. Often times when in the scene Ariel main objective is to listen and observe. During that time I wanted to find small movements to show Ariel's presence without drawing too much attention from the action. Often Ariel could be seen with an inquisitive head cocked to the side or a still body in stoic positions, only moving when hearing something imperative to the mission. When Ariel eavesdrops on Stephano and Caliban, she hears their plans of destroying Prospero and taking control of the island. My Ariel was full of minute inquisitive poses and reactions during this whole scene, taking in information to take back to Prospero. For example, Stephano agrees to the plot, announcing, "Monster, I will kill this man. His daughter and I will become King and Queen –save our Graces! – and Trinculo and thyself shall be viceroys" (III.ii. 55). During this section I was able to employ several small movements, such as a head tilt and lean forward in the silks wrap. With such small nuances I was able to reiterate that Ariel, without the emotion of a human, is simply recording data to take back to her master. In this way, repetition can serve the actor in establishing behavioral ticks that say a lot about the character.

Repetition could also be seen in most of Ariel's entrances and exits. Since he is constantly coming and going in nearly every scene, the director requested some consistency that would also add to the characterization of Ariel. We wanted to create a distinction between Ariel's connection to the air and the earth, so we tried to create an obvious contrast between the two. Whenever Ariel made an entrance or exit that did not

require silks or height, the spirit was as swift as possible, running on and off stage with a bolt of energy, with which we meant to showcase Ariel's omnipresence as a spirit while also highlighting his diligence and connection to Prospera.

Whenever entering with the intention of climbing the silks, Ariel's movements were more methodical, fluid and graceful to show his comfort in the air, as that was the element I chose the character to be most connected with. This took a lot of practice, since naturally as a human the air is not my most natural inhabitation. Climbing was very clunky for me as I started out, because it was tiresome and an act of heavy lifting. But as I became used to it I was able to execute it with more grace and control.

During rehearsals on one particular day, the vocal coach, Daniel Hill, had been watching from the audience. He approached me and mentioned that whenever I was done with a scene that took place from above, I would simply climb down and walk off stage. It seemed like a break from character and a moment that could alternatively be used to my advantage if I made a moment out of it. From that day forward whenever Ariel would descend, I would hold on to the silks with one hand while quickly exiting. Once off stage I would let go of the fabric and the silks would trail behind me, leaving the impression of a spirit in the wind or the essence of Ariel leaving the space. I'm very thankful for this suggestion from Daniel. I believe the repetition was an effective moment that further established Ariel as a spirit of many elements, making a clear and smooth transition from his life in the air to his existence on the ground.

As mentioned previously in regards to repetition, tempo and pacing were often on my mind when composing the character of Ariel. What tempo does one use when presenting a graceful spirit? What about one that inhabits many spaces at once and can

appear on a whim or command? As previously mentioned, the lines lead the audience to believe that Ariel can appear on a whim, being able to sense Prospera's need for him. Time and space are not the same for Ariel as he can feel his spirit pulled across the island with merely a thought. As a human, I do not have this ability, but as an actor it is my job to fool the audience into forgetting about that for the time being. In order to give this illusion, I thought the best tactic would be to play with the tempo. All of Ariel's entrances and exits were quick and concise, but whenever posting up on stage or in the silks for a while, Ariel's movements were lyrical and slower, if not close to stillness. By doing this, my intent was to kill two birds with one stone; show Ariel's flexibility in terms of space and time, and also show the grace of a nonhuman creature that inhabits the natural elements.

At the same time another key Viewpoint, duration, came into play. Some people struggle to distinguish the difference between tempo and duration, assuming that both have something to do with speed. This is true, but they involve speed in different capacities. Tempo is "the rate of speed at which movement occurs; how fast or slow something happens on stage" (8). Duration considers "how long a movement or sequence of movements continues. For example, as Ariel I would often climb the silks in order to observe what was taking place on the island. If I were coming in singing an enticing and enchanting song that was meant to lure Ferdinand to Prospera's cell (Act 1 Scene 2), I would make each individual climb up the silk slow in duration, but leaving no pauses between each movement, so each climb flowed one into the other. Thus, the duration and the tempo are both slow, but together they make a magical and enchanting spectacle. Much later in the play (Act 3 Scene 1) I climbed the silks in order to spy on the three

conspirators. In this case, because I was try to be sneaky and conspicuous, I would make one quick climb, and then pause there for a time until motivated to climb higher to get a better look. Therefore, the opposite is true in that the individual climbs were quick in tempo but the sequence of climbs was slow in duration, because the whole climb took several minutes. Playing with the tempo and duration allowed me to take a piece of blocking that happened often, and individualize it for each circumstance in the plot.

Gesture, a viewpoint that can be easily recognized by the audience and resonate with them, refers to “movements involving part or parts of the body” (9) that are universal, or at least socially recognizable. In terms of semiotics, gestures can take the place of words, meaning the same thing or even being more effective than the word itself. A wave is a gesture that communicates hello or goodbye. A bow is a gesture of reverence or respect. A stomp on the ground could be a gesture for anger or frustration. As an actor exploring different levels and images, it is important to choose effective gestures that adequately express the subtext of the character. I found them extremely helpful in supporting Ariel’s lines, as well as establishing subtext when Ariel did not have lines, but was a large part of the scene. One example of gesture occurred in Act 1 Scene 2, when Ariel briefly stands up to Prospera, saying, “Let me remember thee what thou hast promised, which is not yet performed me.” Prospera presses Ariel with, “What is’t thou can’st demand,” and Ariel retorts, “My liberty.” It this moment I chose to fall into a move called a ball drop, one that looks like a mix between a bow and the fetal position, hanging slightly upside down. This gesture is used to show Ariel’s submission, fear, and some regret in standing up to her master. In this case, the gesture supported the lines already there.



In Ariel's last entrance in the final scene, she says nothing. Prospera simply calls her in, gives her a command to see the ship safely home, and then concedes with, "Then to the elements be free, and fare thou well." At this moment the actor who played Prospera, Kristi Papailler, and I chose a gesture together to give some closure to their relationship, despite Ariel's lack of lines. We reached out to each other, Ariel standing on a bench and Prospera from the floor. Briefly our index and middle fingers touched, in an exchange of magic and power. As Ariel, I gave a quick inhale of breath, and Prospera handed Ariel her staff. With that, Ariel is off, quickly running out of the vomitorium. A simple moment, but one that used gesture to quickly show the connection between the two, and the breaking of that connection as Ariel earns her freedom and Prospera gives up her power over her and the island.

The last viewpoint that can be applied to my performance in *The Tempest* is Kinesthetic Response, which is a “spontaneous reaction to motion which occurs outside you” (8). I thought about how my character would react at almost every point in the rehearsal process, as reaction shows a clear relationship between you and the characters with whom you interact. I used reactions to show how I felt about the threats of Prospera, showing that Ariel’s hiding was in direct correlation to Prospera’s approach to her with the magic staff. There were also many moments when Ariel spies on Caliban and the two clowns, Stephano and Trinculo. I used reactions here to show how Ariel felt about their plans to murder Prospera. At one point, Caliban proclaims that he feels that the spirit is following him around, and my authentic reaction during rehearsal was to cackle at him from the platform above. This seemed an effective way to relate the two characters in the scene, so it was kept for production.

Rudolf Laban

As previously mentioned, one of my favorite movement theorists that influenced me greatly as a young actor was Rudolph Laban. According to John Hodgson, who wrote *Mastering Movement; The Life and Work of Rudolph Laban*, the theorist studied and influenced “several areas of human activity: contemporary dance and dance training, the foundations of actor training, attitudes towards physical education, the development of dance and drama therapy, as well as methods of personnel selection and training in the work place” (Laban, ix). Although the most confusing and complicated of theories, I was fascinated by Laban in my sophomore year of high school. Laban is most known for his

Kinetographie Laban, or Labanotation. This is an extensive series of signs and symbols that can be used to describe everything that moves.

One of the main concepts in his method is the importance of classifying movements into degrees of effort, or as Laban describes it, dynamics. Using these classifications of effort, an actor can explore different ways to show inner intentions through the use of their body. Within the areas of effort, an actor explores the dynamics of space (direct and indirect), weight (strong and light), time (sudden or sustained), as well as flow (bound or free.) Each individual movement that a human makes can be broken down into these categories and found somewhere on the spectrum between the extremes. As an actor who worries about providing interesting and varied dynamics while on stage, it is helpful for me to think about where the majority of my actions lie on the different spectrums, and then find ways to change it up when necessary. I also go back to these concepts when it feels like a certain action or piece of blocking feels unnatural or awkward, and I experiment with the levels to find what feels right.

Of the four categories, flow is discussed less and not explored in depth when an actor is first beginning taught Laban's methods. When I first worked on the notation system in high school we only applied space, time and weight. Although I did not use the notation system while working on my role as Ariel, I thought about how I was executing these three dynamics. I also, for the first time, began to put a lot of thought into that fourth dynamic, flow. Not only did I explore flow in the lyricism of the movements, but I also found there was a lot to think about in terms of restriction and freedom when using the silks. The nature of silks includes the exploration of both, with intricate wraps and

knots and then surprising drops and spins. When considering Laban's theories during the choreography process, I wanted to make sure that I was balanced on this spectrum.

By choreographing both bound and free movements, I was able to keep the audience interested. I was also able to choose actions and blocking that adequately expressed the feeling of the text. For example, there is a scene in Act 3 when Ariel approaches King Alonso and his nobleman, enchanting and frightening them by appearing as a harpy. Ariel reminds them of their treacherous deeds, and in that moment the King and his followers are controlled by magic, being unable to lift their swords to the harpy. Ariel berates them, shouting, "You fools! I and my fellows are ministers of fate. The elements of whom your swords are tempered may as well wound the loud winds, or with bemocked at stabs, kill the still closing waters as diminish one dowel in my plume" (III.iii. 60). In this moment I wanted to choose blocking that would emphasize the bound position of the nobleman and the free, powerful position of Ariel. I would climb to the highest point and then execute a move that my peers and I call the "twirlie bird." While the characters below struggled, Ariel was spinning high above them, calling out to them in a disorienting whirl. I then would rotate into a position called the sailboat, which required me to hang horizontally with my arms holding the silks overhead like a sail. Despite the wrap holding me in place, the spinning effect emphasized my power and freedom compared to the lost noblemen below.



CHAPTER 4: DIFFICULTIES OF INTEGRATING BODY, IMAGINATION AND TEXT IN REHEARSAL

In rehearsing the role I looked at the many Ariels before me, and after the director decided that my character would be without gender, I decided to look at productions where Ariel was played by a man as well as productions where Ariel was played by a woman. I must add that normally I choose not to do research by looking up performances of previous productions. I feel it taints my creative process by influencing it with someone else's interpretation. If in fact I do watch a film of the same play, I do it well into the rehearsal process, so that I have already done my own character analysis, text work, and a bit of kinesthetic creation. In the case of *The Tempest*, I had already been in a production, which informed my character. I had also seen clips from a filmed stage version for classroom purposes.

That 1992 production was the Broadway mounted version directed by Julie Taymor. She would later direct a film of *The Tempest*, featuring Helen Mirren as Prospera, but her earlier Broadway production featured an Ariel that was created using the art of puppetry, an infamous mark of Taymor work. The actor who played Ariel was a woman, although she was dressed all in black, as is the Japanese puppetry tradition, with the hope that the body itself becomes a thing of the background and not a focal point. The puppet she carried was very simple; a plain white head that looked like a mask. The head rested on her hand with some trailing light fabric to symbolize the body.

She simply moved the mask around Prospero and the other characters, providing the voice for the character, but allowing the audience to focus on this otherworldly floating being.

Having seen clips from this version prior to my work on the role, I felt the pressure to create a character that seemed otherworldly. Although puppetry is one way of doing it, I have little to no skill in this area, and I knew that my body and the silks would be the only tools I would have to create this nonhuman character. When contemplating the difference between my Ariel and the one portrayed in Taymor's production, I realized there were more similarities than I had initially recognized. As Ariel is written, she is a slave to Prospero reminds Ariel of this, saying, "If thou more murmur'st I will rend and oak and peg thee in his knotty entrails till thou hast howled away twelve winters" (I.ii.17). In this way, Ariel can be considered the puppet, and Prospero the puppet master. Not using a hand puppet in a literal sense, I did have the opportunity to actualize the role of a magically entrapped marionette by hanging from the silks and allowing the words directed at me from Prospero to dictate my movement, and the amount of knots and tension that held my physical being up above Prospero, who usually stood below with her magical staff and powerful enchanting commands.

Rehearsal

The day after I landed back in the United States after my first trip to Italy, we had our first rehearsal with director Rinda Frye. Although I had done some prep work with the script during my summer and traveling, jet lag and exhaustion left me a little worse for wear, and I struggled as we began Dr. Frye's notorious rehearsal practice of dropping

in, a method that she learned from Dennis Krausnick at Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, MA. It is a method that involves an investigation of each line's subtext, a few words at a time. A very tedious and time-consuming method, it takes place when the actor sits in Alexander technique, a method of carrying and moving your body that uses the least amount of physical and mental tension possible. The sitting position is supposedly comfortable and economical, although some of my cohorts might disagree, especially after half an hour has passed. Behind each actor is a reader, who whispers a few words of the script to you at a time, and then a possible subtext to consider. The actor, without repeating the subtexts, takes in the meaning and intention behind the line that was fed to him or her, and then repeats it back to the reader or the actor sitting opposite them. An actor may spend a whole minute repeating the same phrase and thinking about it in different contexts.

When we began rehearsing during August, we only had a few actors available, as the semester had not yet begun. With these actors we began our work dropping in, and four rehearsals later we had made it through only the first major scene. Of course, Act 1 Scene 2 is the longest scene in the entire script, covering pages and pages of exposition. Even so, it was a lesson in patience, as it had already felt like a century of table work at that point.

Dropping in is a really painful process for me, for several reasons. First of all, it is extremely time consuming and during that time you are expected to sit completely still and stare into someone's eyes while maintaining complete focus. This is difficult for me particularly because I have a very hard time sitting still. I know that excuse is reserved for third graders, but I get very anxious and full of pent up energy when asked to sit still.

Not only is your movement monitored, but also your breath and how you choose to breathe. In Dr. Frye's case, she is fairly lenient, only reminding you every once in a while to watch your posture and your breathing. However, at our second rehearsal we had a guest director in Rinda's absence. She kept her hand on your stomach the whole time and stopped you whenever she noticed you closing your lips, breathing through your nose, or taking too deep a breath. That kind of focus on me while I'm expected to think about my character and the motivation behind my lines actually has the opposite effect on me. It makes me feel uncomfortable, tense, and like I am in a horrible suffocating trap. All I can focus on is the pain and the dizziness and the lack of relief anywhere in sight, because this process with her went two hours without a break. The whole experience was utterly exhausting and frustrating.

Now, I try to find the positive in all theories and processes. And although I don't believe this particular process of dropping in works for me, I do think there are some benefits. In the case of *The Tempest*, I think I can relate this experience of dropping in to my character's circumstances. Ariel is trapped, as she has been in several periods of her life, living as a slave for two different masters, and then in the literal sense of being trapped inside a tree for twelve years. I, Ashley, have never really been trapped. And the dropping in process can't really be considered a real trap, as I can stand up and walk out if I so choose (never mind the consequences). But I think emotionally I can at least use the experience of feeling trapped to try to tap into some of the possible feelings of Ariel through my experience in that chair.

During the dropping in process I tried to be open and allow myself to think about the character as I had never thought about Ariel before. During this exploration, I thought

about Ariel's gender as I had never considered it before. After rehearsals I would do some process journaling about the discoveries, and this is an excerpt where I was battling with my confusion over how to treat Ariel's gender:

As of right now we are keeping the text the same in calling Ariel a he. I'm hoping this is not too confusing for the audience, as I will be wearing a unitard, and although I am not the most curvaceous woman, it will probably accentuate my femininity. In every other way, I plan on treating Ariel as an ambiguous gender. As he is a spirit, who can really say he has a definable gender anyway? Not to relate Ariel to God, but I think the situation is similar, with a figure that is not human. God has been given the pronoun of "He," but I think that is the default pronoun mankind has assigned to describe something they don't understand.

This proves difficult, as I am a girl and performing on silks require some gracefulness. And although I'm not terribly graceful to start with, I will try, and this could prove confusing for the audience. In our first rehearsal of impulse blocking, my first note was, "don't be so girly." And I tried. But it's hard to be an ethereal spirit and be masculine at the same time. Perhaps this challenge is where my movement training comes into play, as I will have to be physically malleable to the requirements of this non-gendered character.

Although dropping in seemed to be tedious and pointless at times, I was able to do a lot of my in-depth character analysis early on so that when it was time to start utilizing the silks in rehearsal, I didn't have to think about Ariel's gender, her relationships to the people around her, or the history and back story that took place before the story began. And it's a good thing that I didn't have to focus on those aspects, because adding in the aerial acrobatics was an incredibly challenging experience and much harder than I expected it to be.

I began training in aerial acrobatics in April 2012, so when *Tempest* rehearsals began I had only been training for about 15 months. And for someone who does not have a background in gymnastics, dancing, or really any lyric form of physical fitness, being prepared was no easy feat. I had spent all summer trying to become strong enough for when rehearsals were to begin. I was in the circus gym 3-5 times a week, conditioning and consulting with friends and instructors about which moves would be visually interesting, yet easy to sustain.

However, during my month in Italy I went through climbing withdrawal, and despite the exhausting workshops and the miles walked everyday, I worried that I would return with diminished ability. Once we finally started working with the silks in rehearsal, the muscle memory kicked in, and I was able to do all of the learned moves. Although I do not believe I lost much upper body strength, it may have been the case that I did not have enough to begin with. I struggled being able to repeat sequences over and over, trying to keep up with the rest of rehearsal. Many times would I panic and think that I had signed onto something I wasn't capable of delivering.

On the first day that we incorporated the silks into rehearsal, August 22nd, I was less than pleased with the result. Despite all the preparation I thought I had done, climbing silks and performing tricks while playing Ariel and saying lines proved to be nearly impossible. The physical exertion added to the nerves of doing it for the first time made my heart beat faster than normal. The words flew out of my head and I ran out of breath almost immediately. Up until that point I had never practiced speaking and climbing at the same time.

The second run-through on the same day went slightly better. I was able to stay up in the air longer and call for line less. However, there was a lot of work to be done. My stamina needed to improve greatly, I needed to have greater breath control, and I needed to become comfortable performing the tricks in front of an audience. I comforted myself by thinking that maybe frequent practice and run-throughs would help to solve all three issues. I began to increase my silks workouts, running lines over and over again while climbing, as well as increasing my cardio workouts when I couldn't be around the silks.

August 26th was the second time we ran through Act 1, Scene 2 while incorporating silks. The first time through I was very happy with the results. I was able to achieve more while saying the lines, only coming down to the ground once. My strength, both physical and of voice, was far better than the first time around. However, when we did the same scene fifteen minutes later, almost all of this strength was gone. Halfway through the scene I found that I couldn't breathe. Reese, a fellow actor who played Ferdinand, kept trying to give me the line so I could continue, but I knew the line already. I merely could not say it for lack of breath. I had to climb down and finish the rest of the scene from the ground. This was extremely frustrating, and I was embarrassed about

failing in front of everyone in rehearsal, which has always been a weakness of mine; I always strive to be perfect.

Even a week later I had come to that point of utter discouragement. Three weeks into rehearsal and I was getting no better at climbing and speaking at the same time. Forget about acting, just breathing was nearly impossible. I started receiving acting notes, naturally, as acting should have been my main job and the director's priority. Emotionally I could hardly process it. Dr. Frye's main note was to change how I was saying all of the lines, to take out all the lyricism and emotion and to only speak to Prospero with pure curious intelligence. Unfortunately, having performed this role before, it was really difficult to totally change up the rhythm. When I was climbing and exerting all of my physical energy, it was extremely difficult to focus on how I was saying the words, and I fell into old patterns of speaking. I hardly noticed the inflection, as it seemed to be secondary to the way my body was moving. Also, I was finding it counterintuitive to remain physically lyrical, while speaking in a stoic manner.

All of the acrobatic frustration aside, I realized that I had a different interpretation of the character than the director. Being a student who would like to get a good report, I would, of course, fall into her interpretation. It was clear to me that the director, having directed *The Tempest* several times before, had a clear idea of what Ariel should and should not be. I could tell from her direction that she was trying to model me after a previous Ariel she had worked with; an actor who was clearly a man. As I had agreed to deliver (or attempt to deliver) Ariel as ambiguous of gender, I tried to do my best to deliver such a character. However, my own body, physical ability, and way of thinking were a hindrance to this endeavor, and one that proved difficult to overcome, especially

considering my own streak of stubbornness. Despite my reluctance, it was important that I make clear and decisive choices on the physical life of the character, whether I agreed or not. I wanted the character of Ariel and her objectives to be clear and accessible for the audience, who may not have a preconceived notion of what kind of being Ariel might be.

A big strike to the ego came when one evening, after continuing to struggle with Act 1 Scene 2, we decided to eliminate my strenuous entrance, which required me to hide inside a silk cocoon for the first 15 minutes of the show before climbing out into the scene. We also eliminated several of the complicated moves during my speeches, limiting the shift in poses for in-between large sections of lines. My breathlessness had become too much of an issue and we decided that it was more important that the lines be understood and that I make it through the whole scene than to try to do too much on the silks.

Although I understood and agreed that this was necessary, at first it was very disappointing to have to omit some of the things I had planned and hoped to do. It felt like failure, and that all the prep work and training I had done was for naught. I was also a little embarrassed, as the complications and strength issues made it seem as though I didn't know my lines or how to execute the various moves. But in the end I had to put my pride aside and choreograph the scene again in a way that could be cleanly executed and repeated from night to night. After all was said and done, the silks work was fairly impressive and engaging for the audience, even if I wasn't able to show off the full gamut. The story became more important than the spectacle at that point, and as a theatre practitioner I supported this decision. This section of the script is so important for the

audience's understanding of the play, as it is filled with exposition. Ariel's role at this moment is the role of the messenger, and if the spectacle were muddy and clumsy, it would detract from the overall purpose of the scene. There is a fine line between engaging and distracting, and the decision to simplify the amount of spectacle ultimately helped us avoid the latter.

As we approached tech week, I began to solidify the blocking and choreography, and was finally able to meld this choreography with the lines and character development required. Although it needed a lot of cleaning up, I was able to string the scenes together and survive through the show run-throughs. My stamina had reached a level it had never reached before, but unfortunately my strength was wavering. Every inch of my body was being over-worked. I could feel it in my back and my elbows, and I was feeling soreness even when I wasn't moving. No amount of Ibuprofen could put off the inevitable: my body's refusal to work properly. It was at this point that the director decided that instead of having Ariel sing three songs from off stage, she would prefer to have me sing from up in the air. This added some extra climbs and the strenuousness of trying to sing in key while supporting myself 16 feet up. As you can see in the photo of this move, the challenge is to look relaxed and restful despite the restraining wrap, and although it was not comfortable to sing and sit above Ferdinand in this fashion, I ultimately agree with the director's choice. The visual gave a magical affect and really reiterated for the audience what a oddity this island is for foreigners like the King's son, Ferdinand.



We reached the day of dry tech, the day when technicians get to slowly add in all of the elements that they have been working on without actors present. Typically these days require two run-throughs; the slow addition of the actors into the picture as they focus lights and time out sound cues, and then a full run through to see how the technical elements work in time with the actual performance. I was able to hang in there (literally) for the cue-to-cue, as they moved between one light change to another. I tried to go easy on myself; not exerting any unnecessary energy, as I knew it would be a long day. Everyone seemed to be very understanding, and the lighting designer, Michael Hottois, did his best to work around me and not keep me holding a pose too long. Even so, there were several moments when I found myself hanging upside down in wraps while they discussed a light change or a sound cue, and as the other actors figured out where they should be to place themselves in the right light.

After making it through the initial tech run, the cast and crew took a break for nearly an hour and a half. Everyone began to devour the pizza that was ordered. I nibbled a little, but mostly took the time to rest my muscles and blow my nose. All during the rehearsal process I had to be really careful about what I ate and when I ate it. Not only did eating a big meal weigh me down and make me feel sluggish, but it would also make me feel nauseous when doing so much physical activity, quick drops and hanging upside down. I had to schedule my eating so that I would have the energy required of me, but not have much in my stomach when it came time to work. I would often eat a large protein filled breakfast, a light lunch around noon, and then stop eating in the hopes that I would have an empty belly come rehearsal time. The challenge, then, was to not devour the whole world when rehearsal was over at 10:30 at night, but instead only eat a small snack of nuts or fruit.

In addition to this physical dilemma caused by the natural activity of eating, I was beginning to become very sick. I am prone to sinus infections during the changing of seasons, and with the exhaustion from workouts and rehearsal, my immune system had weakened. By tech rehearsal I had a full-fledged sinus infection, with a mass of disgusting matter in both my chest and head cavities, which shifted every time I moved. This made hanging upside down very painful and disorienting, and the shift in my head really affected my equilibrium and thus my balance. By the time tech rehearsal arrived, I was on strong antibiotics, which messed with my stomach and often had me running to the bathroom. Disgusting, yes, but a serious matter that really affected me in rehearsals as I prepared for this thesis role that seemed to have taken over my life and my mind.

When we returned to rehearsal to prepare for a second run through with all of the technical elements at play, I began to feel a little nervous. I was so sore and worried about being able to complete some of the more strenuous drops. Little did I know the extent of the actual problem. Within the first fifteen minutes, during the Act 1 Scene 2, I was struggling immensely, each crawl up the silks more painful than the last. And then suddenly I heard the stage manager call “Hold!” and everyone stopped so the lighting designer could make a quick adjustment. I was sitting in a move called the “lounge seat,” and although it is meant to look like you are lounging effortlessly, in fact you are balancing yourself with your arms while your legs are wrapped and squeezed near your crotch. About 30 seconds into this little break, I lost all feeling in my fingers, and everything below the elbows fell asleep with a horrifying tingling feeling. They called to continue the run, and the lights fell on me as I was signaled to begin a song. I began singing, but the pain and the fear made my voice quiver, tears well, and then the words flew out of my head. Since I couldn’t feel the silks between my fingers, I lost my balance and slipped, catching myself around the forearm. I was able to safely bailout and dismount, but the exhaustion and the scare attacked me at once and I finished the song from the ground, half singing and half sobbing before exiting the scene.

Tia Davis, a fellow cast mate who played one of the goddesses, came to my side stage right, rubbing my forearms and comforting me as the panic subsided. I was embarrassed near to death and was determined to climb back up, but she played mom and told the director I would need to do the rest of the run while standing on the ground. So many emotions ran through me that day; fear, anger, embarrassment, and an intense

worry. Would I be ready when the show opened in four days? Would I be able to sustain the last day of performances, when both a matinee and evening show were scheduled?

I was extremely fearful that something like that complete physical breakdown would happen during the run of the show. However, despite an immense amount of pain and muscle fatigue, never once did I have to come down early from the silks. I was able to execute every move, and as I became more comfortable with performing for new audiences, the climbs and poses became more fluid and less nerve-wracking. The one instance when I fumbled happened during opening night, when we were still sorting out some blocking issues during the big storm scene. The way that it was staged, the King's company and the master of the ship try to navigate Prospera's tempest. The nobleman, not having the sea legs that the sailors possessed, were blocked to stumble back and forth between far stage right and left. Meanwhile, as Ariel I used the silks to create the illusions of sails being whipped around by massive gusts of wind. At one point I was to jump on the silks and swing from up stage and downstage. This topography pattern almost made two pendulums crossing each other's paths, and unfortunately on that first night it was not timed correctly. I swerved, missing the other actors, but slamming into the side of the set. I was able to maintain my grip and not fall, but the audience gasped, and I imagine that incident made them a little nervous as the rest of the show went on. I was asking myself if I would be able to maintain control, and I can only guess they were asking the same thing.

After that first day there were no mistakes made, at least not noticeable ones. I was very concerned that when doing two shows on the final Sunday, my muscles would give out and I wouldn't be able to perform after the matinee. Thankfully, with the aid of

icepacks, ibuprofen and Icy Hot, I was able to make it through. In fact, with it being the last show, my energy was extremely high, knowing that a rest was close at hand. It was most like just mental, but I felt less pain and struggle during that last show than I had on the first evening of performance.

Oftentimes people ask actors if they get nervous when performing in front of an audience. A little nervous energy is a positive thing for an actor, since it keeps you focused and on your toes. However, I rarely get very anxious before performing a show. Having been performing for more than half of my life, I've gotten pretty comfortable onstage. Occasionally I get a few jitters when prepping in the dressing room before an opening night, but that anxiety is always relieved in the first few minutes onstage. In the case of *The Tempest*, I was a nervous wreck. Not just before the show, but all the way until I took my bow during curtain call. I was always concerned about whether or not my body would make it through the whole show, wondering if I would fall or forget all of my lines midair. Even on the last show, after having prepped for six weeks and performing in five shows, I was still jittery, requiring lots of physical warm-ups and moments alone to cultivate the focus that each show required. I never forgot lines or fell from the silks, and I believe I was able to stay in character throughout the entire run. None of my reviews were comments about my nerves, but nonetheless, I have never experience the anxiety that came along with adding such a physically demanding aspect to a performance. As my goal for the whole production was to use my physical strength and flexibility to make the text of Shakespeare more accessible to the audience, I was constantly worried that any misstep might distract or take them out of the world of the play. Thus an intense

amount of focus was required at every moment, even more so than other Shakespearean performances I had been a part of in the past.

CHAPTER 5: LESSONS APPLIED MOVING FORWARD

Third Ariel: Repertory Company

At the University of Louisville we have a company within the Theatre Arts Department called the Louisville Repertory Company. This company of four graduate students travels throughout Jefferson County performing for elementary and middle school aged children in the public school system. As a part of this company I meet assistantship requirements to earn my tuition and stipend as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. The company puts on two shows and performs whichever show the school books, so it switches up from day to day. Because the company is so small, often the actors play multiple roles, changing costumes in front of the audience. It is a low budget, low production company, traveling with only enough props and costumes to fill a single car trunk.

Because of the low production values, it is important to add physical dynamics that provide the shows with spectacle. The costumes are minimal, the set being only but a few chairs, and neither really creating the environment of the world of the play. During the rehearsals for the mainstage production of *The Tempest*, we were also rehearsing in the morning for the two traveling shows. I went into rehearsal for the two productions knowing the importance of physical specificity, and already having a focus and agility in my body from each rehearsal the night before. This was to my benefit, as I was prepared

to create the physical gestures, walks, and carriage of each character to give a distinct visual image that the audience could identify when they entered the stage.

This is my first year as a member of the Rep Company. In fact, it is the first year for each member, as none of the previous members were retained. We have two shows that we tour alternatively: *The Magic Tree*, which is a Yoruba folk tale by one of our professors, Nefertiti Burton, and then an abridged version of *The Tempest*. Touring Shakespeare is not a common practice for the company, and when I heard that this was happening, I thought that it would be a pretty exciting idea. The director of our main stage version of the script would also edit it down to an hour-long piece that our group of four actors would be able to do. This meant each actor playing three characters. As it was originally cast, I would reprise the role of Ariel, while also playing Alonso the King and Stephano the drunken butler.

At the time, months before going into the actual rehearsal process for either show, this seemed like a great idea. I thought it would be easy because I would have already played Ariel and have a good grasp on the character. In retrospect, that was naïve, as line cuts made it difficult and I was constantly saying lines that were not in the new script. Not to mention that, although Rinda Frye had a hand in the rewriting of the Rep Company script, there was a completely different director brought in from a local professional company, Stage One, who had his own take on the story as well as the characters. We also had a different costume designer, which surprisingly affected my character development a lot.

When I first got the script and began highlighting the lines of all of my characters, I realized that the composition of the script itself would require a lot of stamina for the

actors. Playing three characters meant that transitions were constant and there would be very little time when an actor would be off stage. This also meant that I as an actor needed to develop very distinct physical and vocal differences between my characters so that the audience could follow the shift as well and not be confused as to which character I was portraying.

Fortunately when the director came in he decided that the show was going to run long, over an hour, and three different story lines and sets of characters would prove too confusing for the intended young audience. Thus he decided to simplify the script even more and make it so that each actor was only switching between two characters. He got rid of the character Alonso for me, which I was fine with because he is the least interesting of my three characters, and has fewer qualities for a character actor to pull from to create a fun character for young audiences.

After that was out of the way I had a much easier time of developing Ariel and Stephano. During our first few rehearsals we spent time doing exercises to figure out how our characters walked and held themselves, trying to find distinct differences between all of them. Because each of the actors was playing multiple characters, we were concerned that the audience would see us as the actor, instead of two very different characters. The attention to the physical differences and change in tempo or rhythm of the characters allowed us to create the muscle memory required when moving between characters. Stephano was immensely fun to create, as he is a very comical and clown-like character. He is also always under the influence, which consequently influences the way he saunters around the stage and slurs his speech. In the past when I have been given the task of playing a man, it has always been a frustrating experience for me, as I am clearly not a

man. But creating this drunken character was not too difficult because it is suppose to be comedy. Although I deepened my voice and tried to give the illusion that I was male bodied, the comedy of it negated the need to really convince the audience that I was a man. When playing Ariel in the mainstage production, I tried to lower my voice into a deeper register and take out all of the feminine qualities in my movement, and I was concerned with it coming out comical, because gender in that case was not a joke. Rather, I wanted it to go unnoticed altogether. When playing Stephano in the Repertory Company I was able to drop that concern and play on the fact that I was a woman pretending to be a drunken braggart of a man.

As opposed to the mainstage version in which I left Ariel's gender ambiguous, the Repertory Company's Ariel was decidedly female. This helped a lot in creating a clearer distinction between the two characters I was playing. This also allowed me the opportunity to create a character more in line with the nymph-like fairy that the script seems to indicate. By playing on a more popular and common version of the character, I think I made it easier for a younger audience to understand and connect with Ariel. If I had left Ariel without gender and created an all-new interpretation of a non-human being, I think the students would have been very lost when trying to follow an already confusing story.

Since the company travels to many different venues, most of them being elementary school cafeterias, it would have been impossible to incorporate silks into this version of the show. This factor was key in changing up the physical life of Ariel, as now she was limited to the ground. This however did not change the mission of Shakespeare's most magical fairytale, as it was still up to me to create an enchanting and otherworldly

spectacle with my own body. At first I felt lost without the silks, but then I realized I just needed to explore some of the same creative processes I had done before, making dynamic physical choices that involved my whole body.

From the very beginning of the rehearsal process the director, Andrew Harris, and I began discussions as to which natural element Ariel was most made of. We agreed that Ariel contained parts of all of the elements (earth, water, air and fire) but that she probably leaned towards one in particular. In the mainstage version I had settled on air as Ariel's most prominent element, as the silks allowed me to inhabit in the air, making it the most logical choice.

However, in this version I did not have the luxury of being in the air. Unfortunately I was very grounded, and I had costuming that required me to be pulled towards the earth. It is a heavy piece that is thrown on quickly between scenes, with draping long fabric that cascades from an oversized sweater and complicated headpiece. The comment was made during the company's costume parade that I looked twenty pounds heavier when I donned that Ariel uniform. And I felt heavier and more grounded and less graceful and less coordinated in this billowing and suffocating piece. It looked cool and ethereal, but it really inhibited any physical freedom, the freedom I believe is required to create a visually dynamic character such as Ariel.

I wanted to counter this as much as possible because my fear was that if I were to make Ariel's dominant element the earth, her physical life would too much resemble that of Caliban's, the mutant and barbaric man also enslaved by Prospera. So for this production I chose to focus on the water. Although grounded, I could use the fabric and a movement of counter tension in my thighs to create the undulating illusion of waves.

While I traveled I could grab hold of the fabric and toss it about as though water were being thrown about an island. And at times that might usually be moments of stillness, I would plant my feet while the rest of my body would slowly ebb back and forth, giving the illusion that Ariel was a body of water that even in its calmest moments was still shifting and changing.

Overall I would say the production was moderately successful, telling an interesting story with many characters that were each individually dynamic and creative. I think this version of Ariel is one that drives the production, because her physical life is one that is energetic and constantly moving, which is a contrast to some of the more somber and human like characters such as Prospera. I think as a company we created a piece that moves well and is visually interesting, but unfortunately the production is not successful in the fact that our younger audience cannot follow the language of the piece, and is solely entertained by the fast moving scene changes and sweaty frenetic actors that they see on stage, and not necessarily by the story itself.

Brechtian Theory Applied

Despite having several months between me and the performances of *The Tempest*, I am constantly coming back to the production and the methods that I used, and I continue to think about alternative choices and things that I could have done differently. Brechtian theory was not one that I explored during this process, although it might have been one to serve the role well. This approach would have been a more stylistic one, one that the director and I never discussed, but for the sake of argument, let us imagine that the cast and production team had decided to go the Brecht route.

As an actor I would have viewed Ariel as a type, not just a character. “ The Brechtian actor represents more than the self of the character. It was Brecht’s contention that Gestus, when properly applied, would enable an audience to understand both the story of the play and its implications...”(Thomson, 127) This type would probably be that of a slave, or a person in an losing an intense power struggle. I think that Caliban and Ariel together would represent two very different types of slaves, with Caliban being the more resistant, while Ariel falls into his role with quiet resentment. If I were to apply these types with social and political commentary, the play itself would become more about a class struggle rather than the classic interpretation of revenge.

Stylistically I would choose to be less fluid and not try to hide the pain and mechanical nature of the silks. Also, I imagine the set designer would have lowered the rigging, allowing the audience to see the silks hardware. Together with the designer, I would make the role of Ariel more of a machine, and much less magical and mysterious. There would be no illusion, and the audience and actor would have a clearer agreement as to the presentation of a “magical spirit.” By doing this, I believe I would be emphasizing what Brecht considered a “double agency of actor and character.” (Thomson, 127)

Although I was not going for a Brechtian approach, though my research since the production I have noticed that there could have been some great opportunities for some of his methods. First, Brecht believed that there should be a “presentational style of the actor who may at any moment sing.” Well, it just so happens that Shakespeare originally wrote for a presentational style, and Ariel often does break out into song. It would be interesting to do this production again and explore taking the performance further into these directions and to play around with the sense of always being close to a musical moment.

Another Brechtian concept that would have been fun to play with is “speaking in the third person (sometimes augmented by speaking the stage directions).” (Thomson, 128) Although I am not a huge proponent of changing the text of Shakespeare, it would have been fun to play around with this, even if just in performance. Ariel already refers to himself in the third person a couple of times. One of his first lines is “To thy strong bidding task, Ariel, and all his qualities.” I think it would be interesting if Ariel spoke in the third person, not only to acknowledge that I am the actor and not the character, but also to explore the idea that Ariel, a spirit, has an identity that is created by his master.

If I ever get a fourth opportunity to play this role, I would love to explore it through the theories of Brecht. Learning about his techniques and methods has made me very interested in experimenting with the use of song, actor/character duality, and the idea of circumstance over the importance of character. I think that there is definitely an audience for epic theatre in the contemporary arts scene, and having worked on this particular character and script several times, I would be interested in spicing it up with a method completely different than the ones I’ve used in the past.

Of all three versions of Ariel that I have played, the aerial Ariel was the most physically exhausting Ariel, requiring the most strength, stamina, skill and discipline. That makes that Ariel the most interesting and awe inspiring Ariel for the audiences. However, I believe that each Ariel that I have created in the three productions was successful mostly because of the physical exertion that each of them required and exhibited, on one level or another. This physical quality set this nonhuman character apart from all of the other characters in the story, putting Ariel at the very least on the same level of an entertainment spectrum as the clowns.

When during the tech run of the University of Louisville's mainstage production I heard the light operator say "holy dialogue, batman," I realized that *The Tempest* contains a lot of dialogue and exposition that can put the audience to sleep, and it is imperative to put in as much visually stimulating and energetic moments as possible to keep the audience interested and on their toes. The clowns obviously serve this purpose, but it made for a more interesting and successful production to also utilize Ariel in this way, whether you put him on silks or merely create an extensive physical life that sets him apart from the more heady, philosophical human characters.

Strength and Stamina as a Dog

Since the mainstage production of *The Tempest* closed, I have found it to be much easier for me as an actor to discover the physical life of each character I work on regardless of the show. It has become second nature to use my whole body as a tool I can use to engage the audience without throwing away other important aspects of the character, the world of the play, and the style that the director chooses. The following semester I had the chance to perform the title role in *Sylvia* by A.R. Gurney. This play is a comedy that focuses on a marriage between a middle-aged couple, and it is mostly presented in the style of realism. However, *Sylvia* is the family dog that causes the rift between the couple, as the husband spends all his time with the stray dog that he has taken in, and the wife struggles to maintain the intimacy and partnership they once had.

This role gave me the opportunity to put some of the skills I had acquired during my thesis role into play, and allowed me to explore and create a complete physicality of a character without acrobatics. *Sylvia* is addressed as a dog and talked about as a dog

between the couple, but she is dressed like a woman and carries on intelligent and insightful conversations with Greg, the husband. It was my job to establish an energy and a collection of physical nuances that would constantly remind the audience that Sylvia is a dog and not “the other woman,” as that could sometimes be confusing. Being a dog owner myself, I had my miniature schnauzer, Rupert, to use as a character study. This made it somewhat easier than creating a non-human, otherworldly character.

Much like I had done with Ariel, I established how the character walked, carried herself through space, reacted to her surroundings, and approached other characters. Obviously Sylvia was very different from Ariel in many ways. Where Ariel was stoic and majestic in her stillness, Sylvia was constantly in motion. Despite being opposite qualities, both choices were executed with full intention and physical engagement, and allowed me to hold the audience’s attention and allow them more insight into the characters and their relationships to others. Despite the breadth of their differences, there was one physical quality that both characters had. Both Ariel and Sylvia employed the signature inquisitive head tilt. I found this to be a very animalistic trait that one might find in both a bird and a dog, and I found it useful to show quite interaction and reaction whenever either character was without text. Having had a lot of practice during *The Tempest*, it was fairly easy and fun when it came time to explore space as Sylvia. First in terms of inhabiting various areas on stage (jumping on furniture and rolling across the living room rug.) It also felt like I had an easier time being intuitive in terms of Sylvia’s spatial relationships, to both her beloved owner, Greg, and the threatening wife, Kate.

After one of the Sylvia performances, a reporter approached me from the university newspaper. She had several questions, but mostly she was curious as to which

character was more difficult, Ariel or Sylvia. I had to think about it for a second, and told her that Ariel was certainly exhausting because of all of the physical exertion and heavy lifting involved. However, Sylvia was certainly a close second, as it required a different kind of exertion, an explosion of energy and fast tempo that was required whenever Sylvia busted through the door or chased down a stray cat.

My role in *The Tempest* was good preparation for the latter show, as I had learned how to pace myself, conserve energy, and also reach into the depths to pull out energy and physical exertion when it seemed I couldn't keep going. I think that I will carry these important tools going forward as I continue to attempt roles that require full body engagement and lots of energy paired with control. It is certainly a difficult balance to find, but my experience employing aerial acrobatics into Shakespeare was excellent preparation. I hope for more opportunities to create physically enticing characters in Shakespeare in particular, as I find it important for theatre artists today to find ways to that pull in new audiences while enhancing the richness of the text that is already there. Being simply a talking head overindulging in the text and the sound of my own voice is no longer an option, as I have seen the captivated audiences and the visceral responses that come from a more physical execution of performance, one that uses strength and stamina in order to challenge the way the audience thinks of character and the world presented to them.

Conclusion

As I recap on the experience of preparing for such a physical role with the goal of creating interesting spectacle, I realize what an important role my athletic background

and early education played in a successful performance. Those early challenges of becoming comfortable in my own body and learning how to communicate with the tools that I had were really the foundation for later exploration that solidified my fascination and interest in physical theatre. The connection that I made to the works of Shakespeare when I was a member of the Globe Players sparked a long lasting relationship to the master writer. This passion would later form as a desire to challenge some of the methods seen in stagnant classical performances that many young audiences are subject to. I also attribute my desire to create visually stimulating and awe inspiring theatre to my early exposure to a broad range of theatrical styles during both my high school years and my time at the University of Kentucky.

It was during my time working on the stage professionally that I learned that maintaining one's strength and stamina offstage would improve my work maintaining energy and creating visually stimulating characters for any piece, be it for theatre for young audiences, stylized performances, and even realism. Once I arrived to graduate school I realized I would need to up my game and develop skills in order to surpass and stand out amongst my academic and professional peers. Aerial acrobatics filled that space for me, teaching me how to be aware and access every part of my body, and the many ways to integrate athleticism to theatrical expression. I was able to transfer the love I found in physical health and aerial acrobatics to the methods being practiced in the classroom, as we explored LeCoq, commedia, and other forms of physical theatre. The training in both acrobatics and physical theatre has consequently supported each other, allowing faster growth in both areas.

Although I am a performer who likes to discover the role and the character's relationships to others by physically experimenting and trying new tactics and dynamics, it was very helpful during *The Tempest* rehearsals to have theory to fall back on and to guide me with different options. Using Stanislavski's system helped to jump start my imagination, which helped me create a character of fantasy despite my very human-like existence. Once my imagination was at play I was able to communicate that physically to create an engaging performance that supported the text. Both Laban and Mary Overlie's theories provided me with the tools of dynamics, and by having the concepts of viewpoints and the efforts to play with, I was able to create spectacle and movement that was engaging and constantly changing. Tadashi Suzuki's methods really aided me when it came time to the physical demands of combining Shakespeare and acrobatics. With my knowledge of Suzuki's methods of centering, breath support, and pulling energy from the feet up, I was able to work through my exhaustion and fatigue.

Despite the difficulties of choreographing and executing my first silks performance and my thesis role simultaneously, my previous training was key in the success of *The Tempest*. I am a strong believer in the idea that theatre is not only a fun and creative venture, but also a discipline, and when you put in the work to develop your physical tool along with your voice, the full package is a more appealing end product for the audience. The added thrills brought on by the aerial silks element of the production as well as the support they provided for the lines and the character of Ariel helped to cultivate a more engaged audience. They were able to see a different side of Shakespeare, and this experience will hopefully bring them back to the theatre wanting more.

I feel extremely lucky to have had the opportunity to combine two of my theatrical loves, Shakespeare and aerial arts. Despite the occasional feeling of being thrown to the wolves, the creative processes, physical and emotional strength that were drawn out of me during preparation and performance has proven to me that great theatre can be made when you take big risks. The audience appreciates risks, loves to be shocked into awe, and even more so loves performances that make them look at the world and the arts in a different way. My role as Ariel in *The Tempest* was a perfect example of how strength and stamina used during a Shakespearean performance can bring a fresh perspective to the poetic beauty that is already there. I would encourage any young theatre artist who is interested in performing, directing or producing plays for today's audiences to consider some of the methods found in physical theatre as a way of making any production stronger and more accessible.

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Christmas Belles	Gina Jo	Kentucky Repertory Theatre	Robert Brock
Dracula	Sarah	Kentucky Repertory Theatre	Robert Brock
Sylvia	Sylvia	University of Louisville	Daniel Hill
The Tempest	Ariel	Stage One/Co Pro UL	Andrew Harris
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