

Fall 12-15-2012

Pigments of Imagination: An Actor's Journey of Creating the Character of Jack Lawson from David Mamet's *Race*

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Pigments of Imagination: An Actor's Journey of Creating the Character of Jack Lawson from
David Mamet's *Race*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In
Film, Theatre, Communication Arts
Theatre Performance

by

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December 2012

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Sam Malone

Arianna Newman

Sarah Chatelain

Diane Baas

Kevin Griffith

Anthonkya Ferinand

Mignon Charvet

Tim O'Neal

Shane Doty

Lakefront Players

Rick Burroughs

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to create a believable, multiple dimension character portrayal of Jack Lawson in David Mamet's *Race*. Documentation of the process will include: an explanation of the acting technique and analysis used to create the backstory and portrayal of the character; insight into the background and beliefs of playwright, David Mamet; and a personal review of my growth and performance.

Keywords: David Mamet; Race; Journal; Stanislavski; Jack

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Pigments of Imagination: An Actor's journey of creating the character of Jack Lawson from
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“All drama is about lies”. This quote by David Mamet is a reminder that theatre is often the true mirror of life. The fabric of society today is knitted together by the thread of lies- the lies we tell each other, and the lies we tell ourselves. Children are taught during their formative years to never lie, unless it is a “white” lie used to spare someone’s feelings. Little do parents know, by using terminology such as this, they are teaching children to pigment their minds with two very different colors. White lies versus black lies, black magic versus white magic, winding up on the blacklist and so on make a distinction to each forthcoming generation that white is somehow good, and black is somehow bad. Modern psychology teaches that each individual is a product of their environment, in that, their thoughts and behaviors are shaped by those surrounding them. Additionally, once these thoughts and behaviors are formed, they are so programmed into our dogma, it is almost impossible to change because of failure to realize there is a problem. The problem is usually fear. The pigments that color our grey matter get a deep hold and much like our immune systems fight off what they see as an unhealthy attack. Many people in our society suffer physical pain due to an overactive immune system. There are several different varieties of these auto-immune diseases but one trait of these various disorders is shared by all. They cause the body to attack and slowly destroy itself. There is no cure for these disorders. The only treatment option is to use suppressant therapy to slow the suffering caused by the disease until it terminates itself when the host dies. Sadly, America, who boasts the slogan- “together we stand, united we fall”, suffers from an attack on itself to which there seems to be no remedy, except for the same treatment as that of auto immune disorders. However, one has to remember that suppressing a disorder doesn’t mean it goes away, it means just that- it is only suppressed. And

unfortunately, it seems our country is making very slow progression in their curative measures. Jack Lawson, a character from David Mamet's play, *Race*, utters in the third scene that "race is the most incendiary topic in our history and once it is out it is impossible to put the lid back on it". And he could not be more right. One only needs to pick up a newspaper or watch television news to see the battles of race still very openly fought. However, as Mamet brings to our attention in *Race*, often the battlefield loaded with the most hidden dangers and most secret weapons is that of our mind. With all the different colors of crayons in the box, only the two placed the most far apart are ever at war; as one is created by the absence of, and the other is created by the full engulfment of pigmentation. Ironically, if you combine these two colors the result is a gray scale. And as any soldier knows, it is not the day or the night that is the most dangerous time to fight, but during the graying of the evening, when haze distorts vision. Determination and vision are the two ingredients necessary to win any battle. Thus, two of the most difficult and yet most important tasks for an actor are first understanding the author's vision, and then creating a character that displays that vision to the audience. The purpose of this thesis is to educate the reader about the process used to construct my perception of the Jack Lawson character and to provide insight into the playwright David Mamet's visionary background.

Chapter One

The creation of a character by an actor is a very intimate process. The basic steps are creating a character's backstory, employing Stanislavski's "magic if" and determining your actions. Once an actor has developed the backstory, it is time for him to begin discovering his actions. This can only be done by first establishing the character's objective, or what the character wants. The actions are then selected to help him achieve his goal. However, before beginning any process, one must know what it means to be an actor. Konstantin Stanislavski, who is known as the father of the system changed the course of acting forever.

On January 5, 1863, a true star came into the world. Stanislavski, born Konstantin Sergeyevich Alexeyev, began his journey to change the arts very early in life. As an actor, he was constantly observing those who felt were the greats, trying to determine what spark they all seemed to share. This observation, gave way to the birth of his now famous approach, which is the staple of all actor training. Stanislavski founded Russia's first ensemble, The Moscow Arts Theatre, in 1898. The Moscow Arts Theatre became essentially, his experimental laboratory in which he developed his approach. His ensemble would spend hours delving into the background of their characters, determining the circumstances stated in the texts, and breaking down the script by motivation of characters. Then, they would apply their own emotional connections, which would drive the action of their characters. Stanislavski created the "magic if" in hopes of helping actors bring truth to the stage, and live a moment to moment existence in the play by having them examine how they would react and feel if they were in the character's situation. This was a very important step in determining a character's action as stated in his book, *The Actor Prepares*,

If you speak any lines or do anything, mechanically without fully realizing who you are, where you came from, why, what you want, where you are going, and what you will do

when you get there, you will be action without imagination. That time, whether it is short or long, will be unreal, and you will be nothing more than a wound up machine, an automation. (p.67).

Additionally, the book documents his belief:

what happens on a stage must be for a purpose. Even keeping your seat must be for a purpose, a logical purpose, not for the general purpose of being in view of the audience.

One must earn the right to be sitting there, and it isn't easy. (p.37)

“It isn't easy”, is the biggest understatement in theatre. The best performer is not one who calls himself an actor, but instead refers to himself as a student of the theatre. Because, the art of acting is an art, if one is serious, never stops studying, and never stops learning. One common learning ground among most conservatories and university theatre arts programs is they are based on the Stanislavski method, or a technique derived from it. Throughout the years, there have been several approaches and influential people, which grew from his method. The most notable are Sanford Meisner, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Michael Chekhov, Harold Clurman, Sheryl Crawford and Uta Hagen. Clurman, Crawford, and Strasberg formed The Group Theatre in New York City in 1931. They were the groundbreaking group, which brought Stanislavski's method to America. Members of this group later formed The Actor's Studio, which brings a history of enrichment to actors. Sanford Meisner, in fact, was David Mamet's acting teacher. David Mamet, who is anything but a fan of Stanislavski, said in respect of Sanford Meisner, “he is the only acting teacher one can trust.”

However, many would not agree with Mamet's stance against Stanislavski. Sir John Gilgud, on page XII of the introduction to *The Actor Prepares*, wrote,

One can apply the Moscow Art theory, the art of living every moment of the part, to Shakespeare and the classics. But you may say, apply it to Hay Fever and it easily becomes ridiculous. I am not so sure, I am pretty certain that the actor trained in the Stanislavski school would carry a tray in a farce comedy better than any actor trained in the normal Anglo-Saxon manner.

This could well be because the Stanislavski approach requires more than imagination, as found on page sixty-six of his book,

A conscious, reasoned approach to the imagination often produces a bloodless, counterfeit, presentment of life. That will not do for the theatre. Our art demands that an actor's whole nature be actively involved that give himself up, both mind and body, to his part. He must feel the challenge to action physically as well as intellectually become the imagination, which has no substance or body can reflexively affect our physical nature and make it act. This faculty is of the greatest importance in our emotion-technique.

One important tool to accomplish this is what Stanislavski calls the circle of attention. This mental training exercise is recalled by him on page seventy-eight. He described a circle of light shining on the table in front of him, where he became aware of the props in front of him, and stated, "he immediately felt at home". The next circle of light engulfed more of the stage, and then finally the entire space. This awareness for an actor requires complete concentration, and complete commitment as,

truth on the stage is whatever we can believe in with sincerity, whether in ourselves or our colleagues. Truth cannot be separated from belief, nor belief from truth. They cannot exist without each other, and without both of them it is impossible to live your part, or create anything. Everything that happens on the stage must be convincing to the actor

himself, to his associates, and to the spectators. It must inspire belief in the possibility, in real life, or emotions, analogous to those being experienced on the stage by the actor.

Each and every moment must be saturated with a belief in the truthfulness of the emotion felt, and in the action carried out, by the actor. A sense of truth contains in itself a sense of what is untrue as well. You must have both. (p.122-123)

This process of marrying one's personal self to the character, or, in other words, employing the "magic if", is an essential skill which must be developed to properly choose actions that will be played.

If there is one thing on which David Mamet agrees with Stanislavski, it is the idea an actor must play actions. Otherwise, Mamet boldly decrees in his book, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor*,

the rest of the Method, including Stanislavski's trilogy are a lot of hog wash. Yes, the actor is undergoing something on stage, but it is beside the point to have him or her undergo the supposed trials of the character upon the stage. His challenge is not to recapitulate, to pretend to the difficulties of the written character; it is to open the mouth, and say the words bravely-adding nothing, denying nothing, and without the intent to manipulate anyone: himself, his fellows, the audience. Stanislavsky said the actor should ask, what would I do in that situation? But I say you should ask not what would I do in that situation, not what must I do to do what I would do in that situation? But you should discard the idea of the situation altogether. (p.31)

He states, "To act means to perform an action, to do something means to hold a belief." (p.68)

Mamet is also known for his opinion, that in America, we waste most of our rehearsal time.

He candidly said,

We spend our three weeks gabbing about the character and spend the last week screaming and hoping for divine intercession, and none of it is in the least useful, and none of it is work. What should happen in the rehearsal process? Two things: 1. The play should be blocked. 2. The actors would become acquainted with the actions they are going to perform. (p.72)

Mamet also feels one should not seek an M.F.A. or advanced training, as he views the only training ground as the theatre. This is in direct contrast to most modern American schools of thought, which hold closer to Stanislavski's philosophy of, "even mechanical acting cannot do without technique."(Stanislavski, 1936, p. 44) It is ironic, that David Mamet studied acting with the likes of Meisner, and makes this claim. His lack of success of appreciating the method and the work of Stanislavski, could be one of the main reasons he became a playwright, at which, it most be noted, he is wildly successful.

Chapter Two

David Mamet, born in 1947 grew up in Chicago. He had very early influences on his theatrical mind from attending plays at the Hull House. He later attended college at Goddard College in Vermont, then studied acting at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of Theatre in NY. Even though he attempted to be an actor, he found his success in playwriting and screenwriting. He has a very long list of accomplishments including teaching positions at Goddard, the Yale School of Drama, and New York University. He has received numerous awards including, most notably, the Pulitzer Prize, the American Academy Award, and the Tony Award. The key to Mamet's success is his command of the language. His dialogue has become known as a style of its own, and has been termed, "Mametspeak". He credits his father, an attorney, with his love of language. In John Lahr's, book *Show and Tell: New Yorker Profile*, he

said, “from the earliest age, one had to think, be careful about what one was going to say, and also how the other person was going to respond.”(31). His father believed communication was the key to making a living. (31)

In his essay, “Make Believe Town”, he states,

his writing influences were Lanford Wilson, Samuel Beckett, and Ernest Hemingway whose words, “tell the story, take out the good lines, and see if it works”, have stuck with him through the years. He dedicated his famous work, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, to Harold Pinter, whom he claims was a huge part of its success, and his other works. (90)

Mamet’s plays are, “noted for strong male characters, and often deal with the decline of morality in a world which has become an emotional spiritual wasteland.”(“imagination,” n.d., para. 17) In “David Mamet’s Right Turn” by Roger L. Simon, he blames this spiritual wasteland on the current and previous generation. He states,

We were self-taught in the sixties to award ourselves merit for membership in a superior group—irrespective of our group’s accomplishments. We continue to do so, irrespective of accomplishments, individual or communal, having told each other we were special. We learned that all one need do is refrain from trusting anybody over thirty; that all people are alike, and to judge their behavior was “judgmental”; that property is theft. As we did not investigate these assertions or their implications, we could not act upon them and felt no need to do so. For we were the culmination of history, superior to all those misguided who had come before, which is to say all humanity.” (Simon, 2011, para. 12)

In a December 4, 1984 interview, Matthew C. Roudane asked how he answers the charge that his plays are negative and cynical, to which Mamet replied,

“I’ve never heard that charge, so I say that’s interesting. But it’s easy to cheer people up if you lie to them. Very easy. Acting President Reagan says he’s not going to raise taxes; of course he’s going to raise taxes, he has to raise taxes. Although it’s easy to cheer people up by lying to them, in my plays I’m not interested in doing that; I’m not a doctor, I’m a writer.

One of the most intriguing things about his writing would be his male characters. On page 166 of *In American Drama Since 1960: A Critical History*, the author notes, what makes the Mamet hero so theatrically engaging concerns an invisible inner drama, a sub-textual crisis that haunts him: underneath his character’s boiled, enameled, public bravado lies a figure plagued with self doubt and insecurities.

In this statement lies the key for an actor to unlock the door to creating his Mamet character.

Chapter Three

In examining the exposition of any play, we learn many things about the characters such as their current age, their occupation, their fears, and their love interest. However, if we meet a character at the age of fifteen, there are fourteen years of missing information shaping the character into the person they are in the text. As an actor, one of the best strategies, not to necessarily determine your action, but to understand why a character would use a particular action is forming a textually based hypothesis of the character’s past. Creating the backstory of Jack Lawson stemmed from a couple of different sources, and use of the text. David Mamet believes an actor should play the subtext, and writes his male characters as being motivated by insecurity. Therefore, I began to search the text for clues of Jack’s insecurities so I might better manifest them in my performance. The dialogue lends much support on this subject. The foundational building block of his insecurity is quickly discovered. Assuming the character is

telling the truth to Susan, He grew up very poor. Very early in the play he tells Susan, “I grew up being poor and I didn’t like it”. Additionally, he asks Henry if he liked it to which Henry replies simply, “I didn’t like it either”.

According to current research, very few people are successful in breaking the poverty cycle. (NPR [NPR], 2012) This shows both Jack and Henry are very driven people, and raises the question of how long their friendship has existed. The character descriptions prescribe both being between forty and fifty years old. Additionally, during a feverous response to Susan, Jack says regarding he and Henry, “over the twenty years we have built this firm,” thereby, establishing their relationship has spanned at least twenty years.

For purposes of the backstory, I feel the relationship spans back to childhood. Considering twenty years ago, due to societal views, there were very few businesses built on mixed race partnerships, it is easy to theorize the bond between these two men must have predated their law school years. Therefore, Jack, growing up poor, most likely did so in a mixed race neighborhood, and forged a bond with Henry very early in life. This would explain his double perception of black people and why he says to Susan, “ I think black people are fragile, ...because they deal with shame.” Interestingly enough, he also says, “Jews deal with guilt, blacks deal with shame. It is just two of the ways we metabolize our feelings of inferiority.” The key word in this phrase is simply “we”. Jack is obviously not Jewish as he reveals that he is Catholic. Based on this textual information, an actor creating the role of Jack can easily support the theory of Jack growing up in a mixed neighborhood and in some small way, identifying closely with the black community, thereby, bringing an even deeper significance to the title, *Race*.

Mamet also includes in his work, references to gender and religion. In this particular play, he references Jews and Catholics. To truly grasp where the character of Jack is coming from, an actor must be knowledgeable of the long-standing disdain between Catholics and Jews, and between Blacks and Jews. The relationship between the Catholics and Jews, although it has grown better in recent years, centers on what each perceive as religious slights from the other. Religion has been the cause of many struggles in society and when it occurs, it is usually never fully rectified.

The relationship between the blacks and the Jews however, is still far from reparation. Many recall the American civil war and the issue of slavery. However, they may not realize it was the Jews who dominated the slave trade. They would capture members of the black race and trade them for things as small as molasses. Additionally, because the Jews were the leaders in trading, the trading stages were often closed on Jewish holidays. (Bilzerian, 2012)

Now, presuming Jack and Henry grew up in a mixed neighborhood such as Harlem in New York, the interaction a poor white boy, who closely identified as black, received from the surrounding Jewish community was obviously terrible. One can see how the poor in this community could easily be blamed for things they did not do, and even set up to get in trouble by others. That one is never immune to false accusations is a huge theme carried throughout the play by both Jack and Henry. Jack also states such things as: “you cannot wipe the slate clean”; “Belief cannot be controlled, one believes people are good people are bad. The appearance of belief may be induced or extorted”; “Neither side wants the truth, each wants to prevail”; “Two parties to a case, loser ever say yes I lost, but you know what? The other guy was right. No, each side thinks their right”; and “Why do you think poor people never get dragged up in the press...because it ain’t gossip.” In fact, the last quote may hold the most power as it shows that

Jack believes, as a general consensus, poor people are expected to be more prone to petty crimes than the rich.

I believe Jack learned the hard way, telling the truth when you are accused often gets you nowhere, and thus, learned to fight. Jack tells his client, Charles Strickland, who keeps declaring his innocence, “Nobody fucking cares you understand? Nobody cares!” In fact, I think the taste for justice as well as the thirst to escape poverty is what motivates Jack to become a lawyer in the first place. In court, he now holds the power over what he had no power over when he was young. The courtroom has become his battleground in which he can equally fight. Henry refers to Jack in the script as being, “an old warhorse with blood in his nose”. Again, I feel Henry is referring to Jack’s entire life instead of just his professional career. In essence, looking at Jack’s childhood, it is clearly evident he was bullied.

Bullying of a child is an experience, which, not only hurts at the moment it occurs, but affects many people for the rest of their lives. In a recent study, *The Boston Globe* examines the stories of 100 adults who were bullied as children. According to the newspaper,

common threads run through their stories: the spotlight vividness of the memories. The anger at their own failure to fight back or get revenge. A sense of lingering impairment, felt again and again in flare-ups of self-doubt, anxiety, or rage. Still burdened with shame, many would not agree to have their names published.” (Russel, 2010, p. 1-2)

All of these effects can easily be argued as apparent in Jack’s personality. He is drawn to high profile cases he feels he can win. He is smart enough to screen the cases in order to advance his firm. At one point, he tells Strickland, “I do not want you relying on our honesty.” When Strickland asked what he should rely on, Henry states “upon our desire for fortune and fame”. Also, it is discovered Jack once told Susan one can win any case, as long as they take only cases

that can be won. Often, people who have been victims of bullying develop a quest to become successful, or they may become successful by default, simply by burying themselves in something they love, in which they feel they have control. Jack's success, I feel, stems from a combination of both of these elements.

Another tragic toll bullying takes, is it often impairs the victim's ability to trust, and creates insecurity which does not allow them to form meaningful relationships. This is evident about Jack, as it is obvious he is married to his work. His only close relationships are Henry and the one forming with Susan, which is devastating to him when it unravels. The lines given to Jack at the play's end: "Did you betray me?" and "you sold us out", are extremely important. These words are not usual for an employer who has found an indiscretion among an employee. The feeling of betrayal is an emotion of sadness stemming from a feeling of closeness to another. Anger would be the typical emotion experienced by an employing lawyer who found his legal assistant had been working against him. A very matter of fact-you're fired, or you have twenty minutes to clean out your personal belongings would be what the offending employee would hear from his or her detached employer. Unlike Susan, who as a result of Jack's pain is told by him, "Get out of my sight. Get out of my sight you fucking ingrate! Get out of my sight!"

Interestingly enough, he speaks the line, "get out of my sight", three times. The exact number of times which Peter betrayed Christ before the morning broke. The same Christ who spoke to his disciple, Judas, "Must you betray me with a kiss?" Since Biblical times, betrayal by definition is the worst act one human can commit against another. The serpent betrayed Eve, Eve betrayed Adam, and Adam betrayed God. As a result, death entered the world. For a person who was bullied, the loss of one perceived friend through

betrayal, brings about a death of another small part of their very soul. This analysis is not to paint the character of Susan as a villain. She was faced with the decision of betraying Jack, or her own beliefs, which she perceives as a betrayal of herself, her race and her gender. It must be noted, Susan in essence, arrived at this spot as a result of her view of being bullied in her own way.

Another interesting aspect about Jack, is how he turns on his own advice. He tells Strickland at the very beginning of the play, “Belief, sir, hamstring the advocate, who is then anchored to the facts. I believe in the process whereby each side is permitted to engage an attorney. Does this find the truth? Neither side wants the truth, each wants to prevail.” He also tells Strickland, “I will assume that you are innocent ...Because you will be paying us to support that assumption”. However, Jack begins to believe Strickland is truly innocent. As he begins to superimpose and embellish facts to prove Strickland’s innocence, he begins to mar what is morally right with what is legally right. This ultimately is what forces Susan’s reaction, bringing about the unraveling of the relationship. The question is, why does he begin to behave in this fashion. Could it be because he truly just wants to win a prominent case? Or, is it because of a flashback to his many experiences of being accused when he was actually innocent? My choice as an actor, because I feel it is a more interesting choice, is the latter. This is an obvious fear of Jack, as he tells Susan when she confronts him about investigating her, “that the laws are such that if you hire an African American and wish to discharge that individuals, they have the potential to allege discrimination ...which allegation the court is likely to accept as proven and the accused stands guilty until proven innocent.” He goes on to use this as a matter of fact excuse for why he feels he must investigate African American Applicants with a greater rigor. The same fear surfaces again in a conversation with Henry regarding why he hired Susan. He reveals to

Henry his concern, with her background and qualifications, she would sue him if he didn't hire her. The feelings he expresses to Strickland, to Henry, and to Susan validate this as a choice for an actor's creation of his backstory.

Chapter Four

As Stanislavski suggests, an actor must connect to a character in a personal way so the two merge to create the magic of honesty on stage. I find I have very personal connections to my analysis of Jack. Since the Mamet hero is driven by self-doubt and insecurities, as documented earlier in this thesis, I used the idea to create the backstory of this character. David Mamet acknowledges all actors are going to be uncomfortable on stage, but must push through the discomfort and perform his actions. I know the feelings of discomfort and insecurity very well. I can attest to the theory of Stanislavski's circle of attention. In those wonderful moments, when I lose my insecurities, and become aware of just what I should be in tune with on stage, my performance is then elevated, and I can truly live in the moment to moment reality of the play. My biggest insecurity comes from the fact I suffer an auto-immune disorder which caused one sided deafness, and occasionally affect posture. When I am on stage, I wonder if my fight against this shows, and if people often think I am mal-formed, or have bad posture, or appear older than the character I am playing. As I state in the self -analysis part of this work, I now know some of my fears are well founded. And so now I can face them. I found it is obvious to a select group, and by that I mean observant people, do notice my fight against the imbalance at times, as the director commented on my walk. I have used my fear before onstage to motivate myself to live in the moment. With this particular production, I decided to let my insecurities through in the character of Jack to try to bring to life the subtext, which Mamet suggests should be played. My concept was to use my own insecurities to allow Jack to appear as someone who grew up the

hard way by being bullied, and put down no matter how hard he tried. I think these insecurities would carry through to his adulthood. I can see him viewing himself much like I do, believing his mind is his best attribute. I believe he, like me, realizes he is not the most attractive person physically, and uses his quickness to constantly validate himself. I believe he is a person who each time he feels he gets his head above water, some new waves come crashing down.

Therefore, I think he, like me, seeks to hide himself in more knowledge to counteract the emotional onslaught. Personally, I see him a lot like me. Because of all of the negative things, which have come his way, and because of the hand he is dealt, he has become a very strong fighter, and a very strong person. I think he is very emotionally guarded from having put too much faith in people other than himself, only to wind up getting himself deeply hurt. I think he is only close to Henry, and was in the process of starting to build trust in Susan. I feel he probably prefers intimate small groups to being the life of the party. I view him, like me as going out to social events, yet somehow feeling not part of what is going on, and as not fitting in the round circle of the social world. I believe this is what drives him to work like he does - to keep his name from negative reviews, and to avoid embarrassment as much as possible.

Much like the character, my relationships in life, from family, to peers, to intimate partnerships, I have somehow managed to mostly land myself in hypercritical environments. People in this situation can wonder why, or spend time blaming themselves for the situation, or they can choose not to embrace the negativity, as much as possible, and learn to make themselves happy. Often this is accomplished by focusing on something you love, or something you are naturally good at, and wanting to become the best you can at it, to prove to yourself you can be successful, regardless of what anyone else thinks, says or does to the contrary. I did that with my teaching career.

I grew up in many ways like Jack, as I was viewed as being different than most of my peers in the neighborhood. My mother was attending college when I was young. She wanted to be an English teacher. She did not get to finish due to relationship issues. However, she molded my life forever. I would sit with her while she listened to the vinyl records of Shakespeare's plays. While most people my age were listening to the Chipmunks, I was listening to Othello. Due to my mother's work schedule, and school schedule, I, unlike anyone else in my neighborhood, attended a private school that focused heavily on the arts beginning in kindergarten. No matter the age one begins the arts, the nature of the environment is hypercritical.

I never fit with the neighborhood boys who played football each afternoon, or climbed trees, or anything else, as it just was not my daily environment. Therefore, obviously, I was an easy target for criticism. I truly found myself not caring deeply about this criticism, and went on with my studies. I remained this way most of my life except for a very social time during my college years when I was around like-minded people. Perhaps that is why they say the college years are the best years of your life.

Additionally, I had the same experience of like-minded people in my early thirties. I lived in Panama City Beach, Florida, and had a wonderful group of friends, who always supported each other. I moved to Pensacola, Florida in my mid-thirties, and found myself to be in the most petty, jealous, and critical environment of my life. I experienced jealousy from my co-workers for teaching merits I received, and even name-calling from people in a community theatre for getting a coveted role.

Always marching to the beat of my own drum, I, in addition to teaching, was fortunate enough to open my own theatre, and build it. Because it is such a safe place, the name given it is

Sanctuary in the Groves-Theatre West, as I created it as a sanctuary for myself, just like the figurative place I had created during most of my years. Although we go by the shortened name-Theatre West, the sanctuary is still very real to me. I truly understand how Jack threw his entire soul into building his firm. Because, when one births something, it, unlike people, is conceived by you, for you, and is a source of unconditional love for you, where you may grow as an artist, host others like yourself, and succeed by the sweat of your brow. At the end of the day, you can go to sleep feeling proud of something, feeling validated as a person, feeling, in dark moments, you have a reason to get up the next morning and more importantly, feeling as you have created a place which will provide the same feelings to others like yourself who find their way there. It is very rewarding feeling you have created such a family and are in some way making life a little better for them.

Chapter Five

Most people are familiar with the phrase, “Lights, Camera, Action,” but do not realize without action, there would be no reason for the lights or camera. Actions are the required element for an actor to be on stage. As stated earlier, both Stanislavski, and Mamet, believe in the importance of actions. The term action may be defined as what an actor does to achieve his objective. This makes it sound very simple, but as most actors will tell you, there is more to the process than meets the eye. According to pages thirteen and fourteen of *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*, the following checklist should be employed by an actor during his selection process. A Proper action must:

1. be physically capable of being done.
2. be fun to do.
3. be specific.

4. have its test in the other person.
5. not be an errand.
6. not presuppose any physical or emotional state.
7. not be manipulative.
8. have a cap.
9. be in line with the intentions of the playwright.

This list can be summarized as an actor must select a specific action that can actually be played and be fun to do. The way to find if the selected action will work or not, is to test it out on stage with your fellow actors. The action should allow an emotional state, not presume one. The action must not be one that manipulates the other actor, thereby, not allowing him to have any control in the scene. The action must protect the character as written by the playwright, and it must have a specific thing to let you know you have succeeded. Additionally, an action should be active. In other words, doing something. An actor will know exactly what he is doing to other actors when he selects active verbs such as to emasculate, to punish, to rebuke, etc. Again, all actions should be based on the character's objective for the scene. An objective is defined as what the character wants to accomplish. Also, according to page xx of *Actions The Actor's Thesaurus*, by Marina Caldarone and Maggie Lloyd-Williams, with a foreword by Terry Johnson, each full sentence should be spoken in one breath, and have one action. The book proclaims, "The Acting Mantra: One thought. One breath. One sentence. One action."

Consequently, if an actor does not have an action, he is not acting, which means he cannot exist in the coveted moment to moment reality of the scene. If he is not living in the moment to moment reality, then not only is his performance not truthful, but it will also be a very uncomfortable time for both he and the audience. He will feel suddenly very exposed and

intimidated, and the audience can sense when an actor is overly uncomfortable, or is indeed, disengaged from the play. Just as every action has an equal and opposite reaction, the audience then becomes for a moment, focused on the actor's loss of character, and then like the actor in that moment, becomes disengaged from the play. This is especially bad for not only the actor, but also the theatre company with which he performs. If an audience becomes disengaged from a performance, they are more hesitant to return. Unfortunately, like the old saying goes, "one rotten apple can spoil a whole barrel", one bad performance from an actor can taint his entire company's reputation.

Chapter Six

Race, written and directed by David Mamet began previews on November 16, 2009, at The Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City, and opened on December 6, 2009. From the official opening night, until closing night, the production ran for 297 performances. The original Broadway cast included, James Spader, David Alan Grier, Keri Washington, and Richard Thomas. The production received very mixed reviews. The December 7th, 2009 edition of the Los Angeles Times published the following summary of opening night critic's opinions. The reviews appear below exactly as they were printed in the edition:

Charles McNulty of The Times wrote that the play "starts strong but loses steam as the playwright approaches his tinderbox topic more like a journalist anxious to appear balanced than a theatrical provocateur wanting to get beneath all the claptrap." He added: "Sure, the profanity rips like only Mamet can rip it, but his ideas lack their usual polemical bite and there's something tentative about the overall vision."

The New York Times' Ben Brantley praised Spader's performance, writing that the actor "considers every inflection and gesture in creating the one role in 'Race' with more layers than the who's-scamming-whom plot." He wrote that overall, the play "lacks real dramatic tension" and that the cast "never acquires that crackling, syncopated urgency

that makes a Mamet play sing and sting."

Variety's David Rooney called the play "slick but hollow" and added that the plot "grows increasingly wobbly as it twists its way to an unsatisfying wrap-up." He noted that the real enjoyment in the production comes from "watching the taut verbal interplay between Spader and Grier. Spader is right at home in the smooth, almost likeably reptilian role, and he gets most of the best zinger distillations of ruthless pragmatism to come out of a Mamet play since 'Glengarry Glen Ross.'"

Elisabeth Vincentelli of The New York Post took one of the harshest stances, writing that "the most stunning thing about the David Mamet play that opened last night is how clunky it is." She noted that "the show's nominally about race, but the elephant in the room is gender... If Hillary Clinton had been elected, would we be watching 'Sex' instead?"

Offering a contrary opinion, John Simon of Bloomberg praised "Race" as "a high-voltage melodrama that is unafraid to raise painful questions while dispensing prickly ideas and provocative dialogue amid steady suspense." He added that "play is full of wry jokes, epigrammatic jolts, and acrid, even cheeky provocations, which, depending on the extent of your guilt feelings, can be taken as deserved flagellation or perfervid overstatement."

Since the closure of the Broadway production, *Race*, continues to be successfully produced in regional theatres, and other institutions across the country. It is an honor to be part of the regional premiere of the production at the University of New Orleans.

Chapter Seven

My scene analysis chart and action selection for use in *Race* is as follows:

Scene 1.1

What the character does:

- Jack interviews Strickland
- Jack tries to convince Strickland how the law game works

- Jack questions Strickland why he wants their defense
- Jack gets Strickland to write down a list of his indiscretions.

Analysis:

- Jack is trying to decide if he wants to get involved with Strickland.
- Drawing out an answer of a very important question.

Actions:

- navigate, indoctrinate, gauge, affirm, neutralize, scrutinize, halt, study, redirect, foil.

Scene 1.2

What the character does:

- Jack collaborates with team.
- Jack coaches Susan

Analysis: Jack is utilizing and instructing his entire team to try to determine if Strickland is a win or lose case.

- Gaining information from his available sources.

Actions:

- quiz, instruct, foster, accommodate, probe, boost, teach, rebuff.

Scene 1.3

What the character does:

- Jack mediates between Henry and Susan.
- Jack discovers a defense angle.

Analysis: Jack is trying to keep peace between Henry and Susan so they can get to the task at hand.

- Diffusing a bomb

Actions:

- rebuff, soothe, kick, cool, refocus, castrate, refocus, reanimate, entice, cheer.

Scene 2.1

What the character does:

- Jack develops defense strategies for the Strickland case.
- Jack coaches Susan.

Analysis: Jack is grasping at straws to try to win case.

- Trying to open car door when keys are locked inside.

Action:

- control, test, focus, slap, entice, inspire, intrigue, soothe.

Scene 2.2

What the character does:

- Jack warns Strickland about going to the press.
- Jack learns the girl was a prostitute.
- Jack tries to get Strickland to plead to a misdemeanor.
- Jack demands Strickland finish his list of indiscretions.

Analysis: Jack is trying to get everyone on the same page, and let him run the show, which is what he does best, so that he might win this case.

- Trying to herd sheep when both sides of the pen are open.

Actions:

- patronize, caution, shake, rattle, probe, soothe, coerce, disregard, shut down.

Scene 2.3

What the character does:

- Jack defends himself to Susan.

Analysis: Jack does everything he can to avoid conflict.

- Dodging bullets in war.

Actions:

- command, spank, intrigue, bargain, ignore, pinch, halt, diffuse, disarm, patronize, assault,
- belittle, oppose, humble, bow, beg, plead, reaffirm.

Scene 2.4

What the character does:

- Jack discovers there is more to Strickland's racial issue than meets the eye.

Analysis: Jack feels the mounting pressure and becomes exasperated.

- Saving a stray dog while being consistently bitten.

Actions:

- question, encourage, re-focus.

Chapter 3.1

What the character does:

- Jack attempts to keep the case on course.
- Jack learns the maid went back to police.
- Jack fires Susan for betraying the firm.
- Jack learns of officer re-filing report
- Jack learns client confessed
- Jack tries to make amends with Susan

Analysis: Jack tries to hold it together and keep the case on track, but is defeated by two many

shock waves at once.

- Fighting the undertow and giving up

Actions:

- beg, grill, expose, flog, beg, confront, fight, calm, diffuse, correct, quiz, extract,

challenge, dehumanize, dethrone, spank, degrade, choke, discharge, disassociate, plead

Chapter Eight

Another technique, I employed in character development, was to journal every day, as the character. The journaling consisted of re-journaling, every day the exact same given circumstances of the character, until I felt, I had mastered it. This is my final result of what might be subconscious blurb typed by Jack, to vent his feelings. The idea behind it was to capture his feelings toward the case, his partner, his legal assistant, and his hidden thoughts on race and other subject matter.

Journal of Jack Lawson

The Creation

8:00 a.m.- This day is starting off ridiculously fast for me. I was hoping to have an easy day to catch up. This was not to be. By the time I walked in the door, it was evident Henry was in a foul mood. Well, even more foul than his normal foul. He was muttering about Susan being late, and the copier not being turned off last night, and the phones not being forwarded. This speech was cut short thankfully, when Susan arrived, and he left the room with a grunt to make coffee. Quiet at last. But it didn't last long. Before I could not even get to the coffee maker and pour my first cup, before the man from the headlines, Charles Strickland walks in my door. No appointment. Asking to see us. Henry didn't want to allow him in, but I convinced him. This man gives new meaning to the word wealth. What is stunning is he walked into our office after leaving Greestein's office. I honestly am intrigued as to why. Greenstein is a Jewish lawyer, who has a name that means exactly what he is- rolling in the green. But, I digress. Mr. Strickland, a white wealthy man is accused of raping a black girl. He is pompous, evasive, and somewhat volatile.

The match between he and Henry should be something to sell tickets for on ebay. If only I had known. As for Strickland, I have spent the past hour trying to pry out of him, why exactly, he came to us. I assumed it is because of our racial make-up and he finally confessed to it. I am having a hard time convincing this man, it is in his best interest to plead to a lesser charge and get it over with. Anyone, of his prominence, is going down. Well, anyone that is- who is white and rich. Hard to believe, times have changed so much. Less than fifty years ago, this would be an open and shut case. He would be innocent, just because his word against hers would hold more weight. Not today, it seems, Henry excluded, so many black people will use whatever advantage of their race they can to get ahead. This girl, however- why could he not buy her off? Or did he, and more importantly, will he try?

Well, I quickly found out that answer. He refuses. This is why I suspect Greenstein fired him. The man is no idiot, he would not take a case that is a loser. Which, is exactly what I am hearing from Henry right now- that we should not. I admit, there is part of me that would love the challenge of this case. O.k. who am I kidding, I would love, if this case could be won, to be the one to win it. But I suppose I will listen to Henry, since Strickland is so evasive, and hold to my old philosophy that one can win any case, as long as they only accept cases that can be won.

10:00 a.m. Well this is just great. Susan made a mistake. A HUGE mistake, she called the D.A. to get the forms we needed because Kelly would not answer. I suppose this is partly my fault for barking at her I needed them now. However, the ensuing fight between she and Henry put me into high gear to find a way to put a Lawson spin on this case and win. Or at least make Henry think I can for awhile, so he will just shut up and let me think. This could be a very long day-make that month.

Noon:

Paradise Found.

Ok, so I found my angle on this case. In the reports, I discovered there is no mention of sequins in the room. I think we could actually crack this case. I admit, I love it when I get a great moment of insight and validate all the money I spent on law school. I think one of the best parts is perhaps, I can say to Henry- I told you so.

Well, that feeling of triumph did not last long. Henry just rushed in to inform me that Strickland wants to go to the press. Honestly, how can someone with that much money be so stupid?

When I began to press him, he admitted the girl was a prostitute. I tried to get him to plead to consorting with a prostitute, but he just doesn't get it. Why? Why won't he see the light?

Is it possible, and do I care if he is innocent? Ok, inside I know he is innocent. But why am I letting it get to me. I do not want to like this guy. I don't like this guy. I don't like anybody.

And yet, something about him reminds me of when I was young, and confused, and innocent, and nobody cared about me.

As if this were not enough, I made a slip of the tongue in conversation and Susan figured out I had her investigated. She also got mad at me because I asked her to wear the dress in a courtroom demonstration. I do feel bad, to some degree. I do like her, and she is slowly earning my trust. But, I just don't know. There is such a fear inside me, that at any time, she could turn. I wish she had never accepted the position. But I had to offer it to her, didn't I? With her background? What would she have done if I had not? But I can't think of that right now. At any rate. Back to Strickland. Maybe this is my fault for going on and on about him having to be cleansed, I mean his obsession with the press. Who knows. Not that it matters, what matters is getting everyone's head in the game and keeping it there. Anyway, I finally got the air

cleared with Susan, and was settling in to work, when in comes Henry, the bearer of all bad news today, and produces a postcard, from Strickland's roommate from 20 years ago. The words, could be so damaging to this case. But not as much as Henry's flip out is becoming to my patience today. You know, even he came in earlier playing the race card. It is like sometimes even he can't see the forest for the trees. He even tried to pin race on Susan- a black woman. Its like he wants to play Bill Cosby- feeling so evolved- everyone else is beneath him. Who knows, maybe it's the Obama years which adds to this. But on the flip side, his fussiness, and evolution are part of his enduring qualities. And most of the time, he is such a great balance for me. But there are times, like today, I feel I can't keep a strong enough handle on him. Maybe it is just double frustration for me today, seeing him go from a bulldog, to escorting the client into the other room to play "priest" and receive his confessional.

2:00 p.m. Have not had lunch, coffee is terrible, Henry should never be allowed to make it.

2:15 p.m. I need a mental break, which is to say, a drink. That is all.

Paradise Lost

3:30 p.m.

Ok the last entry, I just did not know how prophetic it was. Today has been the worst day in my adult life. Henry got really upset with me because he felt my stance of dismissing the post card in the Strickland case was racist. I could read it all over his face, and his comment to Strickland, "we all have to put up with a lot from each other". That was aimed directly at me. I don't know if I was more mad, or more hurt, or more desiring to rattle him and say, do you not realize this is not personal? This is what we do for a living? I swear, he and Susan must have been bitten by the same bug today.

And speaking of Susan, my worst fears came to pass. Someone leaked

our secrets to the other side. Henry convinced me, after all he is a lawyer, it was her, by citing her thesis and other evidence. Upon questioning her, I found her to be admittedly prejudiced toward Strickland because he is white, and upon her pressing me, I finally admitted I took a chance on her because she is black, and she, like me, came up the hard way. Sadly, I have this soft spot for others who did as well. When will I ever learn to stop fighting other people's battles, and let them grow as I did. But at any rate, I lost my temper and fired Susan. Before she could leave the office, Henry answered the phone. The officer had submitted part of a report he forgot, or claims to have forgotten, and Strickland confessed to the crime. Part of me thinks this is because of Henry beating him and making him feel like he hurt his roommate who was black all those years ago, and in fact had an enemy. Just by writing about sex with black women. Anyway, before Susan left, she read me the white people act. Her last words to me were, it doesn't matter what I did or did not do, because, "he was guilty white man". I guess sometimes making an effort to protect ourselves, and others, really does stem from a hidden prejudice. Consequently, the effort does not protect anyone but rather creates enemies from those we try so hard to trust. Wow, could Henry, in his analysis, have been right? I have a lot to correct, and a lot to learn. There is still a scared little boy from a bad neighborhood lurking within me no matter what.

Chapter Nine

Rehearsal Diary for Race:

Rehearsal #1- Read Thru

Tonight we had the read-thru for race. The other actors are amazingly talented

and it is going to be a pleasure. I applied over enunciation of syllables in diction as a tactic so that I can put in to practice what I am learning as far as losing my southern accent. The two male actors are new MFA students. Both are experienced. I especially like the opportunity of working with someone in my age range. The female cast member is a graduate of UNO. I saw her work recently in a production in the city entitled *The Gingham Dog*, which was directed by another UNO graduate. Her talent and timing are going to be a wonderful asset.

Re-Audition for Susan

Auditions for replacing the female character, as the original cast is unable to complete her role. There were three young women who auditioned, and all are Film or Theatre majors.

Great experience. The young lady who was ultimately cast made choices, and eye contact and is going to be an easy person to work with in this production.

Rehearsal # 2

We blocked the first two parts of scene I.

I have a new handle on the character with which to start making choices. From the direction given, I am reviewing my initial perception I had formed about Jack. Apparently, I have viewed the character from a slightly different objective. The interaction with the other actors on stage is a wonderful experience. I especially like the fact, that we all feel comfortable in trying different tactics with each other so early in the production process.

Rehearsal # 3

We continue to block.

David is offering new ideas to challenge our previous concepts on the characters as we go.

For me, the challenge with the blocking, it seems, is going to be the timing of the lines

between point A and point B. This is because so many of my lines are speeches. It is my job as an actor to find honesty, and intent behind the blocking in the pacing type scenes. I will use my actions to help define the pattern of movement.

Rehearsal # 4

Blocking continues- my challenge is the same as yesterday- which is typical for this part of the creative process. Additionally, I have the challenge of overcoming my “isms” as an actor to find what would be the true physicality of this character. David brought to my attention in previous shows I have completed with him, and now in rehearsal for this one, I tend to do a “bounce”. I have starting becoming aware of this, and the connection I have made is- I have worn the same shoes in all 3 shows. I am currently rehearsing in these shoes. I think honestly it is the height of the heel and slope of this dress shoes. It is more severe than most shoes. As I am an actor who has dealt with falling victim to one- sided deafness-which affects my balance, I struggle the most with posture and voice. I am going to begin rehearsal in a different pair of shoes and see if any difference is made in my grounding on stage.

Rehearsal # 5

Blocking completed.

New pair of shoes procured. David even commented that I convinced him the issue must have been the shoes. I immediately felt the difference in my center while standing and moving across stage. This frees me to work on my other issue. Gesturing. I tend to talk and THINK with my hands as I am learning lines. This can lead to inappropriate hand movements that have turned to habit- which makes the physicality of the character harder to create.

Rehearsal # 6

Work through of Scene One.

We attempted to go off book, which went fairly well. Both myself and the actor playing my cohort Henry, were given notes by David that we were starting to approach portraying the characters in an overly serious manner. “This is not LA Law”, was David’s comment to us. We were directed to lighten up so that the humor would develop in this script. We were given the image of being “entertainers” to our clients. I will make this the focus of my acting process. I am going to revisit my actions. I will start by finding a synonym for the action “to entertain”.

Rehearsal # 7

Work through of Scene II.

This entry is short. My issue is lines. I do not know why this seems to be the act where they are so difficult to process and connect. It seems to be much tougher for all of us. This will be my focus. I am going to work in my character journal to try to connect what might prompt me personally to speak these lines.

Rehearsal # 8

Tonight was a work through of Scene III.

This scene went very well for the first time through. This scene is the easiest for me to connect to and justify the actions. My main issue now is working back through all the lines and focusing on parenthetical thought, and also making sure I find the correct operative words. David Mamet’s work is full of difficult punctuation and to do justice to his intent, I need to put it into perspective so the language flows fluently.

Rehearsal # 9

Work through again of Scene II.

This scene seems to be the hardest for me at the present time. The biggest challenge is to

find the rhythm. It also has a good deal of the scene between Jack and Susan. With this being my most difficult scene, and she being a bit intimidated, which I know will fade as we progress, finding the character connection is a bit difficult. My jerky movements still seem to me to need work, and finding ways to justify the movement I have been given.

Rehearsal #10

Stumble-Through.

This did not go terrible at all for a stumble through. Since the play is now completely blocked, and the lines are beginning to come, my plan is to spend tonight beginning my character journal. I will focus on how we got to the end of the exposition. In addition, I am going to practice my “r” sound and my “l” sounds, as I still feel they are sloppy in diction.

Rehearsal # 11

Scene work again with Susan, Henry and I.

Tonight we essentially worked through all of Susan’s scenes.

However, we ran out of time focusing specifically on Scene II. This continues to be the most difficult scene in the show, and it is the most important thing in the show. I am going to try changing actions at tomorrow’s rehearsal, to see if it helps her find her footing, so perhaps, I can relax into mine. I will be using character journaling for this section before I determine new actions. It is late tonight, and I have a very early morning, so my journal time tomorrow night will be character journaling for Scene II.

Rehearsal # 12

Scene work with Charles

To me, these scenes are the ones in which I as an actor am developing the most

comfort. The rhythm is beginning to fall into place, and it is great working scenes with actors who change up their actions often. This is what makes theatre fun. I will spend the next couple of days completing character journaling.

Rehearsal # 13

Regroup

Wow- I always heard the number 13 was unlucky. Before what should have been rehearsal number 13 a week ago, Hurricane Isaac hit, closing the school and therefore, cancelling rehearsals for over a week. Today, we did a stumble through, and from here on out that is the plan as the show literally opens in a week. At least we all spent the time learning lines, so tonight, off book went great.

Rehearsal # 14

Run Thru

Tonight, I was given the note that the beginning seems slow, and the character is not excited enough. I will explore how I can raise the bar on this situation, since Henry's character is very excitable at the beginning, I was trying to counterbalance that. There are some wonderful moments developing between Sam (Henry) and me. It feels as though a real relationship is beginning to develop and that we are beginning to function as long-term business partners would. We are allowing irritations to show among characters, which I believe are just natural occurrences when any two people have spent twenty years together.

Rehearsal # 15

Re-work

Tonight we began to subtract blocking, as it was really our first chance to do so.

Just the bit we took out makes me feel much more secure in the movements I make.

Sadly, working in this manner, I noticed my dialect work disappears. I will go home and work some exercises to try to stay focused on it, both in and out of character.

Rehearsal # 16

Run Thru.

Lines went somewhere. I am going to spend the rest of my evening reviewing them. I think perhaps it is because it is the first time we ran the show with the subtracted blocking that gave me a bit of an issue. I am going to use the technique in my journal where you write only the first letter of each word, so that your mind forces you to search for it. I expect I will be up quite awhile for this endeavor.

Rehearsal # 17

Run Thru.

Lines came better this evening. I was given several specific character notes, mostly physical based, such as watch the rate at which I walk during speeches- put movement with a purpose, and make sure it doesn't feel like I am rushing to get there. I think again, the change in blocking has thrown the flow off. I will re-learn as fast as possible. The relationship between Henry and Jack still continues to grow and find its natural arc. Scene two with Susan is still the most difficult, it is a timing issue. I think I am going to have to really "punch" the end of the line somehow, so she realizes to pick up her cue.

Rehearsal # 18

Start and Stop.

Today, we added lights to the production, and sound cues. It was a typical start and stop. This threw us a bit on lines, but that is to be expected no more rehearsals than we have had due to losing a week. I am concerned by one note I was given. For the opening scene I was asked by the

director, “why are you boring me in the beginning?” I will up the stakes and change action.

Rehearsal # 19

First Dress Rehearsal.

Just being in the costume, changes things for me: Posture, internal characterization, and urgency.

This seems to be the same for most of us. Susan’s character made an appearance. She was in the play moment by moment and it was wonderful to see.

Rehearsal # 20

Final Dress Rehearsal.

Tonight, was the last rehearsal before opening, night. Therefore, this is my last journal. Looking back at the process, I wish we had another week. I feel there are some great things starting to happen, but feel there is so much more growing we could do. I wish we had time to sit down and talk about what are the most important fire lines of each scene. I wish we had time to subtract more blocking, because I still feel often like I go in circles. And I wish I personally had more time to work on my dialect. But it has been a great experience working with such talented actors. I have grown as an artist as a result.

Chapter Ten

The old saying goes: You are your own worst critic. As I come to the personal critique of my performance, my goal is to be objective and to speak openly about what I feel was my growth and my challenges of the show. I undertook a large challenge with this show. We had very little rehearsal time from read thru- to opening, having to re-audition for the role of Susan, and then losing a week during hurricane Isaac. I am not trying to use this as an excuse or justification. I used the week of school closure to focus on learning lines, as up to that point, I had focused on creating the character backstory, and identifying my initial actions. We managed

to block the show in the one week prior to the hurricane, so I was fortunate to have it to review during the hiatus.

However, another goal of mine for this performance was to work on suppressing my southern dialect. This was a major challenge for me not only being a native of the south, but also suffering from a sudden hearing loss a few years ago, which left me with single-sided deafness. This is one reason, as an equity actor, I wanted to return to school, to have a safe environment to retrain my body. Unless a person experiences it first hand, they have no idea the obstacles there are to overcome when you completely lose hearing in one ear. The ability to discriminate speech disappears in the remaining ear, and must be re-learned as it is now up to the one functioning ear to intake all sounds of the environment. It takes awhile for the brain to equalize and process the different sounds, and it will never achieve 100 percent. Physical balance is severely impaired. I spent over six months walking with a cane and going to physical therapy just to learn to regain 60 percent balance. Since that time, I have gotten above 85 percent with hard work and determination. However, this accomplishment, I suppose, is not completely satisfactory for stage work and motivates me to work harder. The great thing about the director is his brutal honesty. This is a quality all professional theatre directors and professors should possess. He keeps me striving to constantly push myself past my physical limits. For example, he commented on my gait in an acting class, saying “you have this walk, I can’t even duplicate it, but it is not Jack.” This could be distressful to me, but is something I need to hear if I am going to continue to attack my handicap. After all, if something is not brought to one’s attention, they may never become aware of an opportunity to improve. If the show advances in competition, I am going to have to work against this newfound shortcoming of which I am glad I was made aware. But, being

fostered, called-out, and challenged are all the elements a graduate program should contain, and is exactly what I was hoping for in this program. I am so glad to be part of it.

What I can take from this experience, is to continue to work on my balance daily, or to realize the limitations it brings and resign myself to character work to which the walk is not a problem. Actually, I think the correct answer, for me, is to combine both options. I will continue to work diligently on my balance issues, and also polish my character work skills. At any rate, back to losing my southern dialect- I have double the work on this issue, and it is a long process.

Due to sound discrimination, diphthongs are harder for my brain to recognize. I began work with a speech therapist this summer, who has diagnosed individual steps specific to me to lose it little by little. The process involves over enunciation of every word as I learn the lines, focusing only on the specific phonetic sounds and diphthongs I have been working on before the show began, and, to employ the VRT technique, which stands for vowel reduction technique.

One of the defining things of the southern dialect is the use of long vowels and short consonants. In fact, in Mid-western speech, it is the direct opposite. One must strive to employ longer consonants and shorter vowels. My process began by differentiating between the sounds of |I| and |E|. I also made sure to use the diphthong |AI|. as southern pronunciation of “I” often flattens the sound, when it should be pronounced much like a pirate saying “Ahhh EEEE”.

Additionally, I gave specific attention to the full sound of the letter “R” and “L”.

Overall, I feel I did well at using the diphthong |AI|, and the difference between |I| and |E|. I feel I did moderately well at utilizing the full sound of the letter “R” and I did notice improvement in vowel reduction, but again, with the crunch time, I did not achieve full success. I am satisfied, that I felt growth in this area during the production and will continue to strive to embrace a Standard American dialect.

As for my acting, I feel like I handled Mamet's text very well, while still managing to create a character, and portray the subtext of insecurity. This may not have been the choice that everyone appreciated, but I feel I stuck to it quite well. When the first adjudicator visited, he questioned if I was trying to portray insecurity or if I felt insecure as an actor. His specific question was, did I feel Jack was uncomfortable in his own skin? My honest answer was, yes. He said, ok, then that is what I got. He then said he felt like the guy would be more one level puppet master, and felt like he controlled everything. I respect his opinion and reviewed my character choices accordingly, but still felt like for me, as an actor, I made the right choice in my approach. Besides, to be the one level puppet master- is that not a dangerous choice in that it would be easy to just fall into "Mamet-speak" and not create a three dimensional character?

Ironically, the second adjudicator, had positive things to say about my choices and use of pace. Truthfully, this made me feel nice because another criticism introduced by the first adjudicator was he felt we did not, as actors, "punch the humor enough", which felt like a generic note without much explanation to me. I am at that fine line with my character, where I think punching the humor, so to speak, at least by my definition, would make a mockery of it to some degree. I just don't feel like this character should be played for the laughs. What actions go with that? I felt like this was a person giving us a note of, "be funny". I discussed this with two of my fellow cast members who felt the same. When I discussed this with the director, who is familiar with the adjudicator, he had a different take of the meaning of the comment, which is a very good thing if the show remounts. Again, I respect the adjudicator's opinion, I just don't feel it was clarified well enough to explore without boundaries of more rehearsals.

I did receive some positive feedback from several audience members who hold advanced degrees in theatre from varying institutions. Most were along the lines of my portrayal of the

character was very real, or they felt like they were not watching me act, but rather being voyeuristic watching a day in the life of an attorney. The responses by the theatre appreciation students were all positive. And from the Acting I class I visited for a question and answer session.

However, the most important thing is what the director thinks of the performance, as it is essentially his art. And, as an academic director, he is the one who sees your growth process. I do not feel he was completely satisfied that I did my absolute best, from the notes given each night. Most of them started with “you always_____”. Typically, in my experience, I find it translates to, “I don’t like what you are doing, because_____.” Let me clarify this by saying, this is not his way of tearing someone down, but pushing them to grow past their ceiling as an actor. David Hoover is exactly the type director he makes sure his students learn to physicalize a character in an honest manner. In other words, all actors have quirky mannerisms they need to lose, personal walls of fear they need to break, or vocalization issues they need to polish. For an academic director to fully appreciate a student’s work, he must be satisfied the actor fought stronger against these things in each production. As the only third year student in the production, I think he expected my fight to be the fight of my life. And I am so thankful to be coached by someone who will not let me, as an actor, settle for less than the best I can give. I have learned as a life-long student of the theatre, all I can do, is to try harder each time. And that is my plan of action, to never give up, and never stop learning all I can when I can. No great artist has ever developed overnight. I cannot end this thesis without thanking David Hoover, who not only directed the show, but also serves the University of New Orleans as chief acting teacher and chair of the department. He truly allows his actors no excuses. He could have dismissed my handicaps but he pushed me through them. The best acting teachers and directors identify things

that should be overcome and will not take less from the actor. I am thankful for the guidance, challenges and experiences I have encountered at the University of New Orleans, and they will forever go with me.

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Vita

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