

5-2013

The Stella Adler Actor's Approach to The Zoo Story.

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The Stella Adler Actor's Approach to *The Zoo Story*

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

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April 27, 2013

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Part I: Prehistory

The opportunity to choose a thesis play and role was bittersweet. It was a daunting task: the pressure to pick the “right” role and the biggest challenge while respecting my artistic and practical limitations. Realizing this early, I began to discuss that selection almost two years ago, meeting with Pat Cronin to brainstorm what role was the right choice. At one point or another, I had chosen most of the greatest roles in the theatrical canon: Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, Edmund (and later Jamie) in *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Milo Tindle in *Sleuth*, Holden Caulfield in a dramatic reading of the entire novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, Nick Carraway in a similar approach to *The Great Gatsby*, Henry II in *Becket*, Thoreau in *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail*, C.S. Lewis in *Freud’s Last Session*, and – of course – Hamlet. None of these clicked in my mind as the proper mixture of a challenging and attainable task.

Time was rapidly running out for me to choose. By a month into the fall semester of my final year, I still had only vague ideas, mostly unrealized. Simultaneously, I began to read the book *Stella Adler on America’s Master Playwrights*, a book so new, it wasn’t even available for purchase yet; my copy was a reviewer’s copy that I had stumbled upon in a New York bookstore. The book is a collection of Stella’s lectures and classes discussing some of the most important and influential plays by the great American playwrights: Miller, O’Neill, Williams, Wilder, Inge, and, probably my all-time favorite, Edward Albee.

Many years before, in high school, I had read Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by what was almost certainly complete chance. The play spoke to me in a deep and disturbing way that had only been achieved by my first read of *Hamlet* in the sixth grade. I had little understanding of the play's context in dramatic literature, but few of the subtleties of wit or character slipped past my precocious, tenth grade mind. In *George and Martha*, I found a shocking description of what I knew (or at least hoped was true): namely, my world – the suburban urbane, the feign and façade, the shallow theism – was merely a construct. In my young mind, these behaviors were learned and chosen, but inherently untruthful.

When I discovered *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, I was a thirsty man discovering water for the first time. It was only by returning to it almost daily that I learned what it was, what it meant, and how to use it to fulfill my need. *George and Martha* spoke intelligently and wittily – a characteristic I sought with passionate fervor – and simultaneously honestly, a characteristic that, in combination with humor and wit, was so incredibly foreign to me. Yet somehow, this mix of humor and honesty amazed me, and I knew that whatever that was, I wanted it more than anything in the world.

I reread the play almost every day for several months, and I found, as the days went by, that I had incidentally memorized large portions of the script completely accidentally. I further noticed that phrases from the play (“Blood under the bridge”, “Good, better, best, bested”, and perhaps most often

“Walking what’s left of [my] wits”) began to arise in my daily conversations, no longer as quotes, but as ideas – or more accurately, rhythms. George’s constant interrupting himself became a mental trait of mine, and like him, I began to think cyclically, devising a central thesis and riffing on it, returning to restate it periodically.

What I didn’t understand at the time was how powerful an influence *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was on my life, and how much of my perspective for years to come would be shaped by it. Without any awareness, the cynical, trodden resignation so prevalent in the play became my own. One might say that I had achieved my wish: I thought as these characters did. At an age when most of my peers’ biggest problems were matters of dating and popularity, I was grappling with the play’s ideas: mortality, the constant battle in one’s head between truth and safety, and the power of self-delusion – not only as a problem with which one must cope, but as a tool by which we soften the blow of reality.

These characters and ideas, I knew, could only arise from a sharp and brutally honest mind. The extent of my knowledge of Edward Albee was that his name appeared as the author of this incredible work, and though, I knew nothing of him (and had read only one work of his voluminous oeuvre) he became my favorite writer. I went on to read many more of his works over the next few years: *Seascape*, *The Goat*, or *Who is Sylvia?*, *The American Dream*, and his adaptation of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. I enjoyed these plays a great deal, but in my

eyes, none of them captured the life-altering honesty of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*.

So when I first saw that Stella's editor, Barry Parris, had included Stella's thoughts and discussions of Albee in the book, I flipped to that chapter first, bypassing some of my other favorite playwrights. I was nonplussed and disappointed to see that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* had not been included. To me, that was akin to omitting *Death of a Salesman* from the chapter on Miller or *Our Town* from Thornton Wilder's. *Woolf* is universally considered Albee's masterpiece, so I couldn't understand why it had been left out, and in its stead, discussion of two of the playwright's earlier one-acts, one of whom I had never heard of (*The Death of Bessie Smith*) and one of whom I had only known by association; two acquaintances had tried to tackle it in high school competitive theatre to little success. The play, of course, was *The Zoo Story*.

As it was the more familiar, I chose to read the transcription of Stella's class on the play. In her charmingly authoritative (dare I say condescending) way, she spoke not only to the themes of the play, but also its size, and the challenge it posed to an actor. Having spent the last several months living in New York and studying her technique of acting, to suddenly have her words on a page in front of me, espousing in detail the practical application of her approach to a script (especially one by a playwright I so admired), was a gift from the goddess herself; this text was scripture to me, and I devoured her

thoughts on *The Zoo Story*— as well as the rest of the book— in a head-spinningly short amount of time.

After months and months of seeking the “perfect” thesis role (if such a thing truly exists) and considering some of the largest and most important roles in the pantheon of theatre, I knew two pages into Stella’s ten-page discussion of an often marginalized one-act play by an often marginalized playwright, Edward Albee, that I had found my thesis role. I was going to play Jerry. It was going to be challenging. I wasn’t even sure if I could do it. But I had to. Stella told me to.

Part II: Preparation

It was at this point that I faced my first artistic decision. Stella had often said – and her protégés, my teachers at her studio, had often repeated – an actor is never justified in accepting something because they are told it is so. In her class on *The Zoo Story*, she told her students, “It is not enough for Stella to tell you Jerry is a man who has size. It is for you to see through the words and find out where this size comes from” (Paris 359). I knew that my basic premise – namely, my need to do this play – was true, but now my process had to begin. I had to discover why it was true.

Stella Adler crafted her approach to acting based largely on her studies with Constantine Stanislavski in Paris. She taught that Stanislavski was the genesis of any honest attempt at acting, and to ignore his influence and teaching was a grave error and could only result in false, presentational, and self-serving acting. In keeping with her desire to ground any artistic endeavor in truth, endowed with a sense of history, I returned instinctually and sub-consciously to my favorite Stanislavski quote to find a starting place: “Creativity starts with the framing of a question.”

Who was this playwright? What is his tone? What is his time? What was it about this play that lived in me? Why did this often-performed play need another production? What service would performing it render to its audience? What ideas would this play provide that another wouldn't? Who would I ask to play Peter? Would it need to be a staged read or an off-book production? Why?

Some of these questions I could answer quickly; I needed it to be as close to a full production (ideally with a basic set and costumes) as possible because I realized that many sections of the play (Jerry's dog story and the death scene, mainly) would ring utterly false in a staged reading. The huge ideas about humanity that Jerry presents in the second half of the dog story would seem small, sermon-like even. In a performance, Jerry would undergo a journey through the monologue, making it up as he goes along and trying to string a million thoughts together. In a staged read, most of that would, by virtue of the staged reading medium itself, fall by the wayside, leaving a man didactically reading a prepared statement. Simply put, Travis, the actor, would be in the way of Jerry, the character.

I also knew that whatever else, I needed to act with Josh Holley. I had known Josh for almost five years and we had been through a lot together, artistically and personally. By random happenstance, we worked our first professional acting job together, *Tecumseh! The Outdoor Drama*. When I was choosing *The Zoo Story*, he was returning from a summer at the Barter Theatre and training with some of the very finest acting teachers and practitioners in the nation and I was returning from a summer at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting. I sought solace in the genuine, intelligent, and trained acting that I knew Josh would bring to the role and to the play. I knew if he were not on board for the project, I would have to seriously reconsider my play selection.

I didn't dwell long on the question of what original ideas would this play provide that another might not. I should make a distinction here for the sake of definition: when I say ideas, I do not mean theme. Theme is an element of the literary study of a play, but it has little to no practical application to the production. What a theme lacks, by definition, is size. By contrast, the ideas of the play are moments, the thoughts that each second hit the performer and the audience. The great theatre critic Martin Esslin eloquently summarized this, saying:

Libraries have been filled with attempts to reduce the meaning of a play like *Hamlet* to a few short and simple lines, yet the play itself remains the clearest and most concise statement of its meaning and message, precisely because its uncertainties and irreducible ambiguities are an essential element of its total impact. (45)

The ideas *The Zoo Story* provides are singular to its time and place. They are dangerous and quick; Albee biographer Mel Gussow documents that, "it took Albee two and a half weeks to write *The Zoo Story*" (92). Much like Jerry, Albee possesses a strong sense of immediacy in presenting his ideas and thoughts. This urgency was revolutionary to the playwriting heritage of our country.

The theatre of the United States in which a young Edward Albee was immersed was filled with some of the unquestionably greatest playwrights this country has ever known. Even before he had written his first play as an adult, he was living in New York for many of the most monumental moments in the

American theatre; he saw and was influenced by the first Broadway productions of O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh*, Genet's *Deathwatch*, and Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*. He witnessed the birth of the Off-Broadway movement and saw there the first productions of "Picasso's *Desire Trapped by the Tail*, E.E. Cummings' *Him*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*" (Gussow 87-88). He knew Thornton Wilder personally, and he had critiqued a great number of Albee's poems.

A cornerstone of Stella's technique rests in the simple fact that, "when you do an author, you must know him. You must understand him and his time, not *your time*" (Paris 7). Edward Albee's time was the beginning of the American theatre's next step. In the years leading up to writing *The Zoo Story*, New York audiences had seen *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. They had seen *The Iceman Cometh*, *A Moon for the Misbegotten*, and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. They had seen *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Golden Boy*, *Awake and Sing*, *Our Town*, *Waiting for Godot*, and countless others.

However, most of those playwrights had written their most identifiable works. O'Neill was dead, Odets had quit writing, Miller was beginning a nine-year absence from the theatre, and Wilder was winding down his career with several flops. Albee's time — *The Zoo Story's* time — is one of great confusion. The entire nation was left asking, 'What's next?'

The need for some semblance of understanding had given rise to the middle class, and their need for security had created the suburbs. In New York, neighborhoods became defined by their social class — the income of the people

that lived there, a radical departure from the neighborhoods based largely on ethnicity. These people in the middle class bought televisions to occupy their time. They turned to conspicuous consumption.

The post-war boom was over, and in its wake was a terrifying void. World War II had given the American public something in common; it had allowed the internal struggle to be replaced by an external struggle. Albee, among others, began to realize that people could no longer find community through a banner or a cause. They had to start from scratch and try to build honest, human connection relying only on the manifestation of internal thought. Because of this, the use of the American theatre as a means of discussion of social issues was coming to a close. The contemplative, baffling theatre coming out of Europe was coming to the United States, and unlike the American theatre, this European theatre was about questions, not answers.

Albee writes for the theatre. Apart from a 2005 book of essays, *Stretching my Mind*, his professional work consists entirely of plays, something that set him apart from many of his contemporaries that wrote in many media. From this, I began to understand that he is not a man of abstract philosophy. He shows in *The Zoo Story* that what interests him most is people, and while Peter's role in the conversation is largely to listen to Jerry, Peter is not a dramatic springboard. He is written as a fully realized human being, and the play could not succeed on any level without him. Albee makes his own perspective very clear, but the opinions of the author never inhibit the truth of the interaction between two strangers.

Only by thinking through this could I understand *The Zoo Story*. This was Albee's time and equally important, this was Peter and Jerry's time. These were their worries and their surroundings. Concisely stated, Edward Albee knew his world and the daily mental, emotional, and existential terror inherent in it. Of this, *The Zoo Story* was born.

Part III: Process

I knew from my training in the Stella Adler technique that acting has very little to do with the work required of an actor. She told her classes, “the term ‘script interpretation’ is a profession; it’s *your* profession. From now on, instead of saying ‘I’m an actor,’ it would be a better idea for you to say ‘My profession is to interpret a script’ (Paris 3). So after step one of approaching the script and attempting to understand how it informed (and in turn, was informed by) its time, my next job was to interpret Albee’s difficult script.

One of my biggest challenges in preparing to play Jerry was communicating Jerry’s extreme likability. It was evident how easily Jerry could become a one-dimensional, confrontational pedant. By only understanding Jerry’s actions and words, an actor would develop a Jerry that was purely external; he would place his blame on the world around him and could only deal with human relationships (for this hour-long piece, with Peter) with anger. However, I didn’t see Jerry in that way.

I knew that for every action and word Jerry had in the play, he had spent several months of thought grappling with each problem: the problems of existence. That struggle is not an intellectual one. Jerry shows that these problems are not theoretical; they are practical, and to continue to live, he must confront them. So my job as the actor attempting to become this man means that I, “have to *experience* [my] play. [I] can’t just *understand* it” (Paris 360).

Jerry struck me as a remarkably open person. Not only is he open to sharing his deepest thoughts and fears, he is equally open to what Peter has to offer. He is extremely observant, taking note of how Peter crosses his legs and what that means (Albee 16). He listens extremely well.

The more I read the script, the more I understood that Jerry is entirely a product of that isolation. He is totally alone in one of the largest and most intimidating cities in the world. What struck me in my first read of the script (as well as many subsequent readings) was how funny Jerry is, and how richly his sense of humor permeates his conversation with Peter. Apart from his ability to make jokes, I perceived Jerry as a man of great understanding, and a great deal of what he understands is the humor in the absurdity of life. For instance, he recognizes Peter's joke in the passage,

Peter: We get all kinds in publishing.

Jerry: You're a very funny man. (*He forces a laugh*) You know that?

You're a very . . . a richly comic person. (Albee 37).

So when our chosen director, my good friend Brock Cooley, Josh Holley and I planned our first rehearsal, I was entering into it with many of these thoughts and many more questions. In entering into the rehearsal process, we only had two actors, one director, and one copy of the script. We didn't have access to a performance space; we didn't even know when we would perform, never mind where. We had no faculty advisors or outside guidance or influence.

What we did have was each other. We had enthusiasm, we had drive, and we had an unyielding pursuit of truth in theatre. We may have only had one copy of the script, but that's all we needed. Our first rehearsal was held in Josh's basement where, by one naked hanging light bulb, Josh and I sat directly beside each other so we could read from the one copy of the script. We knew then that this was the type of theatre we wanted to be doing.

In speaking to us before we read, Brock gave us a few preliminary thoughts about the script. Very generously, he made it abundantly clear that he was more than open to input from Josh and I, as it was my thesis play. I tried to make it abundantly clear to him that while that was true, I was an actor and he was my director; what he says goes. In talking with them in this vein, I realized that we all had a great deal of respect for each other, and each artistic decision could and would be discussed. From the first rehearsal, a precedent was set. Our egos had no place in this process, but for each member of the production, contributing ideas would be integral.

We began to read, and almost immediately the play came to life. Peter and Jerry surprised each other, and much of my worries about communicating Jerry's humor were abated. Josh proved an endlessly active listener, and Peter's sense of humor allowed Jerry to open up and laugh. I was fascinated with Peter and what he had to say and therefore, Travis the actor was fully present in the moment. Brock didn't stop us once; he allowed us to complete a full read.

I also didn't realize until we got to the dog story just how long it was. When I was reading it, Jerry's thoughts flowed together, and while I realized that it was a lengthy piece of monologue, I didn't fully understand how long it took in real time. It was seemingly a bulk of the play, and I began to see the play in three equal sections: pre-dog speech, dog speech, and post-dog speech. This compartmentalization was part of Stanislavski's teaching, which he poetically describes in the extended metaphor of a fine turkey dinner in his masterwork *An Actor Prepares*.

Imagine that this is not a turkey but a five-act play. . . Can you do away with it in a mouthful? No; you cannot make a single mouthful either of a whole turkey or a five-act play. Therefore you must carve it, first, into large pieces. . . There you have the first big divisions. But you cannot swallow even such chunks. Therefore you must cut them into smaller pieces. . .and give it taste by adding an invention of the imagination.

(Stanislavski 122)

After we finished the first "table" read, the three of us sat there in silence. We were amazed at the power of Albee's words when spoken out loud, proving Stella right when she told her class, "Every play is external. It isn't internal. It isn't in you, and it's not going to be!" (Paris 11). While we had each been moved by the story privately – internally – the words spoken out loud carried a new profundity, one imperceptible on the page. Needless to say, we were excited to begin to delve into the work on this play.

As the weeks went by, we met at odd times in odd locations: a half an hour in Josh's living room one day (using couches to create our benches), an hour at my house the next (using coffee tables or the ground). Brock blocked the basics of the play, but the lack of a set and performance space freed that blocking up to be natural, organic. Josh and I could not develop habits based on reliable datum; nothing was expressly reliable, and all we had to rely on was the emotional truth of the piece.

I began to reread the chapter of Adler talking about *The Zoo Story*. I read Albee's return to the play *At Home at the Zoo* in which he added a first act "Homelife" depicting Peter's relationship with his wife. I read Mel Gussow's definitive biography of Edward Albee. I reread the notes from my summer studies at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting almost every other day. I read Albee one-act *The American Dream*. In short, I read everything I could possibly read to better understand Albee and the play.

I also spent much of my free time researching the time and place of the play. I spent hours going over images of New York from the 1950's and 1960s. I read New Yorker articles from the time. I watched a great deal of television from the late 1950's and early 1960's to better understand the popular culture of the time, mostly *The Tonight Show* – starting with Steve Allen and moving to Jack Paar, eventually ending up with the first 7 years of Johnny Carson's show, broadcast from New York every night. These shows gave tremendous insight to

the world of the metropolitan mid-twentieth century, illuminating what Peter would have been watching.

One of the most difficult exercises I was assigned while studying at Adler was the gift exercise. My Adler Technique teacher, Patrick Quagliano, gave each of us an imaginary important person in our lives. He made sure that none of the people he had assigned were real; asking each of us, 'Do you have a sick grandmother?' If the person answered yes, he would assign a new person. He did this, he told us, because the point of the exercise wasn't to confront some personal struggle. Rather, the exercise was one of imagination. He assigned me the man of my dreams.

We were to create in our mind's eye our imaginary person, and create their place and importance in our lives. Then we were to choose for them the greatest physical gift we could possibly give them. It was at this point he concluded the instruction. He sent us home to work on this, and we were to be prepared with both by the next class period. I created the man of my dreams: a short man with short hair, a small, scraggly beard and rectangular glasses. He had a great smile and an even better laugh. He was a classical musician, a first violin with the New York Philharmonic.

I decided that to give him this gift, I had to take him to an extremely nice restaurant. I decided that we would go to a restaurant in Tribeca where a friend of mine was a waitress for a beautiful, candlelit dinner. My gift, I decided, was a late 17th century Stradivarius. I researched Stradivarius violins and developed a

clear mental image of the one I wished to give the man of my dreams, who at this point had been named David.

When I arrived at class, I had many expectations for what we would do with this exercise; mainly I expected that we would get up one at a time in front of our classmates and give the gift to him through improvised monologue. I had even thought through what I might say. In talking with my classmates before his class, I realized I was not alone in this thinking. However, Patrick surprised us all by having us form a grid, eight at a time. He told us we were to describe the gift physically, using no specifics; he repeated four words over and over as we worked: 'Color, size, shape, and texture.'

He tapped us on the shoulder one by one, and we described the gift, utilizing only the four categories he had provided. Soon after we had begun talking, he tapped our shoulders again, and we had to stop for the moment. We each got two turns, and at the end, we all spoke simultaneously. Finally, we had to individually tell the person why we chose this gift to give them.

After we had all finished, Patrick told us to write our thoughts, and when we were done, we were free to leave. I strove for the next few weeks to understand the exercise and its purpose, and what I discovered was that an actor's job is to create a deeply rich, personal, and intimate world with our visual imagination. One of the most difficult challenges for me is being able to completely – to use Patrick's words – 'give it away'.

I discuss this exercise in such detail so that I can explain how much I learned from it, and to what extent I knew it could help me. Jerry has such a rich imagination, one that he has developed as a response to spending the majority of his time in solitude. He has only his thoughts and whims, his images and jokes to keep him through the day. I realized this after only a few rehearsals, and I knew that creating that world in my mind would not be especially challenging. Giving it away to an audience, however, would be.

I assigned myself the gift exercise once more, and this time, I decided to allow Jerry to go through it. I knew it would be extremely challenging to him and to Travis the actor, but I knew it would help the character grow immensely. The parameters I set were as follows. Jerry would create the concrete images of his few possessions, described on page 23 of the script. He would then have to give each and every last possession to Peter, a complete stranger. What I hoped to overcome as an actor attempting to understand Jerry was my faith in, and love of, my possessions.

I own far more possessions than Jerry does. Each of them is precious to me, and even someone borrowing a book of mine unsettles me. However, Jerry owns very little, but seems to have few items of luxury and puts no stock in his physical possessions; he casts them off one by one in his speech to Peter. Giving away these small, trivial items (as well as what he considers to be small, trivial ideas) is part of Jerry's nature, but it was not a part of mine. If I truly wanted to understand Jerry, I had to open myself to that disregard for what I own.

The benefit of having done this exercise was two-fold. I was forced to create tangible images of each possession, itemized and cataloged. This allowed me an entry into Jerry's day-to-day life that the script didn't have. I would see what Jerry sees every time he returns to his small room in the upper West Side. The other result of doing this exercise again from Jerry's perspective was I felt I had raised myself farther up towards Jerry's size. I had struggled to identify the seemingly subtle, but mentally monumental, differences between myself and Jerry, and this exercise, among many others, helped me bridge the gap.

In this way, I tried to integrate and employ as much of my Adler training as possible. I especially focused on using my voice training, so that I would have the freedom to explore Jerry's quietness and tender moments fully, while still giving every bit of that to the audience. I also strove to incorporate my movement training to rid myself of personal and habitual tensions. This proved extremely difficult, so I chose that as my goal for several consecutive rehearsals. By devoting myself to this specific aim, I was able to find a great deal more of Jerry's stillness.

As we got further into the rehearsal process, we eventually established that we'd be performing in the Bud Frank theatre. This came as a bit of a surprise to me; we had discussed performing in a found space, an idea I liked because it continued in our line of broke, guerilla theatre. However, the more I thought about it, the more I came around to the idea. Performing in a theatre

opened a bevy of possibilities. We could have a bigger audience and perhaps even some basic technical elements to enhance the world of the play.

The main problem I was facing as we neared the end of the rehearsal process was a simple one: lines. I had never played a character that talked as much as Jerry does, and the memorization of the dialogue (mainly, the second half of the dog speech) proved extremely challenging. The script was never out of my hand for the month leading up to the performance date, yet I couldn't achieve the word-perfect memorization I wanted so badly. However, I knew the content of the speech well enough that I could improvise many of the words and still retain most of the meaning.

Apart from that, we were in good shape, still making new discoveries until the very end of the rehearsal period. Shortly before our opening, Pat expressed that he wanted to see the show, to make sure we were ready to open. I was excited at this prospect; no one had seen the show yet, and I was eager to get in front of an audience (even an audience of one). Because the theatre was in use, we performed in the ETSU amphitheater, not the ideal performance space for a crisp, November evening.

However, Josh, Brock, Pat, and I made it through an hour in the cold. The new venue had provided a nice, refreshing change. For Jerry during that performance, it was much easier to visualize this world in Central Park when he was surrounded by actual greenery. Pat gave several helpful notes to each of us, among them cautioning me from letting Jerry become too confrontational in his

first encounter with Peter. Armed with several new things to work on, I anticipated our final week of rehearsal.

In the final week, we added our basic costumes, and we finally got to work with the benches we would be using for the performance itself. We got the knife we would be using for the final scene and spent some time working through the stage combat of the stabbing. While my lines were still not word-perfect, we could always get through the play from beginning to end. Essentially, the final week was pre-performance wrap-up: detail work, but no heavy lifting.

We met on performance day and while we were warming up, Melissa Shafer was kind enough to do an extremely rapid lighting design, and then to run lights for us. For this, I am eternally grateful. She had no need to help us, and we didn't want to ask for fear of imposing on her. However, she offered her services to help, and almost every response I got from the play made mention of how much the lighting helped tell the story. After she'd finished, we had a quick fight call, and then Josh and I returned to the dressing room. Three months worth of work had culminated in this: opening *and* closing night. It was time to give Peter and Jerry to the audience.

Part IV: Performance

Our first and only performance was on December 4, 2012. As we were a part of the Patchwork Players' week of performances, time only allowed for one performance, so we only had one shot to make it count. We also had not done any publicity; the only way we advertised the show was a Facebook event. This insured that the crowd would be a small, dedicated one, and as no one would be obligated to come, those who did would—ideally—be more open to receiving the play on an emotional level.

I arrived at the theatre ready to work, and although I was thinking about a million things, I was not nervous. Josh and I made some light conversation, but for the first time in my theatrical career, I was in a dressing room with somebody who saw the pre-show as sacred, a chance to silently and separately take responsibility for one's own performance for that night. I warmed up vocally, releasing vocal tensions, exercising resonance, and going through the vowel progression several times. I stretched and warmed up my body, releasing physical tensions. I mentally went through the seventy-block walk leading up to Jerry's encounter with Peter.

Before I could realize any time had passed, Brock came into the dressing room to tell us it was time. Suddenly, for the first time in several years, I was nervous. I didn't feel ready or prepared, and it seemed too soon for me to present these months of work. I realized that this would—at least for this production—be my last hour with Jerry, and I wasn't ready to give him away.

Perhaps oddly, I felt that I knew him. The last few months had meant thinking every moment about Jerry or the play, and it was as though I knew I was about to lose a great friend forever.

These thoughts carried me from the dressing room into the wings. I tend to pace backstage before I go on, not usually out of nervousness, but rather building a kinetic energy and – as my great movement teacher at Adler, Jena Necrason like to say – “finding my feet”. However, on the performance night, I wasn’t pacing. I was standing in the wings, staring at the benches. The next thing I knew Brock walked off the stage and was standing in the wings next to me, saying ‘Break a leg’. I took a deep breath and walked out quickly, before I had time to think.

Jerry was not there. The actor – me – was totally present, and I was passing nothing over to the character. My silent walk, surveying Peter, was Travis going through the motions, allowing habit and technique to dictate my movements. I looked at the back of Josh’s head, and for a fleeting second, I got out of the way of the character. Then out of nowhere, surprising me, I heard the words come out of my mouth: “I’ve been to the zoo. I said, I’ve been to the zoo. MISTER, I’VE BEEN TO THE ZOO!” (Albee 12).

It is at this point my conscious memory stops. Looking back, I realize that as soon as I spoke, the work I’d done in the rehearsal process kicked in, and I was able to allow Albee’s character to tell Albee’s story with no input from me, save a few fleeting moments. From this, I can draw that I did as much as I was

capable of that night. I knew also that Josh had felt the same; there was never a moment I saw distraction in his eyes on stage, and I believe he perceived the same in me.

The next moment I remember was the dressing room, post show. Josh and I were hugging tightly, silently congratulating each other on using every bit of the training and humanity we had on stage that night. Brock walked in, smiling, and telling us 'Good show.' From that moment until I'd fallen asleep, I was in various stages of holding back tears. I was proud of Josh. I was proud of Brock. I was proud of myself.

Part V: Postmortem

The day and weeks that preceded the performance brought some very kind words out of those who had seen the show. Although the crowd had not been extremely small (we had 50 or so people), I believe that I knew every one in the audience, and almost every one contacted me to compliment me on my performance. To my surprise and delight, most of these included the same type of feedback: 'That moment when. . .' usually followed by a short acting out of the moment in question. I love this type of feedback; it is the surest sign that the audience member was present with the play and had something invested in the characters.

I struggled to adapt to what my life meant, post *Zoo Story*. For the first time in months, I was not carrying the script with me everywhere. I had to teach myself to stop asking 'What would Jerry think of this?' at every new moment in my life. I had to stop myself from talking of Jerry or the play. I knew that it was over, but it was extremely hard to accept.

I was able, over the next few months, to gain enough distance from the piece to analyze my work honestly. For that matter, I'm still trying to gain perspective and look back on the work on *The Zoo Story*. What I can say now is that I am almost completely content with that work. I wish I had put more effort into making sure the lines were completely memorized and word-perfect; at the time, I backed myself into a corner mentally and allowed anxiety to create a barrier between my honest, human self and my self-appraisal as an artist. As a

result, I was working so hard to do everything I could to assure an honest performance that I couldn't assure an honest performance.

However, this problem is a nice problem to have. It is a higher-level problem, and one from which I learned a great deal. It didn't get in the way of presenting the story and the character to the audience, as far as I could tell. It didn't, in the moment, prevent me from being present with Josh. However, I learned something about myself: I often allow the technique to cloud my vision, and though the metaphorical "strings" are there, my job as an actor is to hide them, not to show them.

Working on *The Zoo Story* proved to be the type of process that every actor wants on every show. My fellow actor was ideal: someone interested in communicating truth on stage, not phased by the seemingly "small" part of Peter. Our director was young, enthusiastic, and created an environment where nothing was off-limits from discussion. Our play was dense and rich, a boundless fount of understanding and beautiful ideas presented beautifully. I could trust each element to succeed.

Not every production is as much of a joy as this one was. Rather, very few of them are. However, sometimes the stars align, and the perfect people are there to work with you. A fewer number of times than that, even, the perfect people put in the perfect amount of work. The goal here is not perfection; perfection is impossible. The goal is personal growth, for one's self, the cast and crew, and the audience. In a small way, I think we achieved that with *The Zoo*

Story, and that's all I can ask. Stella's mantra greets you as you open the doors to her studio and it is repeated by every teacher, administrator, and fellow student at the school. "Growth as an artist and as a human being is synonymous."

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